Comparing Teacher and Administrator Perspectives on Multiple Dimensions of Teacher Professionalism

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In this paper, we compare teacher and administrator perspectives on multiple dimensions of teacher professionalism. An instrument with a total of 51 professional behaviors and characteristics that operationalize the multiple dimensions of professionalism was developed. Survey participants, including 216 teachers and 89 administrators, were asked to respond whether each item was a high priority, moderate priority, low priority, or not a priority for teachers. Findings suggest that teachers and administrators agree on many aspects of professionalism. However, there are also important areas of disjuncture between administrators and teachers.

To describe a teacher as a professional does not simply mean that he/she has subject and pedagogical knowledge and is paid for sharing that knowledge with students. Rather, a professional teacher also exhibits professionalism in: personal characteristics, commitment to change and continuous improvement, and through participation in educational activities beyond the confines of the classroom (Sockett, 1993; Tichenor & Tichenor, 2005). In other words, teacher professionalism is a multidimensional concept. In this paper, we compare teacher and administrator perspectives on multiple dimensions of professionalism -- it is important to realize that administrator perspectives on what it means to be "professional" might be very different than what it means to teachers.

On the most basic level, the definition of "professional teacher" refers to the status of a person who is paid to teach. However, professionalism also refers to teachers who represent the best in the profession and set the highest standard for best practice. Wise (1989) describes professional teachers as those:

[who] have a firm grasp of the subjects they teach and are true to the intellectual demands of their disciplines. They are able to analyze the needs of the students for whom they are responsible. They know the standards of practice of their profession. They know that they are accountable for meeting the needs of their students (p. 304-305).

This definition clearly illustrates that teaching at a professional level is an advanced and multidimensional undertaking. Patricia Phelps (2006) categorizes the dimensions of professionalism as responsibility, respect, and risk taking. Phelps (2006) contends that developing professionalism in new teachers is a great challenge.

Stronge (2002) categorized the attributes, behaviors, and attitudes of effective teachers into six major areas: prerequisites of effective teachers, the teacher as a person, classroom management and organization, organizing for instruction, implementing instruction, and monitoring student progress and potential.

The first two areas examine the teacher as an individual, while the remaining four explore the responsibilities and practices of teachers. He further summarizes the characteristics of effective teachers into three statements: the effective teacher recognizes complexity, communicates clearly, and serves conscientiously.

Hoyle (1980) portrays professionalism as the quality of one's practice. That is, the behaviors exhibited by a professional teacher are what identify a teacher's professionalism. Similarly, Hurst and Reding (2000) associate specific behaviors with teacher professionalism, from appearance and punctuality to using proper language and building strong relationships with colleagues. Morrow (1988) believes professionalism is the degree to which one is committed to the profession and notes that individuals vary in their identification with their profession and in their support of the profession's values—i.e., teachers have varying levels of professionalism. Kramer (2003) contends the most critical elements of teacher professionalism can be classified into three categories: attitude, behavior, and communication. These three broad areas cover a wide range of behaviors and characteristics that should be demonstrated in the professional lives of teachers, from being on time and dressing neatly to understanding learning theories to clearly communicating with colleagues, parents, and students (Kramer 2003). Additionally, Cruikshank and Haefele (2001) categorize "good teachers" in multiple areas including being analytic, dutiful, expert, reflective, and respected.

In The Moral Base for Teacher Professionalism, Sockett (1993) lays out a broad theory of the moral foundations of teacher professionalism. The author describes professionalism as the "manner of conduct within an occupation, how members integrate their obligations with their knowledge and skill in a context of collegiality, and their contractual and ethical relations with clients" (p.

9). Using composite descriptions of idealized teachers in three classrooms, he identifies five major aspects of professionalism for teachers: character, commitment to change and continuous improvement, subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and obligations and working relationships beyond the classroom.

While the current literature describes the complexities of being a professional teacher, these descriptions are mostly theoretical in nature and informed by general observations rather than empirical research. To determine what teachers think about effective teaching and professionalism, Tichenor and Tichenor (2005) conducted focus group interviews with elementary school teachers. Analysis of the focus group data demonstrated that teachers' conceptualization matches many of the descriptions in the literature on teacher professionalism and effectiveness (Tichenor & Tichenor, 2005).

