

A study about how to describe the work of teachers: craft workers, executive technicians or professional technicians

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Abstract: The definition of teacher identity is significant for the professional development and teaching methods used by teachers. In reality, teachers most of the time play more than one role. This study analyzes the three roles of teachers as craft workers, executive technicians and professional technicians. The result shows that the combination of executive technicians and professional technicians is currently the most suitable model in China. More efforts should be put on how to more effectively promote the teaching of teachers and improve the quality of education, which is the point that all teachers in any category should consider.

Key words: craft workers; executive technicians; professional technicians

1 Introduction

What are the characteristics of a qualified teacher? What role should teachers play in teaching? Partly as a result of the controversy surrounding this subject, countries, regions and cultures have come up with different definitions and interpretations of teacher's positioning and professional development. As for China, people generally believe that teachers should be innovative, independent, tolerant and dedicated [1]. In addition, the law in mainland China clearly stipulates that teachers should be regarded as professionals who impart students with knowledge and provide critical guidance for their learning and development [2]. The recognition of teacher's identity is not only related to the personal career development of teachers, but also affects the educational philosophy and policies of an entire country. Therefore, the debate and research on the identification of the role of teachers are necessary. This essay will discuss and compare the three concepts of craft workers, executive technicians and professional technicians, and then explain why teachers are more often regarded as executive technicians in the context of Chinese public education, while sharing some of the characteristics and development prospects of professional technicians.

2 Teachers as craft workers

Traditionally, craft work has been associated with the production of commodities in small companies, where it mainly refers to the reproduction of goods through the guidance of skilled masters. This knowledge is passed informally from the master to the apprentice. So, what is teaching as a craft? First, craft teachers tend to learn their skills informally. Their knowledge and experience often do not come from scientific inquiry, but depend on the dissemination of experience between teachers [3]. It means that process knowledge is often local rather than universal. The dissemination and exchange

of this informal knowledge are not systematic and do not require professional guidance. Therefore, craft can be understood as an apprenticeship system. Under this system, new teachers acquire teaching experience by learning and communicating with more experienced colleagues. This phenomenon is very common in education and teaching in China. In many Chinese schools, to promote professional development, teachers often organize discussions surrounding teaching. In this way, new teachers can often learn to teach knowledge based on listening to the conversations or on the experience shared by experienced teachers and then gradually join them [4]. For most new young teachers, it is an effective way to develop professionally and accumulate teaching experience.

The theory of pure craft teaching set out above advocates relying solely on experience and self-reflection. In this context, teachers only need to develop in the education practice within the classroom without any professional theoretical guidance. A similar view is unconvincing in many ways, at least in China, where this approach is unfeasible. First, to support the development of education in China, policymakers need a large and qualified team of standardized teachers. In China, teachers' training is inseparable from the study of educational theory. In 1995 the Ministry of Education set out the teacher qualification and license systems. Consequently, to become a teacher in China, one must first pass the teacher qualification examination, which includes an exam on pedagogy theory and one covering subject knowledge. In fact, some common sense knowledge may mislead them. In the Chinese context, where there is an urgent need for a large number of qualified, standardized teachers, a focus on learning from other teachers' experience may be particularly inefficient. Besides, due to the non-systematic and local characteristics of craft knowledge, it often means that this knowledge depends on the school and its success hinges on the presence of experienced senior teachers able to provide proper guidance.

Some limitations of the craft theory, including uncertainty about the outcome on teacher development and its neglect of educational theory, have made this concept very controversial. Although the idea of teachers as craft workers has not been fully implemented in China, it does not mean that Chinese teachers have none of the characteristics of craft workers. In an exchange with senior teachers, many young teachers can gain valuable teaching experience, such as how to get along with students or how to manage the class better. The experience comes from day-to-day teaching practices and is undoubtedly difficult to obtain from pure theoretical learning.

3 Teachers as executive technicians

The executive technician is the second teacher identity discussed in this essay, as well as being the role that most teachers play in China. Technicians are defined as those who can apply complex theoretical foundations to practice, such as teachers applying a series of abstract educational theories to their teaching practice.

Compared with the craft teachers, the executive technicians lose some freedom. This is because executive technicians often need to follow theory-based guidance when teaching. Teachers do not need to think about the generation of these theories. In China, the concept of a teacher as an executive technician is metaphorical and is not recognized directly by government documents. On the contrary, the Chinese government has declared that teachers should be professionals. *The Teachers Law* of China stipulates that teachers should be regarded as "professionals who are responsible for imparting knowledge, educating people, and providing guidance and assessment to students" [2]. Nevertheless, judging from China's current management system, teachers seem to work more like executive technicians. In China's education system, teachers' autonomy and authority are greatly restricted by their superiors. The professional development and evaluation of Chinese teachers is determined by external authorities. Under this system, teachers participate in various assessments and professional training, while also being responsive to education experts' inspection of teaching quality. Many teachers are often exhausted and have little energy to spend on teaching research and attention to students. Some experts have criticized this assessment and reward system for turning teachers into "performative workers" [5].

