

THE DISPOSITIONS TO TEACH

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Introduction

Recently, we have seen renewed attention given to teacher “dispositions,” as exhibited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Educators 2000 Standards as well as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (1998). However, the interest in the dispositions of effective teachers is not new. Researchers have been examining the dispositions (albeit by names such as attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, etc.) of effective teachers for decades and have found relationships between effectiveness and the dispositions that teachers hold. Now, with the national spotlight on teacher quality and increasing pressures from political and business concerns, it appears that dispositions of effective teachers will become of even greater interest. The issues for teacher educators will be to define what is meant by “dispositions,” review the research base, find appropriate measurement tools, decide on the implications for selecting and preparing future teachers, and conduct additional research. This paper is our attempt to start this process.

Dispositions

Dispositions are often defined as the personal qualities or characteristics that are possessed by individuals, including attitudes, beliefs, interests, appreciations, values, and modes of adjustment. Not surprisingly, there is a significant body of research indicating that teachers’ attitudes, values, and beliefs about students, about teaching, and about themselves, strongly influence the impact they will have on student learning and development (Collinson, et. al., 1999 and Combs, 1974). It is important for teacher educators to know and understand the dispositions of effective teachers, so as to design experiences that will help to develop these characteristics in students and to help students discover if they have the “dispositions to teach.”

The Literature

During the past several decades, there have been many studies conducted to determine or identify the characteristics of effective teachers. These studies usually focused on some aspect of teacher knowledge, pedagogical skills, and/or dispositions. It is the authors’ contention (backed up by the NCATE 2000 Standards, no less) that effective teaching is the intersection of all three of these. Leave

out any one, and meaningful teaching and learning will not occur. However, having stated that, we will devote the remainder of the paper to the dispositions portion of the effectiveness model.

In Effective Teaching: Observations from Research, Demmon-Berger (1986) presented 15 characteristics and techniques that were found among effective teachers. The characteristics included: strong grasp of subject matter, use of systematic instruction techniques, high expectations of students and themselves, willingness to tailor teaching to students' needs, belief in their own efficacy, use of varied teaching strategies, use of preventative discipline, caring, use of a democratic approach, task-oriented, concerned with perceptual meanings rather than facts and events, comfortable interactions with others, good management skills, accessibility to students outside of class, and flexibility and imagination.

Leithwood (1990) and Reiman and Thies-Sprinthall's (1998) analysis of research found that teachers at the highest levels of professional expertise and psychological development were reflective; capable of understanding the assumptions, beliefs, and values behind choices; capable of balancing the student's intellectual achievements and interpersonal learning in the classroom; used a collaborative approach with students to control the classroom; and encouraged creativity and flexibility to create interactive classrooms.

Good and Brophy (1994) described effective teachers as ones who set high, realistic goals, presented information in ways to meet student needs, monitored student progress, and provided opportunities for students to apply what they had learned. Effective teachers were described by Cotton (1995) as those who had clear standards for classroom behavior, clear and focused instruction, used effective questioning techniques, provided feedback, and used a variety of assessment strategies. In addition, Cotton described effective teachers as those who had positive interactions with their students and who were caring.

In 1996, Collinson asked exemplary teachers to identify the characteristics of effective teachers. The teachers talked about the professional knowledge, the interpersonal knowledge, and the intrapersonal knowledge possessed by effective teachers. When talking of intrapersonal knowledge, the exemplary teachers consistently mentioned that effective teachers were involved in continuous learning, were reflective, had an ethic of caring, and displayed a strong work ethic. The descriptions for a disposition toward continuous learning included curiosity, creativity, and flexibility. When referring to an ethic of care, the exemplary teachers talked of the display of care and compassion, respect of self and others, and courage. They used words such as, pride of effort, dedication, and doing one's best, when describing the work ethic of an effective teacher.

