

# Chapter 4

## Changing Definition of Teacher Professionalism: Autonomy and Accountability

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**Abstract** Teacher professionalism has long been a topic of great interest to various stakeholders in education. A review on the extant literature suggested that there were different views on its conceptualization and operationalization. In general, skills and knowledge are two key elements central to the constitution of teacher professionalism. In fact, the definition of teacher professionalism is always changing following new expectations and requirements on teachers, particularly during education reform in a society. These changes may lead to a redistribution of power among different stakeholders in the education system. Teachers are sometimes being empowered but sometimes are being depowered during the changes. In facing challenges coming from the changes, some teachers can get further personal growth and professional development. Over the past decades, Hong Kong has undergone a series of education reforms that exert considerable impacts on teaching profession. In the road of these education reforms, teachers are being empowered through decentralization of decision-making power from central government officials to school-based management. However, this process of teacher empowerment is not monotonous. In recent years, new demands on teaching professionals tend to induce constraints on teachers in exercising their power. The process of teacher empowerment and depowerment in the road of education reform in Hong Kong is a very typical example to illustrate the changing nature of definition of teacher professionalism.

Teacher professionalism has long been a topic of great interest to various stakeholders in education. Different countries, such as England and Wales, have tried to establish greater educational accountability to stakeholders by having greater

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I.H. Amzat and N.P. Valdez (eds.), *Teacher Empowerment Toward Professional Development and Practices*, DOI 10.1007/978-981-10-4151-8\_4

control and regulation by their central governments (Poulson 1998). Such a shift of accountability to stakeholders in education will impose new expectations on teaching professionals and will trigger a new definition of teacher professionalism. These redefinitions of teacher professionalism always bring in new situations of teacher empowerment and professional development. In this book chapter, we exemplify this changing nature of teacher professionalism within the context of Hong Kong's educational system, and discuss how each of these changes will impact upon teacher empowerment and may link to professional development. We begin our chapter with an explanation of how enhancing teacher professionalism can bring benefits to a society from the perspectives of different stakeholders in education (teachers, students, and parents). This is followed by an illustration of how definitions of teacher professionalism can be varied across studies and in different societies.

Teacher professionalization is never a static process. Education reforms can lead to new expectations of the teaching professionals, which may lead to changes in definitions of teacher professionalism. Along with these changes, teachers may get further professional growth and development. We use the education reforms that have taken place in Hong Kong over the past few decades as an example to illustrate this idea of the "changing" nature of teacher professionalism and its linkage with teacher empowerment and professional development. With lessons learnt from these experiences, the implications of this changing nature of teacher professionalism for teacher professional development, practice, and empowerment are discussed.

## 4.1 Defining Teacher Professionalism

Teacher professionalism is not a new topic to educators; it has been studied for decades (Berg 1989; Talbert and McLaughlin 1994; Day 2002; Evans 2011). A number of variables can be included in the concept of professionalism. Day's study (2002) suggested that it is related with elements such as strong technical culture, service ethic (caring for students and expectations for their success), professional commitment, and professional autonomy. Furlong et al. (2000) indicated that knowledge, autonomy, and responsibility are three important concepts of teacher professionalism. Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) suggested that technical culture, service ethic, and professional commitment are three key elements of teacher professionalism. In sum, teachers who are considered as having professionalism must have a strong knowledge base, be committed to students' needs, have high ethical awareness, and have strong individual and collective identities.

A study by Rizvi and Elliot (2005) found that teachers working in government primary schools in Karachi, Pakistan, perceived teacher professionalism as having four dimensions, namely teacher efficacy, teacher practice, teacher leadership, and teacher collaboration. Campbell (1996) indicated that some teachers think of professionalism as conformity to the perceived norms of collective associations, and

that unethical behaviors are always associated with unprofessional behaviors. Professional ethics may be seen as a significant element to teacher professionalism, and when teachers demonstrate unethical behaviors, collegial loyalty can be damaged badly.

A study by Lai and Lo (2007) compared teacher professionalism in two Chinese cities—Hong Kong and Shanghai. Teachers from the two cities were found to have different perceptions and interpretations of teacher professionalism. From interviews with the Hong Kong teachers, there was evidence of a belief that professional teachers should have professional knowledge, be able to apply appropriate teaching methods to their students, and be willing to help students to develop their value systems. In China, the teachers thought that they should comply with the principles of education as recommended by the government. It seems that teacher professionalism is a changeable concept that is context dependent.

