

CHAPTER ONE

Thou Shalt Define Your Terms

When one teacher really wants to insult another teacher, he or she will say with a slight sneer, “That wasn’t very professional of you.” As we head for our first teaching job, our professors wave goodbye and murmur, “And remember, above all, be professional.” We nod knowingly, yet walk away without a clue as to what that specifically means. It’s kind of like telling your class to “Be good!” when you have to run to the office for a few minutes. You have to define your terms. One student may think that means to read quietly in the textbook until you return. Another may think you’ll be quite pleased that he didn’t set anything on fire.

Based on an informal survey of the teachers, students, parents, and administrators with whom I’ve worked, I discovered that very few of us share precisely the same definition of professionalism. A fresh-out-of-college first-year teacher told me that professionalism is being “reserved, clear, using proper English—less slang. Following through with what you say you’re going to do. Writing things down—professionals communicate in writing.” My guess is that this young woman, who is only a few years older than the 12th graders she teaches, has self-consciously stumbled in conversations with older colleagues and has received one too many memos about missed deadlines. What she doesn’t know is that she’s caused a definite buzz around the school because she chose not to remove the small hoop that is pierced into the side of her eyebrow. A number of her colleagues dismiss her based on this one item of jewelry, and several students have grumbled about the fact that, due to the school dress code, they cannot wear piercings on their faces. Right now, she hasn’t had enough experience on the job to be judged by anything

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other than her appearance. One definition of professionalism that would help her be successful on the job is: make sure your appearance reinforces your image as a professional at work.

A five-year veteran responded that a professional is defined by “money, accuracy, and rules,” three areas that have caused her endless frustration inside and outside the classroom. She came to teaching “by accident” and does not share the attitude of most of us who are drawn to teaching: We understand that we’ll never be paid what we’re worth, but we thrive on a sense of earning our living by doing something worthwhile. This young woman is not teaching because she has a passion for her subject or a talent for working with young people; therefore, she searches for the correct format or rule that will allow her to wear the badge of the “professional educator.” For her, professionalism will be defined by paying attention to the details and accepting the fact that she has taken on a job that is more about inspiration than compensation.

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your image as a professional at work.***

When I asked a 25-year veteran to define professionalism in teaching, she responded without hesitation that a professional is “conscientious, discreet, informed, and respectful.” This highly honored, outstanding teacher succinctly and accurately described herself, but I would also guess that she is thinking of the legions of colleagues she has observed over the years who were unsuccessful on the job because they failed in one or more of these areas.

Next, I turned to another group of experts who have spent most of their lives studying teachers—the kids. Our students tend to be highly opinionated on the subject of professionalism and teaching. One rather rebellious high school senior offered, with a smirk, that teachers should “keep their private lives out of their job.” There’s a story there, but I didn’t ask. Many mentioned the teacher’s ability to control a classroom without being too strict and the teacher’s thorough understanding of the subject matter as key issues for professionals. Very few of the students offered an opinion about how teachers dress; however, one 12th grader noted that there was “a difference between wanting to look professional and wanting to

be professional. Your clothes aren't going to teach the class." I would think these students would sum up professionalism as: professionals realize that students learn far more from their actions than their words.

Of course, this survey would be incomplete without including our ultimate employers—the parents. Those with whom I spoke focused mainly on the well-being of their own children. They felt professional educators kept their children safe and engaged. They, too, looked a little puzzled when I directly asked whether a teacher's dress affected his or her ability to perform as a professional. One suggested teachers use "common sense" in choosing what to wear to school, and immediately redirected the conversation to a teacher's ability to "relate to the students and make the subject interesting—no busy work!" I believe the parents would respect this definition of professionalism: Take care of the parents and keep the lines of communication open—they have entrusted you with one of their most precious assets.

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far more from their actions than their words.*

But at the end of the day, when you accept a job with a specific school, it is the head administrator's view of professionalism that will most profoundly affect your comfort level on the job. My current principal skipped not a beat in offering his opinion of a professional educator:

a responsible person who has the ability to work independently and manage uncomfortable situations in a healthy manner. This person meets all stated obligations, continues to grow in the profession, and displays appropriateness in all situations. Professionals model the behavior they expect to receive in return—(don't be late to class, don't hand back papers late, don't cuss). Support the policies of the institution even if they don't agree with them. The faculty meets and exceeds the dress code for all students.

Period. This man has given a great deal of thought to this issue and literally wrote the manual for the teachers with whom he will work. He fully admits he tends to see things in black and white, but

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in truth, what most matters to him is how a teacher's actions reflect on the school.

I always advise new teachers to approach a job interview as a two-way street. If, during the interview process, you realize that the principal's definition of professionalism is very different from your own, you'd better consider carefully before taking the job.

I can think of no more miserable on-the-job scenario than having to work under an administrator whose fundamental philosophies about professionalism differ radically from your own.

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In order to make this decision, you must have a clear picture of yourself as a professional. In my mind, professionals show up to work on time with specific plans as to how they will accomplish the goals they have set for that day. Professional educators model the behaviors that they want their students to emulate—on the job and as members of the community in which they live. Professionals are mindful of the fact that they do not work in isolation; therefore, they treat their coworkers with the respect and thoughtfulness that they would like to receive themselves. Because they understand that the students and their parents are the customers, professional educators work to create a sense of teamwork between the school and the home.

When I accept a teaching position, I am well aware that I have been given an unusual amount of power and influence over children at one of the most impressionable stages of their lives. I need to understand the difference between true power and false power, and carefully monitor my ego so that the actions I take are based on what will help my students achieve their goals. I know that my appearance, my manners, my attitudes, and my problem-solving techniques reverberate far louder than any academic lesson I may be presenting. Before you stand in front of a classroom, you need to generate a clear vision of yourself at your professional best. I hope this book will help you do just that.

The first commandment of professionalism in teaching? Define your terms to be sure that you clearly understand and accept the expectations for a professional in your school, then work as close to that potential as often as you can.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. Which of your own teachers came to mind as you read this chapter? What made them professional—was it their dress, their demeanor, their knowledge of the subject matter, their relationship to the students?
2. Take a quick survey of some nonteachers in your life. Ask them how they define professionalism. How does their response relate to teaching? What did you learn about professionalism in your education classes?