

Issue Two (Spring 1994)

Table of Contents:

A Message from the S.O.T.A. P.D. Chair

Sandra Klinck

Superintendents' Team Message

Dave Coulter

From the Literature...

Teaching - A Multifaceted Profession

Pat Plohman

Our Portfolio Experience

Jan de Denus and Al Kircher

Spelling Begins With a Name

Karen Hartikainen

A MESSAGE FROM THE S. O. T. A. P. D. CHAIR

Sandra Klinck

What is professional development? It means different things to different people. There are different categories for professional development; divisional, school, and individual. One of the great difficulties in trying to address development is that there are so many variables. Each category may have a different focus for development. The coming year will be challenging because there are many areas needing our focus: changing curriculum, middle years, violence, and mainstreaming, to name but a few. These difficult financial times may require focusing jointly on some of these areas. The major difficulty comes when we try to address the extremely important individual category. A vital part of professional growth is that teachers reflect and identify areas for their individual growth. These are very diverse within a school. It is impossible for an individual school to meet these diverse needs. Perhaps guaranteeing one personal professional development day directly to individual teachers might alleviate some of this problem.

No matter where we teach the stress created by change is felt. It is a time for us to remember that change cannot happen overnight but also to realize that we do not need to keep on reinventing the wheel. Many of the 'new' ideas are not new ideas at all but old ideas repackaged and relabelled. Sometimes it seems we plant the seeds and then forget to allow time for them to be nurtured and developed. As we adapt and change to meet challenges we must not discard or stifle our successes or lose sight of our vision. We must reflect and learn from the past. It is vital that we take the time to reflect upon what we believe in and upon what principles public education is based. In other words, use our prior knowledge to create a better future. As education changes we must develop a vision towards which we are constantly striving and concentrate our present limited resources upon the immediate crucial areas without losing sight of our vision.

SUPERINTENDENT'S TEAM MESSAGE

David Coulter

"Professional" is not an uncommon word in teachers' vocabularies. It is used in different contexts, in a number of forms, to refer to a variety of activities. Most often it is used as an adjective to refer to a person or activity. Its opposite -- "unprofessional" -- is probably used at least as often. Professional is a word that has confused me over much of my career; here I try to sketch both the source of that puzzlement and my current understandings.

My earliest encounter with "professional" was over twenty years ago, when as a beginning teacher in Quebec, I was on strike (not an infrequent experience). This activity was deemed "unprofessional" and I was soon legislated back to work. This first encounter with professionalism perhaps helped to trigger my concern with its aspects of power and privilege.

Later in my career I came to associate professionalism with bargaining, particularly in relation to salary, working conditions and my authority as a teacher. In some ways this was a variation on the first meaning, only from a different perspective: professionalism was again being used as a weapon, but by a different party.

This new use of professional was dependent on the authority of specialized knowledge. Teachers could only claim to be professional in the same sense as medical doctors, or lawyers or architects -- and therefore claim their salaries and privileges -- if teachers also had comparable special expertise that permitted them to practice effectively (Larson, 1977; Labaree, 1992).

Evidence of the acceptance of this particular version of professionalism abounds: the lobbying for a professional bill by the Manitoba Teachers' Society, the requirement of certificates for special education teachers and administrators, the lengthening of certification requirements for aspiring teachers, the increasing numbers of teachers pursuing graduate studies. In the United States this is leading to state and national certification examinations for both aspiring and practising teachers.

I have come to believe that this discussion captures only part of what we may mean by professional, and in many ways the least important part. As well as aspects of status and power, professionalism has always been imbued with service (Fenstermacher, 1990). Doctors have obligations to promote health in society; lawyers have

responsibilities to justice. Teachers too must be aware of their obligations to our society and, I believe, in particular reference to education for democracy (Gutmann, 1988; Zeichner, 1991).

