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Teacher professionalism, expertise and the jurisdictional struggle

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Teacher professionalism, expertise and the jurisdictional struggle

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the relationship between teacher professionalism, expertise and educational knowledge is examined via the sociology of the professions, studies of professional knowledge, and the philosophy of expertise. Drawing on the work of Abbott the jurisdictional context of teaching is foregrounded, with a focus on (i) how educational problems are defined; (ii) professional knowledge-in-use (or diagnosis, inference and “treatment” in teaching); and (iii) the potential of systematically organised abstract knowledge base for teaching. It is suggested that teaching is a profession particularly vulnerable to external jurisdictional challenge, with little opportunity for protection against forms of what Abbott terms “advisory” or “subordinate” jurisdiction through state intervention. Reflecting on this context, it is suggested that a key task for teachers and educational researchers internationally is to gain greater control of the definition of educational problems and construct a knowledge base that is more suited to the distinctive purpose of teaching practice.

KEYWORDS

Professional knowledge;
teacher knowledge;
professional development

Introduction

In this paper, teacher professionalism and its relation to professional knowledge are re-examined by drawing on the work of Abbott and the wider sociology of the professions, in combination with insights from the sociology of professional knowledge and the philosophy of expertise. By focusing on the jurisdictional context of teaching, and in particular how (i) educational problems are defined; (ii) tensions emerge around the role of teachers in diagnosis and inference; and (iii) a systematic knowledge base for teaching could be developed, it is possible to characterise teaching as a profession particularly vulnerable to external jurisdictional challenge, with little opportunity for protection against forms of what Abbott terms “advisory” or “subordinate” jurisdiction through state intervention. Reflecting on this context, it is suggested that teachers and educational researchers internationally could reconstruct a knowledge base more suited to the distinctive societal role and purpose of teaching practice, thus enhancing professionalism. Brief illustrations are used from the context of teacher education in a range of European countries and the United States to underpin the argument.

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Teacher professionalism and jurisdiction

Academic debates about the future of teaching as a profession are characterised, on the one hand, by observations of the growing reach of managerial control and centralised directive (Brass & Holloway, 2021), the growth of “contractual accountability” (Sachs, 2016), and the increased influence of employers in advancing forms of organisational and “branded” professionalism (Evetts, 2011; Whitty 2014, developments that may be particularly characteristic of the Anglophone countries but also extend elsewhere (Beach & Bagley, 2013). Contrasting notions are frequently counterposed as more benign visions of professionalism, such as “collaborative” and “democratic” (Sachs, 2003), with teachers enacting more “responsive accountability” (Sachs, 2016) and enjoying a degree of professional discretion and public trust. While each national context is distinct, the role of the state in influencing the roles and expectations of teachers is significant in a profession that has developed with the growth of education systems that continue to be shaped by national directive or more subtle steering mechanisms. In England, for example, the “governmental professionalism” (Beck, 2009) that developed in the 20 years following the introduction of the national curriculum has arguably been reimagined since 2010 as a wave of centralised control via new forms of governance that have permeated both the school and teacher education system (Whitty 2014; Mayer & Mills, 2021). Most recently, this has extended to a new accreditation process for all teacher education providers that reinforces a centrally determined curriculum foundation for teacher education, acknowledging a need for a systematic body of knowledge for teaching but nevertheless neglecting much existing educational knowledge (Hordern & Brooks, 2023).

The work of Andrew Abbott (1988) on the “system of the professions” has been used periodically, albeit rather sporadically, in discussions of teacher professionalism and expertise (see Grossman, 2008; Isaksson & Larsson, 2017; Shalem, 2014). Abbott’s work is significant in developing a distinct lens on professions that contrasts somewhat with the body of work on professionalisation and professional projects (e.g. Larson 1977). Abbott concentrates on how professions achieve and maintain what he terms “jurisdiction”, or “the recognised right” or “more -or-less exclusive claim” to authority over certain complex or socially important tasks (Abbott, 1988, p. 34). He argues that a “jurisdictional claim . . . is based on the power of the profession’s abstract knowledge to define and solve a certain set of problems” (Abbott, 1988, p. 70), but also requires the profession to demonstrate “efficacy” (70) in solving problems in practice in a manner that will sustain the trust of other professionals and the public. Jurisdictional claims can be made by one profession over the existing jurisdiction of another, and if “the incumbent’s efficacy is poor” (in terms of solving the defined problems effectively), these insufficiencies will be highlighted by competing professions to strengthen their claim. Jurisdiction may also be challenged on the basis that “discipline is poor”, if the profession is not organised to undertake its functions effectively, even if there is some agreement on the nature of the problem and potential solution (or what might be termed “theoretical efficacy” (70)). Thus, professions are expected to be able to both define a problem and competently execute the tasks required to resolve it. The “central organising reality of professional life is control of tasks” (Abbott, 1988, p. 84), but this

control is only afforded to the profession if supported by demonstrably effective claims to authoritative expertise in relation to those tasks.