Wubbels, Levy, and Brekelmans (1997) suggested that effective teachers have strong student-teacher relationships. They identified effective teachers as those who allow students freedom and give them responsibility and who are skilled in analyzing student's needs and in meeting those needs. They saw the effective teacher as empathetic, but in control.

Combs (1974) researched the notion that the effective teacher is “a unique human being who has learned to use him/herself effectively and efficiently to carry out his/her own and society’s purpose in the education of others.” More than fifteen studies conducted at the University of Florida (The Florida Studies Dissertations) and the University of Northern Colorado support the view that effective teachers have similar perceptions (dispositions) about themselves, students, and the task of teaching. Combs (1975) includes the following as necessary for effective teaching: perceptions of self as able, positive, and identified with diverse groups; perceptions of others as able, dependable, and worthy; perceptions of the purpose of education as freeing, self revealing, and larger; and a frame of reference that is people oriented, open, and focusing on personal meaning. Furthermore, Combs found that perceptual factors could distinguish between effective and ineffective teachers. In these studies, teacher effectiveness was determined in many ways - evaluation of teachers by pupils, by peers, by administrators, teachers who won national honors for their outstanding teaching, and even by student product outcomes (test scores on achievement tests).

The research findings on dispositions related to effective teaching were sufficiently compelling to call for their inclusion in new national standards (NCATE & NBPT). However, there is no consensus about which dispositions are necessary or how they might be used for selecting and educating teachers, primarily due to the difficulty encountered in assessing them.

Assessing Dispositions

Just as teacher educators have become more comfortable assessing the knowledge and pedagogical skills of preservice teachers, they are now being called upon to assess dispositions. Portfolios, observations, and standardized tests have been routinely used to assess the preservice teachers. However, assessment of dispositions of the preservice teacher calls for a modified approach. Several approaches have been suggested for assessment of disposition.

Wilson and Cameron (1996) used unstructured student teacher journals to assess the student teachers’ perceptions. Journals were used because they offered a broad spectrum of insights. The journals helped to “provide contextual understanding and an insight into the thinking which underpins many of the perceptions” held by the preservice teachers.

In studies conducted by Combs and others, high inference, clinical assessments were used to observe teachers and “read behavior backwards” to the underlying perceptions. Very high levels of inter rater reliability were obtained when raters were trained with perceptual “rubrics” that were then applied to classroom observations, written human relations incidents (HRI), and interviews. The major drawback to the use of this technique in teacher selection and education was the necessity for individual, first-hand training by Combs in the inference skill needed to make judgments about perceptual orientation.

Wasicsko (1977) developed and tested self-instructional materials for use in selecting teachers using perceptual scales. School superintendents completing the self-instructional materials were found to be

able to make reliable perceptual assessments of teachers and teacher candidates on the Perceptual Rating Scale below (effective teacher's perceptions are listed on the left, ineffective teachers on the right).

Perceptual Rating Scale

Rater _____ Date _____ Protocol _____

PERCEPTIONS OF SELF:

IDENTIFIED

The teacher feels a oneness with all mankind. He/she perceives him/herself as deeply and meaningfully related to persons of every description.

UNIDENTIFIED

The teacher feels generally apart from others. His/her feelings of oneness are restricted to those of similar beliefs.

PERCEPTIONS OF OTHERS:

ABLE

The teacher sees others as having capacities to deal with their problems. He/she believes others are basically able to find adequate solutions to events in their own lives.

UNABLE

The teacher sees others as lacking the necessary capacities to deal effectively with their problems. He/she doubts their ability to make their own decisions and run their own lives.

PERCEPTION OF PURPOSE:

LARGER

The teacher views events in a broad perspective. His/her goals extend beyond the immediate to larger implications and contexts.

SMALLER

The teacher views events in a narrow perspective. His/her purposes focus on immediate and specific goals.

FRAME OF REFERENCE:

PEOPLE

The teacher is concerned with the human aspects of affairs. The attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and welfare of persons are prime considerations in his/her thinking.

