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Professionalism Without Autonomy: The Paradox of Modern Education

Every occupational group develops its own set of myths. They do this to make their activities more meaningful both to themselves and to the outside world. In effect, the myth fulfills the psychic needs of the individual member of the occupational group by linking his activities to symbols that enhance the worth of his activity. Thus, the nurse or the soldier can transcend the routine and what is often drudgery by identifying with the high ideals of service and patriotism; from this identification they derive meaning and a satisfaction that may not arise out of the actual work experience they are engaged in. The small business man, the minor bureaucratic official and the secretary derive a similar sense of meaning and worth that their demeaning tasks hold by appropriating the symbols of professionalism to themselves. Teachers also have their own set of myths which are ego-enhancing and which, like the other work groups, are only partially grounded in reality. I would like to suggest that the most important myth of teachers both for psychic and social reasons, is that they are professionals.

Without going into the origins of this myth and the reasons that certain groups continue to perpetuate it, I would like to comment on both its functional and dysfunctional aspects. There are a number of ways in which it serves a positive function. The most important is that it helps in the recruitment of new teachers, especially among that group of people who, consciously or unconsciously, consider teaching as a means of bettering their social station. It also eases the process of decision making for the status-conscious high school graduate who is ignorant both of the demeaning aspects of teaching and its moments of personal fulfillment. For him, the label of professionalism glows in the radiance of idealism and in his own immature way, he is attracted to it. If we had to rely solely on the nature of work conditions to induce new people to come into the field of teaching we would find recruitment even more difficult than it is. In the eyes of the teacher the label of professionalism is a source of self-esteem and social status, equal to that of the doctor and the lawyer, but superior for some mysterious reason to the status of barbers, landscape gardeners and stewardesses who also claim to be professional. That the educated public might question the legitimacy

of the teacher's claim to professionalism does not matter as long as the teacher himself believes it. A third function of the myth is that it serves as an energizing force, a booster to the teacher who is exhausted from the sheer demand of maintaining a relationship with thirty other human beings that is neither oppressive nor acquiescent, and who must, in addition, fulfill the many mindless demands of the institution. Thus, while the myth may appear to play a positive role it is, in reality, a source of substitute gratification; and this raises the problem of its dysfunctional role.

Without attempting to sound paradoxical, one could say that the acceptance of the myth of professonalism is one of the primary stumbling blocks that prevents teachers from creating the work conditions that would make them truly professional. The myth serves, in effect, as a soporific. Like the pills people take to escape the realities they can no longer cope with, teachers, administrators and professors of education use the myth as a means of inducing satisfaction with the demands that are placed on them and the way they meet them. Given the honorific of being professional, teachers can put up with work conditions that might otherwise cause dissatisfaction and perhaps even agitation for change. I suspect that many teachers' conventions serve much the same function as the pep talk before the football game and the moment of togetherness and patriotism that precedes going into battle; it is supposed to divert attention from the toil, danger, and other unpleasant aspects of the task by focusing attention on high sounding ideals.

To see how fictitious the claim to professionalism is, one has only to examine the kind of decisions teachers are *not* allowed to make. On the paramount issue of how many students they can effectively teach, they simply are told. It is reasonable to assume that not all teachers possess the same ability to communicate with the same number of students — and that only the teacher himself would be knowledgeable of the size of class that would best suit his talents. Yet, while the teacher knows most about one of the most relevant considerations, policy governing class size is nevertheless determined on other grounds and by other people. Nor does the teacher have any voice in how much money should be spent on instructional materials. The teacher's area of decision-making is circumscribed by policy decisions over which he has no control, e.g., the amount of money that the district has allocated for art, for library books, for new chemistry equipment, etc. Thus, while the teacher nominally is responsible for educating the student, he has no effective voice in determining the instruments that are essential for carrying out his task. Making decisions about the use of resources that are already available in the classroom is not a significant form of decision making. Very often a teacher has no real voice in what subjects he will have to teach. Whether he will be assigned to teach classes for which he is adequately prepared depends solely on the wisdom of the principal. The time needed for preparation and for keeping abreast

