Teaching: A Job or a Profession? The Perceptions of Educators

Darla M. Martinez and Mike F. Desiderio
College of Education, Texas A&M University–Kingsville, Kingsville, Texas, USA
Anne Papakonstantinou
University School Mathematics Project, Rice University, Houston, Texas, USA

Abstract
Researchers designed a study to investigate educators' perceptions about whether teaching is a job or a profession. A survey was developed to investigate factors such as individual definitions of a job and a profession, years of experience teaching, grade level or category of education, and individual perceptions of a profession. The respondents were 401 upper-level undergraduate preservice teachers and graduate students who were professional educators. Data collected showed many aspects of individuals' perceptions of teaching including control of teaching and working situations, ethics, and personal perceptions of being a professional. Based on the findings from the study, researchers concluded that educators believe teaching is a profession.

Keywords: governmental influence, higher education, political aspects, teacher education/certification.

What perceptions do full-time and preservice educators have for their present or future position as a teacher? One high school algebra teacher with 14 years' experience stated:

I have wanted to be a teacher for as long as I can remember. I had jobs when I was younger and there were days when I had to drag myself out of bed to go to work. Not so since I have been teaching; sure there are days when I wake up tired, but I don't dread going to work. Unfortunately for our students, for many of my colleagues, teaching is just a job. "Real passion is a requirement to be more than a mediocre teacher."

In American society today, it is a given (and is reflected in law) that all children are entitled to an education. The schools our youth attend and the educators who teach them can be considered a part of the core foundation of American society. To this end, the National Council on Teacher Quality (2004, 1) stated:

Address correspondence to Mike F. Desiderio, College of Education, Texas A&M University–Kingsville, 700 University Blvd., MSC 196, Kingsville, TX 78363, USA.
E-mail: kfmid00@tamuk.edu
Martinez, Desiderio, and Papakonstantinou

Great teachers make a profound difference in the lives of children. Each of us can remember the personal qualities of a great teacher whose influence stretches into our adulthood—or who gave our own children a solid start in life. But these elusive qualities are hard to measure. It’s even harder to use them to predict who will become a great teacher.

Teachers hold a unique position in our communities. This allows them to share and develop information between all of societies’ future stakeholders, thus controlling and directly influencing successful social growth and community relations. This prompts the question that many leaders in our society have: Are we sending our children to learn from professional educators, or are we sending them to learn from ordinary people in an ordinary occupation or trade? the question to ask.

The question of whether teaching is a “job” or a “profession” is not new. As far back as the 19th century, examples exist that the discussion of the “job” or “profession” question was well underway. For example, in the June 9, 1892 edition of the Journal of Education, Winship (1892a) argued that until teaching is considered a “profession,” the art and science of teaching would never be known. Winship (1892b) added in a later edition of the Journal of Education that teaching is a “profession,” in part, because of the special training needed to become an educator. Eliot (1892, 21) noted, “Teaching is among the newly recognized professions ...,” and asserted that for teaching to stay a “profession,” educators must go beyond the baccalaureate degree and obtain the master’s degree and even the doctoral degree.

The discussion of the status of teaching as a “job” or as a “profession” continued well into the 20th century. Brown University president, William Faunce (1907, 446), asked that educators consider their undertaking a “profession” rather than a trade because:

Trade is which a man enters for the sake of livelihood; profession is which he enters for the sake of public service. Trade is what he does as a temporary expedient, until he can find something more congenial; profession is that which he intends to be identified for life. Trade is that which any one can enter, if he will; profession is that which a man may go only after rigid inspection and prolonged preparation. Trade is that which knows only the ethics of success; profession is that in which motive and ideal count more than any visible result. Trade makes every man a rival of all other traders; profession makes every man a colleague of all who work beside him.

