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**The Dynamics of Teacher Professionalism
in an Asian Context**

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Abstract

Any study of the success of schools, must focus attention on the role and practices of their teachers. How can we understand the work of the teacher? One important dynamic is the notion of teacher professionalism. Sociological discourse about professionalism and the state can go some way in helping us to understand the contemporary condition of teachers as professionals (Whitty 2002), but rather than asking whether the teaching profession lives up to some supposed ideal of what professionals do, this paper accepts the notion that professionalism is an ever changing condition, a shifting phenomenon (Hanlon 1998) and an expression of what the community hold to be true at the time. This paper is an exploration of the dynamics of teacher professionalism through a case study approach. The purpose of the paper is to provide insight, through a series of ten case studies, into teacher agency, the work, role and perceptions of teachers in an Asian jurisdiction.

Introduction

Trust is part of the dynamic of professionalism. There was a “golden age of teacher autonomy” in Australian and UK educational history, perhaps back to the 1950-70s, where parents ‘trusted’ their child’s school teacher. Parents were expected to trust teachers to know what was best for their children (Whitty 2006, p.3). Teachers were trusted by agencies to create their own teaching programs to deliver what was best for students heading for examinations, “Do it Yourself Curriculum Guides” were used to assist teachers to develop their own materials and practices. This deep trust in teachers’ professional judgment has long since eroded. Now curriculum and even pedagogical approaches are mandated by the state. Centralised curriculum and teacher standards, for example, the Australian National Curriculum K-12 (ACARA, 2015) and Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL 2015) are in place to monitor and regulate teacher’s work. As the term professional in this title emphasizes, teaching is still very much regarded as a profession, but just how a professional is defined has changed.



In Hong Kong, the situation is a little different; the curriculum from Kindergarten through Primary to Secondary 3 is much less controlled, with teachers and schools having greater autonomy in choosing what they teach (within general Education Bureau Guidelines). Similarly, in regards to Teacher Standards, in HK a Teacher Competency Framework was developed in 2003 but is rarely enacted in schools or enforced by the Education Bureau. Moreover the respect given to teachers by the Chinese community is much higher than in most Western jurisdictions. Culturally Chinese place a higher value on education and a higher respect for teachers than is evident in many Western jurisdictions. Dolton (2013) reports on the respect given to teachers in Chinese cultures noting it is the highest of 21 nations surveyed. Although even in Asia teacher professionalism is changing, and as Chang (2009) reports, more and more students do not respect or recognize teachers' school and classroom status and authority.

So what is expected of Hong Kong teachers as professionals? The purpose of this paper is to use case studies to explore the dynamics of teaching professionalism in Hong Kong schools today. It is about informing teacher agency, where as Tsang (2012) notes, in discussing teacher professionalism in Hong Kong, we should recognize teachers' agency: the capacity to interpret, evaluate, and make meaning of their work, and the capacity to take actions based on this interpretation, evaluation, and meaning making (Tsang 2012, p.89).

Is teaching a profession?

Before exploring cases studies of professionalism, we address the question; Is teaching a profession? A concise summary of the development of teacher professionalism in Hong Kong, with its roots beginning in the 1997 era, can be found in Morris (2008) "Teacher professionalism and teacher education in Hong Kong".

Professionalism can be defined in many ways; David (2000) provides a definition which could be generally accepted as a synthesis of views:

1. Professions provide an important public service,
2. They involve a theoretically as well as practically grounded expertise,



3. They have a distinct ethical dimension which calls for expression in a code of practice,
4. They require organization and regulation for purposes of recruitment and discipline and,
5. Professional practitioners require a high degree of individual autonomy-independence of judgment- for effective practice. (David, 2000)

We now look at each of these criteria in terms of teachers' work in Hong Kong.

1. No one would question the essential nature of an education system to society. Schools serve a vitally important public service. Teachers are the heart of schools, and as such serve a vital public service. Whether it is in ensuring the values of the community are recreated in the next generation, or ensuring transfer of the skills, knowledge and understanding needed to be productive members of society, schools are necessary. A point of interest in Hong Kong, is that the vast majority of schools (approximately 96%) are independently managed public schools or private schools.