## **4.2 Changing Definition of Teacher Professionalism**

Teacher professionalization is never a static process. Factors internal and/or external to the teaching professional (e.g., curriculum changes, advancement in technology, changes societal expectation, changes in government policy, changes in the needs of stakeholders) are continuously exerting their impacts to sharpen the constitutions of what entitles one to be a “professional teacher.” Education reform is one major event that may initialize these changes, which in turn trigger new expectations of teacher professionals and lead to a redistribution of power among different stakeholders in the education system. Teachers are sometimes being empowered via these changes but sometimes are being depowered by these changes. Teachers can get professional growth and development through facing the challenges brought by the changes.

## **4.3 Lessons Learnt from the Hong Kong Education System**

The ways in which various changes can exert impacts on the definition of teacher professionalism can be illustrated by considering various education reforms that have taken place in the Hong Kong education system over the past few decades. To set the context, this section will start with a brief review of the reforms that have been undertaken over the past few decades.

According to an analysis by Tang (2011), there were three historical periods of educational change that linked to the broader social, economic, and political histories of Hong Kong. The first period (1965–1984) was an era of quantitative expansion which led to an increased demand for teachers. The second period

(1984–1997) was an era of quality, marked by concerns that teachers should gain more power and autonomy in the core processes of education (such as curriculum design and implementation via a school-based approach). The third period is an era of excellence, competition, and accountability (post-1997) in which teacher's work in schools is under close surveillance by various stakeholders (students, parents, senior management, alumni, and the general public) (see Tang 2011, pp. 368–370 for a more elaborated discussion on this periodization of education change in Hong Kong).

#### ***4.3.1 1965–1984: An Era of Quantitative Expansion***

In the first period of educational change, the government exerted quite a tight and centralized control on almost every aspect of school administration. The major duty of teachers (as prescribed in their employment contracts) was to carry out routine teaching under the centralized curricula. Teachers were more or less “technicians” of teaching in this era. Though not defined explicitly, “teacher professionalism” in this period generally pointed toward classroom skills of teaching and knowledge of the central curricula laid down by the government. Though teachers could have some freedom to decide how to teach, they often had no (or very little) power to decide what to teach. As frontline teachers were quite alienating from the process of decision-making of central policy in this period of time, they could get more time and space to develop their competency in daily classroom teaching. Through practicing autonomy within the classrooms and accountability toward their students, teachers got professional growth and development in their skills and knowledge of teaching.

#### ***4.3.2 1984–1997: An Era of Quality Concerns***

After an expansion of quantity, there was a rising concern about the quality of education in the second period of educational change. The Education Commission published seven reports that provided a number of authoritative “recommendations” for school education. These recommendations eventually turned out to be sorts of government policies in various education sectors. In this period there was a shift of centralization to school-based management and curriculum development. Teachers at this period of time were no longer expected to be faithful executors of the curricula laid down by the central government. They were required to develop their own competencies to apply skills and knowledge learnt in their teacher training programs to their own classroom teaching. When teachers were being empowered in their daily work, they were being expected to be “competent” in carrying out their duties. The Education Commission (1992) adopted “The Teaching Profession” as the theme of its fifth report. This signified an official recognition of “teaching” as

a “profession” by the government. Such recognition brought in further autonomy and empowerment to the teaching profession, but at the same time teachers were expected to bear more responsibility for their students’ educational outcomes. In the previous time period (1965–84), a “professional teacher” could be defined as someone who had achieved an academic qualification (e.g., by completing a teacher training program accredited by the Education Department of Hong Kong government), so that s/he was eligible to carry out teaching duties in a regular classroom.