Stronge (2002) maintains that professional behaviors and characteristics can be fostered for veteran teachers through high-quality and appropriate professional development activities and for beginning teachers through "observing other teachers, receiving peer feedback, cultivating collegial relationships, and participating in lifelong learning experiences" (p. 64). In order to promote teacher professionalism, it is important that administrators and teachers share a common understanding of this concept. Because the success of any school is very often due to the leadership of the school (Marzano, Walters & McNulty, 2005), it is important to understand both the differences and similarities between teachers' and administrators' understanding of professionalism. While it may be assumed there will be many areas of agreement regarding what it means to be a "professional teacher," any areas of difference between teachers and administrators deserve attention in the research literature. If there is not a common understanding of professionalism among teachers and administrators, it is unlikely

that professionalism will be recognized in the larger, public arena. In this paper, we compare administrators' perspectives with teachers' perspectives on professionalism. Such an understanding will allow teacher education programs and school districts to develop programs that promote higher levels of professionalism among all educators.

Method

Building on the results of focus group interviews with teachers (Tichenor & Tichenor, 2005) and using a survey on teacher professionalism developed by Cheng (1996), a survey instrument was developed that asked teachers and administrators to describe the priority teachers place on a wide variety of behaviors and characteristics. Because no single behavior or characteristic can measure the multidimensional concept of professionalism, we developed a comprehensive list of behaviors and characteristics that operationalizes the multiple dimensions of professionalism. A total of 51 behaviors and characteristics were listed and

survey participants were asked to respond as to whether each item was a high priority, moderate priority, low priority, or not a priority for teachers. For example, teachers and administrators were asked how high a priority it is for teachers to discuss teaching philosophies with colleagues. While discussing teaching philosophies in itself does not mean that a teacher is "professional," it may serve as an indicator of professionalism for some teachers and administrators. Likewise, staying current by reading journals and/or attending conferences and workshops may serve as an indicator of professionalism for some teachers and administrators, but not others.

The 51 survey items are categorized into four dimensions of professionalism: personal characteristics, commitment to change and continuous improvement, subject and pedagogical knowledge, and participation in educational activities beyond the confines of the classroom (Sockett, 1993; Tichenor & Tichenor, 2005). Table 1 lists the 51 behaviors and characteristics in the survey and the category of professionalism for each.

Table 1

Category of Professionalism	Characteristics/Behaviors
Personal Character	• dress in a neat manner • exhibit confidence in teaching • display positive attitudes on a daily basis • respect students and their ideas • set high standards for self and students • put the welfare of students before personal interests • display enthusiasm for teaching • behave in an ethical manner in and out of school • regard the education of students as the primary duty • exhibit personal responsibility for the quality of own teaching • display flexibility when working with students and/or teachers • maintain composure in all school-related situations • look forward to coming to school each day • display creativity when working with students • see self as a life-long learner

Table 1 Cont.

Category of Professionalism	Characteristics/Behaviors
Commitment to Change/Continuous Improvement	• select teaching strategies based on best practices in education and current research findings • dedicate self to teaching as a life-long career • make presentations at seminars, workshops, and/or conferences • actively seek professional development opportunities • experiment with innovative teaching practices • initiate new classroom programs to enhance learning for students • keep up with current social and political trends affecting education • stay current in own field by reading journals and/or attending conferences and workshops • regularly observe other teachers to improve own teaching • remain receptive to new ideas and change • engage in teacher research or action research to improve own practice
Subject and Pedagogical Knowledge	• teach in developmentally appropriate ways • understand how academic subjects are linked to other disciplines • understand the developmental needs of children • make classroom decisions based on the needs of students • know and apply human development and learning theories • avoid making students feel embarrassed or ashamed • engage in self-reflection and analyze own teaching • regularly evaluate own choices and actions in the classroom • possess a high degree of content knowledge in own areas of certification • provide all students with fair learning opportunities • possess a high degree of pedagogical knowledge • consider all aspects of students • create positive learning environment for students
Beyond the Classroom	• serve as a positive role model for students and teachers • serve as public advocate for the field of education • actively participate on school-wide committees and/or in school decision-making • share teaching ideas and strategies with colleagues • establish friendly and cooperative relationships with parents • cooperate with colleagues in the interests of students • show respect for colleagues and administrators • help foster a positive working environment within the school • discuss teaching philosophies with colleagues • mentor or willing to mentor beginning and experienced teachers • stay actively involved in professional organizations for educators • participate in curriculum development