Abbott also identifies various types of jurisdictional settlements, including those that are “full, subordinate, intellectual, divided and advisory” (Abbott, 1988, p. 77), which each relate to dynamic processes of struggle between professions and other stakeholders for control of expert tasks. Whereas a full jurisdiction implies complete control over a “heartland of work” (Abbott, 1988, p. 71), a subordinate arrangement occurs when one profession takes responsibility for tasks in a sphere of work where another profession has overall jurisdiction and authority (for example, in the case of some allied health professions in relation to doctors, as discussed in Abbott (1988, pp. 71–73)). There are also agreed divisions of labour in “divided” jurisdictional settlements involving two or more professions (with no profession having complete control), and an “unstable” settlement where a profession retains control of the organised knowledge base of a field of practice but is required to allow other professions to compete for the work, with Abbott identifying psychiatry as a paradigmatic example. Finally, the advisory settlement involves one profession securing the legitimacy to interpret and guide the actions taken by another profession (Abbott, 1988, p. 75). This can be a “protective” or an “offensive device”, where one profession seeks to expand its jurisdiction continually by extending its advisory role, such as with the “expansion of medicine into child behaviour” (Abbott, 1988, p. 76). The extension of an advisory role may lead to public dispute over which profession holds authoritative expertise over the tasks and issues at hand.

There is widespread acknowledgement of the importance of the state in the literature on teacher professionalism, and indeed in the sociology of the professions. Abbott (1988), similarly to other writers (e.g. Freidson, 2001), notes the extent to which professions in the UK and the United States have developed with a degree of self-government independently of the state. For teaching at least, this needs to be seen in the context of the development of social, health and educational systems requiring greater levels of expertise throughout the 20th century (Beck & Young, 2005), which gave rise to many of the public service occupations as we currently understand them. As governments in the UK have become more interested in education and its perceived role in supporting economic development, they have required more of educational institutions and teachers, and engaged more directly in policy around teacher education in addition to curriculum and institutional reform (Beck, 2009; Whitty & Wisby, 2016). As Liu points out, “professionals often compete with the clients and the state for control over diagnoses” (Liu, 2018, p. 50), and indeed in education a struggle between the state and the professional and academic community for control over policy discourse is characteristics of many national contexts (Bernstein, 2000). In addition to England (Beck, 2009; Whitty 2014), reforms to teacher education in the United States (Brass & Holloway, 2021) and in Sweden (Beach & Bagley, 2013) have demonstrated the impact of increasing attention from central governments on teachers’ expertise and sense of professional identity.

Expertise as knowledge-in-use: diagnosis, inference, and treatment

Abbott distinguishes between “professional knowledge in use” and “formal abstract knowledge systems” (Abbott, 1988, p. 53), with both seen as distinct but essential

elements of professional knowledge and expertise. He also notes the popular misconception that these are one and the same, a notion that may give rise to some confusion in policy and practice. Abbott (1988, pp. 40–52) identifies diagnosis, inference and treatment as expert tasks that require “knowledge in use” and are common across professions, while the abstract knowledge system focuses on research and connecting the profession to cultural values and societal expectations. Abbott is not alone in identifying these “two faces of expertise” Winch’s (2010, p. 18) that characterise professional knowledge, encompassing both “the ability to acquire fresh knowledge within the subject” and “expertise related to practice activity” (18) and in noting that these sit in an “intimate relationship” (1–2). As Winch (2010) remarks, the relation between the two has been a central topic of discussion for the study of professions and occupations.

The processes of diagnosis, inference and treatment (Abbott, 1988, pp. 40–52) provide a compelling heuristic for thinking about the expertise required for professional work. Despite the medical connotations of these terms, which reflect to an extent the trajectory of Abbott’s own research into the health professions, they remain useful as a starting point for thinking through the core tasks of any professional group. Indeed, Eraut’s work on professional knowledge and competence, which was informed by research into the work of educational professionals, identifies similar tasks such as “assessing clients and situations”, “deciding what if any action to take”, “pursuing an agreed course of action” and “managing oneself, one’s job and one’s continuing learning” as “four types of professional activity” that are “combined into an integrated performance” (Eraut, 2004, p. 259) representing key aspects of professional expertise. Importantly, Eraut (2004) notes the necessity of “modifying, consulting and reassessing when necessary” (259), recognising the complexity of the inferential and judgement-making process. Winch, in a discussion of various theories of expertise, suggests that a “proficient practitioner” might be thought of as being able to “see situations as wholes ... identify important features of a situation”, perceive “deviations from a normal pattern” and “generate situationally sensitive maxims for guidance” (Winch, 2010, p. 139).

