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Class Struggle: Empowering the Teaching Profession

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There is a lot of debate among educators about the lack of status for the teaching profession. A blogger named [Matt Johnston](#) [1] has pointed out that if we teachers want to be treated as professionals, we can do something about it. We have the numbers and organization. If we have the will, we ought to stop griping and step up to make the changes we desire.

I think it is a bit more complex than that. I believe there are historical factors, relating to culture, economics, and gender that have shaped the profession to be the way it is. It is useful to look at those factors and see what we can do to change them, but I am not sure it helps to point a finger of blame at the whole profession. We all wind up in our roles, and it is tough sometimes to break out of them and take a new path.

I would break the issue Johnston raises into two questions:

- What are the historical conditions that have shaped (and limited the power of) the teaching profession up to this point?
- How can we challenge and change this dynamic so that teachers gain more power in their classrooms and in the profession?

Patriarchy in the Profession

The answer to the first question is really important. We are often compared with lawyers and doctors, but those professions developed under very different circumstances than ours. As the United States became industrialized, its schools shifted from an agrarian model – with one or a few teachers, usually males – to a factory model, with classrooms staffed predominantly by female teachers, governed by a male principal, and overseen by male school boards.

Power in the schools has historically been structured in a patriarchal hierarchy, in which the principal supervises and sets the curriculum, and teachers are expected to follow his directions. Beyond the school, the professional knowledge and research base of the profession has resided in schools of education, which not only prepare teachers but also have an interest in maintaining their own status as the experts on how educators should teach children. And beyond the schools of education are the real forces that shape educational policy: political leaders who see tinkering with education as their opportunity to show they are doing something about society's problems.

I did a little research and came across a contract for a teacher from 1922, which, among other things, forbade her to marry or loiter around ice cream parlors. So I think we need to consider the roots of our profession carefully when we start saying teachers are to blame for their disempowerment. I do not think blame is a very good place from which to develop motivation for change, though some of us are familiar with that device from our family relationships! I think we need to understand, with compassion, how these patterns developed, and then we can begin to challenge them.

Power to the Profession

Which brings us to question two: How do we change the situation so that we can get more power? This is really a question about how you bring about social change. Once again, it is good to look at history and see how things have changed in the past. Matt Johnston points out the large number of teachers, which suggests there is a latent power there.

But social change takes much more than sheer numbers, and even having teachers organized in unions is not enough. Jim Crow lasted for almost a century in spite of the millions of people it oppressed. In order for us to accomplish this shift, there must be a widely shared, clear sense of direction. We need a moral imperative that gives us clarity of purpose. We need to understand that we are in a fluid situation, in which there are different political forces at work, each with its own set of ideas contending for dominance.

Actually, this is a very interesting moment, and things are even more fluid than usual. No Child Left Behind was the policy vehicle of a number of career policy makers, and as it is reaching the end of its credibility, we see many of these former champions leaping aside to become critics so they can position themselves to continue to offer sage advice.

So there is a bit of a vacuum, a time when teacher leaders have the opportunity to put forward another model of school improvement, one that recognizes teacher leadership as the most powerful source of change in schools. But we have to go farther than that. We have to address the questions answered NCLB and the high-stakes testing regime have answered so badly: To whom are our schools accountable? How do we measure learning? How do we share that measurement with the community? How do we develop teaching expertise? What is the role of the teacher in making educational decisions? How do we build sustainable communities of powerful educators in *all* of our schools?

Defining our direction is really just the first step in the social-change process. We will then need to take that vision and share it widely and organize around it broadly. We need to include parents and community leaders. We will need to ally with other people who are making parallel realizations in their walks of life, because this is all part of a larger social dynamic, and our disempowerment is one piece of a much larger pattern.

And we will need to begin taking some collective actions, because if the Montgomery bus boycott had not occurred, we never would have heard of

Rosa Parks, and her arrest would have simply signified a lonely act of defiance instead of the beginning of a social movement. Seattle teacher Carl Chew's [recent act of defiance](#) [2], in which he refused to administer a statewide standardized test to his sixth-grade students, will be a mere footnote if others do not join him.

What do you think about this issue? Please share your thoughts, and read [part two](#) [3] of this entry.

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[1] <http://mattiohnston.blogspot.com/2008/05/thinking-about-professionalization-of.html>

