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WOMEN TEACHERS AND PROFESSIONALISM:
A SINGAPORE CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores women teachers' professionalism in Singapore schools. Based on the premise that a woman's professionalism will depend largely on the degree to which she identifies with the family-based role of woman in the home, her level of education and her working experience, five hypotheses in relation to the professional orientation of women teachers in Singapore are put forward. The study hypothesizes that: (1) Women teachers who are married and who have family commitment will be less professionally minded than the single women teachers, (2) the disparity in the professional orientation of women teachers, which is due to marriage will be minimized by high educational attainments and long working experience of the teachers concerned, (3) the higher the educational attainments of the teachers, the higher the professionalism, (4) the longer the service of the teachers, the higher their professionalism, and (5) the higher the teachers' professional orientation, the higher their professional behavior. Postal questionnaires consisting of three parts, viz., bio-data of the respondents, a measure of professional orientation and a measure of professional behavior, are used. The analyses draw on data obtained from two hundred and sixty-six women teachers randomly selected from different junior colleges, primary and secondary schools in Singapore. The findings reveal that marriage, as generally expected, has a significantly adverse effect on women teachers' professionalism. Both education and experience factors are ineffective in moderating the impact marriage has on the professional orientation of women teachers. These two variables are also found unrelated to women teachers' professionalism in Singapore. Finally, the relationship between women teachers' professionalism and their behavior is shown to be positive but low. The study also suggests that women teachers' professionalism can be raised by maintaining a balance between professional and marital commitment on the part of women teachers, focusing on the problems encountered by teachers in schools, strengthening the link between

the University and the schools, establishing a unified professional association and most importantly, cultivating in the teachers a systematic understanding of the ideas of professionalism.

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INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century has seen an upsurge of professionalism in most Western societies. This has due mainly to advances in science and technology, and to an ever-increasing reliance on specialized knowledge and skills as well as on services rendered by specially trained persons. Idealistic as it is, professionalism, by focussing on the cognitive realm and service ethos of the occupation, is nevertheless in the eyes of many sociologists an important form of work organization, of orientation towards work and above all, a distinctive source of control over work (Freidson,1971; Johnson, 1972).

Owing to its rapidly expanding economics and technology, Singapore has witnessed a similar movement since the end of the last decade. Better skills, qualifications and work attitudes are required of occupational groups; opportunities and incentives are provided by many of the employing bodies to upgrading the skills and services of their employees; the annual National Wages Council awards will soon cease to make way for free collective bargaining between unions and employers in order to encourage better work performance and to promote a sense of collectivity.

In the teaching profession, prominent changes have also been made. Administrative structures at both the Education Ministry and school level have been amended so that teachers can be provided with the necessary professional back-up as well as room for exercising their discretions. The old inspectorial system has been abolished and teachers will from now on be reported and assessed by colleagues who know their work best. The Ministry of Education is also introducing a study loan scheme for serving teachers pursuing degrees in different subject areas at both the local and overseas universities in order to enable them to upgrade their expertise. These changes and policies have all pointed to the determination of the government

to transform the myth of professionalism into part of the work reality.

Given the unprecedented influence of professionalism on the teaching profession, an important question arises: To what extent is this ideology embraced by our teachers, particularly women teachers in Singapore? The present study is intended for answering this question.

I have chosen women teachers as the basis of my study for three reasons:

Firstly, Singapore is a merito-cratic society in which personal advancement as well as betterment of society depend, to a very large extent, on education. As the Deputy Prime Minister, Dr. Goh Keng Swee points out, "...education is a powerful vehicle of social mobility."(1) Not only is education the foundation of all professions, the quality of which has a direct bearing on them, it is also a key to our precious human resources. As the backbone of the education system, teachers bear the responsibility of developing human potential and of producing the types of future citizens the Republic needs. Their work attitude is therefore a decisive factor to the realization of these objectives.

Secondly, like many Western countries, our education is characterized by a preponderance of women teachers in the service. 60.97 per cent of the teachers serving in schools in Singapore are women. Of them, 58.12 per cent are married(2). How these teachers weigh the new work principle which is believed by many of the Western critics to be incompatible with the orthodox feminine role of women is therefore of great consequence to the raising of the standards and status of the profession, which, in turn, have a bearing on the well-being of our young and of society at large.

Finally, while the professional orientation of women teachers is a hotly debated issue in the West, it remains unexplored in local educational research. It is hoped that the present study would give an initial picture on the professional orientation of our women tea-

chers, hence, providing a base for future studies and action in this field.

