

# “Whole Teacher” Crisis: Examining Pre-service Student Teachers’ Perceptions of Professionalism

Minsun Shin<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Early Childhood, Elementary, and Literacy Education, College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ 07043, United States

\*Correspondence: Department of Early Childhood, Elementary, and Literacy Education, College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University, 1 Normal Avenue, Montclair, NJ 07043, United States

Tel: 1-973-655-6961      E-mail: [shinm@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:shinm@mail.montclair.edu)

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## Abstract

The changing nature of teacher professionalism presents an important challenge to teacher education programs. Teacher professionalism can be broadly defined as the set of teachers’ professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions. However, with the increased accountability and standards movement, professionalism in education often overemphasizes accountability by prioritizing knowledge and skills over dispositions. The move in the field toward ‘professionalization’ has generally resulted in systematic reform and professional development rather than promoted ‘professionalism.’ This paper explored pre-service undergraduate students’ perceptions of teacher professionalism at a major university in New Jersey. The results indicated that the students focused more on ‘*performance*’ and ‘*external/outward aspects*’ and less on recognizing the complexity and dynamics of the teaching and learning process. The study argues that teacher education programs must be redesigned so that pre-service students have the opportunity to discuss and develop proper dispositions, reflect upon their perceptions, and enhance teacher professionalism.

**Keywords:** pre-service students; professionalism; teacher education

## 1. Introduction

There is a great demand by society for high quality teaching and teacher professionalism (Boyer, 2004). Researchers consistently demonstrate that the quality of teaching is the most influential factor affecting student outcomes; teacher training and preparation have thus become integral components for instilling better academic skills and social competence in young children (Malm, 2009; Williams & Fromberg, 1992). When the report *A Nation at Risk*, attributed the economic downfall to the mediocrity of schooling and teacher incompetency, advocates of educational reform recommended training “professional teachers” (Ambrosie & Haley, 1988). Professional teachers would possess expertise, autonomy, and commitment to students’ learning and address issues such as quality of education and high quality teaching (Ambrosie & Haley, 1988; Boyer, 2004). It also has been argued that professionalizing the field will improve the overall quality and level of teaching (Saracho & Spodek, 1993). To gain a deeper understanding of the nature of professionalism, it is important to distinguish ‘professionalism’ from ‘professionalization.’

### 1.1 *Teacher professionalism and professionalization*

What is teacher professionalism? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines professionalism as the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or professional person. ‘Professionalism’ pertains to being a professional (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996; Hall & Schulz, 2003; Hargreaves, 2000), which usually encompasses quality and standards of practice as well as the conduct and character of individuals’ actions that guide the practice (Hall & Schulz, 2003). Professionalism can be broadly defined as professional knowledge/qualifications, proven high standards, confidence, attitudes and values that will influence the educators’ practices (Osgood, 2006; Moyles, 2001; Murray, 2006). In short, professionalism requires three essential characteristics: high levels of professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions. ‘Professionalization’ has to do with the social and political project designed to improve the status and standing of teaching as a profession. It refers to such measures as extending accreditation to teachers, lengthening their training, and strengthening their academic knowledge base (Hargreaves, 2000). In this sense, the professionalization agenda and the concepts of professionalism are, or should be, essentially connected and complementary. However, these concepts are often deemed contradictory. Many researchers identify the tensions and struggles between the professionalization process and the complex nature of teacher professionalism (Hall & Shulz, 2003).

### 1.2 *Teacher professionalism and professionalization*

The issue at hand is that the professionalization process has often been couched in terms of accountability and an outcome-focused approach to teaching (Duhn, 2010). Systematic approaches, including professional development workshops and learning courses, have been recommended to help enhance the standards of quality (NAEYC, 1993). In the United States, professional development remains a key factor to improving excellence in education (Shriner, Schleebe, Hamil & Libler, 2009). Because professional workshops and professional learning courses are often structured around state or national curriculum guidelines and lessons (Darling-Hammond, 2005), calls for systematic approaches tend to focus on the “transfer of

knowledge and skills” (VanderVen, 1994, p.86). Ultimately, the emphasis on teachers’ practical knowledge and subject matter expertise restricts their classroom autonomy as well as their personal reflections on the broader moral and social function of education (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996; Osgood, 2006). The current outcome-based educational reform in teacher professional development, therefore, reinforces the idea that *performance* (‘what we do’) is critical to effective teaching (Saracho & Spodek, 1993). In this sense, “stronger professionalization does not always mean greater professionalism” (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 152). The professionalization process can potentially undermine professionalism.