of one's field is similarly decided by an administrator rather than by the teacher who is most qualified to make the decision. In some subject areas changes are taking place so rapidly that there is a danger that the facts presented to the student will be outdated and erroneous. Thus, while the teacher should be making some effort to modify the institutional arrangements — class size, number of classes taught, the facilities necessary for teaching — so that they are in harmony with the changing function of the teacher, we find that, for the most part, they quietly and dutifully conform to the existing conditions. Instead of demanding shorter teaching hours in order to insure that they are keeping up with developments in their subject field, they anesthetize themselves with the heady rhetoric of professionalism. A list of the other areas in which they assume no or only minimal responsibility would include cases of classroom discipline involving major decisions like expulsion from the class, textbooks (here there may be a small area for manoeuvring which appears to be growing), the amount of time that can be spent on a subject and the emphasis to be given (there is some freedom here, but examinations, course of studies and expectations of other teachers tend to circumscribe it), whom their colleagues will be, the kind of training their colleagues should have, and, in some cases, the ideas that can be discussed in the classroom. With regard to the last item, the nature of the intellectual process that goes on in the classroom very often is dependent upon the values and attitudes of the community. If the community does not respect the value of intellectual inquiry the teacher cannot carry on effectively in the classroom even if he holds a Ph.D. degree in his subject area.

If one looks for the rights of teachers what he finds are privileges that can be withdrawn arbitrarily by the school administration. (In some districts, however, privileges become the customary rights of teachers which in turn are respected by the administrator.) I cannot think of any decision that a teacher could make in the line of his work that could not be overturned by an administrator, if the administrator thought it was not in the interests of the school. Even in the area of civil rights the teacher has to make sacrifices not required of other members of the community. In some communities his religion or lack of one, rather than his competency, may determine whether he will be employed. Holding unorthodox ideas can also be the cause of dismissal, even though our social ideals honor freedom of thought and expression. Even the teacher's conduct outside the school is scrutinized; and if a powerful interest group finds it contrary to their own standards they can cause his dismissal by bringing pressure on the school authorities. When one compares the civil rights of teachers with those of professional groups such as dotcors and lawyers, it readily becomes apparent that there is a significant difference. While the ideas, religion, politics and style of life of the doctor or lawyer may offend particular individuals, they cannot cause him to be deprived of his practice in the same way that the teacher, who is in similar circumstances, can be deprived of his job.

Given the subservient role of teachers, the surprising thing is not that teachers are truly professional, but that the myth was started in the first place.

Before I raise the question of whether teachers can or should ever become professional in the true sense of the word, I would like to comment on two facets of the educational system which, in my opinion, largely are responsible for the teacher's lack of professional status. These are local control of education and the administrative organization of the school; surprising as it may seem, both seem to stand in the way of the teacher becoming a professional person.

While the idea of local control is accepted to the point where it has become an integral part of our way of life, there is an unresolved problem that symbolizes the conflict of interests between the school and the community. The problem is to determine who is responsible for deciding what is to be taught in the classroom — the community, acting through its elected representatives, or the teacher, who has a moral responsibility to the student to insure that the educational process does not degenerate into indoctrination or job training. Whereas the teacher's responsibilities are concrete and immediate, the community's interests in education are more diffuse and general. The community is able to formulate general educational policy, but on the more concrete level of methods of discipline, textbooks, ideas that are discussed, etc., the community retains the right to review the decisions made by the teacher. To take an example: when the community sets up and supports public schools it is giving its tacit assent to the principle that all children are to be introduced to the cultural heritage. But it is the teacher who has to translate this general principle into concrete terms by deciding what books, ideas, etc., must be used. If a teacher decides that the use of J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* is a good means of introducing certain ideas or arousing questions in the student's mind, he may have his decision challenged by members of the community who exercise the right granted to them by the practice of local control to pass judgment on the decisions of the teacher. The problem of interests can be stated somewhat differently: the interest of the teacher is in providing the kind of experiences necessary for emancipating the mind of the student; and this requires a critical understanding both of the cultural heritage and the values of contemporary society. Yet the parents have an equally legitimate interest in the education of their children, and it very often takes the form of protecting them from coming in contact with ideas and values which the parent regards as undesirable. When the teacher happens to select for discussion an idea or value that a parent regards as inimicable to the child's welfare, there is conflict. Because of the rationale of local control, when cases of this sort arise, as they occasionally do, it is generally the teacher who must back down even though he may feel that an examination of the controversial idea was a necessary step in the education of the student.

