

LEARNING MODULES TO DEVELOP DISPOSITIONS IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

by

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Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research was to understand the impact of curricular modules designed to develop professional dispositions in pre-service teachers. Based on a commitment to social justice and equity, the underlying premise to attend to dispositional characteristics purports that the development of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors among the education community are essential for ensuring that teachers positively address the social and emotional well-being of their students as requisites for closing the achievement gap. This research emerged from a team of secondary teacher educators who designed active learning modules to address professional dispositions for teachers beginning in pre-service education and continuing through induction, based on a reflective metacognitive sequence of self awareness, reaction, empathy and change, as necessary for developing dispositional stances that ensure social justice and equity.

This research contributes both to the knowledge base for Division K as well as the AERA 2010 Conference Theme; it was an ecological effort to understand what learning opportunities may impact the professional dispositions of pre-service teachers. Appreciating that learning is complex, our research recognized that pre-service teachers are not only experiencing a significant social transition from student life to professional work, or from one professional environment to another, but also being asked to examine personal and unexplored assumptions about bias: how does learning occur, who learns, who ought to learn? That our teacher candidates were navigating a community of learners, confronting their own beliefs, and preparing not only to teach for the first time, but also enter a rather competitive job market, are all significant influences on this ecology of understanding the impact of the implemented curricular modules designed to develop professional dispositions.

Theoretical Framework

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2001) defined dispositions 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. (p. 30)

According to Borko, Liston and Whitcomb (2007), the new standards for professional development schools that NCATE defined in 2000 set the stage for a debate about the role of dispositions in teacher preparation. As editors of the December 2007 *Journal of Teacher Education* special issue on teacher dispositions, they stated that, "arguments supporting the role of dispositions in teacher education curricula and accreditation standards are, at the core, arguments about what we value in the teaching profession" (p. 362). In accordance with these standards, our single subject teacher preparation

program in the College of Education at [Author] values “diversity, educational equity, and social justice, exemplified through reflective teaching” (Author College of Education, 1997).

Burant, Chubbuck and Whipp (2007) claimed that dispositions can be inferred from observable behavior and “can allow teacher educators to identify the dispositions that underlie and motivate a pre-service teacher’s actions and, in fact, help the candidate understand dispositions and how they intersect and produce behaviors” (p. 402). Although they see this approach as flawed, they encourage that teachers should work to “disentangle dispositions from observable behaviors” (p. 404). In this study we provided structured activities for our teacher candidates to self assess and disentangle their dispositions, reflected in their own behaviors and observations, as a process for developing professionalism.

The complexity of developing professional dispositions of pre-service teachers involved the ways in which they are bound up in beliefs about teaching, learning, and the goals for schooling. The basic promise of equality is often thwarted by the inequitable structures of schools and the people—teachers and students—in those schools who bring their own preconceived values and judgments into the culture. Villegas (2007) makes the argument that a primary goal of public education is to positively affect the lives of students and to make them responsible participants in a democracy. Since new learning is affected by prior knowledge and experiences, Villegas goes on to state that

... teaching involves supporting students in their attempts to make sense of new input by helping them build bridges between their prior knowledge and experiences and that input; and that teacher candidates, like any other learners, construct their understandings of learning to teach based on the beliefs, knowledge, and experiences they bring to their formal preparation as teachers. (p. 378)

In agreement with Villegas, we believe our role as teacher educators is to prepare teachers to teach in socially just ways by convincing them to believe all students can learn. In developing that belief, teachers must learn about their students, connect with their students and scaffold learning to their students’ prior knowledge and experiences regardless of background.

The theoretical framework for both our teacher preparation program and this study is based on traditional Native American educational practices, reflected in a concept the Circle of Courage. Brendtro, Brokenleg and Bockern (2001) characterized this Circle of Courage as “the central values—the unifying theme—of positive cultures for education and youth work programs” (p. 45). They defined the circle in four parts:

The Spirit of Belonging: The universal longing for human bonds is cultivated by relationships of trust so that the child can say, “I am loved.”

The Spirit of Mastery: The inborn thirst for learning is cultivated; by learning to cope with the world, the child can say, “I can succeed.”

The Spirit of Independence: Free will is cultivated by responsibility so that the child can say, “I have power to make decisions.”

The Spirit of Generosity: Character is cultivated by concern for others so that the child can say, "I have a purpose for my life." (pp. 137-138)

As part of our program we modeled and hence, expected our candidates to develop teaching strategies to meet the needs of diverse student populations through activities that foster belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. The professional dispositions we sought to develop would embrace as well as allow for high potential to successfully achieve this goal.