Abbott’s (1988) notion of diagnosis is a process by which the professional “assembles the clients’ relevant needs into a picture and then places this picture in the proper diagnostic category” (41). The sub-process of assembling the needs into a picture is termed “colligation” and the placing process termed “categorisation” (41). Abbott acknowledges that “clients” can be individuals and groups, and we might note here that diagnosis for teachers when faced with a group of students might be particularly complex if all students have particular specific needs and requirements. Colligation is the process by which identified problems are interpreted to fit with the professional knowledge system (Abbott, 1988, p. 41), excluding any information deemed irrelevant and categorising the problem within the existing diagnostic framework. The categorisation system is organised “not as a logical hierarchy” but “as a probabilistic hierarchy from the common to the esoteric” (ibid., 42). Thus, the professional may often start with the assumption that the case encountered is similar to previous cases, until information is gathered which suggests otherwise. A teacher may therefore make assumptions about the dynamics of a group or a particular student until further indications suggest that there is something unusual about this class or this young

person. While we might assume that Abbott has an explicit and documented diagnostic system in mind, it seems likely that many professions engage in at least some of the diagnostic process tacitly, and it is only through professional development activities such as critical reflection on practice that the diagnosis becomes more acknowledged and explicit (as Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2005) imply in their discussion of planned and unplanned aspects of teachers' professional learning). Experienced teachers may have little time for structured diagnosis of the needs or motivations of particular classes or students, but they may implicitly be making adaptations to their curriculum design or pedagogic practice as a consequence of ongoing diagnostic processes gained through acquaintance with the class (Korthagen, 2017).

Inference, Abbott writes, is undertaken when the relationship between the diagnostic processes outlined above and decisions about a course of action (i.e. treatment) is not straightforward. Inference can proceed by the ruling out of diagnostic possibilities based on the evidence gathered (as in medicine), or by constructing "as many winning scenarios as possible" (49) (as in military strategy), thus offering the professional a range of opportunities to find an appropriate solution. Abbott suggests that "reasoning by exclusion is a luxury available only to those who get a second chance" (49) and allows a professional time and space to arrive at a suitable strategy for remedying a problem. However, if solutions are not found after a certain time, then other professional groups or state agencies may seek to propose solutions. Abbott emphasises that the "degree to which inference dominates" in a process of professional task management and decision-making is an indicator of "jurisdictional vulnerability" (51). Those professions that rely on inference extensively and cannot show an explicit connection between diagnosis and treatment struggle to demonstrate their legitimacy to outsiders and are therefore vulnerable to critics who may suggest that there is no reasoning to their practice. On the other hand, if there is little need for inference and the diagnosis-treatment relationship is always straightforward, then the work of the profession may become further routinised or automated, and the occupation may be increasingly deprofessionalised. Inference becomes redundant as all possibly eventualities have been mapped and related to the appropriate treatment response. Teachers have historically often argued for the importance of discretion and autonomy in their judgement in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015), thus implying a considerable role for inference and contextuality in decisions about how and what to teach. In a number of countries, this freedom to infer has been increasingly negated, with arguments for greater transparency and clarity about the types of teaching practice that will bring about the most effective improvements in learning outcomes (Brass & Holloway, 2021; Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015). As Shalem notes, if there is "too little room for inference (for example in so-called 'scripted' teaching)" (Shalem, 2014, p. 103), then professionalism is undermined, whereas "too much room for inference" impacts on public trust and the perceived legitimacy of teachers' work, as the reasoning may be perceived to lack validity or accountability.

