

Middle Level Teacher Candidates' Perceptions of Field Experience

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This We Believe (NMSA, 2010) advocated the training of teachers in programs designed to specifically prepare middle level teachers. Teacher education programs are challenged to provide instruction in content, pedagogy and dispositions. Many colleges and universities have included field experience to enhance teacher dispositions among their teacher candidates. Two dispositions which are especially crucial for middle level educators are collaboration and openness. This qualitative study explored the perceptions of middle level teacher candidates as to whether field experiences actually enhanced their dispositions of collaboration and openness to diversity. The study also examined specific experiences and behaviors which might have resulted in the development of those dispositions.

This We Believe (NMSA, 2010) emphasized the importance of teachers who value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them. No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) mandated that schools provide highly qualified teachers in all core academic areas. It defined highly qualified teachers as (a) holding a minimum of a Bachelor's degree, (b) obtaining full state certification, and (c) demonstrating competence in the subject area by passing a state certification exam. Consequently, teacher education programs across the United States have been challenged by NCLB (2002), National Middle School Association (NMSA), and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) to train teachers in content, pedagogy, and dispositions (NCATE, 2002). This has led to an increased emphasis on the quality of teacher preparation programs throughout the nation (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Eberly, Rand, & O'Conner (2007) defined a disposition as the tendency of teacher candidates to respond in specific ways to specific circumstances. NCATE (2002) 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. 52).

Katz (1993), in her seminal research, argued for inclusion of teacher dispositions in teacher education programs because the acquisition of knowledge and skills alone did not guarantee dispositions would be used and applied. Helm (2006) reported field experiences were essential components in teacher preparation programs because they allowed candidates to observe dispositions in the environment where they were being used.

NCLB (2002) changed the way schools operate. Campoy (1997) suggested if novice teachers were to be effective in closing

the gaps in education they could not be trained in traditional, campus-bound programs where course work was separated from actual teaching experience by time and distance. Consequently, teacher education programs were reviewed to ensure their programs were aligned with performance standards established by professional societies, accreditation agencies, and governmental bodies (Ledoux & McHenry, 2006). One method suggested for enhancing educational programs was the use of field experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2005). Taking into account these ideas, many universities included field experiences in their teacher preparation programs. However, a question to be explored is whether or not field experiences enhanced teacher dispositions.

Statement of the Problem

Teacher education programs have been challenged to assess and prepare middle level teachers in the area of professional dispositions (NCATE, 2002). Lund, Wayda, Woodard, and Buck (2007) acknowledged that in the past there was a lack of emphasis on dispositions. This lack of emphasis contributed to the challenge of defining and measuring dispositions for teacher candidates. Although NCATE expected universities to assess the professional dispositions of their teacher candidates, it did not prescribe how to do so (Maylone, 2002). While several authors (Campoy, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Helm, 2006) have indicated providing field experience for the teacher candidate had a positive impact on the development of teacher effectiveness, more data was needed to determine perceptions of how these experiences impacted the middle level teacher candidate.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine middle level teacher candidates' perception of their field experiences and their impact on the development of teacher professional

dispositions. The study expanded the research concerning field experiences and the development of middle level teacher dispositions while providing practical information for teacher educators.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What were the middle level teacher candidates' perception of the field experience and its impact on two teacher professional dispositions: collaboration and openness to culturally diverse people?
2. What specific field experiences or supervisor behaviors resulted in the development of collaboration?
3. What specific field experiences or supervisor behaviors resulted in the development of openness to culturally diverse people?

Literature Review

The literature review is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the research on field experiences, the second section discusses the research on collaboration, and the third section discusses the research on openness to diversity.

Field experience. Darling-Hammond (2005) found that field experiences allowed students to focus on the task of preparing to teach. These experiences were a method of authentically engaging teacher candidates to reflect on their own skill development and their impact on the learners and schools where they train (Ledoux & McHenry, 2008). Branyon (2008) found in-depth field experiences led to a deeper knowledge of students and their needs, understanding the school culture, experiencing the classroom management styles of cooperating teachers, and providing the freedom to focus on content standards and student learning. She also identified specific strategies universities have utilized during field experiences such as cohort collaboration, on-site mentors, and the use of teacher work samples as assessment components.

According to Branyon (2008), on-site mentors were another technique being utilized in field experiences. Mentors were assigned to each teacher candidate. They observed prescribed lessons the candidates taught and met one-on-one with the candidates to reflect collaboratively on the strengths and weaknesses of each lesson. Branyon found mentors served as sounding boards, encouragers, and liaisons in the public schools. These mentors were able to recognize areas where candidates needed further instruction. In Branyon's study, the students reported their mentors provided feedback, resources, support, encouragement, help, and evaluation during their field experience.

