“To work with children, the chance to be creative in my work daily, to make learning fun and interesting, to help children feel cared for and supported at school – that’s professionalism to me.” (ATL member, survey on professionalism, November 2010)

Teachers are amongst the key guardians of education. It is vital that teachers’ voices are the driving force for educational improvement and development, particularly at a time when the education system faces so many challenges and conflicting pressures.

Perceptions of teaching are key to education policy. ATL’s view of teaching is far wider than a short-term political concept of it as a ‘craft’. Our members know that teachers need to innovate, to be able to support children and young people’s learning through an ever-changing society. That innovation is driven by a professionalism based on critical and effective self-reflection, professional autonomy and respect for the role.

Specifically, ATL believes teacher professionalism is based on the following principles.

- The teaching profession is a learning profession, continually developing deep knowledge of:
  - learning
  - how the brain works
  - subjects and the relationships between them
  - pupils, as individuals, and their interests
  - the broader context (political, economic, technological, social, cultural and environmental).

- Teachers’ professional role is based on care for pupils and responsibility for their learning. As part of that, teachers need to build relationships with pupils, families, communities and other professionals.

- The teaching profession draws on theoretical understanding and knowledge in order to adapt teaching practices and methods to pupil need.

- Teacher professionalism is about exercising judgement on curriculum, assessment and pedagogy.

- Teachers have to balance their own professional values against their responsibilities to the organisations in which they work. Further, there has to be a balance between teacher autonomy and appropriate accountability measures prescribed by government.

- Teachers have a responsibility to debate education practice.

In practical terms, therefore, ATL calls for the following.

**Initial teacher education**

- The content and structure for initial teacher education (ITE) programmes should include a breadth and depth of knowledge. In addition to subject pedagogy, ITE programmes should ensure new teachers have sufficient understanding of child development and special educational needs gained through evidence-based theory, classroom practice and access to specialist expertise. All teachers should have a nationally recognised qualification in teaching and education such as QTS or QTLS.

- ITE funding decisions, including bursaries, should be assessed for impact across the education sector. For example, funding decisions should avoid undermining particular subjects, sectors or training routes, which can damage education as a discipline and weaken broader pedagogical approaches.

- Knowledge and understanding of pupils as individuals requires teachers to communicate effectively, to inspire young people, and to have empathy and patience. Selection procedures for ITE should recognise these key requirements. Degree classification must be balanced against other selection criteria, with suitability ascertained through appropriate assessment procedures.

- Recruitment strategies should encourage application from under-represented groups, with routes into teaching assessed against this.

**CPD and the professional continuum**

- With access to relevant and high-quality CPD and reflective practice, teachers grow in professional confidence and skills, and develop particular aspects of their role. CPD should build on the foundations of teachers’ initial professional education, and recognise the stages of development throughout teachers’ careers. This professional continuum should be captured within a framework encompassing ITE and CPD, and including the development of specialisms and leadership. This single, coherent framework could then be used by all teachers, schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) to support teacher development.
The professional continuum should be supported through an entitlement to early and continuing professional development and be reflected in national professional standards.

Induction is a key phase in this professional continuum, particularly with the increasing primacy of shorter ITE programmes. Induction recognises the greater CPD needs of professionals in their early careers and is a vital guarantee of access to increased support from schools. Government should retain induction as a requirement and entitlement for all teachers gaining QTS, and provide funding and guidance to support mentoring in schools.

The role of higher education

Teachers should have access to ITE and CPD that combines both theory and practice. HEIs are best equipped to offer this vital grounding in theoretical understanding of education and pedagogy, and to provide research evidence to inform practice for teachers in all stages of their careers. To promote reflective practice and innovation, initial and ongoing professional education arrangements should therefore include a principal role for HEIs, including participation in teacher research.

Tensions between theory and practice in ITE programmes have been exacerbated by inconsistent quality of HEI-school links. All ITE routes should have a focus on building high-quality structures of professional support between HEIs and schools.

School networks are valuable in supporting HEI-linked ITE and CPD. To ensure proper levels of evidence-based challenge and innovative thinking, these networks should include a diversity of schools in terms of their circumstances and type, promoting a breadth of professional understanding.

Government policy, national standards and accountability

Teachers are experts in curriculum, assessment and pedagogy. This expertise should be recognised through increased autonomy in curriculum development, pupil assessment and pedagogy. National professional standards should reflect this, and avoid political prescription of teacher practice.

Professional standards provide the backdrop to government’s engagement with teacher professionalism; linked to accountability mechanisms such as performance management and inspection, they impact strongly on teaching practice and pupil education. The government should consult properly with teaching unions and professional associations on professional standards so they reflect the richness of the teaching role. Any changes to professional standards should avoid political bias and prescription of teaching methodology.

Evidence shows CPD that is personalised, relevant, sustained and supported is most likely to be effective, which is critical to improving teaching quality and learning experiences and outcomes for pupils. Therefore, CPD should be built on a teacher’s needs and wishes alongside the school’s requirements, rather than merely follow policy diktat.

Collaborative professionalism

Teachers work collaboratively. School and local arrangements should support this through whole-school policies and team working, joint working with external specialist services, partnerships between schools, and constructive communication with parents/carers and the local community.

Professional roles and boundaries should be clearly defined and maintained across the education workforce. Within multi-agency working, roles and boundaries should be recognised by local and national structures of accountability.

Local democratic structures and services, eg local authorities, are key in supporting teachers and their colleagues to fulfil their professional responsibilities to pupils, families and communities. They should be properly funded and empowered to fulfil that role.

ATL believes that the above, alongside supportive performance management and appropriate remuneration, will provide a framework that recognises teachers’ professionalism, promotes teacher morale and retention, and ensures an entitlement for all pupils that will improve educational outcomes.

Through our professional networks, ATL will continue to champion teachers’ expert voice in debates about education practice. We also support teachers’ professionalism through advice, CPD provision and publications. For more, see www.atl.org.uk/teacherprofessionalism.