2. To be a teacher requires theoretical and practical grounded expertise. Four years of tertiary education is a minimum, and in Hong Kong a Masters degree is fast becoming an 'entrance' degree for securing teacher employment, and certainly a Masters or other further study, is essential for promotion in most schools to leadership level positions. In addition, teachers in most countries, have an established set of teacher competencies, or capabilities that are determined to be minimal standards for the profession. In Hong Kong the development of a Teacher Competency Framework was recommended in the EDB Report of the Advisory Committee on Teacher Education and Qualifications (ACTEQ). (2009). This Teacher Competency Framework was developed in 2003 and is available online through the website of the Council of Professional Development of Teachers and Principals (COTAP) (www.cotap.hk). The ACTEQ also recommended a Continuing Professional Development CPD program for teachers, which has been adopted broadly but EDB and within the Code of Aide (governing all schools supported with Government funding). This includes the 'soft' requirement of 150 hours of ongoing professional learning every three years. While the TCF exists, there is little evidence that it is adopted or applied in practice in schools



performance management programs or in teacher registration.

3. Teachers have a Code of Practice. In Hong Kong there is a Council on Professional Conduct in Education (<http://cpc.edb.org.hk/>) who provides a Code for the Education Profession of Hong Kong. The CPC was set up in April 1994 on the recommendation of the Education Commission Report No 5. Its terms of reference are:

- * To advise the Government on measures to promote professional conduct in education;
- * To draft operational criteria defining the conduct expected of an educator and to gain widespread acceptance of these criteria among all sectors of the education community through consultation; and
- * To advise the Permanent Secretary for Education on cases of dispute or alleged professional misconduct involving educators.

This code is, however, rarely evidenced in practice, a search of Education Bureau Circulars shows that only one recent mention of professional conduct, the Education Bureau Circular Memorandum 65/2010 which includes the statement “EDB attaches great importance to the professional conduct of teachers (including principals)...”

In fact, the Code of Practice is not covered at all in the Code of Aide (2015) or School Administration Guide (2015), which are the documents that determine the governance of all HK local schools.

Regardless, most schools would have their own internally developed policy documents that set standards for teacher practice which can be in a sense considered to be codes of practice. Such expectations are commonly noted in the school’s “Teacher Handbooks”.

4. Teachers in Hong Kong must be registered with the Teacher Registration Team before working in any formal school setting. Teacher registration is a rigorous process, and deregistration is a disciplinary option. Teachers may be classified as Registered or Permitted Teachers, where permitted teachers have limitations placed on their practice. Interestingly, the Teacher Registration Team is not an



independent authority but is a unit within the Education Bureau thus controlled by government and not by the profession itself.

5. Teacher autonomy is a hall mark of professionalism. At issue are the constraints put on teachers' work by centralized curriculum, school mandates on teaching and learning practices, and other controlling interests such the requirements of accrediting bodies for teaching practice and pedagogy (e.g. International Baccalaureate Organization). McGrath (2000) questions teacher autonomy, pointing out that teachers may not have professional freedom rather noting that teacher's work may be under institutional and social constraints e.g. curriculum statements, examination systems, education departmental regulations, etc.

But as Chuk (2010, p. 39) says, although teachers may be constrained by the syllabus, curriculum guidelines, examination systems and/or textbooks, they exercise independent judgment when it comes to tailoring their teaching for the maximum benefit of their learners. It is generally and widely accepted that teachers exercise a high degree of autonomy inside their classrooms; teachers' professionalism is characterised by the teachers' capacity for taking control of their teaching, their professional knowledge and their willingness to accept responsibility.

In Hong Kong the autonomous nature of teacher's work is greatly enhanced by the fact that approximately 96% of Hong Kong schools are independent schools. This means that as a system of education the vast majority of schools are not 'owned and operated' by the government (through the Education Bureau) but are independent. This is quite different to countries such as Australia and Singapore, where the majority of schools are government public schools, and as a result, teachers' work can be more tightly governed by Education Bureau direction and far less autonomous.