Yet it is not always possible to exonerate the teacher, even when his motives are the best. As a parent I would be very reluctant to have a teacher discuss sex with my child, for fear that they might introduce into the discussion many of their own unexamined prejudices. In many cases the parent may be far more knowledgeable about a subject than a teacher, but each time he interferes — which may have a beneficial result for the child — *he is denying the teacher the autonomy that is an essential part of professionalism.* Until educators recognize this conflict of interest and attempt, in conjunction with the community, to create new institutional arrangements that will meet the special needs and interests of each group, local control of education will remain one of the main obstacles to attaining professionalism.

I do not wish to leave the impression that the parent's natural reluctance to grant teachers the sole right of determining what constitutes a good education is the only reason that authority and power have been withheld from teachers. Political considerations as well as the force of anti-intellectualism are equally important factors.

Politically, there are very good reasons for retaining control of education at the local level. When decisions dealing with such a fundamental issue as education are made by governmental officials at the national or even provincial level, the self-determination of the people is diminished. Moreover, when control of education is removed from the people themselves and placed in the hands of a centralized authority it is more difficult to preserve the social pluralism that is unique to a democratic society. For the decisions that are handed down impose a degree of standardization and conformity which is inimicable to local differences in life style. Yet, from the teacher's point of view, the idea that local control is an integral part of the democratic process must be refined if the educational system is to contribute to making democracy a viable reality. While it may be argued that control of the educational process is one of the rights granted to the adult members of the community by our democratic form of government, local control of education does not automatically lead to educating the younger generation for self-determination. The adult generation very often uses local control as a means of dominating the way in which the young mature, rather than allowing the younger generation the kind of experiences necessary for discovering their own identity and loyalties. When one generation does not support the right of the succeeding generation to find its own truth, then the system of local control subverts democracy — the very idea which it uses to rationalize its own existence.

Anti-intellectualism, which often is expressed through local control, is one of the best reasons I can think of for arguing that teachers need to be given the autonomy and rights that go with professionalism — that is if the teachers themselves respect the intellectual process. Unfortunately, the egalitarianism of democracy has given rise to the prototype anti-intellectual, whom Ortega, the Spanish philosopher, has

described as the mass-man. His examination of the mass-man revealed the following characteristics: "(1) An inborn, root impression that life is easy, plentiful, without any grave limitations; consequently, each average man finds within himself a sensation of power and triumph which, (2) invites him to stand up for himself as he is, to look upon his moral and intellectual endowment as excellent, complete. This contentment with himself leads him to shut himself off from any external court of appeal; not to listen, not to submit his opinions to judgment, not to consider others' existence. His intimate feeling of power urges him always to exercise predominance. He will act then as if he and his like were the only beings existing in the world; and, consequently, (3) will intervene in all matters, imposing their own vulgar views without respect or regard for others, without limit or reserve, that is to say, in accordance with a system of 'direct action'."[1] Frequently these are the people who exert pressure on teachers who examine ideas which they regard as closed issues or dangerous in a moral or ideological sense. Conformity is a psychologically reassuring thing for them; and unfortunately, to them, the school is fulfilling its function properly when it is staffed by people who subscribe to their orthodoxy and when it indoctrinates the students with the approved ideas and values. Equally unfortunate is the fact that this group of people rely heavily upon the principle of local control to impose their anti-intellectualism on the school.

