

Professionalization or professionalism: Does it matter how we name what we want?

by Tracey Mollins

What Do You Think?

■ The theme of professionalization/professionalism of literacy teachers has received light attention here in Canada. Many literacy teachers in Canada have professional and academic credentials, but there is no specific, required literacy-teacher certification program.

Sometimes we talk about how professionalization has the potential to create openings. Sometimes we look at our ESL (English as a Second Language) colleagues and speculate how we can get some of the good stuff professionalization seems to offer without the headaches it brings.

Some people think that certified professionals garner more respect from policy-makers and their voices have more influence when policy decisions are being made. Some feel that certification would foster a career path that would lead to more financial stability and job satisfaction.

Others feel that certification creates too many barriers; that our strength comes from the fact that people come to literacy from so many different directions. They feel that the field would lose too much if everybody who worked in it travelled the same path to get there.

In my experience, the conversation usually stops there. The barriers seem so costly that the possible openings are not worth the compromise. Literacy workers, even those who are the poorest paid and work in the worst conditions, resist the idea of formal accreditation. What they seem to feel would be valuable is an ongoing, individualized professional development plan supported by the funding of conferences, workshops and resources.

Some make a distinction between the terms professionalization and professionalism. They say that professionalization is a top-down certification process where the requirements for accreditation are determined by a governing body, a panel of experts or stakeholders, who may or may not work in the field. Professionalism, on the other hand, is described as a practice-based approach to ongoing evaluation and development where professionals in a field work together to develop standards of practice and achieve them. Most literacy workers engage in the rare opportunities to develop professionalism with great energy and commitment. They are much more wary of attempts to promote professionalization.

What's the buzz?

The theme of professionalization/professionalism may be getting a little more attention here in Canada.

In *Reading the Future*, the Canadian Council on Learning's study of adults with low literacy skills, one recommendation is "that a national certification on 'Effective Instruction of Essential Skills' would also help to establish a community of practice and to improve instructional practice." (Murray et al p. 52)

In *A Literacy Framework for Alberta—Discussion Draft #2*, participants at the Pan-Canadian Interactive Literacy Forum suggested that one of the key ways “to strengthen instructor qualifications” is to “explore the development of a family literacy and an adult literacy practitioner credential.” (p. 8) The summary report of this discussion, *Literacy, More than Words: Summary of Input on a Literacy Framework for Alberta*, included this recommendation: “Professional accreditation or standards for literacy practitioners/instructors is required to ensure quality delivery.” (p. 17)

On the professionalism side, Dr. Allan Quigley is giving a keynote speech, to be followed by panel discussions, called *The Head, the Hand and the Heart: Building Literacy Through Professionalism* at the Ontario Literacy Coalition conference on October 6—right about now.

What others are saying

In June 2008, I attended the annual conference of RaPAL (Research and Practice in Adult Literacy), an independent network of practitioner-researchers in the British Isles. This year the conference was in Galway, Ireland. It featured a panel discussion about professionalization.

The first thing panelists did was ask delegates to generate a list of qualifications we felt were required of literacy teachers. Our lists mostly included things such as compassion, empathy, flexibility, openness, collegiality, the ability to think on one’s feet, the ability to work from where people are, the ability to adapt constantly, and so on. The panel seemed surprised that our lists were made up almost exclusively of what they called “soft skills,” or personal qualities, rather than the “hard skills,” such as subject-matter knowledge.

I think the panel was hoping to elicit a framework for what we felt should be taught in an accreditation program and were not expecting that we would respond by listing mostly the unteachable—or less teachable—elements of what makes good literacy teachers. Each of us has probably had that experience: we have phrased a question in such a way that it elicits completely unexpected responses and we have to think on our feet to change our plan and incorporate the feedback. So kudos to them for taking the risk.

The practitioners objected when the panelists used the term soft skills because they felt it demeaned what they see as vital to the work. I found

it interesting that the list we practitioners came up with reflects what literacy students say they value in literacy teachers—they rarely mention subject-matter knowledge. We were speaking the language of literacy and our literacy wisdom was on parade. Kudos to us.

The rest of the conversation included some of these points:

- professionalization gives practitioners a career path with options and mobility
- a professionalized workforce will earn more respect from policy-makers and the public, allowing the field to have a stronger, more effective advocacy voice
- the terms and approaches to achieve this voice means we are using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house and where does that leave us?
- the reason practitioners are not respected is not because we are not professionalized (certified, accredited) but because the people we work with are not respected, and possibly because we are a field of mostly women workers
- there is a big difference between professionalization and professionalism

Where are we headed?

The RaPAL conference panel discussion was a good opportunity to explore the issue more fully than I have done here at home. It was fascinating to see the parallels to the Canadian conversations, however brief they usually are. I wonder where the Canadian conversation is going, and if it will go at all. We may get a sense of what is next this fall as people respond to *Reading the Future* and to the ideas in *The Head, the Hand and the Heart*. ■

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SOURCES:

A Literacy Framework for Alberta—Discussion Draft #2. July 25, 2008. Available from www.advancededucation.gov.ab.ca/other/literacy/lit_framework.asp

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Murray, T. Scott, Stan Jones, Doug Willms, Richard Shillington, Mike McCracken, and Victor Glickman (2008). *Reading the Future*. Canadian Council on Learning.