This paper is developed in six parts: The paper will begin with a detailed discussion on the characteristics of professionalism as envisaged by both its Western and local advocates. A good understanding of these characteristics is deemed essential for the present investigation. The second chapter will offer a review of literature on the work orientation of teachers in general and of women teachers in particular. Hypotheses based on the review will be put forward in the following chapter and will be empirically tested. The fourth chapter will deal with the methodology employed in the study, and the results will be presented in the next chapter. Finally, discussion on the findings will be given.

CHAPTER ONE

PROFESSIONALISM: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Professionalism is a composite phenomenon which, far from being fixed and static, varies with time as well as with the cultures and socio-economic developments of societies. Despite some negative viewpoints ascribed to professionalism by such writers as Goldner and Ritti(1967), Pemberston and Boreham(1976) and Illich(1977), the assumption that professionalism is in various ways beneficial to society is generally agreed upon. Tawney(1948), for example, sees professionalism as the major force capable of subjugating rampant individualism to the needs of the community in a functional society. Carr-Saunders and Wilson(1964) regard the "modes of life", "habits of thought" and "standards of judgment" engendered by the ideology as "centres of resistance to crude forces which threaten steady and peaceful evolution of society."(3). Lynn(1964) further affirms this stabilizing function of professionalism by pointing out that the ideology operates not only at a national but also at an international level, for it provides a base for international communities, thereby, helping to maintain world order. Becker(1962) and Halmos(1973) similarly treat professionalism as the source of inspiration which, though it may not exist in reality, acts to guide the efforts of occupational groups aspiring to function in a morally praiseworthy manner. Freidson(1971) and Elliott(1972), on the other hand, see professionalism as a method through which specialized knowledge is developed and utilized; and through which specialized functions within the social system are managed.

Significant and positive implications of professionalism for education in Singapore have also been speculated: Firstly, the ideology helps raise the status and quality of education by cultivating commitment on the part of our teachers to the ideals of service

to the school and community, and to the quest for professional self-improvement. Such commitment, according to the Minister for Trade and Industry, Dr. Tony Tan, is the pre-requisite for education to be recognized as a full-fledged profession by society as is the case with medicine, law and engineering(4). This recognition is, in turn, of paramount importance to our education in view of the recruitment of quality members to the field to alleviate the present teacher shortage problem and the promotion of the morale and confidence of our teachers in carrying out their tasks. Secondly, the ideology is seen as providing a source of strength that guides the behavior of the teachers at work. This function of professionalism is well illustrated by Sia(1981) using the following analogy:

" In the face of growing frustration and disappointment, we must never become so embittered as to lose sight of our high ideals and expectations, for while ideals like stars may seem distant and unattainable, they are absolutely necessary to steer the ship through rough seas. This must be the hallmark of the true professional. "(5).

Given the potential force of professionalism in education, what are its unique features then?

A voluminous literature dating back to the beginning of this century has been devoted to the answer to this question(Flexner,1915; Carr-Saunders and Wilson,1964; Lieberman,1956; Greenwood,1957; Gross,1958; Wilensky,1964; Hall,1968; Goode,1969; Moore,1970; Elliott,1972; Larson,1977; Hoyle,1980.). As a result, an indivisible consensus on any single inventory of the characteristics of professionalism is unlikely to be arrived at. However, a careful review of the literature will give substantial agreement about the general attributes of professionalism.

Professionalism must be scrutinized from two aspects: The structure of the occupation and the attitude held by its members. As Hall(1968) points out, these two levels of professionalism should not be confused, for these do not necessarily vary together. The present

chapter will consider at length the attributes of the ideology from both the structural and attitudinal aspects. In so doing, it also takes into consideration the degree to which teaching in Singapore meets these criteria.

The Structural Model:

It is generally believed that as a profession, the occupational group must demonstrate certain professional traits which distinguish it from other trades. Cited below are six criteria commonly used by writers mentioned above in studying professions.

** A profession performs a unique, definite and essential social service:*

The practice of the profession is limited exclusively to the practitioners such as in the case of medicine, surgery and drug prescribing are tasks performed by doctors only. The scope of the professional service must be definite and unambiguous, and the service thus rendered must be regarded by society at large as indispensable to humanity.

There can be little doubt that education in Singapore fully meets this criterion. Schools are still considered the only proper place for the dissemination of systematic knowledge and for the development of human potential. The recent change in our education policy has further accentuated the important role played by our school teachers in influencing the social mobility and quality of our younger generations. The new education system aims at providing education in accordance with the abilities and aptitudes of the students so that human wastage could be minimized as every individual will be trained to the maximum of their capacity. The success of this new system depends, to a very large degree, on the professional skills, dedication and personal example of the teachers as they are the ones charged directly with the implementation of the system.