The second major barrier that stands in the way of the teachers attaining professional status is the administrative structure of the school, and in particular the role that is designated to the administrator by this structure. The idea that the school principal is a colleague, a fellow teacher, is one that we like to perpetuate, perhaps out of the feeling that "we are all in it together;" but an examination of the respective roles and responsibilities makes it appear as yet another myth. For the most part, the school administrator receives his authority from the school board and thus it is to this body that he must answer both for his own actions and for what goes on in the school. He does not receive his source of authority from the teachers, for they have none to give. The teacher is responsible for implementing the course of studies and maintaining certain standards in the classroom, but the teacher is not held responsible for what goes on in another teacher's classroom. Nor does the teacher have the authority to interfere in the way another teacher is doing her job. The school administrator, on the other hand, is responsible for what goes on in every classroom and it is for this reason that he has been given the authority to judge the effectiveness of all his teachers and to dismiss anyone who is not doing his job satisfactorily. Because the administrator is responsible to the board rather than to the teachers, any responsibilities that the administrators

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[1]José Ortega y Grasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1932), p. 74.

grant to the teachers will be minor ones, for in the eyes of the board the administrator is still the agent who is responsible for how the teachers carry out the responsibilities delegated to them. The direction in which authority now moves — from the board to the administrator to the teacher — and the more encompassing responsibilities of the school administrator makes it impossible for the teacher to make the kind of decisions which normally are made by professional groups.

While the administrator often represents and speaks for teachers, it is impossible for him to have the same interests. In fact, in several areas his interests are in conflict with those of the teacher. The authority granted by the board makes him, in effect, an employer in his relationship with teachers. He often makes the most important decisions about who will be hired, evaluates the performance of his teaching staff and writes up the competency report. Yet, when it comes to salary negotiations, the school administrator often is placed in the position of representing teachers and he is expected to present the demands of the teachers before the very group that can make the decision to fire him. If he forcefully represents the interests of the teachers he will lose his effectiveness as a representative of the board and perhaps even be dismissed. (Undoubtedly, he will have earned in the process the goodwill of the teachers, but that may not be sufficient consolation for a person who finds himself without a job.) Conversely, if the administrator can get the teachers to modify their demands for improved work conditions and salary, then he has served the interests of the group that really counts, as far as his employment is concerned — the board of education. This same employer-employee relationship makes it equally ludicrous for teachers to allow administrators in their professional organizations. Both teachers and administrators should have separate organizations that allow them to define and work toward the fulfillment of their special interests.

There are a number of other areas in which the interests of the administrator differ from those of the teacher, and I would like briefly to go into two of these. The public relations role which is part of the responsibility of the administrator represents an area where a real conflict of interest can arise between the administrator and the teacher. Because of the special nature of the administrator's responsibilities he often is more sensitive to the reactions of the community than he is to the importance of free inquiry in the classroom. From his point of view it is much more fruitful to ask the teacher to drop the discussion of a controversial idea than it is to defend the teacher's right to academic freedom. If he can maintain harmony between the school and powerful interest groups in the community, he will have greater support when it comes to passing school bonds, and in general, running the school. In order to attain this harmony in a pluralistic society it is often necessary to neutralize the school intellectually by allowing only those ideas and values to be discussed which are acceptable to

