

# Understanding Teachers' Perspectives on Professionalism

Mercedes S. Tichenor  
Stetson University

John M. Tichenor  
Stetson University

## Abstract

*What does it mean to be a professional and to exhibit professionalism? Depending on the context, these concepts may evoke many images and have multiple definitions. In this paper, we examine what it means to be a professional and to exhibit professionalism in the field of education. We go beyond theoretical definitions of teacher professionalism to explore what it means on a practical level. Specifically, we use focus group interviews to ask inservice teachers what they believe are the basic qualities of professional teachers and what aspects of professionalism ideal teachers exhibit. According to teachers in this study, professionalism is exhibited in many ways and encompasses both attitudes and behaviors.*

What does it mean to be a professional and to exhibit professionalism? Depending on the context, these concepts may evoke many images and have multiple definitions. In the world of sports, professionals are distinguished by the level of skill that competitively sets them apart from amateurs. Likewise in music, professionals have a level of skill that enables them to perform beyond the amateur level and often, as in sports, qualifies the professionals to be paid for their performance. In the business world, "professional" is often synonymous with "successful" or at least refers to behavior that is expected of individuals in specific occupations. Doctors, nurses, physical therapists, pharmacists, and others are health care professionals with clearly delineated roles, responsibilities, and limits on their occupational behaviors. Moreover, professionals in the "classic" fields of law, medicine and theology have codified rules and expectations for behavior developed over many centuries (Hart & Marshall, 1992). In these examples, there are many shared understandings regarding what it means to be "professional." In the field of education, however, being a classroom teacher is not always associated with being a professional. That is, American society does not generally view teachers in the same way as they view other professionals; the belief that "anyone can teach" is not found in other professions (i.e.,

not just anyone can play professional baseball, or be an accountant or engineer, or practice law or medicine).

While teachers may be viewed differently than other professionals, the importance of effective teachers in societal change cannot be underestimated. In fact, the classroom teacher is arguably the single most important individual in directing student success. Although authors such as Stronge and Tucker (2000) agree that the teacher is the most important school-based factor in student achievement, there remains an uncertainty of what comprises "effective" or "professional" teaching. By understanding and sharing a common definition of "professional" and "effective," perhaps we can improve teaching so that more students will benefit from successful educational experiences. In this paper, we examine what it means to be a professional and to exhibit professionalism in the field of education from the perspective of practicing teachers. While there are many descriptions of teacher as professionals and its importance, little research has examined what practicing teachers think about this subject. We go beyond theoretical definitions of teacher professionalism to explore what it means on a practical level. Specifically, we use focus group interviews to ask inservice teachers what they believe are the

basic qualities of professional teachers and what aspects of professionalism ideal teachers exhibit.

### Teachers as Effective Professionals

On the most basic level, the definition of “professional teacher” refers to the status of a person who is paid to teach. It can also, on a higher level, refer to teachers who represent the best in the profession and set the highest standard for best practice. For example, 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 complex undertaking. Both Clement (2002) and Seifert (1999) point out that becoming a professional teacher is a process that takes time to master.

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. In other words, 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*, Hugh Sockett (1993) lays out a broad theory of the moral foundations of teacher professionalism. He 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.

A teacher’s character refers to personal virtues such as patience, determination, courage, and respect for children. Sockett (1993) claims that we often overlook the importance of character by focusing on performance of the teaching act. However, he believes that it is impossible to separate the character of the individual teacher from the act of teaching. Sockett’s (1993) second category of teacher professionalism is commitment to change and continuous improvement. He states (p. 7), “Striving to adjust to change seems inevitable for a professional if teaching is to be good, since children in classrooms are never

replicas of those who have gone before." Teachers exhibiting this behavior are constantly looking for ways to improve their practice and adjust to the individual needs of students. Mitchell and Kerchner (1983) describe a similar trait in which teachers adapt their teaching strategies based on analyses of the students' learning situations.

Next, teachers must have a depth of knowledge and understanding of what they teach as well as pedagogical knowledge and the skills to teach. Sockett (1993) correctly makes the distinction between these two aspects of professionalism; one may have a solid grasp of subject knowledge, but not have the pedagogical knowledge and skills to teach students. He believes pedagogical knowledge goes beyond subject knowledge to include an awareness of the teaching context. In other words, teachers must be effective in the "hows" of teaching such as questioning, classroom management, and curriculum delivery. Sockett (1993) believes that modern education emphasizes the pedagogical aspect of professionalism above and to the detriment of the other categories.