In this new time period, personal conduct beyond teacher competency and academic qualifications was another emerging criterion for teaching as a profession. Though challenging, an increasing need on entitlement of teacher professionalism could open a new horizon of teacher empowerment and leads to possibilities of further professional development. In 1982, the professional status of teachers was addressed formally for the first time in the report titled “A Perspective on Education in Hong Kong” (Visiting Panel Commissioned by the Hong Kong Government 1982). In this document, teachers’ professional conduct was considered to be one very important concern for the development of teacher professionalism. As recommended by the Education Commission Report No. 1 (Education Commission 1984), a Preparatory Committee was formed in 1987 by 63 educational bodies to draft a professional code for education workers. The finalized code was proposed and renamed the “Code for the Education Profession of Hong Kong” (hereafter referred to as “the Code”) in 1990 (Council on Professional Conduct in Education 1995). The Code has served as the guiding principle for teachers in their everyday teaching practices as well as their personal conduct. According to the Code, teachers are “required” to have commitments not just to the profession and the community, but also to students, colleagues, employers, and parents/guardians (Council on Professional Conduct in Education 1995). These documents could indeed heighten the awareness of teachers on issues of ethics in teaching professionals. Teachers were being empowered by the “Do” (What they can do) and depowered by the “Don’t” (What they should not do) of the Code. In facing this new challenge, teacher could get professional growth and development in another domain of teacher professionalism beyond skills and knowledge of teaching (i.e., the “attitudes” domain).

### ***4.3.3 1997 and Beyond: New Demands of Professionalism Due to Close Surveillance of Various Stakeholders***

Starting from the return of Hong Kong’s sovereignty from Britain to China in 1997, there has been an ongoing quest for excellence in education. This striving for excellence has been manifested as an increasing demand on teachers’ competencies through certification. For language teachers, mandatory qualifications such as the Language Proficiency Requirement for Teachers (Education and Manpower Bureau 2004) have been set. Putonghua and English teachers are required to have academic

degrees in relevant languages as well as demonstrated abilities in classroom teaching of the relevant languages. According to the Education Bureau (2014), in order for English and Putonghua teachers to get the Certificate of Merit, they have to attain an overall proficiency level of 4 or above. Many experienced language teachers are very dissatisfied with this requirement, particularly as they are only group of teachers subject to this type of expectation. They feel strongly that their classroom experiences in language teaching are not being honored by the government as a professional practice.

It seems that teacher professionalism in this time period has been defined as a combination of academic qualifications (such as subject knowledge in language and pedagogical content knowledge in language teaching for language teachers) and personal competency. It seems that the concept of competency has been broadened and moved beyond the boundary of subject matter (e.g., a physics teacher should be competent in the knowledge of physics itself and the pedagogical content knowledge of teaching physics) to some generic skills and knowledge of classroom teaching and learning (e.g., the use of IT in interactive classroom teaching and learning). Though teachers can get further personal growth and professional development through meeting the evolving needs on them, quite often they feel frustrated of running into expectations of the authorities. Teachers have very limited power to negotiate regarding these requirements. The ever-increasing demands on them have imposed great pressures on teachers, which can lead to deterioration in their mental health. In order to address the heightened levels of dissatisfaction in teachers, the pace of the reform appears to have been slowed down in recent years.

Due to the rapid change and demands for new knowledge and skills for effective teaching and learning, teachers' commitment to change and continuous professional development has become one very important concern for teacher professionalism. In fact, Hong Kong teachers' continuing professional development had been overlooked before the 2000s. Before 2002, teachers' professional development was encouraged but not considered as a "compulsory" requirement (Chan and Lee 2008), and was not encouraged by school leaders and administrators. The situation has been changed since the Advisory Committee on Teacher Education and Qualifications (ACTEQ) issued the document "Towards a Learning Profession: The Teacher Competencies Framework and the Continuing Professional Development of Teachers" in November 2003 (ACTEQ 2003). According to this document, a Teacher Competencies Framework and Policy Framework for Teachers' Continuing Professional Development was proposed as the reference for "establishing direction and creating momentum in continuing professional development" (ACTEQ 2003, p. 1). As proposed in this Document, all teachers, irrespective of their rank and capacity, are required to engage in Continuing Professional Development activities of not less than 150 h in a three-year cycle" (ACTEQ 2003, p. 13). This mandatory requirement on teachers states clearly and explicitly that continuous professional development is a "must" rather than an "option" in their professional lives.

Apart from skills, knowledge and competency, there has also been an emerging dimension in the definition of Hong Kong teacher professionalism after the return

of sovereignty to China in 1997. As a way to maintain a stable society, Hong Kong's colonial government was quite successful in creating a fairly apolitical environment in its education sector. Issues related to teachers' "attitudes" were rarely touched upon in official documents from the Hong Kong government.