If a post-modern, critical perspective is taken, than it could be argued that there is a de-professionalization of teachers' work, as they crumble under multiple pressures and intensified work demands. Kwok (2012) suggests that a major reason for a lot of teachers' negative emotional experience (in Hong Kong) is due to recent education reforms, which have created working conditions of teachers that are unfavorable and that do not fulfill teachers' professional expectations.



For example, he suggests that many teachers autonomy is being eroded in Hong Kong, because they have to spend too much time on administrative duties and not enough time on instructional and educational practices. This has given rise to questions put by some writers and commentators as to whether teachers are truly professionals or not (Shon, 2006).

Demirkasumoglu (2010) holds that the issue of teacher professionalism can be viewed from different perspectives. He notes Sachs (2003) in considering that the teacher professionalism issue can be seen as a social and political strategy to promote the status of teaching profession. He also refers to Hargreaves (2000) in noting that discussions of professionalism can be seen as an exciting broad social movement that protects and advances teachers' ability to work effectively with groups and institutions beyond school (e.g. professional associations).

In summary, if the definition offered by David (2000) is used as the basis upon which to explore the question of teacher professionalism in the HK context, than the outcome is undecided. Regardless it can be proposed, that in the Hong Kong school system, which is dominated by a strong Chinese culture, education is held in high esteem (Dolton, 2013), and teaching is held to be profession by the majority of Hong Kong citizen and by teachers.

The professionalism of teachers is most often judged by behaviour. Adherence to stated 'codes of conduct' is important, but teachers' behaviour is constantly under the scrutiny of parents and the public. The community has an expectation of how 'professionals' should act and given that teachers are trusted with the care and education of children, they are held to high standards indeed. Let us turn to defining the dynamics of teacher professionalism.

Teacher's professionalism explored through case studies

In order to explore the dynamics of teacher professionalism, the following ten case studies are presented to stimulate reflection about what constitutes teacher's professional behaviour. The situations, briefly described, are based on actual cases of teachers who worked in either primary or secondary schools in Hong Kong between 2019 and 2016.



- **Case Study 1: “Mr Choi and Examination Past Papers”**

Mr Choi’s student results for the last 3 years HKDSE exams had been terrible. He has been a teacher for 15 years but seems to have lost his enthusiasm for teaching. In the past year he has been late arriving to school 42 times.

At the Annual Performance Management interview the principal asked; “Please look at last year’s exam and draw up a curriculum map that shows where you have covered each of the exam questions, in your annual teaching program. That is, where during the year did you teach each concept to your class, and how often did you cover that topic”.

After a few minutes Mr Choi replied: “I cannot do this as I don’t have a copy of the exam from last year or the year before.”

Outcome: Mr Choi was considered by the principal to be unprofessional. The reasons were, Firstly that In HK students are required to be punctual to class or face discipline and therefore it is considered unprofessional for teachers to be late. Secondly, while there is no stated requirement for teachers to have obtained copies of past examination papers, it is very unprofessional that he would not have them, as this indicates that he has not referred to them in the preparation of his students. Not knowing what was in past exams represents a lack of duty of care.

- **Case Study 2: “Ms Tong and EMI”**

Ms Tong is a Secondary 1-3 Science teacher in a 100% English Medium of Instruction (EMI) school. She is very popular and well liked by students, but her exam results are quite poor. Walking past her classroom, the Vice Principal noted that Ms Tong was teaching in Chinese (not English as required). This happened on 5 occasions.

The VP finally went to her class and asked her; “Please explain why you were teaching Science in Chinese and not in English?” Ms Tong responded: “Sorry, my students do not understand difficult science concepts if I teach in English, so I use Chinese and they like it very much.”