The final category in Sockett's typology of teacher professionalism involves obligations and working relationships beyond the classroom. This broad category includes characteristics that allow teachers to work with colleagues, parents, and the public. Sockett (p. 8) describes this aspect of teacher professionalism in the following way:

...outside the classroom a teacher has wider obligations and working relationships with colleagues and with parents in the exercise of his or her role as a teacher. Professionalism requires that we go beyond classroom performance or classroom activity as descriptors of teaching acts to the complete and complex role a teacher fulfills. Public education needs teachers who are able not only to shine in the four categories mentioned within the classroom but also to undertake the demands of partnership with other professionals, of collaborative leadership, and of a wider role within the school.

Clearly, the concepts "professional" and "effective" have many layers and belie a single definition. As Stronge (2002) contends, "effective teaching is an elusive concept." In other words, defining exactly what is meant by "effective" or "professional" teacher is no simple matter; there are many definitions. Stronge and Hindman (2003) state, "Some researchers define teacher effectiveness in terms of student achievement; others focus on high performance ratings from supervisors; and still others rely on comments from students, administrators, and interested stakeholders" (p. 49). The issue at hand is not to come up with a single, all-encompassing definition of professional or effective teacher. Rather, it is to establish parameters of behaviors and characteristics that can be fostered among teachers. Further, while the 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. The purpose of our exploratory study was to begin an empirical examination of professionalism from practicing teachers' perspectives. Therefore, we asked, "how do practicing teachers define professionalism?" To answer this research question, we have embarked on a multi-stage study to understand practicing teachers' perspectives of professionalism. In this paper, we describe the first stage of the study: exploratory focus group interviews with elementary school teachers.

### Method

To determine what teachers think about effective teaching and professionalism, focus group interviews with teachers were conducted at four elementary schools, each of which is a professional development school (PDS) partner with a university teacher education program. This collaborative relationship offers students and faculty at the university a context for bridging theory and practice. Education majors have opportunities to visit a variety of classrooms, observe mentor teachers, work with children, and be part of a greater learning community. Teachers have opportunities to participate in a number of profes-

sional development activities, such as conferences, study groups, and workshops. While the PDS relationship may have some impact on the teachers' perspectives on professionalism, the schools are otherwise very ordinary. Further, each elementary school in the PDS partnership serves a diverse population of students with many on free or reduced lunch.

Focus group interviews were appropriate for this study because they help reveal the perceptions, feelings, and thinking of people about issues (Krueger & Casey, 2000). At three of the elementary schools, the principals asked for volunteers to participate in the discussions. The number of participants at these three schools were eight, nine, and eleven. At the fourth school, the discussion occurred at a faculty meeting, hence most of the teachers participated (approximately 40 teachers). While we recognize that a group with 40 participants does not adhere to standard focus group methodology which calls for group sizes of 6 to 8 (Krueger & Casey, 2000), we nonetheless wanted to include the perspectives of the teachers at this PDS site. In order to obtain teachers' spontaneous responses, none of the groups were informed of the topic of the focus group interviews beforehand. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour and included teachers across grade levels, subjects, and years of teaching experience. The sessions were facilitated by two university faculty members who asked teachers two open-ended questions: 1) What does it mean to be a professional teacher?; and 2) How do teachers exhibit professionalism? The questions were intentionally broad in order to elicit an open discussion. However, the facilitators used clarifying questions and prompts to keep the discussion active and participants focused on the issue. The responses were notated on large pads of paper as well as tape recorded. After each focus group, data from the written notes and tapes were coded and categorized in common themes. Although two broad questions were used to facilitate discussion, the responses to both questions were analyzed together. Following Krueger's (1998) focus group analysis guidelines, participant comments were analyzed for internal consistency, frequency,

intensity, extensiveness, and specificity. Some characteristics identified by the teachers overlap and may represent aspects of more than one theme, but we categorized the characteristics where we thought was most appropriate.

### Findings

According to teachers in this study, professionalism is exhibited in many ways and encompasses both attitudes and behaviors. After examining the data, we recognized that teachers' comments fit into well-established categories of teacher professionalism and the qualities of effective teaching. However, we purposely grouped teacher comments according to Sockett's (1993) five categories of professionalism: 1) character, 2) commitment to change and continuous improvement, 3) subject knowledge, 4) pedagogical knowledge, and 5) obligations and working relationships beyond the classroom. These categories cover a wide range of aspects of professionalism and effectiveness and provided a comprehensive coding scheme for the teachers' comments.