In an era when our schools are being reinvented, we have a particular professional responsibility to ensure that democratic principles and values are not lost in the clamour. In the push for charter schools, for example, some parents and children are privileged at the expense of others. Advocates insist on being able to select their clientele: "We're not interested in having the academically-challenged kids ... We're taking out the cream of the crop" (Masson quoted in *Globe and Mail*, April 1994). In the concern for safer schools, we cannot easily discard children. In the name of economic competitiveness, we cannot create six-year-old losers. These are not simple problems, but are instead complex dilemmas. I believe that we have a professional responsibility to become involved in the dialogue about the future of our schools.

Teachers can make important contributions to this discussion. First, we can talk about dialogue rather than debate. We need to understand issues and viewpoints, rather than argue from prepared positions. We need a dialogue for understanding (Burbules, 1993), rare in a society that often prizes winning debating points over careful listening. Second, we can contribute our professional knowledge, overt and tacit, disciplinary and pedagogical. The dialogue should be an informed one. Finally, we can contribute our understanding of the world of children. In the clamour of discussion, only adults voices may be heard; we need to make sure the quietest, most timid voices can also be audible.

These contributions are important and can best be made by teachers as professionals, but professionals not in a restricted sense, but in a broad moral one. Certainly I find this new meaning more helpful and satisfying than my original understanding from twenty years ago.

References

- Burbules, N. (1993). *Dialogue in Teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Fenstermacher, G.D. (1990). Some Moral Considerations on Teaching as a Profession. In J. Goodlad, R. Soder and K. Sirotnik (Eds.), *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching*, pp. (130-151). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gutmann, A. (1988). *Democratic Education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Labaree, D.F. (1992). Power, Knowledge, and the Relationization of Teaching: A Genealogy of the Movement to Professionalize Teaching. *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 62, No. 2, pp. 123-154.
- Larson, M.S. (1977). *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.
- Zeichner, K. (1991). Contradictions and Tensions in the Professionalization of Teaching and the Democratization of Schools. *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 92, No. 3, pp. 363-379.

FROM THE LITERATURE ...

The current edition of *Teachers College Record* has three intriguing articles.

"Educational Improvement and Public Debate"

Ellen Condliffe Lagemann (pp. 169-176)

This paper has special meaning for us in Manitoba. Lagemann describes the importance and difficulty of initiating and maintaining a public dialogue about the purposes of schools in our culture.

Failing to appreciate the value of conversation, we have failed to invent ways to marshal the support and public involvement that public education requires if it is to keep step with changing times and serve the diverse needs of an ever more diverse people. Perhaps we need a Great National Teach-In about Education -- an hour when all business stops and people gather in schools, libraries, churches, and homes to talk about some aspect of education. The idea is, of course, implausible, but so is the ironic fact that we are awash with communications and yet impoverished in our capabilities to talk effectively about educational purpose.

"Diversity and Inclusion: Toward a Curriculum for Human Beings"

Maxine Greene

This article is typical of Green's work: literate, thoughtful, and erudite. In it she provides a rationale for why it is so important to include marginalized and silenced voices.

Like many in our field, I am preoccupied by the "savage inequalities" Jonathan Kozel describes. My interest in coping with diversity and striving toward significant inclusion derives to a large degree from an awareness of the savagery, the brutal marginalizations, the structured silences, the imposed invisibility so present all around.

Her conclusion

...the point of a system of constraints is whether it leaves individuals the liberty to transform the system. The restrictions that exist, ... have to be within the reach of those affected by them so they at least have the possibility of altering them. It would appear to me, in an emerging society marked by a rich range of differences, that restrictions do indeed have to be brought within reach so that persons of all sorts can come together to change them.

"Computers Meet Classroom: Classroom Wins"

Larry Cuban (pp. 185-210)

Cuban argues that the slow pace of technological change in schools has less to do with logistical issues and more to do with the nature of schools as institutions, particularly cultural beliefs about teaching and the age-graded structure of schools. Cuban provides three possible scenarios of what might happen in the next decade and comments on which are likely and desirable.