Diaz, Pelletier, and Provenzo (2005) concluded that professionalism in education includes the recognition of teachers as critical and effective leaders of instruction, as well as the creators of the social settings in which they work. Professionalism in teaching is a state of mind, having little to do with one’s occupational ranking or years of service. It could be inferred from Diaz et al. that if all teachers were to portray themselves with this level of professionalism, then complete job satisfaction would be achieved. Xin and MacMillan
(1999, 39) stated, “One aspect of commitment appears to be job satisfaction.” According to Tomlinson and Jarvis (2006, 16), “Teachers, who see strength in students, teach positively; teaching to student strengths help students see themselves positively.”

It is imperative that teachers hold a certain mindset; a person must want to teach for the passion, not the profit. In a study of preservice teachers in their senior year of college, Whitbeck (2000) found that participants believe teaching to be a “calling,” and that teachers are role models for society. Hanson (1962, 318) noted, “Control of ethics is one of the differences between professions and trades”; and as a result, as recognized role models, teachers must hold themselves to a code of ethics.

The authors agree with Clark’s (1930, 213) assertion that a professional is “a person devoted to a cause, and for this reason must study through reading.” A professional in any field will survive on hard work, dedication, and determination. The idea of professionalism relies on one’s own personal motivations and approach to work ethic. In any profession, a person must not only want to be there, he or she must have the passion and special skills needed, as well as an understanding of sacrifice in order to be successful. There is no exception of this requirement in the field of education. Thus, it can be inferred, if you want something done right, hire professionals.

Unfortunately, not everyone agrees that teaching is a “profession.” In communities across the United States, there is a tendency to willingly declare the “job” of teaching as the most important in our society (dare we say world) due to the implications teachers have on all of our futures. Yet, those same communities show lament for those who venture into teaching as a professional career path. A very hindering memento of the American “community’s” clear temperament toward teaching viewed as a “profession” is readily present in the well-known yarn, “Those who can—do, those who can’t—teach” (Shaw 1903). Griffin (1997, 12) stated:

[Although teachers aspire to professional status, the pay, the power, and the prestige usually accorded those with professional status are lacking in the teaching profession.]

Riley (2003, 19–20) asked the pointed question of whether “… teaching today [is] a trade (a skilled technical occupation) or a profession (requiring high standards and ongoing professional development).” He argued that continuing education is necessary for teachers to be kept abreast of the latest developments in their field and, thus, be members of a profession. Riley (26) added that “Government attitudes to teachers and teaching will continue to shape the climate, the supply of teachers and the quality of those teachers.”

Over the years, many have questioned whether teaching is a “job” or a “profession.” Nias (1989, 181) indicated that some teachers might not consider themselves professionals when they make statements such as, “I teach, but I do not feel like a teacher.” A logical question prompted is, “How do individuals studying to become teachers see the position of teaching?” Further, how do teachers seeking additional education see their position in teaching? This study looks at the perceptions of preservice and in-service teachers, who either are taking classes or have recently graduated from Texas A&M.
Martinez, Desiderio, and Papakonstantinou

University–Kingsville, TX, and Rice University, Houston, TX, regarding whether they believe teaching is a “job” or a “profession.”

Method

The population for this study consisted entirely of preservice teachers and graduate education students attending Texas A&M University–Kingsville and the Rice University School Mathematics Project, representing 430 students in total. For the sake of statistical procedures, the authors used the entire population for their research sample.

All education faculty members in the undergraduate and graduate programs were asked to provide time for the students in their classes to complete a survey questionnaire, and 401 useable questionnaires were returned. The questionnaire asked respondents for general contact information; level of education; the grade they taught or subjects taught or would like to teach; the respondents’ definition of a “job”; the respondents’ definition of a “profession”; and, based on their definitions of a “job” and a “profession,” if their present and future position in education was a “job” or “profession.” Additionally, they were asked to explain why they considered their position a “job” or a “profession.” Respondents were also queried regarding their willingness to participate in follow-up interviews concerning the topic. Thirteen percent indicated that they would participate in such follow-up interviews.

