

# Nature of Teaching and Teaching as a Profession

[2012]

## The Nature of Teaching

In its broadest sense, teaching is a process that facilitates learning. Teaching is the specialized application of knowledge, skills and attributes designed to provide unique service to meet the educational needs of the individual and of society. The choice of learning activities whereby the goals of education are realized in the school is the responsibility of the teaching profession.

In addition to providing students with learning opportunities to meet curriculum outcomes, teaching emphasizes the development of values and guides students in their social relationships. Teachers employ practices that develop positive self-concept in students. Although the work of teachers typically takes place in a classroom setting, the direct interaction between teacher and student is the single most important element in teaching.

## Teaching as a Profession

The continued professionalization of teaching is a long-standing goal of the Alberta Teachers' Association. The Association continues to work to advance teaching as a profession. Professionalism is a complex and elusive concept; it is dynamic and fluid. Six generally accepted criteria are used to define a profession. The teaching profession in Alberta fulfills those criteria in the following ways:

1. *Its members have an organized body of knowledge that separates the group from all others.* Teachers are equipped with such a body of knowledge, having an extensive background in the world and its culture and a set of teaching methods experientially derived through continuous research in all parts of the world.

2. *It serves a great social purpose.* Teachers carry responsibilities weighted with social purpose. Through a rigid and self-imposed adherence to the Code of Professional Conduct, which sets out their duties and responsibilities, teachers pass on their accumulated culture and assist each student under their care in achieving self-realization.

3. *There is cooperation achieved through a professional organization.* Cooperation plays an important role in the development of the teaching profession because it represents a banding together to achieve commonly desired purposes. The teaching profession has won its well-deserved place in the social order through continuous cooperation in research, professional preparation and strict adherence to the Code of Professional Conduct, which obligates every teacher to treat each student within a sacred trust. Teachers have control or influence over their own governance, socialization into teaching and research connected with their profession.

4. *There is a formal period of preparation and a requirement for continuous growth and development.* Teachers are required to complete a defined teacher preparation program followed by a period of induction or internship prior to being granted permanent certification. This period includes support for the formative growth of teachers and judgments about their competence. Teachers are devoted to continuous development of their ability to deliver their service.

5. *There is a degree of autonomy accorded the professional.* Teachers have opportunities to make decisions about important aspects of their work. Teachers apply reasoned judgment and professional decision making daily in diagnosing educational needs, prescribing and implementing instructional programs, and evaluating the progress of students. Teacher judgment unleashes learning and creates the basis for experience.

6. *The profession has control or influence over education standards, admissions, licensing, professional development, ethical and performance standards, and professional discipline.* As professionals, teachers are governed in their professional relationships with other members, school boards, students and the general public by rules of conduct set out in the Association's Code of Professional Conduct. The code stipulates minimum standards of professional conduct for teachers, but it is not an exhaustive list of such standards. Unless exempted by legislation, any member of the Association who is alleged to have violated the standards of the profession, including the provisions of the code, may be subject to a charge of unprofessional conduct under the Discipline Bylaws of the Association.

The competence of teachers is governed by the Practice Review Bylaws of the Association. The expectations for the professional practice of teachers related to interim and permanent certification are found in the *Teaching Quality Standard Applicable to the Provision of Basic Education in Alberta*. The Teaching Quality Standard defines the knowledge, skills and attributes all teachers are expected to demonstrate as they complete their professional preparation, enter the profession and progress through their careers. Additionally, the Department of Education's Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy (Policy 2.1.5) supports and reinforces the Teaching Quality Standard by setting out basic expectations for teacher growth, supervision and evaluation.

## Teachers as Professionals

The certificated teacher is the essential element in the delivery of instruction to students, regardless of the mode of instruction. A teacher has professional knowledge and skills gained through formal preparation and experience. Teachers provide personal, caring service to students by diagnosing their needs and by planning, selecting and using methods and evaluation procedures designed to promote learning. The processes of teaching include understanding and adhering to legal and legislated frameworks and policies; identifying and responding to student learning needs; providing effective and responsive instruction; assessing and communicating student learning; developing and maintaining a safe, respectful environment conducive to student learning; establishing and maintaining professional relationships; and engaging in reflective professional practice. These processes must be free of discriminatory practices and should contribute to the holistic development of students who are actively engaged, responsible and contributing members of a democratic society. The educational interests of students are best served by teachers who practise under conditions that enable them to exercise professional judgment. Teachers have a right to participate in all decisions that affect them or their work, and have a corresponding responsibility to provide informed leadership in matters related to their professional practice.

## The Association's Role in the Context of Teacher Professionalism

The Alberta Teachers' Association is a self-governing body financed through membership fees established in accordance with the bylaws of the Association. The legal framework through which the Association functions is the *Teaching Profession Act*. The Association, through the democratic interaction of its members, is the collective voice of Alberta teachers. It is a unilateral organization that includes as active members certificated individuals employed in public education as classroom teachers, as well as school- and district-based administrators. The profession believes that all

professional educators should be members of the Association and strives to accomplish this through an amendment to the *Teaching Profession Act* that would include superintendents and deputy superintendents appointed by school boards.

As a professional teachers' association, the Alberta Teachers' Association performs a wide range of activities related to the enhancement of teaching as a profession, the improvement of public education and the well-being of its members. The Association furthers the professional status of teaching by policing the conduct and competence of its members through its Discipline Bylaws and Practice Review Bylaws, ensuring high levels of practice for students and public assurance in the teaching profession. The Association also has a responsibility to appraise the expectations of society and to recommend changes to Alberta's education system to meet changing needs. Thus, it maintains an active interest and a position of leadership in all areas of public education. This includes systematic long-range planning in such matters as the processes of teaching, working conditions for professional service, organization and administration of schools, teacher education and certification, curriculum, educational research and development, early childhood education, and education finance. Through its committees dealing with these topics, as well as through representation on many departmental committees and boards, the Association stays at the forefront of the most recent developments and represents the interests of its members. To accomplish this, the Association should have adequate representation on all Department of Education committees, boards and advisory bodies dealing with matters related to teaching and learning, and all members representing the profession on government advisory bodies, boards and committees should be named by the Association.

## **Professional Self-Governance**

A common criterion for measuring the degree of public acceptance achieved by a professional organization is its ability and willingness to exercise rigorous control over membership standards. This means that the professional body has control over the educational, certification, practice and competence standards to determine who enters into and remains in the profession. A long-standing goal of the profession is to have jurisdiction over teacher certification in Alberta. The Association's having such authority would parallel the established practice of other professions.

As the authoritative voice of the teaching profession in the province, the Association must play a role in making decisions related to teacher preparation, recruitment, selection, admission, institutional preparation, internship, placement and programs of support in the early years of practice. It should have direct and formal representation in the process that accredits institutions that grant degrees in education.

Finally, the Association believes that teachers require one teaching certificate and that all teachers have the same certificate. As previously mentioned, the profession, through the Association, should have full responsibility for the issuance of teaching certificates and the suspension or cancellation of certificates on grounds of incompetence or unprofessional conduct.

## **Conclusion**

Alberta is recognized for having one of the best public education systems in the world. Central to the system are caring, highly competent professional teachers who are supported by a professional association that recognizes as its core responsibilities stewardship of the profession, services to its members and commitment to public education. The continued efforts of teachers to strive to improve their professional practice, supported by the collective through the Alberta Teachers' Association, will ensure that Alberta students will continue to receive quality teaching resulting in enriched educational experiences.