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Dispositions: Defining, Aligning and Assessing

Introduction

With the focus on student achievement, nationwide attempts are being made to improve schools and school systems. In these reforms teachers are the single most important factor (Darling-Hammond 1997; Wilson, Floden, and Ferrini-Mundy 2001). Teacher preparation programs have a unique opportunity and responsibility, therefore, to have a significant impact on teacher quality. Central to the ability to do so is a comprehensive understanding of what factors constitute teacher quality.

For the past several decades researchers have consistently focused on content knowledge and pedagogical skills to define teacher quality (Rosenshine and Furst 1973; Brophy and Good 1986; Shulman 1986). Teacher quality is dependent upon the interaction between the teacher's content knowledge and the teaching (pedagogical) ability. As indicated by Bulger, Mohr and Walls (2002), a teacher may possess significant content knowledge yet be unable to deliver the content by implementing instructional methods that enhance student learning. Conversely, a teacher may possess pedagogical skills but lack the content knowledge necessary for effective teaching and student learning. Content knowledge and pedagogical skills have long been mainstays of teacher preparation institutions.

Since the landmark report published by the National Commission for Teaching and America's Future (1996), the discussions about teacher quality have added a third dimension to the study of teacher quality – student achievement gains. Markley's (2004) recent review of the history of teacher evaluation contends that historically researchers believed that content knowledge and effective teaching techniques would automatically yield positive student achievement. Only recently has research begun to look seriously at student achievement data. In Wayne and Young's (2003) review of teacher characteristics and student achievement gains, they examined four categories of teacher characteristics: college ratings, test scores, degrees and coursework, and certification status. Wayne and Young recognized the limitations of the review and suggested there is clearly a need to further examine the relationship between student achievement gains and teacher characteristics. In the examination of teacher preparation for standards-based education, it was clearly evident that content and pedagogy were essential, but the ability to address the needs of diverse learners and the ability to use multiple assessments were also identified as program practices that support the preparation of teachers for standards-based education. (Lauer, Martin-Glenn and Dean 2002).

Recent standards defining teacher quality, however, have led to an even deeper examination of

essential components. Over the past 10 years, many states and teacher preparation institutions have adopted standards from the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). These standards reflect conceptions of teaching that emphasize the context-specific nature of teaching and the need for teachers to integrate content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and context in making instructional decisions, engaging students in active learning, and reflecting on practice. The 10 key principles of the INTASC standards are organized into 3 categories: knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

The INTASC standards require evaluation in order to determine whether or not the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions are evident in a preservice teacher. Educators have had experience in effectively assessing a person's knowledge and skills (Burden and Byrd 2003; Dunkin and Biddle 1974; Good and Brophy 1997, Rosenshine, 1971; Teddlie and Stringfield 1993). Dispositions, however, are more difficult to teach assess, and evaluate, and one must begin with a common understanding and an agreed upon definition of "dispositions." Regardless of how one defines teacher quality, it is apparent that teaching involves a complex interplay that includes knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Defining Teacher Dispositions

Multiple definitions of dispositions can be found in the literature. Katz (1993) referred to a disposition as a pattern of behavior exhibited frequently and, in the absence of voluntary control, that is intentional and oriented to broad goals. NCATE (2002) defines dispositions as follows:

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. For example, they might include a belief that all students can learn, a vision of high and challenging standards, or a commitment to a safe and supportive learning environment (53).

Defining and assessing dispositions creates a challenge for teacher preparation institutions. An examination of research indicates several approaches including self-instruction materials using perceptual rating scales (Wasicsko 1977), use of Human Relations Incidents and subsequent interviews (Combs 1974), use of biographical and metaphorical self-assessments (Holt-Reynolds 1991), and use of teacher journals (Wilson and Cameron 1996). These assessments offer insight into the process of defining and evaluating teacher dispositions but do not adequately or systematically offer a model for the process.

In a metropolitan Midwestern College of Education, faculty and staff began a year-long journey to reflect upon their own understanding and definition of dispositions and to examine how dispositions are to be taught and assessed within their teacher preparation program. Their journey was informed by ongoing data collection and analysis on the process. Because dispositions address human behavior, reaching consensus and mutual agreement regarding the teaching and assessment of candidate dispositions presented a new challenge. Faculty were surveyed on an individual and small group basis to determine (1) how they defined dispositions and (2) how they were implementing teacher dispositions into the courses they were teaching. These data were collected and analyzed in January of 2003 and again in January of 2004.

Between January of 2003 and January 2004, dispositions, as defined by individual faculty, became increasingly similar and aligned more closely with definitions found within professional literature. A majority of faculty in 2003 (67%) included “attitudes” in their definition but did not incorporate terms such as “values” and “beliefs,” terms frequently found in the literature. Overall, 2003 definitions were somewhat simplistic, often expressed in phrases or a listing of words. Some examples from the initial survey that represent a limited understanding of dispositions included:

“All factors contributing to ‘withitness.’”