TEACHING... A MULTI-FACETED PROFESSION

Pat Plohman

Conventional definitions of a profession have suggested that true professionals adhere to a formal body of knowledge, have workplace autonomy and provide an essential service. It has also been somewhat traditional for us as educators to define ourselves within this context. Perhaps we would better serve our profession and ourselves by clarifying our notion of ourselves as professionals. We should therefore not confine ourselves to predetermined professional criteria but explore what is unique about our profession.

The teaching profession is agreeably incredibly complex. We do not have a "codified body of knowledge." It is true that we provide our service based on academic and practical training but we operate from a knowledge base that is personally constructed to incorporate our personalities, philosophies and expertise. For our profession there is a "myriad of possibilities" in any teaching/learning situation, not one interpretation, or one judgement, or one antidote. We cannot, therefore, be expected to rely exclusively on curriculum developers and text book publishers to dictate our activities. We base our decision on a combination of theoretical, practical, and personal knowledge that each particular situation demands.

Simply stated, a professional does whatever it takes to get the job done. This is where teachers extend the previous stated limits of a professional.

We initially and continually devote ourselves to conscientious learning while attempting to keep pace with developing contemporary knowledge of the learning process and learning strategies.

While traditional professionals function in a predesigned physical environment, for example a dentist's office or a courtroom, we, as teachers, create our working environment so that it not only provides a physical setting but an intellectually motivating atmosphere within which learning can be facilitated.

While other professions can assume their clients or patrons are `ready' for their service, i.e. person visits the doctor with an earache, we cannot make the same assumptions. As the ever increasing stresses placed upon home and family reveal themselves, our profession has assumed responsibility for preparing students physically (breakfast), emotionally and psychologically for our service. We strive to reduce the distance between client and expert to create a nurturing relationship that allows us to be not only "teachers of children" but "advocates for children".

Beyond providing an essential service we as educators are charged with passing on civilization. We provide students with a sense of the past (where society came from), the present (what society is now) and the skills and knowledge to enable them to participate in that society in the future. Our challenge therefore is to keep pace with a profession whose only constant is change. Our expertise and effectiveness are embedded in change. Our leadership is needed to provide quality citizens for involvement in a democratic society.

In actual fact our profession is so complex that some might even say we are a "multi-faceted profession."

OUR PORTFOLIO EXPERIENCE

Jan de Denus and Al Kircher

When we first considered joining the Portfolio Research Team it seemed like a good opportunity to learn and to contribute to the division. There was to be a survey to design and interpret, articles to read and discuss, a series of interviews with teachers, and of course the inevitable report. The team had eight other members with a wide range of experiences and lots of enthusiasm. Three questions were identified to focus our efforts. This sounded straight forward and exciting. It was definitely exciting, but straight forward...to quote a Grade 3 student "no way!"

As we began to meet as a team and discuss the policy, our conversations could have sounded a bit like this. We'll define portfolio. Wait! If WE define a portfolio, it limits the potential of the concept but if we don't where is the leadership? "Ah ha." The dilemma, the discussion, the debate and eventually...slow down team! Do it another way. Let's look at other professions to see what they put into their portfolios. The artist carefully selects only the **best works** that show to others the **depth, versatility and skill of creation**. The investor **balances** high risk/high gain selections with "safe" ones, monitors the selections over time, and considers the current context to plan for the future. The writer's diary **explores** inner feelings and thoughts for insight, reflection, and direction. All we have to do is find the common threads from these approaches and we'll have a working definition. Common threads? The differences seem more helpful than the similarities. Will the common threads be relevant for education? Whoa team! Why not leave our view wide open and study what teachers think and find helpful?

We found ourselves focusing on the original questions! What are the understandings that teachers and administrators have of their roles? Does Policy GBI support the development of those understandings? How does Policy GBI contribute to the education of students in Seven Oaks? These questions framed our dialogue and guided our research.