Although the concept of the executive technician has many drawbacks, it still has great practicality. In my opinion, no teaching method is perfect and teachers as executive technicians are currently the most suitable teaching model for China. This approach is also welcomed by many national policymakers because it is universal, feasible and can be vigorously promoted across the country to train a qualified teacher team. In these areas, the concept of craft teaching seems too idealized and executive technicians can make up for this shortcoming. Teachers who have been trained in educational theory and have a unified national teaching qualification can improve the quality of teaching in remote areas and balance the gap in educational resources between different areas. In addition, the use of theories or textbook guides provided by education experts is helpful for new teachers to quickly settle into the job, without having to spend time exploring or relying on the experience of senior teachers.

4 Teachers as professional technicians

The third role played by teachers is that of professional technicians, which is also the role that best meets people's expectations towards them. The role as professional technicians is an idealized view of teachers' role, which can make up for the shortcomings of craft teachers and executive technicians. C. Winch describes the concept of a professional technician as "the professional who has both the craft knowledge of the teacher and the practical basis of the executive technician". In this way, they can decide how to use educational theory based on an assessment of their needs. To do this is not straightforward, as teachers need the ability to think dialectically and question the theory. On the other hand, C. Winch believes that teachers who are professional technicians need constant reflection if they want to make progress and succeed in teaching. Reflection is then the foundation of teachers' professionalism. Teachers need to clearly recognize their strengths and use them effectively while teaching. At the same time, they should be aware of their shortcomings and not let these affect their passion for teaching or transform them into a mechanical knowledge transmitter. This ability is essential for professional technicians [3].

Furthermore, for teachers to realize the ideal of teachers as professional technicians, they should be granted more autonomy. Teachers should have the right to choose the way in which they want to teach and which theoretical methods to use to achieve the curriculum goals. Although Chinese teachers cannot currently be defined as professional technicians, this does not mean that they have no potential to develop as such. The government enacted new policies for quality education and curriculum reform, and vigorously promoted new teaching methods. Although the accountability system for teachers has not changed yet, Paine & Fang explained that the grass-roots accountability system is becoming more and more standardized, and many outstanding teachers have received advanced foreign teacher training. "These teachers are expected to change from practice to practice (peer exchange, sharing practice). The tradition of dialogue and research teaching has been transformed into the theoretically guided case and curriculum research." This research method, which combines teaching practice and theory, makes teachers move towards professional technicians. Although the development of teachers as professional technicians remains an ideal, there is scope for Chinese teachers to move in this direction.

5 What does a teacher who combines executive and professional technician look like?

As educational practice has developed over time, people are increasingly expecting teachers to play more roles. The three identities of teachers discussed above--craft workers, executive technicians and professional technicians, cannot fully define a teacher's identity themselves. Nothing prevents a teacher to have more than an identity, as, for instance, a teacher can be both a craftsman and a professional technician. In some cases, an executive technician can also be a craft worker. As argued above, in China, teachers are mostly executive technicians. This has followed from the need to meet the rapid development of education and to balance the differences in educational resources across regions. However, merely treating teachers as executive technicians can make them feel as lacking autonomy and, in this way, they may lose their enthusiasm

for teaching. Therefore, combining the roles of executive technicians and professional technicians should be the most suitable model for China to follow.

How should a teacher team with these two qualities look like? First, teachers should receive regular teaching training, have basic educational theory and subject knowledge, and be able to limit the impact of false common sense on teaching. Second, teachers should be given more autonomy. Especially for Chinese teachers, their authority is often limited by the accountability and performance systems, and it is complex for them to teach students according to their own understanding of professionalism. If the Chinese government wants to increase the enthusiasm of teachers without changing the accountability system, it should adjust the rules of evaluation. In addition, schools should encourage teachers to use more teaching methods than just the textbook, including multimedia, outdoor inspections, simulated situations, etc. In addition, within the class, the authority of the formed team of teachers, which combine the characteristics of executive technicians and professional technicians, needs to be respected by the authorities. However, this does not mean that the authority of all teaching management and curriculum arrangements is delegated to teachers. Teachers should also follow the guidance of the theory, but not be limited by it. They should learn to reflect and question, and flexibly apply educational theories to achieve the best teaching results. If Chinese teachers can do this, they will be one step closer to the idealized model of professional technicians.

6 Conclusion

The definition of teacher identity is significant for the professional development and teaching methods used by teachers. For a country, teacher identity directly affects the formulation of education policies and the results of student training. Therefore, research on the role of teachers is valuable. In reality, teachers most of the time play more than one role. In China, teachers are more like executive technicians, while they have gradually developed towards professionalism. Although this has not been enough to fully transform them in teachers to professional technicians, there is a clear future potential for this to happen based on the teachers themselves and government education policies. For China, the combination of executive technicians and professional technicians is currently the most suitable model. More efforts should be put on how to more effectively promote the teaching of teachers and improve the quality of education, which is the point that all teachers in any category should consider.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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