“Key aspects of what makes a good teacher.”

“behavior training; general attitude; general morality schema”

“A character trait, the way a person typically responds/react in situations; respect with others; resourceful; independent; confident; be curious – want to learn, asks question.”

By January of 2004 faculty definitions of teacher dispositions changed significantly. The combination of beliefs, values and attitudes became common descriptors in the majority of the definitions (61%). Phrases, question marks and other indicators of a limited understanding were nonexistent. The data collection, analysis, discussion and reflection that took place regarding the definition of dispositions was an important step in faculty reaching a consensus on a definition that was adopted by the college for the fall semester of 2004.

Besides defining dispositions, assuring the integration of dispositions throughout pre-service coursework was a priority. To obtain baseline data as to what was occurring in 2003, faculty were also asked to respond to the question, “Do you currently integrate dispositions into coursework? If so, how?” When surveyed in 2003, 85% of the faculty integrated dispositions. Primary methods for doing so included portfolio (40%) discussion (20%), scenarios or case studies (10%), and standards (15%). Another 15% indicated they did incorporate dispositions, but they did not clarify how they did so. They offered responses such as, “they are hidden,” “listed in syllabus – required demonstration in order to pass course,” and “I use my own judgment.”

When the faculty responded to the question a year later, 89% of faculty indicated they integrated dispositions into their coursework and identified methods as discussion (56%), case studies and scenarios (22%), field experience evaluation (14%), standards (14%), portfolio (30%). An increased number of faculty indicated the integration of dispositions into their courses using multiple methods. Only one respondent indicated that he/she did so informally.

The data regarding integration of dispositions into coursework, which provided an overview of the teaching and assessing of dispositions that was occurring, led to the development matrices to document systematic integration.

Use of Matrices to Document Systematic Integration

During the spring 2004 semester faculty who teach courses in the educational sequence (e.g., foundations, human relations, human growth and learning, special education and general methods) and advanced special methods courses were asked to document tasks common across all sections of a course which required students to demonstrate their understandings about professional dispositions. Faculty also indicated the developmental level at which they perceived the task to be taught and learned. At the awareness level, students were expected to demonstrate comprehension of what professional dispositions are and how they relate to teacher behaviors that have an impact on student learning. At the conceptualization level students would be able to interpret the effect of certain professional dispositions applied within a context. This often takes place during early field experiences when observation is the primary focus. At the internalization level students should be able to analyze and reflect upon their professional dispositions within the context of advanced field experiences in which they actually engage in teaching P-12 students.

The matrices prompted faculty to discuss how they were formally integrating dispositions into their course content and how they were assessing students' acquisition of this knowledge. These discussions clarified expectations for faculty so that they could teach to and about dispositions with more intentionality. It provided a means by which they could examine the integration of dispositions across the program, thus providing a vehicle by which to identify unintended redundancies as well as potential omissions.

A faculty review of the matrices in spring 2005 provided evidence of ongoing integration of professional dispositions into courses. In addition, there was an increase in the expectation that students would demonstrate their knowledge at higher developmental levels, shifting from awareness to conceptualization with intended movement towards internalization as tasks became more refined and complex in response to foundations laid in earlier course work.

Conclusion

For many of our teacher candidates, the term "dispositions" was a new addition to their vocabulary. As the college prepares candidates for the teaching profession, our goal is to provide

a consistent definition of dispositions and developmentally teach this concept beginning with awareness, moving to the level of conceptualization, and finally to internalization. In order to do so, consistency throughout the college in defining dispositions as well as clearly articulating and sequentially implementing and assessing dispositions throughout coursework and field experiences was necessary. The collection of data from faculty was used to inform this process, and the outcome was two-fold:

1. *An institutional definition of dispositions*
2. *The creation of a matrices that articulate the infusion and assessment of dispositions into courses.*

The process of institutionally defining dispositions and examining the infusion and assessment of dispositions into courses has been highly beneficial for our candidates, faculty and staff. For candidates, dispositions are consistently defined throughout their program. The instruction and assessment of dispositions are developmental in nature, beginning at the awareness level and moving toward conceptualization with the ultimate goal of internalization. Assessments from coursework to field experience are aligned with the institutional definition. For faculty and staff, the definition and matrices provide an essential communication link, which contributes to the ability to provide effective instruction and assessment as dispositions are developmentally taught and assessed. In addition, if a teacher candidate does not have a dispositional “fit” for the profession, data have been collected throughout the program to help inform appropriate decisions regarding advising candidates.

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