

An Investigation of Teacher Candidates’ Professionalism and the Effectiveness of Direct Instruction

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Abstract

The most recent generation of graduates, known as millennials – those born between the years of 1981 and 1996 – are entering the workforce and the teaching profession. A recent publication indicated that millennials now comprise approximately 50% of the workforce, and they will make up 75% by the year 2030 (Emmons, 2018). As millennials enter the work force, there have been conflicts due to generational differences and a lack of professionalism in the workplace (Pew Research Center, 2015). Because teachers interact with students, parents, colleagues and administrators on a daily basis, they must act in a professional manner at all times. Educator Preparation Programs have become aware of the conflicts between generations, particularly in regard to the lack of professionalism, and have implemented professional standards for their candidates to uphold while in the program and out in the field (CCSSO, 2013). The main purpose of this study was to collect data to review the impact that specific courses geared toward professionalism in the workplace had on teacher candidates in an educator preparation program. As such, data was collected through candidate self-evaluation and instructor input.

Keywords: *literacy, technology, social media, popular culture, student engagement, professionalism*

Introduction

The generation currently identified as ‘millennials’ – those individuals born from 1981-1996 (Pew Research Center, 2007 & 2015) are now entering the teaching profession. This group has been characterized as special, sheltered, confident, conventional, team-oriented, achieving and pressured (Howe & Strauss, 2000; De Bard, 2004). In fact, according

to their older coworkers, millennials are viewed as “having a lessened work ethic, a sense of entitlement, and not conducting themselves as professionals, all of which clash with the values of former generations of workers” (Pew Research Center, 2015). Research by Howe and Strauss (2000) reveals that millennials have been “regarded as special since birth and have been more obsessed-over than Xers” (p. 13). In a

presentation by Mosier (2001), the job assets of millennials include the following: prone to collective action, optimistic, a sense of tenacity, heroic spirit, multi-tasking abilities, and technology savvy. However, he also stated that liabilities exist, as well. These liabilities include the need for supervision and structure, inexperience in dealing with people and difficult situations, and an expectation that effort is equated with quality. Many careers have adapted to meet the needs of this generation's cultural traits, but have also found it necessary to take additional measures to specifically teach about professionalism in the work place. The topic of professionalism in the workplace has been at the forefront of discussion in human resource departments across the workplace.

Students between the ages of 22 to 37 fall into this category known as millennials. This demographic may be currently teaching or entering the field of education. Once in the field, they will affect hundreds of students during their professional career. Because of this, educator preparation programs (EPP's) are responsible for ensuring that teacher candidates are prepared to enter the teaching field with ethical and professional dispositions. In the past, educator preparation programs were primarily responsible for preparing candidates in the areas of content and pedagogy. Due to the increase in social media use of millennials and reports of inappropriate postings or interactions with minors based on the professional code of ethics (TEA, 2016), EPP's have taken additional measures to remedy this type of behavior. Thus, EPP's now also carry the additional responsibility for developing teacher candidates who are professional, ethical and prepared to work with other generations in the workforce (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Teachers in the past were very limited in terms of what was acceptable both in and out of schools (Sadker and Zittleman, 2010). For example, in the 1920's, teachers were not allowed to marry, wear makeup, smoke, or drink. While times have changed significantly, acting in a professional manner is still very important. Texas EPP's are obligated to review,

address, and implement teaching practices regarding professionalism in its courses for candidates when there have been reports of infractions and/or violations of the Texas Code of Ethics, (TEA, 2016). Professionalism becomes of utmost importance when violations include inappropriate relationships between teachers and students, drug distribution, and social media misuse (SBEC, 2015). These infractions have become more prevalent in recent years, partially due to the ongoing growth and popularity of social media (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). An article by Wise (1989) describes professional teachers as those who are responsible, able to analyze what their students need, provide that help, and know the standards for their profession.