### *1.3 Whole Teacher Development*

Teaching is complex work. It involves a high level of knowledge and skills, proper dispositions, and personal competencies. A disposition is defined as the “tendency to exhibit frequently, consciously, and voluntarily a pattern of behavior that is directed to a broad goal” (Katz, 1999, p1-2 cited in King et al., 2007). Dispositions or “civil” conduct are considered equally critical to effective teaching (King, Hilber & Engley, 2007). The problem is the difficulty in accurately describing this moral dimension of teaching.

Teaching is decidedly emotional because it comprises dynamic and emotional practices, independent decision-making, and moral responsibilities (Malm, 2009). What may be missing from this rigorous process of being a professional are the unique characteristics each and every individual brings into the field of teaching. There is less focus on self-reflection regarding educators’ goals, values, and attitudes, which directly impact their practice. The ethical dimension of teaching is less emphasized in education programs (Warnick & Silverman, 2011). The mastery of knowledge and skills may well ignore the complexity and dynamics of a social construction of professionalism. Teachers’ sense of self, beliefs, and existing knowledge will be influenced by their previous life experiences, schooling, and school system. Therefore, the process of becoming a high quality professional teacher must involve inquiry and close examination of one’s own individual strengths and dispositions.

This study attempted to analyze and articulate the missing pieces in the monolithic portrayals of teacher professionalism in the current era of accountability. Teachers’ conduct, demeanor, and professional dispositions should be identified and developed further in teacher education programs. We must ask whether we are cultivating the “whole teacher” in teacher education programs. How can we foster “whole teacher professionalism” by helping pre-service undergraduate students in the field of early childhood and elementary education develop deeper understandings of themselves and the contexts of teaching?

In this light, the purpose of this study was to explore how pre-service undergraduate students in early childhood and elementary education at a university in New Jersey, USA, perceive and define professionalism in the process of becoming a teacher. This study aimed to reinvigorate the discussion around teacher professionalism and improve teacher education programs. This study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How do pre-service students in the fields of early childhood and elementary education perceive professionalism?

- (2) What factors do pre-service students in the fields of early childhood and elementary education identify as necessary to promoting professionalism?

## 2. Methods

Anchored in a social constructivist framework, this study invited a total of 60 pre-service undergraduate students to complete a questionnaire. The data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

### 2.1 Context and participants

This study took place at a major university in New Jersey. Given the purpose of the study, the pre-service undergraduate students in the Early Childhood and Elementary Teacher Education program were invited to participate in this study. The students were working toward either P-3 (Preschool to Grade 3) or K-5 (Kindergarten to Grade 5) certification. Because early childhood includes from birth to age 8, both early childhood education students and elementary education students were included. A total of 60 students participated. All students were seniors enrolled in a fieldwork course in which they spend two full days in the field, either in an early childhood care setting or an elementary classroom.

The majority of the students were female (N=57). There were only 3 male students. Nearly all (95%) of the students were between 21 and 25 years of age. In terms of ethnic background, 33 (58.9 %) of the students were White, 9 (16.1%) were Hispanic, 10 (17.9%) were African-American, 3 (5.4%) were Asian-Pacific Islander, and 1 was Aramaic. There were 4 students who did not share their ethnic background.

### 2.2 Data Sources and Data Analysis

A questionnaire was utilized to collect data pertaining to the purpose of this study. The questionnaire consisted of three major parts: personal background information, a 5-point Likert scale to rank the responses, and open-ended questions. The scale ranged from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important) and was used to categorize each student's response to a number of statements.

Based on the National Education Association (NEA) code of ethics and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Code of ethical conduct and statement of commitment, the questionnaire included 8 categories of statements: 1) Qualifications, 2) Beliefs and values, 3) Knowledge, 4) Classroom management, 5) Curriculum and pedagogy, 6) Colleague relationships, 7) Proper appearance, and 8) Further professional development. The participants were asked to rate a total of 23 statements in the rating scale part of the questionnaire. Finally, the participants responded to open-ended questions, such as, "define 'professionalism' in your own words," "share what would be the most important thing that needs to be done to foster professionalism in the field of education," and "add any final comments."