* *A profession is founded upon a systematic body of knowledge:*

A systematic body of knowledge is believed to be an important feature in distinguishing the profession from the non-profession, for it constitutes the repertoire of the professional's competence in the handling of the client's problem; hence, the source of power. The knowledge base of teaching includes both subject-matter knowledge and a knowledge of educational theory. Whereas the former places emphasis on the depth of the subject taught by the teacher, which could be acquired only through higher education, the latter stresses the primary disciplines such as philosophy, sociology and psychology in education as well as the pedagogical skills mastered during the professional training. Both these two kinds of knowledge are of equal importance in assessing the competence of the teacher, for teaching effectiveness could not be achieved without the latter, while the ignorance of the former could only lead to what Neal(1976) has termed, "the dissemination of barbarism with skill"(6).

These two aspects of the teaching foundation are fully recognized by education in Singapore. This is evidenced by the determination of and actions adopted by the government to staff our schools with graduate teachers, and by efforts put forward by such organizations as the Institute of Education, the Ministry of Education, the Singapore Teachers' Union and the Regional Language Centre to carry out research and to provide training in order to improve the knowledge base of our teachers.

* *A profession requires a lengthy period of academic and practical training:*

A protracted period of training, both intellectual and practical, is deemed essential because the professional could not be fully socialized into the norms and cultures of the profession and could not master specialized knowledge and skills

to the required extent if he/she did not spend a lengthy period with the professional school. The length of training received by the professional also carries important connotations for society at large, for this is the stamp of quality service upon which it depends.

Since July, 1980, the formerly part-time preservice teacher programme has been amended to provide a full-time training for novices. The period that a teacher trainee now spends with the Institute is 1-1½ years for a university degree holder, 2-3 years for a G.C.E.'A' level candidate and 3 years for a G.C.E.'O' level candidate. The teacher training programmes, which are largely provided by the Institute of Education, place emphasis not only on the theoretical aspects of teaching and the practical experience of the student teachers, but also on the continual learning of the practising teachers.

* *A formalized professional association:*

It is generally believed that as a profession, mutual identification of distinctly occupational interests among members always leads to some form of professional association. The function of a professional association is three-fold: Firstly, it provides a base for the collaborating identity of its members. Secondly, it provides some mechanism of control to maintain standards of performance and over access to the occupation. Finally, it protects and promotes the interests of its members. This very last function of the professional organization, however, should not overshadow all others in importance or the service ethos of the profession would be undermined.

As education in Singapore is a public enterprise and the control of which is vested in the government, the teachers' unions have little say on matters concerning the recruitment, promotion and firing of teachers; nor have they any profound influence on tea-

chers' behavior, except in the case of granting membership to the teachers. The main function of the unions, apart from providing a vehicle through which teachers' opinions are voiced and through which the basic interests of teachers are secured, is seen lying in the auxiliary form of assistance they render to the whole education service. To cite an example, the follow-up study carried out by members of the Singapore Teachers' Union after the implementation of the new education system to gather teachers' views on the recent educational development is seen as supplying the Ministry with the useful feedback on which subsequent government action could be based.

* *A profession has a code of ethics:*

In the advanced professions, professional standards are usually embodied in and enforced through codes of ethics. It is by these codes of ethics, the professional's behavior is to be restricted, and by which his/her morals are to be strengthened.

A code of ethics is also considered necessary to the teaching profession. As outlined in one of the workshops organized by the Singapore Teachers' Union, the conduct of a professional (the teacher in this case) must "confirm to the Code of Ethics for the profession, whether this code is tacit or spelt out in print. Those who violate this code can be summarily disciplined"(7). However, the ethical code in education lacks the power found in those labelled by the established professions such as medicine and law. Since education does not have a professionally controlled licensing body, such a code can only act as a guide, not an enforcing strength, to the teacher's conduct.

* *A profession has a high degree of autonomy:*

Autonomy is an important professional attribute in view of the esoteric knowledge claimed by the profession, the specialized training received by its members and the nature of service which

is beyond the layman's grasp. The notion of professional autonomy can be understood from two dimensions: The autonomy enjoyed by the individual professional and that by the occupational group as a whole. The former refers to the freedom of the individual professional to make decision and to exercise judgment in the interest of his/her clients whereas the latter points to the autonomous operation of the profession as a whole.

