

Convocation Address - VII

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Towards Teacher Professionalism

Let me first of all offer my humble thanks and gratitude to the Vice Chancellor and Council of the Open University of Sri Lanka for honouring me today by conferring an Honorary Degree at the General Convocation and for inviting me to deliver the Convocation Address this afternoon. I will be failing in my duty if I do not express my gratitude to all my colleagues, especially in the Faculty of Education for staunchly supporting me in all my endeavours during the period I worked with them. In professional careers, nothing can be achieved singly but only through teamwork, partnerships and collaboration. Whatever I have achieved during the period of my tenure as a Professor and a Dean could not have been achieved without the support of all the academic, administrative and non-academic staff in the University with whom I had to work in various instances. I have also been fortunate to get advice and encouragement from the three Vice Chancellors and the three Deans of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences under whom I worked closely during the time I spent at the Open University. As a member of various Statutory Bodies and Committees I also worked with the Deans and a large number of academic and administrative staff of the other three Faculties and other University divisions. This is not to forget the contribution of my colleagues, Heads of Departments and Deans in the Faculty of Education, University of Colombo, where I spent the major part of my career. To all of them, I say "Thank You".

I have selected the theme "Towards Teacher Professionalism" for my Convocation Address this afternoon. Firstly, this is as tribute to all the teachers who are being awarded the Postgraduate Diploma in Education, who represent the largest clientele of the Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education. The major part of the energies of the staff in the Faculty, from the Dean and the Head to our trusted employee, Mr. Stanley Rodrigo, are expended on the organisation and the delivery of this programme. This address is a gentle reminder of the

expected role the teachers should perform to elevate the status of teaching in our country.

Secondly, I selected this theme to pay tribute to my own teachers, both at school level and university level, who instilled in me a respect for the noble profession that I chose and who through their expert knowledge, commitment and integrity were true exemplars of professionalism and thus had a strong influence on moulding my own work attitudes and values.

Thirdly I felt that, for most of us, university teachers, gathered here, the issue of professionalism may be a theme worthy of discussion.

Literature on education abounds with references to teaching as a profession. It was only a few decades ago that education developed as a coherent and independent discipline with contributions from other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, statistics, history and philosophy. This development of the discipline of education paved way for the design and development of teacher education programmes to prepare teachers for the teaching profession. Thus in most developed countries, teaching is fully accepted as a profession. It is therefore, necessary to question why in Sri Lanka, teaching is yet to be considered as a profession.

I remember how some years ago several leading educationists, who by any criteria could be considered as professionals par excellence, failed to get membership in the Organization of Professional Associations (OPA) because of the inability to convince the OPA that teaching is a profession.

Comparing my experiences as a teacher during the short period I taught at a secondary school in my home town with the general observations that are being made today on teaching, I am saddened by the public perceptions regarding the deterioration of professional standards in the profession. In our culture, teaching and medicine have long earned the respect of the community yet often the public queries whether these are any nobler than other wage-earning occupations. I was particularly amazed to read an advertisement that appeared in a leading newspaper just after the release of GCE (A.L) results, where a tuition master had given a list of perhaps more than 200 students who had obtained three or two As by studying in his establishment. He claimed that these were the students who agreed to allow their names to be published and that there were many more

others. I wonder what credit the schools at which these students were enrolled will claim for teaching them!

To come back to the issue of teaching as a profession, Etzioni stated that professions have been represented theoretically in the image of those who belong to them and who advance their interests, as having a strong technical culture with a specialized knowledge base and shared standards of practice, a service ethic where there is a commitment to clients' needs, a firm monopoly over service, long periods of training and high degrees of autonomy. If we examine the situation of teachers in our country against each of these conditions, though not exactly in the same sequence, it is easy to understand why teaching is not considered as a profession here.

Almost ten years ago, the National Education Commission, declared that teaching would be made an all-graduate profession and that an attempt should be made to provide pre-service training to all teachers before they are appointed. But election after election, successive governments have continued to provide teaching appointments to persons whose qualifications vary from GCE (O.L) onwards, due to pressure from various groups. One encouraging feature is that at least for recruitment to Colleges of Teaching, three passes at GCE(A.L) has been mandatory. This recruitment procedure implies that the criteria of "long periods of training or the development of a specialized knowledge base" cannot be ensured in a certain proportion of our teachers.

Consequently, teaching lacks shared standards and a firm monopoly over service. All of us are aware how jealously medical trade unions and professional associations guard recruitment to their profession. Sometimes, the governments in the West deliberately restrict numbers in certain professions. If at all, when newcomers are admitted extremely stringent admission procedures are enforced. But teaching becomes the victim of its own recruitment procedures and loses monopoly over its service. In any other profession, be it Medicine, Engineering or Law, decisions regarding policy and implementation become the prerogative of those who are members of that profession.