every important social group. The other course of action — defending the teacher's right to academic freedom (I am not talking about what often becomes a matter of indoctrination) — has the effect of alienating certain groups from the school and thus jeopardizing its financial support. What might be called the conflict which arises out of role-environment relationships is the second area I wish to mention. The kind of environment which is most conducive to the teacher's success is one that tends toward complexity and flexibility while the kind of environment that is most easy to administer is one that is both simple and standardized. The teacher needs a wide variety of resource materials and much flexibility in scheduling their use. Without them, it is difficult to stimulate student interest and to adapt the teaching process to its ebb and flow. Yet, while these conditions are essential to the teacher, they create more work for the principal; and perhaps worse yet, they make it more difficult for the school administrator to know what his teachers are doing at any given time. From the administrative point of view, which largely is determined by his responsibility for what goes on in the school, it is far better to standardize the teaching staff by hiring only those individuals who subscribe to orthodox middle class values, to standardize each learning experience into units of time, to standardize course studies — in short, to treat each class as interchangeable. If teachers were allowed to organize among themselves the amount of time they needed each day to deal with a learning experience, and to determine what instructional materials would be required — perhaps it might mean a trip to the city jail to see first hand the social effects of certain types of institutions — the efficiency of the educational operation would be drastically reduced. It is unfortunate that the system places the responsibility for education on the administrator, for he can only fulfill this responsibility more effectively by being knowledgeable about what his teachers are doing at any given period in the day. This leads quite naturally to a lock-step approach to education.

The purpose of going into the conflict of interests between administrators and teachers is to point out that the organization of the school and the means of administering it preclude the possibility of teachers becoming a professional group within the system as it is today. Before the myth of professionalism can be transformed into a reality it will be necessary to re-define the areas of responsibilities of the three main groups concerned with education — the teachers, administrators and the public. In conclusion I would like to advance a rationale that might be used to justify restructuring the educational system so that the teacher is given autonomy in the classroom — and thus professional status.

The first and most important argument is that the teacher has a moral responsibility to be intellectually honest with the students. As this may require presenting the students with a point of view or idea

that conflicts with the orthodoxies of the community, it is imperative that the teacher's rights in the classroom be defined so that they can either be respected by the community or defended collectively by teachers. The moral responsibility of the teacher — which I assume is to the student first and thus only indirectly to the community — can be carried out only as the teacher takes responsibility for what goes on in the classroom. The present system makes conformity to the decisions of the administration a moral imperative. And yet while the system seems to reward the teacher who does not take personal responsibility, I do not think that it relieves the teacher of his moral responsibility. The teacher is still faced with a choice: whether he is going to carry out a decision handed down by the school administration which he knows to be detrimental to the intellectual development of the student or whether he will stand up for what he knows will contribute to emancipating the mind of the student. As long as a person is still in the teaching field he is faced with the decision of acting as a free and morally responsible human being or of accepting the authority of the institution as being supreme — as some people have surrendered to the nation-state.

A second reason for granting the teacher greater autonomy is that it would release the creative energies and foster the individual initiative of the teacher. The teacher is the one who is closest to the actual educational process and it should be this person, rather than the remote bureaucratic official, who makes decisions about content and methodology. While there are encouraging signs that the teacher is being freed from official restraints, the system nevertheless is still organized so that a person can function in the classroom without giving any real thought to the adequacy of his teaching methods, or to what it is that he is trying to do. Excessive reliance on curriculum guides and the methodological panaceas learned in teacher training institutions unfortunately is still a way of life for a great many teachers who think of themselves as professionals; and it is one of the main reasons that education is so slow to test and adopt new ideas and procedures. While teaching should be highly experimental, the teachers still accept a system in which innovations are initiated at the top and must filter down to the classroom. As teachers move in the direction of professionalism, however, they will be faced with the problem of restructuring the educational system so that it is more responsive to the ideas of the actual practitioners.

In conclusion, I would say that professionalism will become more of a reality as teachers take more personal responsibility for defining their working conditions, the goals of education and the level of training that is necessary for making the teacher knowledgeable about the culture he is attempting to transmit. This may entail, among other things, relegating the school's administrative official to an ancillary position. Evaluating the teacher's performance in the classroom, the right to

overturn decisions arbitrarily in all areas in which teachers exercise judgment, and the denigrating practice of intruding at will into the classroom — and it must be added, unannounced and uninvited — should, perhaps all be replaced by a system that enables the teachers collectively within the school to be self-regulating. A system that recognizes the autonomy of the teacher would have a better chance of creating the conditions necessary for giving the student a liberalizing education than our present system of local control. And this is the goal, I assume, that we are trying to achieve.