I AM A PROFESSIONAL

LEARNING COMMUNITIES ELEVATE TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND IDENTITY

By Edward F. Tobia and Shirley M. Hord

On a highway that cuts through the downtown of a large urban city was a billboard that read: "Want to teach? When can you start?"

It made us think long and hard about the message society sends to teachers: Anyone can teach. That phrase could come right out of the animated film, *Ratatouille*, in which the phrase "anyone can cook" is a central theme. In one sense, it's true. Anyone can teach, and everyone does: Parents consciously and unconsciously teach their children, and we all teach others by our examples. We have all been taught to walk, talk in our native tongue, throw a ball, or drive a car. But what separates that form of teaching from those who teach professionally?

There's one scene in the movie that gets to the point. It's where chef Gusteau states, "What I say is true — anyone can cook … but only the fearless can be great." For a teacher, what does it mean to be fearless? And what does being fearless have to do with being a professional? Let's start by examining the characteristics of a profession.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A PROFESSION

When we asked a gathering of teachers what it means to be a professional, their initial reaction was to describe how one dresses, interacts with others in a congenial way, and behaves outside of the work setting. It was more about behaving well in the company of others than about the work they do.

As we began our search for literature about teaching as a profession, one of the first articles we came across was one titled, "Is teaching a profession?" (Taylor & Runte, 1995). This didn't seem promising.

While the concept of professionalism is elusive, we discovered a few sources that attempted to define the characteristics of a profession (Bulger, 1972; Burbules & Densmore, 1991; Larson, 1977):

1. Formal preparation for one's chosen field, most often through a university;
2. A formal association that holds itself responsible for the quality of services provided by an individual in the profession;
3. A regulated certification process tied to some form of entry examination;
4. A unique set of skills based on a thorough understanding of the knowledge base generated by members of the profession;
5. A service that is both unique and vital to society;
6. A strong sense of service to the clients or recipients of the professional service;
7. A sense of responsibility and service to the profession itself;
8. An ethical code that guides the behavior of individuals;
9. A high degree of respect from the members of society served by the profession.

6 characteristics of an effective professional learning community

- Structural conditions.
- Intentional collective learning.
- Supportive relational conditions.
- Peers supporting peers.
- Shared values and vision.
- Shared and supportive leadership.

The occupation of teaching has many of the characteristics of a profession. It was once a calling that had the same degree of respect given to members of the clergy, but somewhere in the evolution of teaching in the United States, that sense of respect has been diminished, especially by policymakers who impose punitive actions when students fail to meet policy mandates.

There are many attempts to improve teaching emanating from the U.S. Department of Education, state departments of education, and organizations such as the National Center for Teacher Effectiveness, ASCD, National Council of Teachers of English, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and Learning Forward, as well as national, regional, and local teacher unions. There are many strategies on how to improve teaching, but very few coming from teachers. How can teachers claim to be professionals if all of their actions are mandated and regulated from outside of the schoolhouse? What keeps them from demonstrating to policymakers that they can fearlessly address all of the learning challenges they face in classrooms every day? We will address those questions by exploring the emergence of the teaching profession, why it has met challenges getting there, and how teachers can fearlessly show that they are true professionals.

THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF TEACHING

Teaching in the United States was initially a cottage industry. Mothers, committed to strong religious beliefs, worked with their children in the evenings. The Bible served as the single source of reading material, and a piece of charcoal rescued from the fireplace was used to teach basic mathematics. These isolated entrepreneurs worked as the sole proprietor of formal learning as "dame schools" (Monaghan, 1988; Sugg, 1978) developed to serve children who lived in close proximity to the sole educator, a mother.

