Are They Really Your Teachers?

Recently, I had lunch with Peggy, an experienced principal preparing to begin the school year in a brand-new school. We discussed her plans for a get-acquainted event for faculty, followed by a potluck dinner. Peggy wanted to lay the foundation for a positive experience and create energy for a collaborative, healthy school culture. However, after our meeting I felt uncomfortable. In spite of her excellent planning, and my sense that I had given her good advice, I had a nagging feeling. Something just didn’t feel quite right.

As I pulled into a parking space on campus, I realized what was nagging me. It was my use of the term “my teachers” in our lunch meeting—a term that is open to interpretation and one that principals should use with great care. When a student says “my teacher,” there is a clear meaning. The student is literally referring to his or her teacher, usually with respect. However, we have all experienced learning and guidance by others. Regardless of our age, we view these teachers with reverence and respect. When a student says “my teacher,” there is a clear meaning. The student is literally referring to his or her teacher, usually with respect.

However, in my lunch conversation with Peggy, my use of the term “my teachers” was inappropriate because I used this term in a way that I believe many and perhaps most teachers find disparaging. I continually referred to my former work as a principal in “my school” and to the teachers with whom I worked as “my teachers.” I also repeatedly referred to the teachers with whom Peggy worked as “your teachers.”

Certainly, many principals use “my” in reference to teachers and others in the school, such as “my custodian” or “my secretary,” simply to economize on words. “My teachers” is shorter and quicker to say than “the teachers with whom I work,” or “the teachers in our school.” The problem is that rather than serving as a title of respect, “my teachers” may be interpreted by teachers as a symbol of the power that a principal holds over them.

During our meeting, Peggy used terms such as “the teachers” and “the school.” I think she knew that if you truly view teachers as professionals, then it is inappropriate to refer to them as “my teachers” and it is inappropriate to refer to the school in which you and the teachers work as “my school.” As principals, we do not own the teachers, their work, or the school.

Although the professionals with whom you work are bureaucratically subservient to the principal position, principals should recognize that many or most of these teachers have a knowledge of teaching and learning that is equal to and likely greater than their own. Principals recognize that their job is to provide the resources teachers need to meet the complex needs of the diverse students in their classrooms.

And yes, one of the important resources is supervision of instruction—helping teachers work through student learning problems and develop better instructional strategies. But having the responsibility to support teachers’ growth through supervision does not make them your teachers. It is important that teachers are the owners of their work with students, as well as their work toward self-improvement.

When “My Teacher” Is Correct

Recognizing teachers as professionals and as your equals in terms of their teaching knowledge will contribute more to improved instruction than expressions of power denoted by the pronoun “my.” However, there is one powerful context for the use of the term “my teacher” by a principal. There are times when a principal learns from a teacher, or from teachers, in the school. In this context, it is absolutely appropriate for the principal to refer to this person as “my teacher.”
rienced principals can recall numerous times when a teacher or teachers prevented them from the consequences of a wrong decision, or helped prevent an error. Often, these teachers took the risks of being the bearer of bad news for the betterment of the students, the school, and the principal.

If the principal can acknowledge learning from such a teacher or teachers, then the school becomes a space where it is safe to seek help and risk making mistakes so that learning can occur. If the principal is a learner, then learning can be a popular and favored activity. Such an acknowledgement honors the meaning of the term “my teacher” as someone who teaches, guides, and facilitates learning. This goes right to the core of schooling’s purpose.

The term “teacher” is one that represents some of the best human qualities: helping others know more and do better. It should never be used in reference to power. It should only be used as a term of respect. This is a lesson I have long known, but one I temporarily forgot. So, thank you, Peggy, for being my teacher and helping me relearn this important lesson.

Eric Glover is an associate professor in the Clemmer College of Education at East Tennessee State University. His e-mail address is glovere@etsu.edu.

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**HERE’S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT**

Do you believe that using the term “my teachers” is condescending to your faculty? The author argues that principals should move away from using the term because it is inappropriate in most cases. Are teachers being too sensitive, or is this a valid argument?

Voice your opinion by going to the Principals’ Office blog at [http://naesp.typepad.com](http://naesp.typepad.com) and clicking on “Speaking Out.”

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**PreschoolFirst.com** is an award-winning resource for teachers in Pre-K, Head Start, and special ed centers that provides thousands of play-based activities for the infant/toddler and preschool years. Hundreds of behaviors children should master before entering school correlate to each state’s Pre-K learning standards so children will be ready for Kindergarten. Integrated online assessment gives teachers and parents a meaningful evaluation of each child’s progress. PreschoolFirst’s materials for parents are also available in Spanish.

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