As cited in Tichenor and Tichenor (2004), Wong and Wong expanded on this notion, adding that, "A professional is defined not by the business a person is in but by the way that person does his or her business" (p. 293). The study conducted by Tichenor and Tichenor (2004) found that teachers are able to identify and articulate factors of professionalism, including aspects both in and out of the classroom. The aspect that was mentioned the most by participants in the study was character, and included "one who is resilient and keeps his/her composure at all times and under all circumstances; is caring, nurturing, friendly, patient with all, well-organized, flexible, and remembers that he/she is a role model to students" (p. 92). Additionally, Creasy (2015), noted that although the term "professionalism" is somewhat elusive, universally, professionals should have knowledge of their field and exhibit ethical sound behavior. For teacher candidates, this would include attendance, punctuality, following rules and procedures of the district, and adhering to the ethical codes of the state while on school campuses for field observations.

Statement of the Problem

According to reports from TEA and SBEC, there is a need for teacher candidates to exhibit professionalism in the field of teaching (TEA, 2019). Although some traits of

professionalism may be inherent for those entering the teaching field, that may not be the case for all candidates. For example, in studies conducted by Elam, Stratton, and Gibson (2007) and Creasy (2015), the researchers found that professionalism should be explicitly taught, modeled, and reinforced for teacher candidates so they can learn how to become effective professionals.

Armed with data from previous studies, researchers set out to determine how the implementation of professional dispositions in an educator preparation program in a rural mid-American setting affected instructor rating and candidate self-evaluations of professional preparedness. The implementation of the professional dispositions included modeling strategies aimed at teaching the dispositions explicitly. The researcher also provided opportunities for field-based learning, visits from area principals, lectures from other individuals in the field of education, and mock interviews. The Career Services Office also provided their expertise to teach “the soft skills” such as communication, time management, preparedness, and a sense of strong work ethic that professionals require. These additional opportunities and trainings provided quality programs that focused on the following dispositions: demonstrating an expectation that all students can learn displaying sensitivity to students’ needs, working with colleagues to advance learning, modeling poise, maturity, and sound judgement, and engaging in continuous self-evaluation and improvement.

Expected Findings:

The researchers believed the additional opportunities, trainings from career services, and advice from experts in the education field would make a significant impact on the ethical and professional dispositions for participants at the end of the study. The researchers sought to investigate the impact that direct instruction of the college of education’s ethical and professional dispositions would have on teacher candidate’s knowledge of professionalism, the difference between pre and post candidate self-

evaluation form results after instruction, and if there would be a notable increase of candidate awareness for the need to become critically reflective of their actions regarding professionalism, and finally if candidates would have knowledge of how to model poise, maturity, and sound judgement with peers, clinical instructors, cooperating teachers and relevant stakeholders at the end of the course based upon qualitative data.

Methodology

Participants

Convenience sampling was utilized to select participants and included students who were enrolled in an educational psychology course. The course requirements included opportunities for field-based learning, visits from guest lecturers, explicit modeling and teaching of the dispositions, and mock. One of the researchers for this study was the instructor for the course and read the consent form to all students. Students were aware that not participating in the study was optional and would not affect their grade. Data for this study was collected only from participants with a signed consent form.

Procedures

At the beginning of the semester, all students in the course were required to complete a self-evaluation form (See Appendix A) that rated their knowledge and self-perceived competence in each of the professional dispositions. The self-evaluation form was a course assignment, but only students with signed consent forms had their self-evaluations analyzed for this study. The instructor also began a file for each student who agreed to become a participant for this study with the purpose of tracking the development and growth for each student, and compiling information regarding the level of new knowledge gained for each student in the study. This information was used as qualitative documentation to support the anticipated growth in professionalism over the course of the semester.

During the semester, the instructor introduced and purposefully and explicitly taught each disposition. This was a change from previous semesters since the dispositions were new to the EPP and newly introduced within the past year. Course requirements provided candidates with opportunities for students to visit area schools after the instructor explicitly reviewed the dispositions to cover professionalism before candidates entered classrooms. Reflecting on the classroom experiences allowed the instructor to pinpoint positive and negative behaviors and offer immediate feedback. Specifically, this included discussions on punctuality and attendance, interactions with teachers and students, and professional dress. This enabled students to practice and understand the implications of professionalism in the field. The researchers also scheduled a variety of guest speakers who could provide additional knowledge for professionalism in the workplace. These speakers included directors of local non-profits, business professionals, area veteran teachers, former public school administrators, and the Career Services Office who provided their own interpretation and information about professionalism and discussed their expectations for professional and ethical behavior for the field of education. This allowed the candidates the opportunity to ask questions they may have had about entering the teaching profession and allowed them to add new understanding to their own current knowledge of professionalism. Lastly, mock interviews were scheduled for all students before the end of the course. This allowed students to gain a better perspective of what to expect in an interview and how to put into practice what they learned in the course regarding professionalism. This experience provided the candidates the opportunity to dress professionally and communicate effectively in a professional manner.

