

Defining Professionalism in Teacher Education Programs

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Abstract

Professionalism and how it is to be acquired should be a focus of every teacher education program. Despite the significant role professionalism plays there is a lack of a universally accepted definition of professionalism in teacher education programs. This paper investigates “working definitions” of professionalism as they pertain to teacher preparation programs and their teacher candidates.

Keywords: professional, dispositions, teacher education, teacher preparation

Teacher preparation programs across the country emphasize three vital elements in their programs. Those elements are preparing aspiring educators to possess and demonstrate the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to be an effective instructor. Content knowledge is certainly necessary to provide learners with accurate information to be learned and later applied in life situations. Skills, in this listing, refer to the pedagogy of teaching. The methods of instruction that peak a student’s interest and make the learning meaningful and memorable. Dispositions are commonly the aspect of teacher preparation that addresses what is viewed as professionalism. This terminology is more elusive to define with common language as Specialized Professional Associations (SPAs) emphasize the importance of professionalism, but do not have a unified definition of what professionalism is for a teacher candidate. How does a teacher candidate learn to be a professional? It begins with teacher candidates understanding of what professionalism means in the field of education. With this need for a definition in mind, how do we, as teacher educators define professionalism in our teacher preparation programs? Without a universally accepted definition that is accompanied by the characteristics or qualities valued as indicators of a professional, labeling or stating that our teacher candidates have attained this status is questionable. Within many teacher preparation programs, it is assumed or taken for granted that pre-service teachers will simply become professionals as a result of completing the teacher education program. Or, perhaps teacher educators believe that professional dispositions will be automatically acquired through field experiences.

Whatever the belief or assumption pertaining to professionalism and the dispositions characteristic of an educational professional, the fact is that professionalism and the acquisition of professional dispositions is believed to be important by 22 different Specialized Professional Associations (SPAs); almost all of which have at least one standard addressing “professionalism”. Across the various disciplines of teacher education it is clear that “educators are expected to develop the characteristics of a professional and model professionalism every day” (Kramer, 2003, p. 22). When asked to define “professionalism,” the definition would probably include examples of what is commonly considered professional-like behaviors. To define the term “professionalism” is elusive and SPAs have crafted definitions to meet the specific needs of their particular discipline. In teacher education literature, most of these definitions agree that a professional demonstrates behaviors which portray the knowledge and skills of the profession. Thus, professionalism is defined as “an ideal to which individuals and occupational groups aspire, in order to distinguish themselves from other workers” (Pratte & Rury, 1991, p 60). Grady, Helbling and Lubeck (2008) added that a professional also “exercises discretion in making decisions within the scope of their expertise, and they assume some authority for their own professional development” (p. 603). Regardless of the lack of a universally accepted professionalism definition, what is consistent in the relevant literature is that professionals are expected to have specific knowledge which they utilize to make sound judgments, specialized training, characteristics that are unique to their field, and standards to which they are accountable. Professionalism is multifaceted and therefore difficult to define (Brehm et al., 2006).

Brehm argues that professionalism is divided into the three categories; 1) professional parameters, 2) professional behaviors, and 3) professional responsibilities. Professional parameters focuses on the legal and ethical issues to which a professional must adhere such as the local, state, and federal laws pertaining to educational and instructional issues (i.e., American with Disabilities Act, No Child Left Behind, Child Maltreatment, etc.) or Code of Professional Conduct delineated by state boards of education or SPAs. Professional behaviors are observable actions that demonstrate the individual's appropriate behaviors such as: maintaining appropriate relationships with students, parents, and colleagues; modeling of the appearance and attitudes of a professional; and promptness. Professional responsibilities for a teacher would include demonstrating responsibility to the profession, students, the school district, the community. Examples of professional responsibility would include becoming an active member of one's professional association, volunteering for school or community functions and attending school events. When defining professionalism, Brown and Ferrill (2009) emphasized the importance of identifying the unique characteristics of one's profession and how it differs from others. What are the dispositions of a professional? It is important to note that Katz and Rath's definition includes a summary of actions that can be observed or documented through the use of behavioral observations. Many of these dispositions are what Brehm and colleagues (2006) referred to as professional behaviors (e.g., maintaining appropriate relationships, acceptable appearance and attitudes such as a belief that all students can learn).

The importance of professionalism and exhibiting the dispositions associated with that of a professional can be conveyed both overtly and covertly. Overtly, the program can explain to the students what the programmatic expectations are for each person upon admission to the program, and then address how these expectations will be assessed throughout the curriculum. When considering professionalism in teacher preparation programs, this author advocates that consideration should be given to The Framework for Teaching (Danielson, 2013). This set of research-based components of instruction is aligned to the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards. Particular focus should be given for this defining of professionalism in teacher education programs to Domain 4: Professional Responsibilities. Included in this domain are the subsets of 4a. Reflecting on Teaching; 4b. Maintaining Accurate Records; 4c. Communicating with Families; 4d. Participating in the Professional Community; 4e. Growing and Developing Professionally; and 4f. Showing Professionalism. These components are further broken down into "indicators" of the fulfillment of professional responsibilities. One institution of higher learning has adapted these indicators to more readily fit, not the professional responsibilities of teachers, but the professional responsibilities of teacher candidates. This institution, Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, shows in their Student Teaching Handbook (2015) under Slippery Rock University, Framework for Teaching, Domain 4 Professional Responsibilities the following modifications of Danielson's indicators:

Domain 4: Professional Responsibility

Components:

4a: Reflecting on Teaching

- articulates an understanding of lessons' goals and objectives
- states the strengths and weaknesses of lessons based on data
- analyzes students' participation in terms of content comprehension
- encourages participation from diverse student populations
- writes reflections about lessons and refines subsequent instruction
- accepts feedback and implements recommendations
- develops written plans for improvement

4b: Maintaining Accurate Records

- records and updates the results of students' assignments
- collects information about students' progress in a systematic manner
- analyzes performance of students with diverse learning styles
- maintains records of non-instructional activities

4c: Communicating with Families

- maintains confidentiality in all situations/settings
- communicates positive information and concerns to parents/caregivers

- engages family members/caregivers in the instructional program

4d: Working in and Contributing to the School and District

- establishes rapport with members of diverse populations
- seeks assistance from other professionals concerning teaching and learning
- participates in school-related activities

4e: Growing and Developing Professionally

- participates in student teaching seminars and other required university events
- attends all required school and district professional development programs
- shows evidence of participation in at least one professional organization
- integrates information from professional publications into daily instruction
- articulates a philosophy of education that includes critical self-reflection
- assesses personal cultural perspective and its influence on interactions with others

4f: Showing Professionalism

- attends promptly and regularly
- dresses professionally in the school setting
- practices personal hygiene and neat grooming
- completes schedules, assignments, and other paperwork on time
- completes work in the manner prescribed by the university and/or the school district
- complies with school and class rules
- uses relevant codes of ethics for the teaching profession
- follows proper procedures for reporting students' welfare and safety
- acts responsibly regarding school and personal property
- challenges stereotypical attitudes
- ensures that all students receive an equitable opportunity to succeed

While these indicators/descriptors do not provide a commonly accepted definition of professionalism in teacher education programs, it is also increasingly clear that SPAs will not come to a consensus in their defining of professionalism in teacher preparation. With this realization, it become vital for the faculty of teacher education training programs to agree upon the dispositions/characteristics on which the teacher candidates will be evaluated. From these indicators, teacher candidates will formulate their own definition in striving to meet the standards set for them.

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