The research process involved surveying all the teachers in the Division to gather some broad data and then identifying fifteen volunteers who shared their experiences with team members during two interview sessions. This resulted in a "mountain" of data that we organized, and reduced to manageable and meaningful understandings of teachers' experiences, understandings of the policy and any perceived effects on classroom practices and student learning.

Terms like ethnographic, qualitative paradigm, structured interview and warrant became part of our vocabulary. We made presentations of our findings locally and

internationally. As we read the literature related to portfolios we found that not only were we learning but Seven Oaks was taking portfolios in a new and unique direction that was of interest to the broader educational community. The teacher, as professional rather than as technician, was a core concept that sparked many valuable conversations, as we considered some of the assumptions about, and implications of, this complex concept. We also developed understandings that related to the three questions guiding the research.

As the third year of policy implementation and research draws to a close we have not found *definitive answers* but have developed deeper understandings of the process of teacher reflection, portfolio development and educational dialogue. Working with teachers and team members has challenged our ideas and assumptions, stretched our learning and sharpened our thinking.

The team will produce a final report during the Fall of 1994. The content of this report will summarize our understandings and recommendations regarding Policy GBI.

SPELLING BEGINS WITH A NAME: A REFLECTION ON SPELLING SKILLS ACQUISITION

Karen Hartikainen

As a grade one teacher, I am interested in the way children acquire spelling skills. I believe that reading and writing are simultaneous processes which happen quite naturally in a positive environment. In other words, as children learn to walk and talk under the encouragement of a significant adult, so do they learn literacy skills. Spelling, however, is an integral part of reading and writing. Could I apply the same belief to spelling? Can children learn to spell naturally under certain circumstances?

I have read a number of books and articles in an attempt to strengthen my understanding of how children progress toward standard spelling. I realized that I needed to make my students aware of proper spelling but how did I help them begin when few of them had the strategies to put words on paper? I encourage the children to write from the first day of school and, predictably, many use scribbles to represent the words in their stories. Ethel Buchanan (*Spelling For Whole Language Classrooms*, 1989) refers to this as the pre-phonetic stage. Some are able to copy words from a chart. Some are familiar with the sounds produced by letters (early phonetic stage) and are able to use this knowledge when writing. The current literature states that children go through these developmental stages as they attempt to make sense out of the English language. Mary Tarasoff (*A Guide to Children's Spelling Development for Parents & Teachers*, 1992) says that children soon become aware that properly spelled words can be read by others and this makes communicating through writing easier.

My first objective, therefore, is to expose my students to as much literature as possible. In this way they develop a better understanding of the function of print. I read to and with them, we chant from posters and charts, and I print their spoken words on flashcards and the board, knowing my modeling will help develop the skills which they need to acquire in order to read, write and spell. However, as the children become aware of the print, their desire to reproduce it for themselves becomes a lesson in frustration. I get frequent requests to supply the words. I began to realize that the children wanted a word to look like it does in a book and, furthermore, they still lacked the skills to attempt any form of spelling. I decided to create a system whereby desired words would be written down in a communal dictionary. Each child also has a set of personal "key" words to be referred to when writing. This, combined with McCrackens' frame sentences (*Spelling Through Phonics*, 1982), clearly illustrates for the child the connection between reading, writing, and spelling. I have noticed that, rather than interfering with their creativity, the children gain more confidence in their ability to write if they know they can always have the words they need. Now a child can write, knowing the word used is spelled correctly and what is written can be read and, because the

child has ownership of the chosen words, the learning is significant. All three processes are thus interdependent.