For Abbott, the process of treatment, or proposing solutions to the problems or issues presented by clients, is also guided by a classification system which is "organised around the common cases that make up the majority of professional work" (Abbott, 1988, pp. 44–45). As noted above, the relationship between diagnosis and

treatment has a significant bearing on the extent to which inferential expertise is required, and too linear a relationship may lead to calls for “delegation or deprofessionalisation” (Abbott, 1988, p. 46) in which the task involved starts to resemble “executing a precept derived from someone else” (Winch, 2010, p. 165) and thus more executive and technical than requiring discretion and specialised expertise. Equally, Abbott argues, if the outcome of treatment can be measured transparently, then this may lead to greater scrutiny from those external to the profession (Abbott, 1988, p. 46). Understanding the efficacy of treatment is a major concern for professionals, clients and the public, and Abbott states that effective treatment needs to *reintroduce* the “human properties of the client” (Abbott, 1988, p. 46) that may have been excluded at diagnosis in order to ensure that treatment works for real people, bearing in mind their individuality. Attempts to prescribe treatments that neglect individual human characteristics may be problematic, and thus prescriptive approaches towards teaching or curriculum design that downplay students’ backgrounds and dispositions may undermine educational progress. Abbott (1988, p. 48) also draws attention to the recursive nature of diagnosis and treatment in many professional contexts, particularly where professionals have further opportunities to try different strategies. In such scenarios, there are opportunities to try something different next time if the first strategy is not as effective as it might be. In terms of teaching, where decisions must often be made about groups of students in the midst of a class in progress, there may frequently be a recourse to commonly used strategies to engage and support students’ education (Korthagen, 2017), while new strategies may need careful consideration in respect of their suitability for the context.

The role of abstract knowledge

In parallel to diagnosis, inference and treatment, Abbott highlights the role of academic knowledge as providing both a symbolic affirmation of the role of the profession in society and a resource for developing professional expertise, albeit in a format that is not straightforwardly translatable to professional practice. While diagnosis, inference and treatment relate to “a theory of professional knowledge in use”, academic knowledge is set out in “formal, abstract knowledge systems” (Abbott, 1988, p. 53). In contrast to the order of diagnostic classification systems which tend to proceed from “common to esoteric”, formal academic knowledge systems tend to be organised “along logically consistent, rationally conceptualised dimensions” (53). Abbott provides the example of Medicine (aetiology, pathology) and Law (rights, duties) as example of these rationally conceptualised classifications. The reasons for this different mode of organisation relate to the pursuit of greater explanation, understanding and abstraction (in academic knowledge) in contrast to the pursuit of efficacious practice (in the case of the professional knowledge in use). Abbott (1988, p. 53) gives the example of the academic working in Psychiatry who aims to unpack the general dynamics of a defence mechanism through a research study and scholarly investigation, while a professional Psychiatrist seeks to identify the defence mechanism in the case of a particular client. The academic classification system is thus not ordered to meet the expectations of the working professional but to meet an expectation of consistency and logical organisation in order to develop greater insight and purchase on the phenomena in question.

Academic knowledge can generate and inform fresh diagnosis, treatments and inferences processes, not least because of its potential for “invention” and forging “connections that seem nonsensical” (Abbott, 1988, p. 55) in the context of current practice. In this sense academic research, by thinking the “unthinkable” (Bernstein, 2000) and configuring new conceptual relations can “reveal underlying regularities that can ultimately reshape practical knowledge” (Abbott, 1988, p. 55). Abbott suggests that academic knowledge “legitimises professional work by clarifying its foundations and tracing them to major cultural values” (54), while providing a demonstration of how work is underpinned by rigour and logical foundations. The “demonstrable legitimacy” of academic professional knowledge “protects jurisdiction” (54) of the profession and secures its societal contribution. In terms of teaching, there has been widespread criticism of the contributions of the academic study of education, at least in the Anglosphere (Barrett & Hordern, 2021; Furlong, 2013). This criticism has been framed in terms a perceived fragmentation and incoherence, but also irrelevance and lack of rigour in the face of the challenges faced by teachers (Furlong, 2013). As will be discussed below, such challenges risk undermining the legitimacy of teaching as a profession as constituted in many countries (Tatto, 2021), and criticism from policy-makers has led to moves to redirect the knowledge base towards a more scientific approach that is said to offer the potential for greater collective expertise (Barrett & Hordern, 2021).

Some scholars have made use of Abbott’s work for consideration of teacher professionalism. For example, Grossman (2008) draws on Abbott to reflect on the state of teacher education research in the United States, pointing to “serious jurisdictional challenges” and “ideological chasms” threatening university-based teacher education (Grossman, 2008, p. 21). On the other hand, Shalem identifies the significance of Abbott’s academic and diagnostic classifications as a means to “bind professional judgement” in teaching, providing “the basis for the inferential act” (Shalem, 2014, p. 103) and maintaining the specialisation of the profession. Nevertheless, Shalem also notes the teaching profession’s “lack of access to tight and accurate academic classifications, let alone diagnostic ones” (Shalem, 2014, p. 98), undermining the capacity of the teacher to make sense of practice contexts, while also highlighting that educational theory has developed distinctive concepts that could provide an academic knowledge base for the profession (Shalem, 2014, p. 96).