Teachers in Singapore seem to enjoy autonomy of these two kinds, but of a very different form. Education in Singapore has a long history of centralization; educational plans and innovations are, more often than not, initiated from the upper echelon of the hierarchy so that education can be integrated with the overall economic and social development of the nation. This is an important fact in view of the nation's strategic position in the region and of its scarce resources. However, it is also being recognized that the basic teaching organizational unit is the school, and that teachers know the problems of their students better than the Ministry officers. Opinions of the school staff are therefore often sought after by the Headquarters in solving practical problems. The professional power of teachers is justified here by their acting as advisers and experts in the context of government decision-making rather than by their autonomy in making educational policy. On the other hand, the power of an individual teacher is all-prevailing in class. He/she enjoys absolute autonomy in the selection of pedagogical methods, classroom management strategies and in influencing the course of learning. Teachers also possess a special kind of power, which, to a certain extent, can be equated with that of the most prestigious professionals. They determine the future of the students by promoting or demoting their charges or by channelling them into different ability groups.

The Attitudinal Model:

The attitudes held by members are as important in defining professions as the structural dimension discussed above. The fol-

Following criteria are believed to adequately depict the attitude of a true professional.

* *A professional must be competently oriented:*

Since members of the society believe in and relying on the esoteric knowledge possessed by the professional in solving their daily problems, a professional should always feel obliged to foster his/her expertise and to find better ways to fulfil his/her responsibilities.

In the teaching profession in Singapore, that teachers should be constantly upgrading and updating their competence through courses, seminars and conferences pertaining to teaching and learning is a particularly important attitude to be instilled in our teachers in view of the rapid and successive changes that take place in our education system. As Sia(1979) points out: "Not to progress professionally is to regress...A teacher can never truly teach unless he is still learning himself."(8)

* *A professional must have a sense of calling to the field:*

A professional places greater emphasis on intrinsic satisfaction derived from his work, rather than on monetary rewards or other benefits offered to him externally. This intrinsic value, which arises from the exercise of specialized knowledge and skill, on the other hand, engenders a sense of devotion, hence, a lifelong commitment to work on the part of the professional.

This sense of commitment is particularly cited by the Minister for Trade and Industry, Dr. Tony Tan, as a desirable attitude which outweighs others in the maintenance of a high level of professionalism in teaching. As he indicates, "the teacher who displays integrity and dedication will constantly want to improve himself by maintaining high standards of personal and professional conduct. He will continue

to grow professionally through reading, studying and actively participating in professional activities. He will apply continual self-evaluation to assess how he has conducted himself and managed his school work."(9). A strong sense of commitment is also evidenced by the teacher's belief that he/she should love and take pride in his/her work.

** A professional must demonstrate a belief in service to the public:*

A professional must believe that his service is both indispensable and beneficial to society. Snizek(1972) suggests that "since the general public has difficulty believing in the indispensability of services performed by some occupations, practitioners are often slow to develop this belief. Therefore, the degree to which they do so becomes"an important attitude component for measuring professionalism (10). The service orientation of the professional can also be defined as the norm that decisions made by the professional should be based on the needs of the clients, rather than on the material interest and needs of the professional himself.

When applied to education in Singapore, this would mean that teachers should act not in the interests of the employing authority and of themselves, but in those of the students. Thus, a strong sense of responsibility to their students is a virtue that our teachers need to cultivate if they are to become full-fledged professionals.

** A professional must use the professional organization as a major referent:*

Both the formal and informal professional organizations should always be treated by a professional as an important source of ideas and judgments in his work. The professional looks to his professional colleagues for cues and insights to

guide his action, and through identifying closely with one another, helps uphold the values and norms of the profession and maintain the standards of performance. This "colleague consciousness"(Gross,1958) is usually manifested in the form of membership possessed by the professional in a strong professional association and by his participation in such professional activities as conferences, meetings and so on.

A colleague orientation is deemed necessary for our teachers if they are to strive towards professionalism. They need to support one another, both in thinking and in action, and to work together for the good of their students and their profession.

* *A professional must have a strong sense of autonomy:*

A professional must demonstrate a positive attitude towards autonomous practice, that is, a willingness, a feeling of freedom and competence to exercise discretions. Any decision and judgment made by the professional with regard to his work should not be influenced by pressures imposed on him by the laity, including the employing body, the clients, as well as non-members of the profession.

The recent change of educational and administrative direction in Singapore has provided our teachers and principals with greater discretionary power in the running of the schools. This is, without doubt, a challenge; a challenge which will contribute to the self-esteem of the teachers and to the raising of the status of the profession, and which must be accepted by the teachers with a good grace and confidence.

This chapter has delineated both the structural and attitudinal characteristics of a profession. Though importance of these two aspects of the profession is being recognized, for teachers do not function in the abstract, special attention has, nevertheless, been

given to the latter. The following chapter will give a brief review of studies on the work attitudes of teachers in general and of women teachers in particular.