

The Three Rs of PROFESSIONALISM

by Patricia H. Phelps

When teachers commit to three key values, professionalism improves.

Consider the following brief descriptions of teachers. Jim comes unprepared to a parent conference. Alicia brags about her ability to “stump” students with test items. Catherine marks her college graduation by celebrating the termination of reading professional journals. Marcus regularly leaves his school campus to run errands during his “prep” period. In the teacher’s lounge, Melissa often shares detailed information about specific students that others do not need to know. What do these teachers have in common? Most would characterize their behaviors as “unprofessional”—a label that is certainly not desired in education or in any field. To be considered professional, teachers must understand better the meaning and indicators of professionalism.

In my 20 years of experience as a teacher educator, I have found developing professionalism to be the most challenging aspect of preparing new teachers. When problems exist in the area of professionalism, teacher candidates often do not recognize them. A closer look at the meaning and manifestations of professionalism may

help future and current teachers gain and pursue this critical attribute.

The meaning of professionalism is frequently noticed in the context of its absence. For instance, when an individual behaves in an unprofessional manner, observers may subsequently reflect upon the meaning of professionalism. Though Sizer and Sizer (1999, 15) called professionalism “ill-defined,” seeking a definition is essential. As defined by Swisher and Page (2005, 2), professionalism refers to “the internalized beliefs . . . regarding professional obligations, attributes, interactions, attitudes, values, and role behaviors.” Thus, helping

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teachers acquire these beliefs is an important part of the socialization process. Because negative images of teaching portrayed in movies and television can impact these beliefs, colleagues should assist beginning teachers by portraying and reinforcing positive behaviors.

Professionalism is measured by the best and the highest standards. When teachers use excellence as a critical criterion for judging their actions and attitudes, their professionalism is enhanced. Three primary indicators constitute the meaning of professionalism: responsibility, respect, and risk taking. When teachers are committed to these three values, their behaviors will reveal greater professionalism.

Responsibility

Professionalism means that teachers fully accept the challenges of teaching (Phelps 2003). Danielson (1996) presented a well-known framework of teaching practice that encompasses teaching's complex dimensions via four major components. By not endorsing a single teaching approach or style, Danielson's (1996) model preserves the autonomy of teachers and respects their individual judgment. One of the model's components (Domain 4) is "Professional Responsibilities." These responsibilities include duties beyond the classroom, such as keeping accurate records, communicating with families, and participating in school activities—all basic requirements of fulfilling the teaching role. By executing such vital role activities effectively, teachers demonstrate responsibility that shows professionalism (Danielson 1996, component 4f).

Teachers who assume responsibility for student learning have a sense of efficacy, a critical component of professionalism (Coberly and Cosgrove 2002). At a luncheon I recently attended, one participant stated, "I don't want to be responsible for someone else's learning." Fortunately, this individual had already left teaching; she definitely lacked efficacy. Teachers with a high sense of efficacy believe that they can make a difference in students' lives. However, such teachers do not merely hold this belief—they *act* upon it. They continue to seek new strategies and alternatives. Persistence is apparent in efficacious teachers as they constantly search for what works (Haberman 1995). This search can take place through personal reflecting, interacting with teaching colleagues, reading professional journals, or engaging in other professional development activities. Innovative and creative teachers who assume responsibility for student learning are willing to try different strategies.

Teachers whose sense of efficacy is strong do not blame external circumstances when students do not learn, but instead take a proactive approach by seeking ways to

help students achieve. Asking themselves whether their actions will help students to learn, these teachers will, in turn, exhibit more professionalism. Efficacious teachers tap their own resources to impact student learning. They continue to find alternatives in the best interest of students, and they are willing to take responsibility for students' learning.

In a recent field setting where I supervised a tutoring program, a preservice teacher was having difficulty getting a middle school student to do homework. Once she discovered that his interests were music and math, she developed a newspaper activity for this student to create a job description and predict the finances of a musician. Rather than giving up or becoming discouraged, the teacher candidate looked for another avenue to reach the student. Professional teachers stay focused on their primary goal, which is to promote student learning. If this standard is used as the most significant gauge, then decisions and behaviors more readily will reflect professionalism.