Outcome: Ms Tong was disregarding a school rule (all teaching is to be in English) because she found that her students responded better in Chinese. Ms Tong reasoned that this was professional as she held the best interest of her students at heart. The principal and school disagreed. They determined that Ms Tong in disregarding the school rule was in breach of her contractual requirements. Most importantly, they noted that the parents had chosen to enroll their children in this school because of its 100% EMI status and further more, as the final examinations for Science subjects would be in English, she was disadvantaging her students chances of doing well in the examinations (they needed to practice in English). Ms Tong was considered to be unprofessional and disciplinary action against her was instituted.

- **Case Study 3: “Ms Au and SENS Student”**

Ms Au teaches a P4-P5 class. The students are very good, but she has one Special Educational Needs (SENS) student, Katie in her class. Katie has low level Aspersers Syndrome as well as other physical disabilities. Ms Au has taken to sending Katie out of the class to go to the Office each day during class writing time. The Principal was sick of this and he sent for her to come to his office, where he asked her: “Please explain why you keep sending Katie out of your class to the Office?” Ms Au responded: “Katie loves to read and will do that all day, but she will not write. She has a bad hand-tremor and finds it very difficult and embarrassing to write. So I send her to the office so she does not have to be humiliated in class”.

Outcome: Ms Au actions were found to be unprofessional. The reasons given were that the school and the Education Bureau have an Inclusion Policy, whereby students with disabilities should not be excluded on the grounds of their disability. To send Katie to the Office when it was time for Writing Lessons was in clear breach of this policy. Of importance in this decision, was the belief by Katie that she was been punished by being sent to the Office because of her hand tremor. Ms Au was given a formal letter of warning, and told to stop sending Katie to the Office. The school also arranged for special Teacher Aide assistant to support Katie during writing times.



- **Case Study 4: “Ms Lam and Liberal Studies”**

Ms Lam teaches S4-S6 classes in Liberal Studies (LS). Her students get very good pass rates of 98% (Level 3 or 4), but the problem is that her Credit scores (Level 5, 5*, 5**) are very poor, as a result her Value Added Scores are also very low. The principal is concerned. At the annual Performance Management, she says to the Principal: “This is not my fault. As a school we need to change our whole school approach to LS. We need to teach LS lessons in S1 – S3. This is after all a core subject; students must be well prepared before they come to S4. We should drop Home Economics and replace it with LS. If you give me more time with the students, they will do better. And anyway Home Economics is an outdated subject. We should get rid of the Home Economics teacher.”

Outcome: Ms Lam believed she was being professional in advocating for her subject. She believed that students in LS would get better results if there was more lesson time given over to LS, professional teachers should push for more resources for their subject, they should be advocates for their students. The principal did agree that seeking extra resources for a subject is valid, however, advocating that LS is more important than Home Economics was not professional. Furthermore, the principal noted that professionalism is also about achieving the best within limited resources, and not blaming a lack of resources for failure to succeed. Ms Lam was directed to review her LS teaching programs and scope and sequence documents.

- **Case Study 5: “Mr Leung the authoritarian”**

Mr Leung is a ‘scary old male physics teacher’. He is 57yrs old and he is always the first to arrive and last to leave. He works hard and takes on many ‘extra’ administrative jobs. His results in F6 Physics are really excellent. The students who can last with him (many students pull out of his physics classes, especially girls) achieve outstandingly. But the school has received six complaints from parents about him yelling and scaring his students and bullying them, even to the extent of making some students cry. He is seen to be a bully who scares his students into working hard. On the other side of the story, the school has also received two letters of high commendation from parents, stating he is the best



teacher in the school and more should be like him. They praise his authoritarian style and that he drives their children to work hard, which, in their opinion is much needed in youth today.

Outcome: Mr Leung's teaching style is authoritarian, he is forceful and abrasive and unrepentant. He believes that he gets outstanding results because he drives his students to work hard. He says his results speak for themselves. Moreover, he has many alumni who have gone on to great careers, who speak nothing but praise for what he did for them. The principal, while maybe wishing to agree in his heart of hearts, cannot do so. Mr Leung is found to be highly unprofessional, and the reason given is that it is found that he has 'bullied and harassed' students, and that this is against the school and Education Bureau strong Anti-bullying Policy. Evidence presented of making girls cry, was also considered to be litigious under HK Ordinances. Mr Leung resigned from the school, unable to make or willing to make the change in teaching style, he was readily employed in another institution.