Techniques and Modes of Inquiry

As a qualitative research study, this project was characterized by the methods of action research. Through reflection and progressive problem solving, the teaching/research team implemented an active learning curriculum in the form of case studies, simulations, discussion prompts and reflective writing to help pre-service teacher candidates develop professional dispositional beliefs and pedagogies. We began this research by developing teaching modules that addressed eight teacher disposition behaviors (Baldwin, Keating & Bachman, 2005), which are supported by the INTASC (1992) *Model Standards for Beginning Teacher Licensing, Assessment and Development*:

1. Attention to classroom and workplace attendance, promptness, and participation (*INTASC Standard 9: Reflection and Professional Development*)
2. Attention to classroom and workplace discussion protocols (*INTASC Standard #6. Communication and Standard 4. Instructional Strategies*)
3. Social and cooperative skills (as illustrated by collaboration with colleagues). (*INTASC Standard 5: Learning Environment, and Standard 9: Collaboration, Ethics, and Relationships*)
4. Attention to assignments and workplace paperwork requirements (*INTASC Standard 9: Reflection and Professional Development*)
5. General classroom and workplace demeanor (*INTASC Standard 6: Communication*)
6. Flexibility (*INTASC Standard 5: Learning Environment*)
7. Commitment to ensuring social justice and equity for all Students (*INTASC Standard 3: Diverse Learners*)
8. Openness to and enthusiasm for learning (*INTASC Standard 9: Reflection and Professional Development*)

These interactive learning modules were designed to help our candidates understand the dispositions, as well as develop habits of socially just, best teaching practices. The learning modules consisted of a variety of activities including: case studies, simulations, discussions and reflective writing. Each learning module used theory and research to set the stage and provided background for concrete behaviors to be practiced. We implemented the learning modules across the courses in the Single Subject program of study over the past few years. The summer of 2009 was marked by a careful gathering of all courses' dispositional curriculum materials, review of previous years' data, refinement of materials, and structured design for use during 2009-2010. The teacher candidates that composed this portion of the study were all 60 enrolled students in the Single Subject program during the 2009-2010.

As a form of reflection and evaluation we had the candidates assess their behaviors every 4 weeks, beginning with the opening session of the program. Each candidate self-assessed each area by utilizing a scale from 1-4 and providing both evidence and rationale for their assessment. As a way to encourage honest reflection and growth, the candidates' self-assessment scores did not impact their grades for the courses.

In addition to the self-assessments, each member of the teacher/research team maintained a journal highlighting noticeable concerns, achievements, strengths, and changes regarding the subjects' dispositions. As a final significant source of data, pre-service teacher supervisors observed and reported the candidate's dispositions across the years of the data collection.

During the study, these journals, supervisor observations, and self-assessments were reviewed for individual concerns and commendations, as well as effectiveness toward meeting our goals to develop a productive orientation to each of these dispositions. Themes as well as unique instances were identified, reflecting the value of both potentially generalizable constructs as well as particular instances that may be worthy of more attention that qualitative inquiry allows (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Sources, Evidence, Objects, or Materials

Data collection over a period of three years includes a description of the learning modules, students' reflective writing from the learning modules and the students' disposition self-assessments. Since our credential program is a fifth year program, the data was from three different groups. We used analysis of the results from the first year to make modifications in the second year. In the third year of the study, we refined the learning sequence and developed more active learning modules with a pointed aim to bridging the gap between awareness of self and actual professional application.

In addition we compared survey data from cohort groups in the first two years who did not experience the learning modules with those in the third year who received the modified learning sequence to determine how the learning modules and the disposition self-assessments were helpful as a learning tool to develop as a professional teacher.

Results and/or Substantiated Conclusions

After the initial analysis we focused on two key areas self-awareness of the teacher attributes and the candidates' specific behaviors. A key benefit to guiding teacher candidates through a self-evaluation process is to assist them to develop awareness of effective teacher dispositions and to promote reflective practices and habits.

From the first two years' results and survey feedback, we determined that some credential candidates were not developing a depth of understanding regarding their responsibility for professionalism. Therefore, their ability to empathize and constructively communicate with colleagues and their own students regarding unproductive behaviors was limited. One question in an end-of-program survey asked candidates the extent to which they were able to talk to colleagues about improving their own behaviors. Most responses revealed very little of this type of interaction. We also asked them what

impact the dispositions have had on their interactions with high school students. Once again, the response was minimal. To address these issues, we infused a repetitive and deliberate learning sequence in each module. Scenarios, case studies, role plays, simulations and discussions included questions, reflective writing, and discussion at strategic junctures to address:

1. Awareness and Understanding of Self (Independence)
2. Awareness of Reactions in the Community (Belonging)
3. Understanding Motivation and Developing Empathy (Generosity)
4. Enacting Change in Yourself and Others (Mastery)

Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work

The significance of this study is the potential of supporting new teachers to become effective professionals. The learning modules we created helped us develop best practices for developing teacher dispositions and professional behavior.

Maria Villegas (2008) urges us to pay attention to the dispositional behaviors of teacher candidates as a moral and ethical obligation that we, as teacher educators, have to the students those candidates will teach. "Because teacher candidates' beliefs are powerful filters that not only make new phenomena understandable but also organize new ideas, teacher educators cannot ignore their students' entering and developing beliefs" (p. 373).

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