Guided by responsibility, teachers will hold the belief that they have an obligation to students, students' families, colleagues, and the school as a whole. The more committed teachers are to the value of responsibility, the more professionalism they will exhibit. Teachers who value responsibility, for example, are prepared for parent conferences. They do not bluff. While the conditions in schools sometimes may force teachers to engage in bluffing (i.e., "misleading others by means of an artful demeanor" [Sizer and Sizer 1999, 43]), standards of professionalism suggest that teachers search for ways to overcome the need to bluff, or at least to admit honestly they are doing so, and to work for change in the system that reinforces such bluffing behavior.

Respect

Teachers who show professionalism are committed to using respect as a touchstone for their actions. They model integrity, or wholeness (Palmer 1998), and present an authentic self to students while they acknowledge that vulnerability is a part of teaching. In addition, they keep in mind that "the students are watching" (Sizer and Sizer 1999) as they capitalize on the power of modeling. To show respect, teachers' behaviors must be congruent with their values. For example, if honesty is imperative for students to exhibit, then that same value should be evident in teachers' actions. Respect is inherent in striving for congruency.

Teachers who use respect as a behavioral norm desire to serve students actively. Such an attitude of service translates into being available to meet with students and their families, seeking additional resources

to help students, and challenging obstacles that students confront in schools—particularly those who have traditionally been underserved (e.g., students from low socioeconomic groups and students who perform below grade-level academic standards).

Fulfilling this service aspect of professionalism requires teachers to act as advocates for students and to exhibit altruism. Rather than basing their actions upon self-serving interests (e.g., running errands vs. preparing lessons), professional teachers are student-serving first and foremost. This does not mean that teachers neglect their own needs. However, in making instructional decisions, the needs of students should take priority if professionalism is to prevail. Colleagues can help new teachers find a balance between duty and devotion. To demonstrate greater professionalism, teachers should focus upon meeting their students' needs, because they *ought* to and because they *want* to do so.

As an important emotional dimension in teaching, caring reflects respect and influences teachers' professionalism. When caring forms the basis of teachers' decisions and actions, then not only will students be better served, but also their best interests will assume top priority (Noddings 1992). Caring teachers are able to empathize with students and colleagues. Teachers who are able to place themselves in the situations faced by others will act in ways that are perceived as caring and professional.

Respect can be conveyed particularly in the manner that teachers speak. Keller (1999) described two different types of teacher lounge talk—caring vs. toxic. Conversations that are focused on improving situations and concerned with helping students are respectful and caring. Professionalism is thus mirrored in teacher talk that seeks solutions. Communicating respectfully about students, to students, as well as with and about colleagues, indicates a high degree of professionalism.

Risk Taking

If, as Smith (1990, 216) indicated, “the essence of teaching is taking chances,” then risk taking is an important indicator of professionalism. Teachers who are committed to risk taking are not afraid to pose difficult questions or take unpopular stands. For example, rather than accept the status quo, professionalism means that teachers raise difficult questions. Why do we fragment learning with a bell schedule? How could our school more effectively assess student learning? Why do we continue to do what is not working? Questions such as these invite administrators and other teachers to examine the causes of challenges faced by their schools.

Raising difficult questions also supports what Sizer and Sizer (1999) labeled as grappling, or struggling with intellectually challenging situations and content. If this behavior is desired among students, then teachers also must show it.

Another manifestation of professionalism through risk taking is a commitment to continuous learning (Phelps 2003). Learning something new is taking a risk per se. Teachers who see themselves as learners and who are willing to take risks for the sake of better student learning make a greater impact upon students (Barth 2004). Examples of ongoing learning practices are staying current by reading professional literature and refusing to use the same lesson plan from five years ago. Moreover, one thought-provoking question for teachers to consider regularly is: “How much are you prepared to risk of what is familiar, comfortable, safe, and perhaps working well for you, in the name of better education for others?” (Barth 2004, 186). Teachers who honestly face this question will make changes in their practice as necessary, be committed to service, and become teacher leaders. The result will be greater professionalism among teachers.

Closing Thoughts

To increase professionalism among teachers, practitioners must embrace *responsibility*, demonstrate *respect*, and practice *risk taking*. Teachers must recognize that professionalism is determined by the beliefs and values that they have internalized. Engaging in reflection and dialogue provides a way for teachers to discover the extent of their own professionalism or lack thereof. As teachers endeavor to respond with respect, assume responsibility, and engage in risk taking, their individual professionalism will improve; fewer acts of unprofessional behavior will then occur. The three Rs of responsibility, respect, and risk taking help teachers to understand professionalism better so that they can manifest it more frequently. ■

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