As settlements developed, churches and one-room schoolhouses served a sparse population. A teacher with little preparation (graduation from primary school) worked in isolation. Because few others in the communities possessed reading or writing skills, the teacher enjoyed high regard and esteem for his or her skills and assumed wisdom. Teaching became a status symbol in the community. Teacher training was slow to develop. From 1850 to 1920, normal schools began to provide this service (Neil, 1986). Teachers were seen as being "educated," adding to their stature. At the turn of the 20th century, teaching met many of the characteristics of a profession.

However, business trends began to influence the emerging profession:

"In the 20th century, as schools grew larger, school principals and district superintendents became important for the role they could play in managing the school campuses and the district to which they were assigned. These players on the educational stage enacted their roles in the interest of efficiency, adopted from the business models of the time … (and) classrooms and cultures promoted insulation from any new ideas, leaving principals and classroom teachers generally as self-employed individuals. Here, individual teachers in their isolated classrooms (even if they shared a classroom wall) conducted their work as best they could, dependent on their personal knowledge of curriculum and instruction, and theory of student learning" (Hord & Tobia, 2012, p. 19).

Efficiency took over, and an entire industry of teacher in-service training took the developing knowledge base and put it into the hands of people outside the schoolhouse. Teachers began to be treated as less than professional.

THE DE-PROFESSIONALIZATION OF TEACHING

After the publication of "A Nation at Risk," the landmark 1983 report on American education (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the public began to demand greater quality in all schools, and that quality was defined by results on achievement tests. Teacher evaluation systems developed, tied to high-stakes testing programs, tied to well-meaning but harsh accountability systems based on rewards and punishment. The result was mistrust among peers, and teachers and administrators playing the system or even cheating.

Teachers, lacking a voice in legislatures passing strict ac-

countability systems, turned to unions. Many of these unions used tactics such as strikes and walkouts, which are not characteristics associated with a profession. Legislatures began to look outside the traditional teacher preparation programs at universities to fill vacancies with teachers who complete alternative certification. Many of these alternative programs are excellent, but some are less than satisfactory. While the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has made progress toward defining what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do, the board is designed for practicing teachers rather than the kind of national board suggested in 1985 by Albert Shanker, then president of the American Federation of Teachers: "It would be a group which would spend a period of time studying what is it that a teacher should know before becoming certified, and how do you measure it? … Over a period of time, I would hope that the board eventually would be controlled by the profession itself, even if it didn't start completely that way" (Shanker, 1985).

The concept of professional teachers controlling entry into the profession is a long way from our current system, which treats teachers as less than professional. The transition back to professional status starts with teachers who have become "fearless" enough to gather in small communities as learners to constantly support one another's professional growth. These small teams of teachers are coming together in schools across the country to learn how to solve the challenges of teaching and learning. These islands of excellence consist of teachers who behave as professionals. The movement called professional learning communities must become the norm in every school for teachers to claim their place as respected professionals.

THE RE-PROFESSIONALIZATION OF TEACHING

Teachers work with students every day, and many work in challenging conditions. In a small U.S. town on the Mexico border, teachers at San Jose Middle School (the school name is a pseudonym) convene in data teams and meet in professional learning communities to examine the impact of their teaching on student learning. They have matured from teams coming together to do common planning to teams that learn the most effective ways of addressing the learning needs of all students. The school now exemplifies six characteristics of an effective professional learning community: structural conditions, intentional collective learning, supportive relational conditions, peers supporting peers, shared values and vision, and shared and supportive leadership. Here is how those characteristics look at San Jose Middle School.

Structural conditions

The district provides an identified time for the communities to meet daily for one hour before the instructional day begins. At San Jose, several communities meet simultaneously in the library or occasionally in a teacher's classroom. The district

expects groups to use student data from multiple sources to identify students in need of improved performance.

Intentional collective learning

Once student needs are identified, communities discuss ways to address those needs. Teachers share repertoire, experiences, or solutions to these challenges. If no teacher in the community offers an instructional suggestion, the group may seek help from another team or from the master teacher, a supporter of their learning and work supplied by the district. When the community determines a new practice to employ in the classroom, members engage in learning what the new practice is and how to use it.