Open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively, identifying emergent themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief through the analytic process. The data were coded and categorized through careful, multiple readings to distinguish any meaningful

segments of data (Merriam, 1998). The rating scale portion was analyzed quantitatively to bring forth a supplement, such as frequency and mean, to corroborate the qualitative interpretation of the data. Analyses of both the rating scale and open-ended question portions were constantly compared and contrasted to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the data.

### 3. Findings

Through the rating scale and open-ended comments portion, the pre-service undergraduate students revealed their perceptions and definitions of teacher professionalism. The findings showed that as future teachers, the participants seemed to emphasize the importance of holding high expectations for all children, value performance and management, and experience conflicting views on professionalism. The following themes were brought forward through the data analysis process.

#### 3.1 Educational beliefs vs. Attire

The quantitative statistics revealed that the ‘Beliefs and values’ category was viewed as important to participants. More specifically, 96.7 % (N=58) of participants rated the statement, ‘*Belief that each and every child can learn*’ as very important. This particular statement marked the highest average score across all statements in the rating scales section (average score=4.97).

However, in the open comments portion, only one participant mentioned the importance of future teachers holding high expectations for students. Although the participants rated educational values and altruistic beliefs highly in the rating scale portion, when asked to think deeply about the meaning of professionalism and define professionalism in their own words, the participants tended to focus on external aspects. For instance, one participant defined professionalism as “*Dressing and acting appropriate for the role you take in the classroom and environment.*” It was stunning to see approximately half of the participants articulate the importance of proper attire and dress code for professional teachers in the open-ended comments portion:

*“Looking professional=dressing well. Speaking professional=using the right words.”*

*“You need to look professional. Dressing part is very important.”*

*“Dressing part, dressing professionally is important as well as living a professional, mature, respected lifestyle.”*

The above comments indicate that acting appropriately and appearing professional were considered equivalent to achieving professionalism in these participants’ minds.

#### 3.2 Respect vs. Classroom Management

“Respect” is the key word throughout the data analysis process. In the rating scale portion, the participants shared that honesty, integrity, and respect would be important factors in the classroom. ‘*Respect from students*’ received an average score of 4.82, and 51 participants

(85%) marked this statement as very important. Similarly, in the open-ended comments portion, the participants articulated the importance of establishing strong respectful relationships with students, colleagues, and administrators, as exemplified in the following comments:

*“The most important thing is to have respect for the teacher.”*

*“The most important thing that needs to be established and fostered is respect. Teachers as well as students need [to] be respectful to their colleagues and the students and parents because a healthy relationship [is] needed”*

However, qualitative analysis of open-ended comments yielded a deeper level of understanding of the participants’ views on respect. This issue of respect seemed to be closely intertwined with the concern of classroom management. For example, one participant said, *“Without respect, I think teacher[s] cannot discipline or interact with the student[s] appropriate[ly].”* As one participant mentioned, *“Setting a tone where students respect one another and understand that rules and instructions are to be followed at all time[s],”* the issue of respect seemed to be related not to the respectful relationships that should be fostered in the classroom but to performance. This point was congruent with the following comments from the participants:

*“I believe it is more important to be respected as their teacher so that everyone can get what they need out of each session”*

*“If the students cannot show respect of [to] the teacher, the teacher will not be able to teach effectively.”*

*“Students must respect and understand that the teacher is an authority figure while being comfortable enough to talk to them on a personal level.”*

As illustrated above, the participants seemed to believe that respect is a precursor to proper classroom management and effective teaching.

### 3.3 Knowledge vs. Future professional development

In terms of ‘Knowledge’ and ‘Curriculum and pedagogy,’ the students viewed these categories as relatively important, as shown in Table 2 below. The average score for ‘*A strong knowledge base/subject matter (expertise)*’ was 4.66, and the average score for the statement, ‘*Knowledge of various teaching methods*’ was 4.63. ‘*Careful preparation of lesson plans, teaching materials, etc.*’ received an average score of 4.75, while ‘*Effective verbal and nonverbal techniques to foster inquiry*’ received an average score of 4.66.

These categories revealed an intriguing result. For instance, ‘*Knowledge of special needs and diversity*’ received an average score of 4.82. Out of 60 participants, 42 participants responded that knowledge of special needs and diversity would be very important to future teachers. However, ‘*Training to deal with learning problems*’ received an average score of 4.41, which was the second lowest average score across all the statements. Only 31 students thought that ‘*Training to deal with learning problems*’ would be very important for a future teacher. Thus, a question to ponder is “How can we gain a solid understanding and knowledge

of special needs and diversity without proper training, preparation, and education?” Only one participant mentioned the topic:

*“I believe that professionalism consists of being patient with the students. This involves understanding that not all children learn the same way or at the same pace.”*

There was almost no discussion of diversity and disability in the open-ended comments portion. Moreover, the discussion around adapting instruction and/or differentiated instruction strategies to meet the needs of all students regardless of their exceptionalities and diversity was scarce.