Not so in education, the area under which teaching operates. All decision makers pertinent to different professional areas are representatives of the professions themselves, but very rarely are

teachers, teacher educators or educationists appointed to such decision-making bodies even in the area of education. Whether we possess technical expertise or specialized knowledge or not, authorities do not appear to feel that we possess such expertise.

But perhaps, the basic issue here is more than one of qualifications and the length of training. In our own school careers, we would have encountered even a few exemplary teachers, who may have lacked high qualifications but possessed a strong sense of commitment to contribute to the well-being of their pupils. It is here, that the "service ethic where there is a commitment to client's needs" becomes significant. Thus Hoyle stated that professions are those occupations whose members bring a high degree of knowledge and skill to those social functions which are most central to the well-being of society. Professionals put service to clients as more important than material gains. Some would argue that teaching is not as a vital service as medicine or law as the decisions of a doctor or a lawyer have profound consequences on clients. Yet the critical importance a teacher's decisions has on the life of a child - his outlook on life, behaviour, motivations, aspirations and achievement throughout life cannot be under-estimated by any means.

The expected role of the teacher can be defined as the set of expectations that are held for teachers by both teachers and other persons. Kelsall and Kelsall pointed out that teachers are expected to emancipate pupils from their home communities, encourage achievement among pupils, sort out and socialize "winners" and "losers" in the achievement game, inculcate societal norms in pupils, teach technical skills, instill interpersonal sensitivity and aid pupils in making decisions and train them for occupations. A tall order indeed! In our educational system, I am not certain what proportion of the teachers in service have ever thought of their performance in terms of such expectations.

Etzioni also mentioned about professions being "represented theoretically in the image of those who belong to them and who advance their interests". Most other professions have their own professional associations, in addition to trade unions, which project the image of the profession. Sadly, in the history of the teaching profession in this country, a few professional associations were established, but lacked the capacity to sustain themselves and generally are dysfunctional. This feature could easily be linked to the processes of recruitment and lack of cohesion among constituent groups. It is noteworthy that even teacher trade unions, such as Lanka

Jathika Guru Sangamaya, which were quite powerful in the past, appear to have faded away.

A professional has the freedom to practice his/her profession. Teachers should have the right to participate in designing the curriculum, selecting teaching methods and contributing to the formulation of policies related to the education of their pupils. We have witnessed how the National Education Commission requests views and suggestions for reforms in education from the public on various occasions, but in the absence of a vibrant professional association, the extent to which such views are forthcoming from teachers is debatable.

Wagner in 1989 pointed out that educators (teachers) have a specific responsibility in respect to certain moral norms which are summed up in what is called a "pedagogical ethos" or a Code of Ethics. As a minimal requirement of this ethos, negatively formulated, the teacher has to refrain from doing anything that would harm or hurt the students. Positive formulations can be found in various moral codes for the teaching profession that specify the teachers' commitments to their students, to the public, and to their profession. A Code of Ethics ensures the performance of duties in accordance with certain agreed principles. In Sri Lanka, we can only say that time and again, the need for a Code of Ethics for teachers was brought up, debated, once even formulated but not approved or decided upon.

It is here that professional attitudes become important. A teacher's prime concern is the welfare of the pupils put in his/her charge. Fairness and non-discrimination on the basis of any background characteristic is an essential element in the conduct of a profession. A teacher should never use the professional relationship between himself and the pupils for any exploitative or immoral pursuits. What needs to be emphasized here is that knowledge and skills does not become a sufficient condition to perform successfully as a teacher. Professional attitudes alone will ensure that a teacher uses the skills that he/she has developed. What distinguishes a professional from a technician are the professional attitudes, the professional autonomy and the ethical dimensions embodied in teaching.

Now, when I reflect back on my own career as a teacher educator, I realize that I have tended lately to place greater stress on the inculcation of professional attitudes and values through whatever subjects that I teach to my student teachers than on the impartation of

subject matter content. I now realize that this perhaps is the strategy for rescuing our teachers from the vicious circle of examination domination and rote-memorization that is imprisoning them at present.

Overall, what we note is that ill-conceived procedures of recruitment, lack of a vision or efforts to improve professionalism in teaching has resulted in the deterioration of teacher performance which makes the possibility of getting acceptance as a profession more and more elusive. Political leaders, educational authorities and we, the teacher educators who have engaged in teacher education, all must equally share the responsibility for this situation. The adverse impact of the situation existing at present is not limited to the level of general education but extends even to the post-secondary levels. Teacher professionalism has been examined on previous occasions in this country and I cannot claim to have done anything more than to revisit the issue and to plead that this needs to be given the attention it deserves by all stakeholders in today's context.