Supportive relational conditions

How community members relate to each other is highly important to ensure that data study, suggestion giving, discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of interventions for students, and how to learn how to deliver the interventions proceed productively. Teachers' respect and regard for each other, their use of conversation styles, their interactions, and how they confront conflict all contribute to strong trust in each other and to a smoothly functioning community.

The principal at San Jose encourages relational conditions by providing time for members to interact in a nonthreatening environment as well as supporting their efforts to collaborate.

Peers supporting peers

Teachers visit each other on invitation to observe the host teacher's identified classroom practices, take notes about the observations of the host teacher's requested behaviors, and share feedback later. Or, a colleague might visit another classroom to observe quality teaching in order to learn a new instructional strategy. Peer visitations provide support as well as a way for teachers to hold one another accountable for operating at their professional peak in service to students. San Jose's teachers are proud to share their skills and are open to learn from one another.

Shared values and vision

All of the actions described above are done within the parameters of a shared vision of what the school and classrooms should be about, and in alignment with a mental image of what new strategies and processes would look like when implemented in a high-quality way.

Teachers are developing the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that promote their feeling of efficacy and the power to influence others — colleagues and students. Community members have grown in competence and confidence, and with trust in each other, so that they hold each other accountable.

Shared and supportive leadership

The principal creates opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles and supports them in developing the skills to do so. Importantly, within state and district rules and regulations, policies and practices, learning community members have begun to make suggestions for what they will learn and what they will do in support of students' increased learning success. These suggestions and decisions come from their own experiences, reading and study, and interactions with colleagues in large group learning sessions, at conferences, and in school-based professional learning. They are developing the confidence to offer ideas, to discuss and support them, to listen to others, and to compromise in the best interests of students.

BRIDGING TO PROFESSIONALISM

Returning to the characteristics of persons who represent a profession in a high-quality way, two characteristics stand out:
- A strong sense of service to the clients or recipients of the professional service; and
- A unique set of skills based on a thorough understanding of the knowledge base generated by members of the profession.

It has become increasingly clear that fearless teachers engage in continuous learning, maintain a current knowledge and skills base, and participate in making decisions about where, how, and when to employ the skills and knowledge they have shared.

At San Jose Middle School, teachers' strong sense of service to students, who are the recipients of their concerned efforts, is a strong factor permeating the fabric of teachers' work. While teachers have not always immediately embraced change, they have reached consensus to improve their practices and, subsequently, student outcomes.

In community, participants have acquired new knowledge and skills and gained competence and confidence in their role as educators (relational conditions). They self-organize their teams, share ideas, discuss issues, make decisions, and act upon them (shared and supportive leadership). All of this is based on a shared vision of their school and its work. Teachers visiting each other's classrooms to observe their practice (peers supporting peers) is the hallmark of a mature group of professionals, seeking colleagues' feedback in order to improve their classroom and school practice.

These characteristics have developed through the structures and schedules of the school's learning teams or communities (structural conditions). In the community, the team studies data, identifies problems, determines solutions, and learns how to use the solutions for improvement (intentional collegial learning) based on student data.

San Jose educators have steadily grown in their instructional practice so that each student reaches successful learning. The school's state achievement ratings have steadily risen, to everyone's satisfaction — students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Students benefit from the long-term vision of the district

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and from teachers' work in learning communities.

Educators in effective learning communities also gain a professional perspective and demeanor. Not all teachers involved in professional learning communities are engaging in the research-based factors described here. Nor are all teachers given the latitude to study instructional problems, explore solutions, and make decisions about what to do. This can happen only if the leadership of the school supports it and creates working conditions in which professional learning communities flourish.

But these educators, who have sharpened their practice and keep focused on student success, can be described as authentic professional educators, continuously improving their knowledge and skills; committing their energy, resources, and wisdom to students; and, at the end of the day, representing all that is best in the profession of education.

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