- **Case Study 6: "Ms Woo and the Democracy Movement"**

Ms Woo is a Primary 5 teacher. She is a very good primary school teacher who gets very good outcomes and is loved by all her students. She was personally involved in the "Umbrella Revolution" that took to the streets in mass rallies of public support for the democracy movement in HK. She is very concerned for what she sees as grave problems for the young people of HK. In class she promoted students to be involved in the "Yellow" movement and even decorated her classroom with yellow umbrellas and slogans. She invited her young students to come visit the street protest site on the weekend. Four parents complained about this to the school principal and one parent complained to the Education Bureau.

Outcome: Ms Woo believed in the cause and the right to protest. She believed that students needed to know about important social issues, that this was a part of an all round education, as much as reading, writing and maths. This was a politically sensitive issue. Ms Woo was found to be highly unprofessional; the reason was because of the age of her primary 5 students (10 - 11 year olds). Ms Woo was formally interviewed, and formally warned in writing, that



she must not 'impose' her political views onto her students. She was informed that teaching about the social movement, was different to inviting her young students to join the protest on the weekends.

- **Case Study 7: "Ms Yu the New Age Thinker"**

Ms Yu teaches Early Childhood (P1 & P2) and she is a 'New Age thinker'. Currently she is a vegan who believes in Piggott-Litman's Theory that links aspects of Choice Theory and the Theories of Reggio Emilia. She is terrible at things like assessment, monitoring, program delivery and data recording. Her students have a lot of time to explore their creativity and use their imagination in class. She promotes free play and does not like rote learning practices. Ten parents have come together to meet the principal where they have complained and demanded that their children be moved to another class so they can have a 'proper' education. The school is not a Reggio Emilia or alternative education school, it is an aided public primary school.

Outcome: At interview Ms Yu tried to explain to the principal that her teaching philosophies are sound and well researched. She noted that for Primary 1 and 2 (5 – 7 yrs olds), there was great support for students to be Active Learners and to explore their creativity. She argued that as a professional it was her right to be able to teach her classes in the best way that she could, and she firmly believed in her pedagogical approaches. The principal held her to be truly professional and she agreed that there was a great deal of evidence and research supporting Ms Yu's teaching pedagogies. Unfortunately, these were not the philosophies or mission of their school, nor were they in keeping with the schools adopted curriculum and pedagogical approaches. Ms Yu's contract as a teacher, was not renewed at the end of the year.

- **Case Study 8: "Mr Fu and the Wine Store"**

Mr Fu is 56 yrs old, 10 years ago he wanted to be a primary school principal, but he was always passed over for any promotions. Now, he arrives 2 minutes before the start of school and is always the first to leave school in the afternoon. He does not attend any school functions or activities that are not



absolutely compulsory. He never volunteers and never engages in teacher's social activities. He does the bare minimum of work and is considered to be lazy by other staff who prefer not to work in teams with him.

Mr Fu's wife owns a shop that sells high quality wines in Central and when he is not at school he works in his wife's store and runs their online wine order business. Two other teachers have complained to the principal about Mr Fu's lack of cooperation and about the fact that he promotes and sells alcohol.

Outcome: Mr Fu argues that what he does in his own time outside of school is his own personal business and that it does not affect his teaching. Mr Fu says because teaching does not pay well many teachers have other money making interests. He says that the business belongs to his wife and he is not getting paid to work in the business. Besides, he never tries to sell wine to teachers or parents. The principal acknowledges that some teachers have other interests outside of school and some are involved in second jobs. The principal does, however, add that selling alcohol and promoting the sale of alcohol is not in keeping with what is expected of a teacher in Hong Kong and that it tarnishes the image of the profession. Under the school's employment contracts, teachers are required to gain the approval of the school to engage in any other secondary employment. The principal ruled that assisting in his wife's business constituted a second job and this was not approved. Mr Fu resigned from the school.

