

Teacher Educators and Teacher Candidates: Are Generational Differences Present in the Assessment of Dispositions?

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Abstract

This purpose of this study was to investigate potential generational differences between evaluative dispositions cited by teacher candidates and those cited by teacher educators. The participants in the study (n=81) were female day students and non-traditional evening college students at a small, private college in South Carolina identified by certifying area: early childhood, elementary, special education, speech language pathology, and other. Participants were surveyed to identify the 10 most important dispositions and professional behaviors associated with successful teaching. The identified dispositions and professional behaviors were compared to the dispositions and professional behavior listing used for evaluation of teacher candidates during field experiences. Finding showed both similarities and unique descriptors among the five groups of participants. In addition, consistency in the identified dispositions and professional behaviors between teacher candidates and teacher educators was noted.

Introduction

While completing a program of study leading to certification, a teacher candidate must spend significant time in public school classrooms. On each occasion, the candidate works under the guidance of both a cooperating teacher and a college faculty member who share the responsibility for supervision of the candidate in the field experience. Success in the field placement is dependent upon the candidate's content knowledge of what is to be taught and the candidate's skills in presenting lessons, managing the classroom, etc. Equally as important are the candidate's dispositions, defined by The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) as "the values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator's own professional growth. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice" (2002, p. 53).

Consider this scenario: A teacher candidate is scheduled for a formal observation by the college supervisor. At the appointed time the observation is scheduled to begin, the candidate dashes into the classroom, asked the cooperating teacher for a "few minutes" to ready herself for the lesson, and proceeds to begin to assemble the materials needed for the lesson. In addition, the candidate is continually adjusting her clothes so midriff skin doesn't show. At the conclusion of the observation, the college supervisor prepares to conference with the candidate citing appropriate professional responsibilities, appropriate course responsibilities, initiative, appropriate collaborative skills and positive

presentation of self – all stated dispositional behaviors of the college – as areas of concern. The candidate seems confused and doesn't understand why starting the lesson "a few minutes late" has turned in to such a big deal. Katz (1993) identified a disposition as a pattern of behavior exhibited frequently. In 2007, the norm of what are both expected and appropriate behaviors and actions has changed. Marino (2003) shared his view that virtues of college students today are different from the virtues of previous generations of college students. Is the supervisor too harsh in her assessment of the candidate's dispositions? Is there a disconnect in the meaning of expected dispositions? Does the candidate see her behaviors as less than professional? An analysis of one small, private college's evaluation of teacher candidates' dispositions and professional behaviors was conducted to address this issue.

Identification of Dispositions

Damon (2005) stated that the NCATE definition of dispositions primarily focuses on candidates' beliefs and attitudes; Damon indicates that "candidates not only must have such beliefs and attitudes but must be guided by them" (p. 2). Assessment of these beliefs and attitudes can be problematic. Burke (2002) stated that one of the most difficult tasks of teacher educators is assessing candidates' inappropriate behaviors and dispositions. In the late 1990s, teacher educators at a small, private college for women originally identified 10 dispositions and professional behaviors for candidates seeking certification. These dispositions and professional behaviors grew from the essential beliefs of the Professional Education Unit. These beliefs, still in place today, address the following areas: teaching and learning are enriched by a liberal arts foundation; teaching and learning require active participation in carefully organized educational experiences; teaching and learning integrate pedagogy, practice, and professional development; teaching and learning include the study of varied perspectives; teaching and learning must address connections between theory and practice; teaching and learning must focus on diversified instruction and access to knowledge; teaching and learning must build inquiry and problem solving skills in students; and teaching and learning must address ensure competence in communicating and collaborating with school and community partners (Conceptual Framework, pp. 5-9).

This original listing of 10 dispositions and professional behaviors was used to assess candidates and included the following dispositions and professional behaviors: integrity, dependability, enthusiasm, initiative, accurate content, effective oral and written communication, appropriate relational skills, appropriate appearance, commitment to excellence and keeping a professional portfolio. Realizing the challenge that defining and assessing dispositions creates for teacher preparation institutions (Edick, Danielson, & Edwards, 2005), during 2004-05, these same teacher educators reviewed, refined and expanded the original list of dispositions and professional behaviors from 10 to 13. The revised listing of dispositions and professional behaviors includes the following: professional attire, integrity, appropriate professional responsibilities, appropriate course responsibilities, enthusiasm, initiative, effective oral and written communication, positive presentation of self, appropriate collaborative skills, ability to accept constructive criticism, valuing all people, and valuing learning. Currently, the list of 13 dispositions

and professional behaviors is used to assess candidates in all field experiences and serves as a general guide for the expected behavior of candidates as they progress through a certification program. Data collected during 2005-06 revealed that 100% of all candidates scored “proficient” or above on each of the 13 dispositions during the fall semester, and 100% of candidates scored “proficient” or above on each of the 13 dispositions with the exception of “appropriate course responsibilities” during the spring semester; 89% of candidates scored “proficient” or above on that indicator during the spring 06 semester. As the data indicate, candidates are generally successful in demonstrating appropriate dispositions and professional behaviors as defined by the Professional Education Unit at this college.