#### *Character*

Teachers in this study seem to agree with Sockett's proposition that personal virtues such as patience, determination, courage, and respect for children contribute to professionalism. In each interview, teachers first commented on the character component of professionalism. These comments also made up the primary response category in each of the four interviews. Teachers' comments describing the character aspect of professionalism demonstrated a consistency in this theme more than any other. For this category of professionalism, participants described an ideal "professional" teacher as one who is resilient and keeps his/her composure at all times and under all circumstances; is caring, nurturing, friendly, patient with all, well-organized, flexible, displays confidence in the classroom; and remembers that he/she is a role model for students. According to the participants, professional teachers are also conscientious, creative, dedicated, goal oriented (they set their own goals and adhere to them). They also care about what they do, take pride in

their work, have good morals, are ethical in and out of school, adhere to code of conduct/ethical behavior, set high standards for self and students, go above and beyond to do the job, and are open to new ideas/receptive to suggestions. They dress neat and clean and appropriate for teaching situation, have positive attitudes, respect children and their thinking, have a passion for teaching, are dedicated to students, and put the child's welfare first. They are risk takers, eager to learn new things, view teaching as a career, not just a job, look forward to coming to school, and are enthusiastic about teaching. Clearly, the many features of "character" identified by the focus group participants define an ideal type not found in any single teacher on any given day. Further, there will not be agreement among all educators that each of these examples is a necessary character trait for professional teachers. However, the long list of "character" characterizations illustrates the importance of these traits for the teachers we interviewed.

*Commitment to change and continuous improvement.* Teachers in the focus group interviews made comments that indicate their awareness of attributes related to the commitment to change and continuous improvement. For example, one teacher said, "Professional teachers are reflective and constantly evaluating their choices and actions to improve instruction." An examination of the teacher comments clearly indicates that they recognize the necessity to change and continually seek to improve their classroom practices. One teacher summarized this by stating that professional teachers always ask, "How does what I'm doing help my students?" Comments coded in this category of professionalism also include: continues education, reads journals and attends conferences, stays current in the field with latest research and changes in best practices, not satisfied with the status-quo, attends workshops to help classroom practice, looks for resources to aid in lessons. Further, participants described "professional teachers" as those who understand current trends in education, actively seek opportunities to grow professionally, participate in meaningful professional development activities, initiate

changes if appropriate/necessary (new programs), and are lifelong learners.

*Subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge.* Through responses such as "have a knowledge of curriculum," "possess content knowledge," and "be knowledgeable in all areas of certification," teachers in this study recognized the importance of subject knowledge as a component of professionalism. However, they seem to emphasize pedagogical knowledge more than subject knowledge. The emphasis on pedagogical knowledge may be in part due to the fact that teachers in this study all taught at the elementary school level, many of them responsible for teaching a broad spectrum of the curriculum—e.g., math, reading, science, social studies, etc. On the other hand, the heavier weighting of comments regarding pedagogical over subject knowledge may lend support to Sockett's contention that modern education emphasizes the pedagogical aspects of professionalism to the detriment of the other areas. Other teacher comments about subject and pedagogical knowledge were coded as: innovative teaching, reflective, effective implementation of curriculum, participates in action research, motivates students to learn, knows how to assess learning and plan lessons accordingly, applies learning theories, addresses needs of children, uses proper English and is articulate, uses appropriate learning strategies for discipline (varies them according to needs of students and subject), and has various teaching strategies and knows when to use them.

#### *Beyond the Classroom*

Although there was less discussion on this aspect of teacher professionalism, teachers in the study recognize that professionalism involves more than simply their actions inside the classroom. They understand that professional teachers have a responsibility to collaborate and cooperate with faculty, staff, administration, parents, and community members. One teacher's comment that "professional teachers are involved in developing and changing policies and rules" illustrates that professionalism should impact many educational settings. Comments from teachers in the focus

group interviews illustrating the “beyond the classroom” aspect of professionalism also include:

effective communication with parents, colleagues, community members; role model for other teachers in and out of the classroom; mentors other teachers when appropriate; participates in school decisions; cooperative with faculty, staff, administration, parents, community members; shows respect for colleagues and parents; engages in collaborative efforts; concerned about fellow teachers; and participates in professional organizations.

### Conclusion

Because the foundation of an educated society relies on the teachers who daily interact with students from early childhood to young adulthood, it is important to understand what it means to be a professional teacher. Linda Darling-Hammond (1996, p. 5) states, “The invention of 21st century schools that can educate all children well rests, first and foremost, upon the development of a highly qualified and committed teaching force.” These kinds of schools demand that teachers understand how children learn and make teaching decisions based on that knowledge. However, it would be misguided to simply state that the educational system needs professional teachers without understanding what is meant by “professional.” In this paper, we examined what “professional” means to practicing teachers and found that their conceptualization matches many of the descriptions in the literature on teacher professionalism and effectiveness. A close look at the teachers’ responses reveals interesting conclusions and raises several questions for further investigation.