In a similar vein, the ‘Further Professional Development’ category was rated low. Participants did not highly rate the importance of further professional development, such as participating in professional organization and professional development workshops. ‘Participation in professional organizations and workshops’ received an average score of 4.42. Only 32 participants marked this statement as very important. Furthermore, ‘Ability to teach other teachers about innovative teaching methods’ showed the lowest average score across all the statements, with an average score of 4.25.

In the open-ended comments portion, few participants mentioned the importance of having ongoing training and attending teacher conferences, as illustrated in the comments below:

*“I think teachers should receive a yearly training. This should be mandatory. This training should discuss acceptable professional behavior and how it influences a child’s learning experience.”*

*“Attend teacher conference to gain knowledge and use in classrooms.”*

This lack of pre-service students’ regard for continued professional development is quite problematic considering that the field of education has emphasized professional development workshops and learning courses to help enhance the standards of quality and teacher professionalism. However, the participants did not see the value of professional development workshops.

#### **4. Discussion**

The results of this study raised an important issue to consider regarding the perceptions of teacher professionalism pre-service students formulate in teacher education program. The quantitative analysis of rating scales illustrated that pre-service students place great importance on believing that each and every child can learn and on establishing respectful relationships. However, the qualitative analysis of the open-ended comments portion demonstrated that the definitions of professionalism provided by pre-service students were closely related to proper attire, classroom management, and effective/efficient performance. When portraying themselves as professional teachers, the participants tended to focus on ‘external/outward aspects’ rather than dispositions and confidence. The participants commented that it would be important to “be prepared for the task” as well as “maintain the boundary of teacher/student”

in order to perform their role efficiently, or as one of the participants put it, “*carry out [the] task in an effective method.*” The results of this study revealed that the pre-service undergraduate students may perceive performance as more important than disposition. This finding is congruent with other claims and is supported by other research (Duhn, 2010; Saracho & Spodek, 1993; VanderVen, 1994).

I argue that teacher educators need to rethink the meaning of professionalism in the field of education and reinvent ways to encourage pre-service students to expand their conceptions of professionalism. Teacher professionalism consists of three broad but critical components: knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Osgood, 2006; Moyles, 2001; Murray, 2006). With the Academic Standards movement, there is a tendency to prioritize knowledge and skills and ignore thoughtful reflection on professional ethics (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996; Osgood, 2006; Warnick & Silverman, 2011). Dispositions and attitudes are critical to students’ learning and success. Given that educators’ goals, values, and attitudes directly impact practice, it is critical that teacher education programs provide ample opportunities for pre-service students to address the issue of proper dispositions in the field of education and reflect upon and discuss their perceptions, doubts, and concerns about being a teacher. The crucial role that personal dispositions play in teaching and learning should be better understood and acknowledged in the field of education (Malm, 2009). To develop a healthy sense of professionalism, reflective practice should be emphasized in teacher education programs.

The field of education tends to focus on a professional development system as a catalyst to address barriers to high quality for all by emphasizing specialized skills, knowledge, and practice (NAEYC, 1993). It was noted that the participants in this study did not yet recognize the value of leadership in school settings or professional development workshops. However, leadership is a dispositional quality that indicates excellence in the field of education (King et al., 2007). The professional development system’s heavy focus on delivering knowledge and tools can negatively impact the complex process of becoming a professional early childhood and elementary teacher. We must avoid task and goal-oriented views on education if we are to cultivate professional teachers with expertise, commitment, positive dispositions, and leadership abilities. It is imperative for pre-service students to learn in an environment in which they can perform critical analyses of what it means to be a professional teacher, discuss the role of dispositions in teaching and professional learning, and develop leadership in the fields of early childhood and elementary education. In other words, we should cultivate the ‘whole teacher.’

Professionalism cannot simply be taught. Because pre-service students are still formulating their own perceptions of teaching and learning and developing their identities as future teachers, it is critical that teacher educators work to develop the ‘whole teacher’ in early childhood and elementary teacher education programs.



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