Limitations of Abbott’s work

It is worth noting what Abbott’s work on professional expertise does not engage with. For Liu (2018), who is largely sympathetic to Abbott’s approach, there is an underdevelopment of the extent to which diagnosis is a point of tension between professions, and indeed can also involve state actors with their own views of how problems should be defined. Liu highlights the notion of “diagnostic struggle”, relating to “contests among actors over diagnoses of problems” often underpinned by different epistemologies (Halliday 2009, 278 in Liu, 2018), which might be advocated by different professions or the state, and may also relate potentially to different conceptions of the problem or focus of the diagnosis. Abbott’s work tends to assume that a profession has a high degree of control of problem definition, and while this may be true of some

of the more established professions such as medicine (although there could be caveats here as other professions may have different views on what constitutes meaningful “good health”, as Abbott himself implies with acknowledgement of the historical role of the clergy (Abbott, 1988, pp. 35–36)), it is not necessarily the case for others. Some professions rely to a greater extent on the existence of certain systems and policies generated by the state, or on commercial and organisational circumstances for the maintenance of their jurisdictional security (Evetts, 2011). To use Abbott’s terms, the less secure the jurisdiction of the professional group, the weaker their control over what constitutes the professional problem.

Building on the work of Beck and Young (2005) it might also be asserted that Abbott does not sufficiently draw attention to the relationship between professional knowledge, commitment and identity. Beck and Young suggest that it is the extent to which academic aspects of professional knowledge have been undermined through a belief in their “inevitable obsolescence” (Beck & Young, 2005, p. 191) that has eroded the foundations on which professional identities and commitments to professional practice have historically been built. The consequence is something like the incursion of market and bureaucratic logics into the organisation of professional activity, fuelling organisational professionalism (Evetts, 2011). With what Bernstein calls the divorce of knowledge from “inwardness” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 86), professional commitments are undermined through a process whereby expert knowledge is separated from consideration of values and judgement in expert practice as knowledge is “literally dehumanised” (86). While this may superficially reduce the cost of professional practice and potentially improve the transparency of decision-making via greater contractual accountability (Sachs, 2016), it ultimately results in professional decision-making that does not take account of the “human characteristics” of clients (or in the case of teaching, students).

Furthermore, Abbott (1988) provides limited discussion of the processes that provide some “quality control” to professional knowledge. Addis and Winch (2019) make the persuasive argument that educational expertise requires the development of criteria by which new claims to knowledge can be evaluated, and these criteria need to maintain the confidence of the profession and the wider public. In a similar vein, Young and Muller indicate the importance of systematic revisability of knowledge for its ongoing validity and credibility, suggesting that “epistemic bestness” (Young & Muller, 2013, p. 236) is maintained through nuanced processes of review and revision that involve expert networks that develop a shared dialogue around what constitutes the best available knowledge in relation to the disciplinary or professional practice. While such networks may be well developed and work to an agreed set of criteria in some professions (for example medicine), fewer assumptions can be made in respect of educational professions such as teaching.

The paper now turns to a consideration of how Abbott’s work can help unpack some of the perennial problems facing teacher professionalism and its relation to teaching expertise

The defining of educational problems

There can be a tendency to gloss over issues relating to the core purposes of professions and to assume folk understandings of their objectives. For example, in medicine, there

can be a default interpretation that suggests that illness is a problem to be solved by whatever treatment has been proven to be most efficacious according to research studies. However, such an interpretation may lead to a definition of “good health” that is simplistic and simply relates to the alleviation of a condition without considering the wider consequences of a particular treatment, including impacts for the “ethical care” of patients and their quality of life (Greenhalgh, Howick, & Maskrey, 2014). Abbott draws attention to the “objective qualities” of problems or tasks, which “always remained tied to the object” (Abbott, 1988, p. 36) which they are concerned with, and therefore “resist . . . reconstruction” (36). On the other hand, problems can be more “subjectively shaped” if they possess fewer universal qualities and are thus more available to redefinition and reinterpretation in different contexts. Many professional problems may possess both objective and subjective qualities.