First, the findings in this study indicate that teachers have high standards, ideals, and expectations for themselves and other teachers. The findings also suggest that teachers believe there are qualities and characteristics of teachers that separate “professionals” from others. In other words, they do not believe all teachers exhibit the behaviors and characteristics of being a professional. Hence, it is important for the educational

community to determine ways to enhance the professionalism of all teachers. Stronge (2002) maintains that these behaviors and characteristics can be fostered for veteran teachers through high-quality and appropriate professional development activities and beginning teachers through “observing other teachers, receiving peer feedback, cultivating collegial relationships, and participating in lifelong learning experiences” (p. 64).

Interestingly, teachers discussed the “character” component of professionalism more than any other aspect. It is apparent that this is an important part of being a professional teacher. This coincides with Wong and Wong’s (1998) contention that, “A professional is defined not by the business a person is in but by the way that person does his or her business” (p. 293). The emphasis on the character aspect of professionalism raises an important question: can “character” be taught or is this simply something individuals bring with them to the teaching profession?

Finally, the results of this study indicate the importance of communicating what it means to be a professional teacher to a wider audience. Although there may be a general agreement among educators regarding what it means to exhibit professionalism, it is important to communicate this outside the field to combat the widely held notion that anyone can teach. Teachers in this study concurred by mentioning the importance of communicating what they do to the public. This supports Sockett’s (1993) emphasis on the importance of communicating to the public the values and practices of the teaching profession. He also believes that standards of professionalism need to be clarified in order to guide novice teachers, develop appropriate evaluation structures for teachers, and improve teaching. Therefore, it is important to continue research in this area.

As mentioned above, this research was the first part of a multi-stage study examining teacher professionalism. The results from the focus group interviews have been used to develop a survey instrument that has been administered to more than two hundred practicing teachers, from both PDS and non-PDS sites. Using the results from the survey research, we hope to answer several addi-

tional research questions. First, are the characteristics of teacher professionalism primarily idealized or do teachers typically behave in these ways? What aspects of professionalism do teachers deem as most important and why? Further, does teaching at PDS sites impact the professionalism of teachers? As we continue to examine teachers' understanding of what it means to a professional, we need to learn how to best utilize this information in order to cultivate and enhance the professionalism of all teachers.

### References

- Clement, L. (2002). Welcome to a profession. *New Teacher Advocate*, 10(2), 4.
- Cruickshank, D., & Haefele, D. (2001). Good teachers, plural. *Educational Leadership*, 58(5), 26–30.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1996). The quiet revolution: Rethinking teacher development. *Educational Leadership*, 53(6), 4–10.
- Hart, S., & Marshall, D. (1992). *The question of teacher professionalism*. Chicago, IL: The University of Illinois. (ERIC Document Reproductions Service No. ED 349 291)
- Hoyle, E. (1980). Professionalization and deprofessionalization in education. In E. Hoyle & J. E. Meggary (Eds.), *The professional development of teachers* (pp. 42–57). London: Kogan Page.
- Hurst, B., & Reding, C. (2000). *Professionalism in teaching*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Kramer, P. (2003). The ABC's of professionalism. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 40(1), 22–25.
- Krueger, R. A. (1998). *Analyzing & reporting focus group results*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Mitchell, D. E., & Kerchner, C. T. (1983). Labor relations and teacher policy. In L. S. Shulman & G. Sykes (Eds.), *Handbook of teaching and policy* (pp. 214–238). New York: Longman.
- Morrow, P. C. (1988). Professionalism as a form of work commitment. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 32, 92–111.
- Seifert, K. L. (1999). *Reflective thinking and professional development: A primer*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sockett, H. (1993). *The moral base for teacher professionalism*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Stronge, J. (2002). *Qualities of effective teachers*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Stronge, J., & Hindman, J. (2003). Hiring the best teachers. *Educational Leadership*, 60(8), 48–52.
- Stronge, J., & Tucker, P. (2000). *Teacher evaluation and student achievement*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- Wise, A. (1989). Professional teaching: A new paradigm for the management of education. In T. J. Sergiovanni & J. H. Moore (Eds.), *Schooling for tomorrow* (pp. 301–310). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Wong, H. K., Wong, R. T. (1998). *The first days of school: How to be an effective teacher*. Mountain View, CA: Harry K. Wong Publications.