The researchers kept documentation throughout the course of the semester, including samples of work from candidates with a signed consent. At the conclusion of the course, candidates were assigned a final self-evaluation, noting where

changes occurred in their thinking from the beginning of the semester and their thoughts about the implications of understanding the professional dispositions and the reason for implementation of them as they strived to become professionals in the field of education (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007). Additionally, the instructor completed a rating of each participants' knowledge and competence for each disposition by analyzing pre- and post-candidate self-evaluations and instructor documentation, including samples of assignments and instructor notes of each participant's progress.

Findings and Discussion

At the end of the course, the researchers analyzed the candidates' pre and post self-evaluations and the instructor evaluations, which included notes from the instructor's perspective on each disposition. The researchers utilized axial coding, a qualitative method of line by line coding to determine patterns. The analysis yielded several interesting findings. Many of the findings supported the researchers' predetermined hypotheses, yet some new findings emerged that will lead to changes in the course and will warrant further research. The following six themes emerged from this study:

1. Pre-evaluations revealed that participants had a very limited understanding of what poise, maturity, and sound judgement meant at the beginning of the course.
2. Direct instruction of the dispositions increased candidates' knowledge of professionalism from generic to specific
3. Candidates reported an overall growth of knowledge and understanding of the dispositions at the end of the course
4. Candidates' knowledge of moral and ethical standards and the consequences for violations of ethical conduct increased
5. Candidates' awareness of the need for continuous self-reflection of what professionalism means had increased over the course of the semester.

Post-evaluations indicated the candidates' knowledge had increased based on analyses of the qualitative data from pre- and post-candidate self-evaluations, but there was a significant need indicated by candidates that more field experiences should be required to gain the needed confidence for professionalism in this area. It is important to add that while the candidates' moral and ethical knowledge increased with direct instruction, this knowledge did not increase substantially, and participants gave literal-level responses, simply "regurgitating" the rules and the consequences for violations. Although this is a good start, aspiring educators need to know more than the rules and consequences for inappropriate ethical behavior. Additionally, the researchers noted through discussions in class, that students were not able to articulate the reasoning behind the rules. The researchers found that learning was at a very literal level based on the post-evaluation self-reports by participants.

There are many possible reasons for these findings, including the possibility that the questions asked in the self-evaluation form completed by each participant may not have adequately addressed the actual knowledge of each participant based upon how the questions were worded on the self-evaluation form. The researchers also concluded that because field-based experiences were minimal, participants might not have been given enough time to put theory into practice. These findings have evidenced the need for an additional observation requirement of ten hours for this course in the future.

Further research is needed to determine if an increased amount of time in schools will

contribute to candidate development of the skills and confidence needed to understand the importance of not only the candidate ethical and professional dispositions, but also ultimately the need for professionalism as they enter the teaching profession. Additionally, further research is recommended to discover the best methods for teaching the theory of professionalism in an EPP classroom prior to participating in classroom experiences. Direct instruction was effective to a degree, but more in-depth coverage, along with the practical application of additional field experiences may be needed to fully develop professionalism in future teachers.

Conclusion

The American workforce has changed significantly within the past twenty years (Pew Research Center, 2016). What traditionally was unprofessional in past generations in the workplace has now become more acceptable due to the mindset of younger professionals entering the work force. With this change, most companies and corporations have adjusted. However, teaching is a field in which young minds are molded and students require role models that exhibit strong moral and ethical characteristics and conduct. Although the norm for morals and ethics can be different for each individual, there are certain standards that all educators must adhere to and abide by (SBEC, 2015). The new challenge for EPP's and faculty has shifted from teaching content and pedagogy to ensuring all candidates understand what professionalism entails. Teachers should hold themselves to the upmost moral and ethical standards and conduct themselves appropriately at all times.

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