While doctors enjoy a relatively secure jurisdiction, partly as a consequence of the demonstrable objective efficacy of their task performance in relation to improving the health of the human body, the influence of teaching on student outcomes remains complex and difficult to demonstrate (Burroughs et al. 2019), and confusion around the “problems” or purposes of the teaching profession may be a contributory factor. For some policy-makers in some nations a “good education” relates only to a narrow conception of the qualification function (particularly when this function can be measured in terms of standardised testing and compared with the outcomes of other education systems) (Biesta, 2015). An overwhelming focus on preparation for exams may well, however, neglect opportunities for civic development or personal formation. While policy reforms in many countries may seek to push teachers towards defining their professional problems in terms of enhancing measurable learning outcomes (e.g. in the United States, England and Australia (Goodwin, 2021; Mayer & Mills, 2021), and thus potentially stimulate the growth in classification systems that relate to these problems, teachers and the public may take a different view as to what is expected from the education system. Thirty years ago Abbott noted that teaching has some “objective foundations” that are “organisational” in character, in the sense that teaching profession is a product of “mass welfare and educational systems” (Abbott, 1988, p. 39), which potentially can set the parameters of what constitutes teaching. However, given the remodelling of the welfare state, global education reform and associated changes in expectations of teachers it seems reasonable to argue that these objective foundations are much less stable in the contemporary context.

Diagnostic struggles, the inferential space, and prescribed treatments

It can also be argued that some aspects of teachers work inherently facilitate ongoing incursions by other professions and the state. In contrast to many professional groups, teachers work with their “clients”, the children or young people, over longer periods of time and thus have the opportunity (and responsibility) to attend to their needs in a more holistic manner which takes account of their humanity as much as their specific learning needs. There is a long and persuasive tradition in educational theory that explores the responsibility of the teacher in these terms, as being as much about opening up opportunities for students and supporting the development of self and character (Deng, 2020; Krogh et al. 2022), as about teaching a subject or managing

a learning process. Such a role is perhaps better defined pedagogically as much as professionally (Biesta, 2015). The complexity and societal importance of such a role requires a particular type of professional development that is moral and ethical as much as geared to the practical competency of teaching a class of students (and subject knowledge), but the fruits of such expertise may be imperceptible or only felt over long periods of time, or for many students much later in life. The complexity and humanistic nature of aspects of teacher expertise thus require capacity for inferential discretion to take account of the individuality of the students, and the contextuality of their backgrounds, in coming to a decision about how to act in a particular classroom situation. Decisions have to sometimes be taken quickly, in the heat of practice, and arguably are more efficacious when teachers have greater range and depth of experience (Eraut, 2004; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005). On the other hand, decisions can also be a subject of deliberation in more structured reflective practice, in accordance with certain principles or guiding questions (Krogh et al. (2022) and see, for example, Westbury et al. (2000)).

But If teaching is seen as a profession in which “inference dominates” then there is substantial “jurisdictional vulnerability” (Abbott, 1988, p. 51), with the lack of measurability of the process of judgement and low accountability for decision-making potentially leading to considerable scepticism amongst policy-makers about the inferential discretion that teachers may enjoy. The contemporary expectations placed on education by policy-makers do not allow for such a “luxury” of inference (Abbott, 1988, p. 50). The difficulties with demonstrating the efficacy of the outcomes of inference (in terms of improved measurable outcomes for children and young people) have led to attempts by governments in the United States and in England to develop an advisory or increasingly subordinate jurisdictional arrangement through “public claims” to have insights into authoritative educational expertise. For example, in 2013 in England, the government received an influential report from Ben Goldacre, an academic with a background in medicine and epidemiology, advocating a model of evidence-based practice based on randomised control trials (Goldacre, 2013), drawing specifically on the trajectory of medical practice over time. Goldacre argued that treatments or “interventions” needed to be evaluated systematically according to these trials, and once found to be effective through a process of “identifying what works the best” (Goldacre, 2013, p. 12) those treatments could become mainstream educational practice. This report, Goldacre’s speech and the subsequent backing by the government amount to a “public claim” (Abbott, 1988) to authoritative expertise over educational research. The implicit understanding was that the scientific methods and the relentless focus on evidence that have reformed medical decision-making could now transform educational practice. This notion has heavily influenced recent reforms in England and become embedded in discourse about educational systems, research and practice (Helgetun and Menter 2022). A form of advisory jurisdiction has eventuated.