After the survey was piloted and revised, teachers from eight elementary schools in one county in central Florida were selected to participate in this voluntary study. The sample consisted of four schools that are part of a professional development school (PDS) partnership with a university department of teacher education and four non-PDS sites in the same geographical area. This convenience sample may limit the ability to generalize the results to a larger population of teachers, but it provided access to many teachers for this exploratory study. The surveys were distributed at the beginning of faculty meetings and collected at the end of the meetings. A total of 216 surveys were collected from teachers at the eight schools.

After the teachers were surveyed, administrators were surveyed through a web-based survey. Rather than simply asking administrators at the eight schools to complete the survey, a larger scale survey of administrators was conducted. In order to have a sample size comparable to the sample of 216 teachers, principals and assistant principals were surveyed in a three-county area that included the eight schools at which teachers were surveyed. The survey methodology involved sending e-mail messages to the administrators of each elementary school in the three-county area, asking them to participate in a web-based survey. A total of 340 e-mail invitations were distributed. Follow-up reminders were sent to increase the response rate. A total of 89 of the elementary school administrators responded to the survey for a 27 percent response rate.

Table 2 presents the gender composition of the respondents. A larger percent of the administrators were male (19%) than the teachers (8%). Table 3 presents the race/ethnicity of the respondents. The administrators represent a large, three-county area in central Florida and are much more diverse than the teacher survey respondents in the eight schools in one county. This hinders the ability to generalize the results to a larger population of teachers and administrators. However, the results of this exploratory study point to interesting findings that deserve further study.

Table 2.
Gender of Respondent

	Administrators		Teachers	
Gender	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Female	72	81%	193	92%
Male	17	19%	16	8%
Total	89*	100%	209**	100%

*3 respondents did not identify their gender
**7 respondents did not identify their gender

Findings

On many of the survey items, we predicted a high level of agreement among all survey respondents. That is, we expected that most teachers and administrators would agree that

Table 3.
Race/Ethnicity of Respondent

	Administrators		Teachers	
Race/Ethnicity	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
White/Non-Hispanic	65	71%	198	92%
African American	12	13%	2	1%
Hispanic	10	11%	4	2%
Other	2	2%	3	1%
Unidentified	3	3%	9	4%
Total	92	100%	216	100%

certain characteristics and behaviors should be a high priority for teachers. For instance, creating a positive learning environment for students would most likely be a high priority for both groups. However, we did expect to find variation in the level of priority (i.e., high, moderate, low) in many of the items. We treated each variable as interval-like and calculated means for each survey item. The response category "not a priority" was coded as 1; "low priority" was coded as 2; "moderate priority" was coded as 3; and "high priority" was coded as 4. Therefore, the closer to 4 the calculated mean was, the higher the priority respondents placed on the item. For example, the item "create positive learning environment for students" had a mean of 3.98 for administrators and teachers, indicating the vast majority of respondents see this characteristic as a high priority. Likewise, the mean response for teachers on the item "make presentations at seminars, workshops, and/or conferences" was only 2.17, indicating that teachers, on average, placed a low priority on this behavior. None of the behaviors/characteristics had a mean score lower than 2. In other words, administrators and teachers place little priority on each of the items. This is what we anticipated because the items were developed to represent a wide variety of professional behaviors and characteristics. On 32 of the 51 items, there were no statistically significant differences between the priority placed on behaviors/characteristics by teachers and administrators. However, Table 4 presents the means of the 19 items in which there was a statistically significant difference between teacher and administrator responses at the standard alpha levels of .05, .01, and .001. Next, we discuss selected survey items with significant differences between administrators and teachers.

Teachers and administrators both responded that dedicating oneself to teaching as a life-long career is a priority. However, teachers view this as a higher priority than administrators. The mean for teachers (3.63) was closer to the maximum value of four (high priority) and the administrator's mean (3.24) was closer to the "moderate priority" category. This is interesting in that it may indicate a disconnect between administrators' and teachers' perspectives on the basic concept of teaching as a career. It may suggest that administrators do not view teaching as a lifelong career to the extent that teachers do. However, it is important that administrators highly value and support the view of teaching as a life-long career. Only with adequate support of educational administrators can teachers dedicate themselves to teaching throughout an entire career. Administrators must be aware that dedication to teaching as a lifelong career is a high priority for many teachers.