Demographic data were recorded and reported. When looking at respondents’ limited open-ended remarks, researchers sorted the data into the categories that emerged; however, many responses were placed in multiple categories. A peer debrief performed a second analysis of the responses to ensure consistency of the data in the categories. Any differences in the categorization of data were resolved through discussion (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Findings

Researchers surveyed 401 preservice (41 percent of total) and professional educators (59 percent of total) attending classes at Texas A&M University–Kingsville and Rice University. Respondents indicated their level of teaching experience, as shown in Table 1, including participants with less than one year of experience.

Included are both undergraduate and beginning teachers working on initial certification in the Alternative Certification Program. Table 2 shows the grade level each respondent indicated as his or her present or future teaching position.

Respondents were asked to give their perceived definition of a “job,” as well as their perceived definition of a “profession.” Tables 3 and 4 show what the respondents indicated.

Selected open-ended responses that are indicative of what respondents wrote when talking about the definitions of “job” and “profession” include the following:

- Respondent #4 with 23 years in education: “professions are a subset of jobs.”
- Respondent #14 with seven years in education: “I’ve put a lot of hard work, blood, sweat, and tears into my profession.”
Table 1. Years of Teaching Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience Level</th>
<th>Total Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 Years</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-15 Years</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-25 Years</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25+ Years</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Present and Future Education Position by Grade Level or Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Para-Professional</th>
<th>College Instructor</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EC-4</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
<td>08%</td>
<td>01%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-8</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
<td>02%</td>
<td>01%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td></td>
<td>02%</td>
<td>01%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC-12</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td></td>
<td>01%</td>
<td>01%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. What Is Your Definition of a “Job”? 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service for Money</th>
<th>Clock In and Out</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>74%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. What Is Your Definition of a “Profession”? 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passionate for Work</th>
<th>Special Skill</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>44%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Respondent #19 with 56 years in education: “I have had jobs in several areas and have never felt the satisfaction or challenges that I meet in my profession.”
- Respondent #31 with six years in education: “A ‘job’ is a place that you go to every day and collect a check at the end of the week, nothing more, nothing less.”
- Respondent #37 with 30 years in education: “A profession will be always incomplete. There is always something more to learn. A profession is the continuous process of learning and teaching.”
- Respondent #42 with 12 years in education: “I would have quit a long time ago if I were in this position for the money.”
- Respondent #44 with five years in education: “Like jobs, you also have to meet demands and please many people but depending on the atmosphere, the profession can turn into a job.”
- Respondent #55 with nine years in education: “What is your definition of a job? 9-5—leave it behind you when you go home—a paycheck! What is your definition of a profession? 24/7—think, worry, plan, scheme, even in your sleep.”
- Respondent #320, an undergraduate junior: “When you are in a profession, your job is what you should be happy with. It should be a job where you can advance to a higher position.”
- Respondent #331, an undergraduate senior: “My job is to be a professional and an expert in all aspects of teaching.”
- Respondent #337, an undergraduate senior: “A profession is a career. It is something you enjoy doing and get emotional as well as monetary satisfaction from. It is work that is enjoyable and allows opportunities for advancement.”
Table 5. Based on Your Definition, Is Your Position as an Educator a “Job” or a “Profession”?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Job”</th>
<th>“Profession”</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Does Your Selection Surprise You?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>44%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were then asked to indicate, based upon their definition of a “job” and “profession,” whether their present (or future) position in education was a “job” or a “profession.” Responses to this question are shown in Table 5, and indicate that the majority of respondents perceived their position as a “profession” and not as a “job.”

Respondents were then asked if they were surprised by their answer of whether their position was a “job” or a “profession.” Respondents’ answers are shown in Table 6.

Finally, respondents were asked whether they were surprised by their definition of their position in education being a “job” or a “profession.” Wide varieties of responses for this open-ended question were received, and the top four categories of responses are listed in Table 7.