DePorter, Reardon, and Singer-Nourie (1999) identified eight principles for teaching success: integrity, learning from failures, purposeful talk, focus on the present, commitment, ownership, flexibility, and balance. Zehm and Kottler (1993) stated that the human dimensions of teaching were paramount to success and, if in place, a teacher will “gain power as a professional influencer” (p. 2). During the fall semester of 2006, teacher candidates in several classes were surveyed and were asked which dispositions and professional behaviors were critical for their success. Those surveyed included both traditional college students and non-traditional college students who attended classes in the evening. The population included candidates in elementary education, early childhood education, special education, speech language pathology, secondary certifiers and those certifying in k-12 areas (such as art and music). For the purposes of this study, data were categorized from elementary education certifiers, early childhood education certifiers, special education certifiers, speech language pathology candidates, or other certifiers.

Early childhood certifiers (n=21) collectively identified 50 dispositions and professional behaviors they associated with successful teaching. Responses unique to this group were “fun” and “approachable.” Early Childhood certifiers identified the following top five dispositions and professional behaviors: positive attitude, knowledgeable, appropriate behavior, punctual, and professional attire. Other highly regarded dispositions and professional behaviors among early childhood certifiers were enthusiasm, ethical, confidence, the ability to motivate students, and patience.

Elementary certifiers (n=21) collectively identified 52 dispositions and professional behaviors they associated with successful teaching. Responses ranged from “accommodating” to “well mannered.” Elementary certifiers identified the following top five dispositions and professional behaviors: respectful, knowledgeable, organized, punctual, and appropriate behavior. Other highly regarded dispositions and professional behaviors for elementary certifiers were positive relationships, good communication skills, ethical, caring, and professional attire.

Special education certifiers (n=10) collectively identified 33 dispositions and professional behaviors they associated with successful teaching. “Hopeful” and “encouraging” were responses seen only for this group. Special Education certifiers identified the following top five dispositions and professional behaviors: enthusiastic, respect diversity, motivated, positive relationships, and respectful. In addition, Special Education certifiers noted “open-mindedness” and “organization” as particularly important.

Speech language pathology candidates (n=13) collectively identified 49 dispositions and professional behaviors they associated with successful practice in the

field. For these students, “optimism” and “determination” were responses unique to the group. Speech language pathology candidates identified the following top five dispositions and professional behaviors: helpful, respectful, caring, appropriate behavior, and punctual. Good communication skills, a professional attitude, content knowledge and organizational skills were also identified as highly important to this group.

Other certifiers (n=16) collectively identified 53 dispositions and professional behaviors they associated with successful teaching. This group, which included candidates certifying in art, dance, English, mathematics, and music, identified the following top five dispositions and professional behaviors: respectful, professional attire, knowledgeable, positive relationships, and punctual. In addition, two strongly significant descriptors for this group were “organized” and “passionate.” Responses unique to this group were “calm” and “easy going.”

Findings

The data indicate that there is some consensus among teacher candidates that certain dispositions and professional behaviors are needed to be successful in the field of education regardless of certifying area. Being respectful was identified as a “top five” response in four of the five groups (elementary, special education, speech language pathology, other). Punctuality was also identified as a “top five” response in four groups (early childhood, elementary, speech language pathology, other). Appropriate behavior was identified as a “top five” response in three groups (early childhood, elementary, speech language pathology) as was being knowledgeable (early childhood, elementary, other). Appropriate attire was identified as a “top five” response by early childhood candidates and other candidates. Although not in the “top five”, appropriate attire was identified as another important professional behavior by elementary candidates.

When reviewing the currently used listing of teacher candidates’ dispositions and professional behaviors at this institution, respectful behaviors are included under the positive professional attitude criterion. Punctuality is specifically stated as a mandatory behavior along with perfect attendance and preparation for each class. Appropriate professional behavior is implicitly stated in conjunction with integrity and confidentiality. Appropriate presentation of self includes appropriate grooming and attire and is included on the list of dispositions and professional behaviors. Although stated by three groups as being imperative to success, being knowledgeable is not listed on the Professional Education Unit’s listing of teacher candidates’ dispositions and professional behaviors as an evaluative criterion. Knowledge of content and pedagogy is assessed as part of the State’s assessment and evaluation system on a separate instrument.

Conclusion

Abrutyn (2006) discussed the importance of gathering data directly from students to target areas of improvement in a school. The current study allowed the researchers to gather data about important dispositions and professional behaviors directly from students, in this case, teacher candidates. The findings suggest that there is a great deal of overlap in the dispositions and professional behaviors currently assessed by the Professional Education Unit and those identified as important for success by teacher candidates. Even in 2007, the likelihood that the student identified at the beginning of

this article – the candidate who at the appointed observation time dashed into the classroom, asked the cooperating teacher for a “few minutes” to ready herself for the lesson, proceeded to begin to assemble the materials needed for the lesson, and adjusted her clothes so skin didn’t show – would question whether or not the Professional Education Unit’s identified dispositions and professional behaviors were needed or appropriate seems remote. Perhaps the reason for such consistency in the identified dispositions and professional behaviors stated by teacher educators and candidates is that these have been instilled in the candidates during their program of study. But, perhaps candidates, even in 2007, simply understand, appreciate, and expect professional behaviors in the classroom for themselves and for their peers.

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