Stronge (2002) contends that the professionalism of novice teachers may be enhanced through regular observation of other teachers. However, the priority teachers place on regularly observing other teachers to improve one's own teaching was significantly lower than administrators. The mean score for administrators was 3.49, midway between moderate priority (3) and high priority (4). Teachers, on the other hand, more closely identified this as a moderate priority (Mean=3.04). This may indicate that administrators recognize the benefit of this activity more than teachers. However, it may also reflect a reality for many teachers that they cannot regularly observe other teachers to improve their own teaching. If this is the case, administrators may need to structure opportunities for teachers to more regularly observe best practices in teaching. Such regular opportunities may increase teacher recognition of the benefit of this activity and increase the level of priority they place on observing other teachers. Further, there may be a component of teacher embarrassment in this area. When an administrator asks a teacher to observe another teacher, it may be in response to a perceived weakness in the teacher. However, even the best teacher can learn from regular observation of other teachers.

Table 4.
Differences in means between administrators and teachers on all measures of professional behaviors/characteristics

	Group	Mean	Std. Dev.
Dedicate self to teaching as a life-long career ***	Administrator	3.24	.717
	teacher	3.63	.581
Make presentations at seminars, workshops, and/or conferences ***	Administrator	2.51	.721
	teacher	2.17	.876
Regularly observe other teachers to improve own teaching ***	Administrator	3.49	.565
	teacher	3.04	.776
Engage in teacher research or action research to improve own practice ***	Administrator	3.43	.652
	teacher	2.90	.865
Participate in curriculum development ***	Administrator	3.45	.619
	teacher	3.09	.845
Actively participate on school-wide committees and/or in school decision-making ***	Administrator	3.32	.592
	teacher	3.01	.741
Avoid making students feel embarrassed or ashamed **	Administrator	3.97	.180
	Teacher	3.85	.354
Select teaching strategies based on best practices in education and current research findings **	Administrator	3.92	.267
	Teacher	3.79	.408
Actively seek professional development opportunities **	Administrator	3.68	.490
	Teacher	3.49	.588
Cooperate with colleagues in the interests of students **	Administrator	3.74	.442
	Teacher	3.88	.338
Initiate new classroom programs to enhance learning for students **	Administrator	3.39	.610
	Teacher	3.59	.573
Look forward to coming to school each day **	Administrator	3.86	.350
	Teacher	3.67	.545
Stay actively involved in professional organizations for educators **	Administrator	2.93	.660
	Teacher	2.64	.900
Serve as a positive role model for students and teachers *	Administrator	3.91	.283
	Teacher	3.97	.165
Display positive attitudes on a daily basis *	Administrator	3.85	.361
	Teacher	3.92	.271
Dress in a neat manner *	Administrator	3.63	.507
	Teacher	3.74	.448
Engage in self-reflection and analyze own teaching *	Administrator	3.82	.437
	Teacher	3.70	.500
Share teaching ideas and strategies with colleagues *	Administrator	3.55	.521
	Teacher	3.72	.501
Consider all aspects of students *	Administrator	3.78	.467
	Teacher	3.65	.517

*** alpha= .001; **alpha= .01 * alpha=.05

Another difference between teachers and administrators is that teachers do not view active participation on school-wide committees and/ or school decision-making as high a priority as administrators. The mean response for teachers was approximately at the moderate priority level (Mean=3.01) while the administrators' mean was 3.32. This indicates that administrators see teacher participation in school governance as a slightly higher priority than teachers. While the results do not indicate that teachers place no priority on school governance, the disjuncture between teachers and administrators may be important in understanding why some teachers do not participate on school-wide committees and school decision-making. If teachers recognize that administrators place a higher emphasis on participation on school-wide committees and/ or decision-making, it may help foster a greater sense of ownership of such activities.