However, the minimising of inferential discretion in teaching, and the standardisation of teaching processes or setting of prescriptive “treatments” for the problems of learning particular curriculum content, lead to considerable further problems that undermine educational experiences (Shalem, 2014). As noted above, Abbott states that the efficacy of professional work is undermined if professionals fail to reintroduce the “human properties of the client” (Abbott, 1988, p. 46) during the treatment process

that may have been excluded at the diagnosis stage. It is highly questionable whether attempts to personalise learning through the setting of individual learning goals is tantamount to reintroducing the “human properties” in education, if the “human” aspect of educational process is understood in terms of much educational theory. If we take account of notions of individual formation or the “development of whole persons” through relational processes (Noddings, 2003, p. 250), then we can quickly see the shortcomings of seeing the professional tasks of the teacher in terms of short-term effects or impacts on learning outcomes. As noted above the significant benefits of education are often imperceptible immediately but apparent at later stages in life and are as much intertwined with civic participation as attainment in public exams.

Challenges to the systematic knowledge base of teaching expertise

Grossman, writing about the jurisdictional challenge to teacher educators in the United States, observes that research into teacher education struggles to “demonstrate that, in fact, how teachers are prepared does make a difference . . . to the outcomes that the public cares most about – student learning” (Grossman, 2008, p. 12). As Furlong and Whitty (2017) demonstrate, an underlying issue in educational knowledge is the range of contrasting assumptions that underpin abstract knowledge systems, ranging from the foundation disciplines to the “new science” of education, and their perceived inadequacy in supporting “professional knowledge-in-use”. Grossman’s recipe for remedying the perceived gap between knowledge production and “practice” is to strengthen jurisdictional claims through a “more programmatic vision of research in teacher education” (Grossman, 2008, p. 17), creating the “kinds of measures of teacher knowledge and teacher learning that would help us to examine the outcomes of teacher education in a systematic way” through “large scale studies” (19).

Abbott (1988) emphasises the indispensability of abstract knowledge systems for professional work. Arguably without such a system a profession has no means of generating the thinking required for tackling new tasks that emerge through social, economic and technological change. The system has to balance its imperative to create ordering principles that enable researchers to conduct inquiries with an awareness of changing expectations of the profession over time. The abstract thinking and general principles that lie behind professional work may well need to be continually updated and recontextualised to meet new challenges. The claims the abstract system makes are “cognitive only” (Abbott, 1988, p. 58) and therefore there is important “recontextualisation” work to do to ensure that the principles and claims are translated into new diagnostic or treatment processes (and professional action) (Eraut, 2004; Hordern, 2014). If this fails to happen then “abstractions are simply generalities without legitimacy” (Abbott, 1988, p. 103).

It is important to ask whether the knowledge base for teaching is (i) systematic, in the sense of coherent and organised in a way that supports ongoing inquiry and use, and whether it is (ii) being recontextualised or updated to meet new challenges facing teachers. Differing notions of the purpose of teaching may well suggest different ordering principles enabling systematicity. Grossman (2008) suggests that the abstract knowledge system for teaching can achieve greater systematicity through greater aggregation and scale, with a focus on (what it is assumed) the public care about, namely

student learning and “impact on student achievement” (Grossman, 2008, p. 20). This is a similar strategy to that advocated by Gorard and colleagues in England, who argue that it is imperative that educational research should always “be placed clearly and coherently in the context of” previous “evidence”, with “each new result” adding “to a kind of narrative ‘Bayesian’ synthesis”, and thus updating the ‘repository’ of educational knowledge (Gorard, See, & Siddiqui, 2020, p. 599). These calls for the improvement of the organisation of educational knowledge are also aligned with the intentions of many policy-makers and state sponsored research agencies in the U.S.A. and England (for example the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Institute for Educational Sciences (IES), who seek to fund, select and aggregate research that meets their criteria of quality) (Hordern, Muller, & Deng, 2021). However, this focus on greater systematicity is concomitant with a scientific focus on causal explanation rather than meaning (Smeyers & Smith, 2014), via a narrowing of the educational “problem” to that of measurable student “learning” and achievement (Hordern, Muller, & Deng, 2021), and an assumption that the impact of interventions can be evaluated meaningfully through randomised controlled trials. While there may be considerable potential for a more coherent and systematic knowledge base, this process risks turning educational processes into discrete learning episodes that just measure performance. It also risks downplaying the contextuality of individual human characteristics that need to be brought back in within teaching scenarios.