In Hong Kong, arguments concerning political issues have become serious after the return of sovereignty to the People's Republic of China. There are concerns on about the appropriateness of teachers' roles in major political and social issues. The question is whether it is appropriate for teachers to take up the ethical responsibility to defend their political mandate, and to serve as a moral sample in sensitive political and social issues. Some state that teachers should be "neutral" in discussing political and social issues. In this regard, teachers are supposed not to share their own political orientations, nor persuade students to be involved actively in political activities. For example, it has been suggested that overpersuasion, indoctrination into one's own political orientation, or persuading students to join in a voting campaign are considered as "unethical" (e.g., Ching 1995). However, on the other hand, according to Klaassen (2012), being a teacher nowadays means that one needs the courage to keep to certain professional and moral standards and to promote the development of universal moral norms and values. Besides demonstrating the bravery to do this, moral courage also indicates the perseverance to adhere to the goals that are oriented toward the well-being of the pupils who are in need of the teacher's daily help and strength to reach desired cognitive, social, and moral goals. Under this line of thinking, the Union of Education Norway (Utdanningsforbundet) stated clearly that it is teachers who have an ethical responsibility to show courage and defend their political mandates (The Union of Education Norway n.d.), thus making the teacher role into something beyond "sharing."

Other than teachers' involvement in political and social issues, there is a hot debate about the role of teachers as "moral examples." In recent years in Hong Kong, there have been reports of teachers accused of unprofessional behavior, including failing to report for duty with no reason, reporting for duty drunk, having sexual relationships with students and former students, and many other vices. The Council for Professional Conduct in Education received 40 complaints about misconduct by teachers and school administrators within 6 months in 2012, which was about 67% of the total number of cases being received from the previous 2-year period (Oriental Daily News 2012). The chairman of the Council for Professional Conduct in Education described this as "a big jump" (South China Morning Post 2012). In relation to this, there has been wide discussion about whether moral modeling, and "moral standards" should be included in teachers professional codes of conduct. In many Chinese societies, as influenced by traditional Chinese culture, the teacher is not just expected to teach subject-related matter, but is also involved in educating young people to have appropriate value systems. Therefore, the teacher is generally accepted as a moral educator who takes the responsibility for cultivating students' moral values (Watkins and Biggs 1996). The Character Development Foundation also stated that it is one very important component in teacher professionalism that "the educator serves as an exemplary moral leader,

following ethical practices toward students, families, colleagues, administrators, and the profession. The educator upholds high ethical standards of personal integrity, civility, compassion, responsibility, truthfulness, honesty, and courage, knowing that these are needed to inspire public confidence and trust” (Character Development Foundation n.d.). The International Institute for Educational Planning has also stated that “the articulation of good habits that members should acquire, the duties that they should follow, and the attending consequence of such behaviors, makes it clear that ethics in a profession must be viewed from both professional and business viewpoints in order to assure the highest possible standards” (Nuland 2009; p. 21).

However, to a certain extent, increased regulations or codes not only limit professional autonomy, but also take away teachers’ powers. It seems that “external regulation does more harm than good” (Dresscher 2007, p.13). According to Ozga (1988), teacher professionalism was a form of “direct” or “indirect” control of political, economic, social, and cultural circumstances. He noted a marked shift in the mode of state regulation of teacher professionalism from a “licensed” form of autonomy to a more tightly controlled ‘regulated’ one. To a certain extent, more guidelines, rules, or any forms of control over teachers’ work would lead to de-professionalized or even proletarianized teachers (Hextall et al. 2007). Findings from different studies have also reflected that some teachers have reservations in considering themselves as “moral models.” Teachers, in general, tend to keep their own autonomy and expect to have their own choices of lifestyle undisturbed by their professional identity. A study in Hong Kong reflected that more than 40% of teachers disagreed with the idea having guidelines in the professional code of conduct to “control” teachers’ personal activities such as “gambling”, “alcohol”, or “open relationships” (Chan et al. 2013). In a study by Klaassen (2012), only around half of the teachers (44.6%) were of the opinion that a certain degree of moral courage was necessary to fulfill an exemplary function. The other half (52.2%) thought that it was not necessary to demonstrate courage in order to be an example.