The idea of choice, I have discovered, becomes crucial to a child's learning. Children need the opportunity to choose their reading material. Likewise, they also need the freedom to choose topics about which to write. Why then, not allow them the choice of spelling words? Sandra Wilde (*You Can Read This!*, 1992) suggests that children be encouraged to choose thematic words, personally difficult words or words which emphasize a language strategy as opposed to a more formal spelling program. I believe this to be a valuable approach especially for children who lack confidence in their abilities to use strategies effectively. I began to see how important choice is to a novice speller. Consider the fact that a child begins to write by copying his/her name. Is it too simplistic to think of this as the first stage of spelling? The simple act of printing a name demonstrates to the child that certain letters go together in a certain order and make a certain configuration which is uniquely the child's name. Perhaps the child will ask to see other family members' names. Why? Because those names have significance to the child. Parents can enhance the literary experience by reading to their children and they can assist in the learning of writing and spelling by modeling words on paper. It becomes a natural extension, then, to continue this process at school. When asking for a word which is needed to complete a written thought, the child can trust the teacher to supply it.

Obviously, the caution is not to create dependent students. Along with assisting a child who is becoming confident in his/her use of words, it is necessary to develop the strategies which will enable a child to use invented spelling. Phonics and sight words used in context help developing spellers rely on their own thought processes. By this I mean, attention should be given to the patterns of language, including irregularities, and familiar words. It has been my experience that children make the transition to invented spelling (advanced phonetic and phonic stage) naturally as they come to realize they have the ability to attempt the words needed for their written work. Buchanan makes the distinction between phonetics and phonics as the progression from the sound production of letters to the rules about the sound/symbol relationships. Once they are comfortable with these strategies, I must then guide them toward conventional spelling. The process then, as I see it, is cyclical. The children go from print spelling (as it looks in a book), supplied by a significant adult, to invented spelling, arrived at by using learned strategies, back to standard spelling (as it looks in a book).

I have, like other educators, constructed an eclectic approach to spelling which may be as individual for me as the spelling process is to my students. These are my reflections gathered from the children in my class and gleaned from the resources written by experts in the field of spelling acquisition. In summary, I believe:

Spelling begins before invented spelling. Invented spelling presumes some knowledge of the sound/symbol system and experience with print. Adult modeling of significant words and the subsequent copying of these words may be regarded as the

early stages as this prepares the child for the eventual accuracy needed in standard spelling. (i.e. child's name)

Spelling is strengthened by exposure to literature as is reading and writing. The more children comprehend the function of print, the more likely they are to recognize letter order and configuration in familiar words. This, combined with understanding of the sound/symbol system, enables them to reproduce properly spelled words. Practice comes, therefore, with real reading and writing as opposed to teacher-directed, text-suggested activities.

Spelling is individual. Spelling programs appear to be designed for children who are at a specific learning level, yet not all children in any given classroom will be at the same level at one time. Each child needs to go through the stages (as suggested by Buchanan) at his/her own pace. Allowing children the opportunity to have input into their spelling needs may be a compromise towards individualized spelling. Specifically chosen words will have more significance and are more likely to be remembered if the words then become part of the child's repertoire to be used in written work. Writing is a very personal experience with words being chosen to express one's thoughts. It only stands to reason, then, that children learn to spell the words they need, not words dictated by a text.

We have come to recognize that reading and writing are skills learned in stages and that immersing children in a literature-rich environment encourages this natural development. Perhaps we need to see spelling as having similar characteristics. Spelling, so tightly woven into the fabric of language arts, is an aspect of both reading and writing.

Suggested Readings

Buchanan, Ethel. *Spelling For Whole Language Classrooms*. Winnipeg, Whole Language Consultants Ltd., 1989.

McCracken, Marlene J. and Robert A. McCracken. *Spelling Through Phonics*. Winnipeg, Peguis Publishers Ltd., 1982.

Tarasoff, Mary. *A Guide to Children's Spelling Development for Parents & Teachers*. Victoria, Active Learning Institute, 1992.

* Tarasoff, Mary. *Spelling Strategies You Can Teach*. Victoria, Active Learning Institute, 1990.

* Wilde, Sandra. *You Can Read This! Spelling and Punctuation for Whole Language Classrooms, K-6*. Portsmouth, N.H., Heinemann Educational Books, Inc. 1992.

* **Available at ERC Library**