THINGS

The teacher is concerned with the impersonal aspects of affairs. Questions of order, management, mechanics, and details of things and events are prime considerations in his/her thinking.

Changing Dispositions

It is not enough to know how we perceive. That is but the first step (albeit an important step) in the journey toward becoming an effective teacher. It is also essential to think of ways to change and improve dispositions or perceptions of teachers-in-training and inservice teachers.

Powers (1999) stated that, “dispositions outlined in the various standards are dispositions that could be ‘taught’ to students.” She also suggested an alternative to teaching dispositions. Her suggestion was that students could be made more aware of appropriate dispositions and helped to adopt them. She suggested that preservice teachers could be placed in situations that bring them into social contact with teachers exhibiting appropriate dispositions.

Dispositions of effective teachers have been introduced to education students in Iowa colleges. All teacher education majors graduating from Iowa colleges are required to have human relations training, which includes at least a discussion of dispositions of effective teachers (Stahlhut & Hawkes, 1994). The University of Northern Iowa and other Iowa colleges require their preservice teachers to take a human relations course in conjunction with their full semester student teaching experience. This course at the University of Northern Iowa has two major goals: (1) to confront individuals with experiences designed to create an awareness of biases, attitudes, and beliefs and to create awareness of the degree of congruency between stated beliefs and actual behavior; and (2) to internalize and translate such awareness into actions which result in more positive relationships within the teaching/learning environment.

In attempting to improve dispositions or perceptions a Teacher Effectiveness training model, which consisted of a series of intensive, one-week workshops, was offered to elementary and secondary classroom teachers. Percy (1990) found that the teacher effectiveness training enhanced both teachers’ attitudes toward children and selected teacher behaviors associated with effective teaching. The training resulted in a significant increase in the teacher’s attitudes toward children and teacher’s ability to listen empathically and confront appropriately.

Kemp (1994) asked preservice teachers, who were assigned to observe in public high schools, to focus on how issues of cultural diversity were handled. Following their observations, they were asked to reflect and to analyze their reflections. Ten sets of reflections were selected and analyzed. Most of the preservice teachers whose reflections were analyzed exhibited an understanding of the following: (1) more than academics occur in the classroom, (2) students bring a variety of realities to the classroom, (3) the classroom is a training center for how students will function in the larger society, and (4) just as prejudice can be learned, so can cooperation and conflict resolution.

Chandler (1998) presented self-examination of disposition and the use of reframing, “a process of changing the focus of a situation or problem and examining it from a different perspective,” as a way to change perceptions. He stated that there are several belief biases that interfere with effective student-teacher relationships and presents seven mindsets. He suggested that how “we examine and understand

student behavior may be a function of one or more of these particular mindsets.” Chandler also offered strategies for reframing each mindset.

In Becoming a Teacher: A Personal Journey, a workbook to be used in introductory education courses, Wasicsko (2000 pre publication) applies the research on perceptions of effective teachers to assist students in self-assessment of disposition. Through the use of human relations incidents and a favorite teacher essay, students are assisted in reflecting on their perceptions and attempting to determine if a career in teaching is a good match for them. Preparation to pilot test the workbook in the fall of 2001 is underway.

Conclusion

Great teachers have to know much and be able to do more. They must focus on mastery of cognitive processes (more knowledge, greater achievement, etc.) and personal adjustment and mental health (self-concept, self-esteem). Being effective as a teacher means not only being proficient with teaching processes (methods, strategies, and behaviors) that lead to student products (knowledge, achievement, etc.), but also being a person who can facilitate positive change in people’s lives.

The authors contend that *effective teachers are effective people*. They are warm and caring, they enjoy life, and they are enthusiastic about helping other people grow and develop. The teacher who is effective is one who combines these personal qualities (dispositions) with content and methods in order to impact on students in a positive way.

Now the onus is on teacher educators to conduct, refine, and apply research on dispositions to improve the processes through which teachers are selected and educated. Not a small challenge, but an exciting and promising one!

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