In facing new demands and new perspectives from different stakeholders, moral requirement for teachers seems to have been listed by some educators as an important element for a new professionalism in education (e.g., Klaassen and Maslovaty 2010). Teachers do not live just within the framework of professionalism, they are also members of society and other contexts (Dresscher 2007). How to prepare them to be aware of their professional obligations will be a very critical agenda, which may eventually affect the whole teacher training system as well as the philosophy of teacher training program in future.

#### 4.4 Conclusion and Looking Forward

Education reforms in Hong Kong over the past few decades can serve as exemplars for this changing nature in defining teacher professionalism and its impact on teacher empowerment and professional development. It can be anticipated that this



dynamic nature of defining teacher professionalism will be continued into the future. Teachers need to be well prepared for changes rather than resisting them. “Lifelong learning” will be an integral part of teachers’ lives in the journey of teacher professionalism.

Owing to different new demands and expectations placed on the teaching, some teachers may not be able to adapt well to these new challenges and demands. It is not just about workload issue, but also related to teachers’ self-efficacy and professional identity. Starting from the 2000s, there was emerging evidence of negative impacts on teachers’ physical and mental health, such as mood disorders, suicide tendencies, over high pressure, high resignation rates, super high workload (Cheng 2009), and unacceptable long working hours (Chan et al. 2013). In this regard, how to create a better working environment and rebuild the image and confidence of the teaching profession is of paramount importance (Cheng 2009). In Hong Kong, the topic of stress management has been included in many teacher training programs (some in preservice and some in in-service training courses) and teachers seem to have benefitted from them. These successful experiences in Hong Kong to promote teachers’ well-being can be borrowed across borders (probably with some adaptations) for teachers to cope with the changing needs and demands on them in other societies.

Another lesson that can be learnt from the Hong Kong experience is that the pace of education reform should not be too fast. There was estimation from the Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union that more than ten new educational initiatives were launched in a 10-year period (2000–2010) of education reform in Hong Kong. These initiatives introduced both specific (e.g., requirements for more sophisticated subject and pedagogical content knowledge for English teachers) and general (e.g., requirements for IT skills for all teachers) changes to the definition of teacher professionalism. Though teachers can be benefited from getting personal growth and professional development in meeting these new demands, too frequent changes can bring in undesirable interruptions to the routine of teaching life. Most teachers (including both new and experienced ones) found it difficult to adapt themselves successfully to their rapid changing roles in society and became tired of having to reestablish new professional identities again and again. Some teachers even regarded the increasing demands and needs imposed on them as a sign of diminishing autonomy in the profession and a way of taking away the power from them. For smooth implementation of an educational initiative triggered by an education reform, bureaucracies in any society should consider establishing the right balance between accountability (toward various stakeholders of education) and autonomy (of the teaching professional). For any change, if teachers can get an experience of being empowered in their practice, they will be more likely to endorse the change.

Are teachers in Hong Kong being further empowered in the road of education reform? Upon recognition of the diversity of school cultures and acknowledgement of individual differences in the learning process, Hong Kong has adopted a school-based approach in recent education reform. Such an approach tends to decentralize the power of decision-making from the government officials to school management. As a consequence, teachers can gain more and more power from the

central government through active participation in the decision-making process. This process of teacher empowerment is not monotonous. In recent years, new demands on teaching professionals tend to impose more and more invisible constraints on teachers in exercising their power. Along with the changing definition of teacher professionalism, teachers in Hong Kong are in the turbulence of empowerment and depowerment. Nevertheless, teachers are getting more opportunities to get personal growth and professional development by engaging themselves in the changes. In recent years, debate on the political positioning of teachers in Hong Kong has posed a question to the teaching professional across the borders. In a collectivistic society, teachers as members of the society are supposed to be able to sacrifice their own interests for the benefit of society. In contrast, teachers from individualistic societies are supported to voice their needs and opinions openly. How to build up teachers' courage to work against unreasonable demands from society and to uphold their professional identity will be a challenge not only to teachers in Hong Kong but also to those across borders. In facing this challenge, teachers in Hong Kong need to be empowered further to uphold their professional beliefs and practices.

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