On the other hand, it may well be possible to build greater systematicity in educational research and construct an abstract knowledge system that prioritises the “goods” that only education can offer to individuals and society, which might include the generation of ‘intellectual enthusiasm’, “the challenge and satisfaction shared ... in engaging new material” and “the development of whole persons” (Noddings, 2003, pp. 249–250), and thus provide the normative conditions for participative democracy (e.g. inclusion, participation and enhancement) (Bernstein, 2000). Instead of educational knowledge production focusing on evaluating the measurable impact of “interventions” on explicit outcomes (as Gorard, See, & Siddiqui, 2020 or Grossman, 2008 might prioritise), it would be important to ask to what extent a programme of research contributes to the illumination and further development of these educational goods. It is important to note that, despite the weak institutional position of educational research in the United States and England (for example), in some other countries Education has historically had greater disciplinary autonomy (Schriewer, 2017), enabling the development of systematically organised knowledge traditions that have generated meaningful abstractions for teaching (see Vollmer, 2021 for an interesting recent example of this work in Germany).

If greater systematicity is feasible, via a clarification of the purposes of education and educational research, then questions remain about the process of recontextualization, updating and iteration. Difficulties seem to arise where there is too much structural separation between the “researchers” and the “teachers”, or on the other hand limited acknowledgement of Abbott’s (1988) observation that the ordering principles of the abstract knowledge system are quite different from that of the professional tasks of teaching (including educational versions of diagnosis, inference and treatment). Some organisations, for example the EEF or the What Works Centre at the IES, have resorted to a process of summarising the findings of existing studies, based on their scientific

selectivity criteria. However, in the case of the EEF there is at least a further acknowledgement that such summaries cannot replace the professional knowledge, experience and judgement of teachers (Educational Endowment Foundation EEF, 2022), an implicit nod to the subtle relationship between an abstract knowledge system (however flawed) and “professional knowledge-in-use” (Abbott, 1988). Nevertheless, if teacher expertise is attentive to the problems of teaching practice the abstract knowledge system requires the iteration of criteria by which new claims to knowledge can be evaluated (Addis & Winch, 2019), and processes of systematic revisability which are usually enacted by academic and professional communities independently of government intervention (Young & Muller, 2013).

Concluding remarks

The nature of the diagnosis, inference and treatment relationship in teaching gives rise to vulnerability to advisory or potentially subordinate jurisdictional arrangements, which can be facilitated or directly enacted by the state. As expectations of education and teachers work have changed, so inevitably the limited luxury that teachers have sometimes enjoyed to define educational problems and autonomously diagnose, infer and treat has become more constrained in many educational systems, often through the centralisation of teacher accreditation processes. This is potentially leading to a situation in which what constitutes teachers’ professional knowledge is subject to advice and guidance from the state or via state-mandated organisations that have been given authority to specify criteria for teacher expertise. These criteria, and the selection of preferred research studies that meet them, may reflect assumptions about the types of professional knowledge that are considered superior to those that have customarily informed teaching practice. Thus, the professional knowledge of the economist or the psychologist may be seen to be appropriate to provide “advice” to the educationalist and the teacher, limiting their capacity to think theoretically and abstractly about education, and ultimately results in a “subordinate” jurisdictional arrangement.

The flaw entailed by these incursions into the professional jurisdiction of teaching is in a misunderstanding of educational practice and the professional knowledge that is required. With some parallel with other people-centred professions there is a requirement to ensure that the “human characteristics” of students are brought back in the context of the “treatment” phase of teaching practice. In other words, the relational and human nature of teaching practice cannot be realistically avoided. Arguably, to be truly educational, the “goods” outlined by Noddings (2003) must be foregrounded. The seductive nature of universal treatment prescriptions thus would need to be treated with scepticism, but this can only be achieved through a challenge to the incursions and restructuring of the abstract knowledge system outlined above. Following Abbott (1988), it is only through making public claims to authoritative educational expertise, a “theoretical efficacy” coupled with a functional efficacy, that jurisdiction could be wrestled back and secured.

Abbott’s work can be used as a theoretical template for policy analysis and for empirical studies examining teacher professionalism in particular national contexts. The nature of external jurisdictional challenges to teaching arising from educational policy reforms and forms or advisory jurisdiction is worthy of

particular scrutiny, bearing in mind the increasing role of the state and state-sponsored advisory bodies in mandating teacher professional knowledge in a number of national contexts (e.g. England, Australia). A further aspect of such potential analytical work would involve exploring the policy processes by which educational problems are constructed and defined, identifying how “human characteristics” may be excluded from what is measured in the evaluation of educational “treatments” and their outcomes. Finally, if inference is considered an inevitable constituent aspect of teachers’ work, then empirical and conceptual work could usefully concentrate on what is distinctive in respect of those inferential processes, not least in maintaining a consideration of the circumstances of individual students.

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