It is also noteworthy that administrators place a very high priority on selecting teaching strategies based on best practices in education and current research findings (Mean=3.92). In other words, the vast majority of administrator respondents reported this as a high priority. While teachers also placed a high priority on this practice, the mean of 3.79 was lower at a statistically significant level. Further, the variation in teacher responses (standard deviation = .408) was much higher than the variation in administrator responses (standard deviation = .267). Examining the actual teacher responses to this item, 79% consider selecting teaching strategies based on best practices in education and current research findings a high priority while 21% see it as a moderate priority. Some of the teachers who do not see this as a high priority may take the perspective that they are already implementing best practices and may not have time or inclination to examine and possibly change their current teaching practices. However, it is important that administrators and teachers continually examine new teaching strategies based on current research and best practices.

An issue in which there was a large, statistically significant difference between administrators and teachers was the item that addressed the priority to engage in teacher research or action research to improve a teacher's own practice. The mean priority rating for administrators was 3.43, while the mean for teachers was 2.90. Teachers, on average, said this was slightly below a moderate priority while administrators rated it nearly midway between moderate and high priority. While engaging in teacher research or action research to improve one's own practice is not in itself an indicator of the professionalism of a teacher, the rather large difference between teachers and administrators on this issue is important. Administrators must share with teachers that this should be at least a moderate priority and provide guidance and support for teachers to conduct their own action research.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As described above, the 51 characteristics and behaviors of teachers listed in the survey make up a composite picture of professionalism. None of the individual items by themselves capture what it means to a professional. Rather, the items draw an amalgamated picture of professionalism. The multiple behaviors and characteristics are categorized into four basic dimensions found in the research literature on teacher professionalism: personal characteristics, commitment to change and continuous improvement, and through participation in educational activities beyond the confines of the classroom (Sockett, 1993; Tichenor & Tichenor, 2005). Overall, there were statistically significant differences between teachers and administrators on 19 of the 51 items describing various aspects of teacher professionalism (see Table 4.). Of the 19 items, three are classified as Personal Character aspects and three are Subject and Pedagogical Knowledge aspects of professionalism. Further, seven of the statistically significant items are in the category Commitment to Change/Continuous Improvement

and six are in the Professionalism Beyond the Classroom aspect of professionalism.

We conclude that the dimensions of professionalism on which there is greatest agreement between teachers and administrators are: 1) Personal Character and 2) Subject and Pedagogical Knowledge. Of the fifteen items that denote the Personal Character dimension of professionalism, administrators and teachers place the same level of priority on twelve items – i.e., there were statistically significant differences on only three of the Personal Character items. We expected the Personal Character items would be relatively equally prioritized by teachers and administrators. It can be argued that many Personal Character behaviors and characteristics are established long before entering the teaching career and are carried with educators throughout their careers. Similarly, teachers and administrators place the same level of priority on ten of the thirteen items that address Subject and Pedagogical Knowledge. However, there were significant levels of disagreement on the level of priority that should be placed on items in the professionalism dimensions Commitment to Change/ Continuous Improvement and Beyond the Classroom.

Teachers and administrators differed significantly on seven of the eleven behaviors/ characteristics in the dimension of Commitment to Change/Continuous Improvement. Likewise, there was significant disagreement about the level of priority administrators and teachers believe should be placed on behaviors and characteristics that represent professional obligations and working relationships beyond the classroom. There were statistically significant differences on six of the twelve items in this dimension of professionalism.

Finally, because this was an exploratory study using convenience samples of teachers and administrators, we recommend this research be replicated using a more robust sampling technique in order to generalize the results to a larger population of teachers and administrators, perhaps including secondary teachers and administrators. However, the results of this exploratory study are still encouraging. It highlights that there are opportunities to bring teachers and administrators together on the dimensions of professionalism on which their differences are greatest (Commitment to Change/Continuous Improvement and Professional Obligations Beyond the Classroom). By recognizing these differences, the expectations of many of the behaviors and characteristics of professionalism may be better communicated between teachers and administrators. For example, if action research is an important priority to administrators, this can be communicated, supported, and nurtured in teachers. Further, if there is disagreement on the priority level placed on actively seeking professional development opportunities, administrators may be able to put structures in place that actively encourage this behavior. By seeking to diminish the areas of disagreement on teacher professionalism, the level of teacher professionalism may be raised for all educators.

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