Examples of written responses received are listed as follows:

- Respondent #33 with 25 years in education: “I suppose it does surprise me. Many people associate high-dollar salary with a profession. Since this is not a high-dollar profession, it may appear more like a job. I also feel that the role of the teacher is now transitioning to a job status. My biggest concern is the government’s lack of understanding that students learn at different rates and not all students are cognitively equipped to do abstract ideas. … I feel that for some students we need to cover less and in more depth rather than rushing through the entire curriculum.”
- Respondent #23 with 21 years in education: “I love helping young minds expand and teaching does that. I had been a professional job-hopper, changing jobs every 5 years, but I came into teaching and have lasted a long while. Seeing the lights come on to students who had been [in the] dark is amazing.”
- Respondent #22 with 32 years in education: “I have done this for 32 years because I enjoy it and take pride in what I do.”
- Respondent #246, an undergraduate junior: “Most educators in public (and many private) institutions are told to act professional. Though the pay certainly does not reflect a professional job, the job is done by most in a professional manner.”
- Respondent #248, an undergraduate senior: “I know I have always wanted to teach music. I truly believe that this is what I was born to do, and I want nothing more than to touch children’s lives and be the best I can at my profession.”
- Respondent #323, an undergraduate senior: “I always wanted to be an educator and work with children. I love to see them learn and enjoy what they do in class.”
Table 7. Was Respondent Surprised by Their Position Definition of a “Job” or a “Profession”?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Always Felt Teaching Was a “Profession”</th>
<th>By Definition, Teaching Is a “Profession”</th>
<th>Teaching Is a “Profession” That Feels Like a “Job”</th>
<th>Teaching Is Their Passion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the majority of educators (91 percent) agreed that teaching is indeed a “profession.” Further, 93 percent of preservice and in-service teachers were not surprised by their selection. However, upon closer analysis of responses to the open-ended questions, several respondents, including those with the most experience in education, who stated that teaching was a “profession,” wrote comments to the contrary. Examples of respondents’ comments include:

- Respondent #2 with 19 years in education: “... [A]lthough I treat my job as a profession, I am treated as a wage worker with check-ins and check-outs. Sometimes I feel as if I am not trusted to do my job.”

- Respondent #27 with more than 10 years in education: “I have always considered teaching a profession but not all teachers professional. It is up to the individual to make their job a profession if they want to.”

- Respondent #28 with 36 years in education: “Although teaching is recognized by professional organizations, those organizations are not professionally respected.”

- Respondent #30 with 14 years in education: “... Unfortunately for our students, for many of my colleagues—teaching is just a job.”

- Respondent #51 with 10 years in education: “I feel that the longer I teach, the more my position is becoming a job. I still want to teach those who want to learn, but the students I have in class appear to be less interested in learning, or are not willing to put an effort into the ‘learning cycle’—i.e., do their part (study, homework, prepare for tests, pay attention and participate in class).”

Conclusion

From directing social growth and community relations to constantly sharing and developing information, educators perform one of the most vital roles in society. Society seeks out its “masters” and its “professors” to teach new, upcoming individuals a “profession,” whether they are preparing students to become a doctor, engineer, or a lawyer. Yet, society blurs the line of being a professional when it applies to teacher preparation and teaching.

As suggested in this study, 91 percent of responding current and future educators regard the field of education as undeniable a “profession.” When asked to define a “profession,” 44 percent of the respondents deemed “passion” as a predominant defining and essential characteristic, while 39 percent of respondents held that special skills obtained for the position were the underlying factor defining a “profession.” The authors submit that educators create society’s professionals; no “profession” is possible without teachers. Therefore, the “education profession” and its members must flourish and prosper.
Martinez, Desiderio, and Papakonstantinou

There is a lack of current research on the perceptions of educators as to whether teaching is a "job" or a "profession." In order to get a more complete understanding and representation of educators regarding their position on the status of teaching as a "profession," more studies are needed. Only then can educators stand up with one voice to talk about the "profession," its needs, and its place in society.

References