- **Case Study 9: "Mr Cheung and Facebook"**

Mr Cheung was in regular communication with a 15 yr old girl student via Facebook and Facebook Messenger. She is not in his classes but is a student in his school. Mr Cheung would send jokes to the girl. He would share jokes with a number of other students as a part of the social network. One day after the School Swimming Gala, he asked the girl student to send him a copy of the photograph of herself that he knew she took during the swimming event. When she said no, he asked a second time. The student then sent him two photographs of herself, in one she is in a swimsuit, in which her naked breasts can be clearly seen. After investigation, it is found that Mr Cheung has never met the girl alone or that there has been any inappropriate touching or



physical relations of any kind. The student is supportive of Mr Leung and does not want him to be in trouble. The girl's parents were upset when they discovered by accident who she had sent the photo to.

Outcome: The Principal accepted that the teacher did not on purpose request a naked image of the girl, but the principal held that any private or social communications between a teacher and an underage student were highly unprofessional and could be foreseen to lead to problems.

The principal determined that Mr Cheung had never touched the girl, but the fact that the 15 year old girl (below the legal age of consent) had sent such a photo of herself to the teacher contravened laws of 'sexting', the teacher had received this photo and had it on his phone and he had not immediately reported this to the school or police. After seeking legal counsel, the teacher resigned from the school and the parents dropped police charges against him.

- **Case Study 10: "Ms Yip and the Suicide Gesture"**

Ms Yip is the Classroom teacher for Class 1B. One of the students, Mary, failed an English examination and she became very emotional. After the class she went up to the 5th floor and climbed up onto the balcony handrail. Two of her friends saw her and rushed to pull her back. They then took her to Ms Yip. The girl cried and said she did not want Ms Yip to inform her parents. The girl was very emotional as she worried about the reaction of her parents. She said "I cannot stand how my parents will react if they find I have failed English and what I have done, it would be terrible and I'd rather die". Even though this was a 'Suicide Gesture' and as such the school rules say the parents and Education Dept should be informed, Ms Yip decided not to inform the parents or department.

Outcome: The principal found out about the situation a day later when two of Mary's class mates came to see her. They said they were really worried about Mary and what she had done. The principal immediately called Ms Yip into her office. Ms Yip said that she had made a professional decision that the problem rested with Mary's grave fear of her parents. She said that she did not think that Mary would have jumped, but was only up on the balcony handrail to get



attention, which she had done. The principal disagreed, she informed Ms Yip that she had acted very unprofessionally. The principal said that the school policy was in place because it was also the law in HK, that any student 'suicide gesture' must be reported to the police and to the Child Welfare Agency. She said that if Ms Yip was truly professional, she would have put aside her feelings for the girl immediate emotions and known that in reporting the suicide gesture, the girl would be provide with what she needs, which is professional support and psychological care. Finally the principal warned that it was highly unprofessional for teachers to make decisions for parents and that this was a serious breach of duty of care, for if the girl had later committed suicide, the teacher would be facing serious charges of negligence.

Conclusions

While questions can be raised about teacher professionalism in some jurisdictions, it has been accepted in this paper that due to cultural norms, the Hong Kong community highly regard teaching as a profession. Similarly, teachers in Hong Kong also consider themselves to be professionals and as such it is a concept that guides practice. Expectations of professionalism are important in regards to what is perceived to be the role, responsibilities, accepted practices and behaviour of teachers.

In these ten case studies, different stories are presented that illustrate what constitutes professionalism or at least where professionalism is considered to be breached. These case studies could possibly have been set in the context of other education jurisdictions, like Australia or Singapore, but in other countries, local ordinances and expectations of what teachers do and how teachers are perceived by the community, can affect how professionalism is defined.

Taken together, these case studies tell a story about what teacher professionalism is, and when combined with the many other case studies that could be told, this paper provides a guide to understanding the dynamics of teacher professionalism in an Asian jurisdiction.



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