

Teaching and Vocation

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Periodically, the question arises: “To what extent is teaching a vocation?” This discourse, which often finds little favour in the current educational climate of accountability and thrust for professional recognition, is very relevant to discussions of teaching. The idea of reviewing teachers’ work as vocation has been addressed by researchers in Finland where the concept of vocation emerged in interviews about teachers’ rationales for choosing their careers. They were surprised because “the concept of ‘vocation’ seemed old-fashioned and religious,” and attributed part of their surprise to the literature on the professionalism of teaching, which had over time attempted to disclaim vocation as part of teachers’ work since it was seen as detracting from efforts to develop a more professional identity.

In the Caribbean, too, with a long history of religious involvement in education, many teacher narratives contain descriptions of teaching as a vocational career. The central characteristic of this vocation is a desire *to serve* others. It is important, though, that this idea of vocation and identification with it come from teachers themselves and **not** from external authorities, since, if teaching is a vocation it is a secular one and, like other vocations, an individual choice. The imposition of the teaching identity as a vocational one by powerful authorities limits the ability of teachers to narrate and navigate the transient boundaries of their own identities. Furthermore, when *a desire to serve* is appropriated and transformed into **THE duty** to serve, this undermines the most powerful and foundational aspect of any vocation—the capacity and choice *to speak*.

An important virtue in a teacher’s work is rebellion and criticism. This virtue compels him/her to a critical vocation as a “public” or “professional” intellectual. This vocation of the teacher as public intellectual involves a courageous commitment to continually confront, contradict, and compel the transformation of the petrifying and putrefying “fixed truths” of unjust authoritative educational discourses. A conception of teaching and learning, which acknowledges principled and ethical rebellion and criticism as virtues to be nurtured rather than vices to be systematically eradicated, is a more open and desirable one than that which currently prevails, in which dissension is often a prelude to censure or suspension. Such a view helps teachers to appropriate and value the voice, power, and agency that they always already have, which at times may be diminished by forms of pedagogical and institutional control. It is a perspective that adds to discourses on teacher empowerment and critical pedagogy.

We must be careful though with this concept of vocation, and recognise in it not only the call to a radical (sacrificial) openness to others in teaching, which exposes one’s vulnerability, but also the critical moral responsibility of the teacher as public intellectual to speak out when this vulnerability is used as a basis for oppression. Vocation in this sense ought not to be based solely on an ascetic monasticism or religious altruism, but should be reflective of the different ways that teachers in all walks of life view their own work. Thus when teachers “abandon their classrooms” in order to actively protest their working conditions, unfair or unethical work practices, or oppressive policies that impede their ability to fulfil routine aspects of their work, they are indeed practising their vocation in the widest and original sense of the word and contributing to developing their teaching identity as professional public intellectuals. When they

write in newspapers, blog on the Net, march in the streets, and cry on television, they call on society to acknowledge (and respond to) the ways in which their vocational vulnerability and integrity have been violated.

Vocation is also an attribute that David Halpin, a British educator, ascribes to the Romantic conception of the Hero. He writes, “such vocationalism requires courage, entailing a willingness by teachers to take risks, sometimes at some cost to themselves... it remains the virtue of heroes. It is also a necessary virtue in teaching.” While Halpin’s Romantic conception is based on and may evoke masculine narratives, in educational settings where women increasingly outnumber men, it is women who most frequently demonstrate this attribute in their day-to-day activities. However, such heroism/vocationalism is often subsumed under authoritative categories such as duty, responsibility, or a type of “*professional essentialism*,” which seeks to regulate, prescribe, and impose a singular meaning to vocation. A revitalised model of teaching as vocation involves adopting a radically open posture towards service and speaking, and protection of the right to both, which troubles such coarse categorisations.

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