To assess candidate performance in the field experience, NCATE (2002) prescribed a teacher work sample. Candidates produced a teacher work sample, which demonstrated how their instruction impacted learners during the field experience (Branyon, 2008). By assessing prior student knowledge, analyzing and reflecting on the assessment, and modifying lesson plans to indicate the new information, Branyon (2008) found students

were planning lessons with learners' needs and styles in mind and differentiating instruction based on individual student needs.

D'Aniello (2008) discovered teachers who expressed higher satisfaction with clinical experiences tended to rate their overall preparation program higher. She recommended colleges and universities design methods of instruction and guided practice which provided prospective teachers opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and dispositions at higher levels in field experiences throughout their preparation program.

Talbert-Johnson (2006) found teacher education programs offered field experiences early and throughout their programs to ensure candidates understood that dispositions enhanced teaching. Garmon (2005) asserted each student brought their own attitudes, beliefs, values, dispositions, and experiences to teacher preparation courses and therefore responded differently to instructional techniques. This research gave promise to the idea that students' dispositions could be improved throughout their field experiences.

Emphasizing teacher dispositions. Since the passage of the NCATE's 2000 Standards, institutions have struggled with the need to make the role of teacher dispositions more explicit in the preparation of future educators (Wascisko, Callahan, & Wirtz, 2004). Helm (2006b) acknowledged that dispositions were just as important to assess as knowledge and skills. Helm (2006a) believed instructors in teacher education programs should make their students more aware of dispositions and then model important dispositions for the duration of their program.

Schussler (2006) pointed out that while NCATE standards called for colleges and universities to measure knowledge, skills and dispositions, the three were not mutually exclusive but rather conceptually related to each other. Schussler concluded teaching was a perceptual activity which used dispositions as a filter to determine how information was improved and acted upon. Dispositions impacted teachers' interpretation of situations.

In order for teacher education programs to develop teacher candidates' dispositions, Schussler (2006) suggested programs modify their practices in several ways. First of all, create a context where dispositions were valued (Carroll, 2005). An increased emphasis on dispositions might be achieved by requiring candidates to demonstrate awareness, inclination and reflection on how they will think and behave in certain classroom situations (Schussler, 2006). Additionally, Carroll (2005) asserted assessing dispositions required "making the invisible visible" through active means, assessing in both structured ways and through ongoing observation, and assessing over time. He stressed the criteria used in the assessment of dispositions should be both "public and explicit" and have moral meaning for teacher educators and their practice (p. 85).

Collaboration. Collaboration in the form of teaming was one of the key elements of middle level education (George & Alexander, 1993). According to Katzenback and Smith (1993), teaming focused on collaborative work-products, personal growth, and performance results. Arnold (1997) pointed out

that teams could create a more personal, positive climate where risk taking, initiative, and responsibility were cultivated. He also stressed that teaming gave colleagues the opportunity to develop curriculum, share ideas and responsibilities, learn new skills and receive support.

Cohort collaboration may be defined as block class scheduling for field experience where students in a cohort attend all their education courses together and are placed in the same school for field experience (Branyon, 2008). Students reported to Branyon (2008) that the cohort process prepared them for working on grade-level teams and participating in school-wide culture. Candidates developed closeness to classmates, shared ideas, planned lessons together, developed a sense of teamwork, and utilized peer coaching

Openness to diversity. Helm (2007) believed that teachers who possessed the right dispositions could be a key component in the success of diverse student populations. Garmon (2007) stated that nearly 90% of the teachers in the United States were White, while 38% of the students in the country were of diverse ethnic origins. He also recognized that the majority of prospective teachers were White and had limited knowledge of and experience with students from ethnic backgrounds other than their own. Garmon found that placing pre-service teachers in diverse schools for field experience was a best practice for teacher preparation programs.

Valentin (2006) affirmed that pre-service teachers must have opportunities to interact with students from diverse backgrounds during their field experiences. She suggested that only by exposure to diverse classrooms early and often during teacher preparation programs would prospective teachers gain the dispositions necessary to

Methodology

This qualitative study examined the perceptions of teacher candidates concerning the impact of their recent field experiences on the development of professional teaching dispositions. Focus group interviews were conducted with middle level teacher candidates concerning their field experience in middle level grades and their perception into the development of professional teaching dispositions.

Focus group interviews. This study utilized focus group interviews using structured questions and free listing (Johnson & Weller, 2002) with teacher candidates who had recently completed field experiences in the Middle Level Grades (4-8) Program at a university in Texas. According to Krueger (1994) and Morgan (1993), the focus group method allowed the researchers to explore the views and experiences of the participants and provided insight into the perceptions of the group. Focus group interviews also afforded an opportunity for students to examine the complex meaning of their perceptions regarding the impact of their field experiences on their professional dispositions.

Free listing (Johnson & Weller, 2002) was the qualitative technique used to uncover participants' perceptions regarding

the impact of the field experience on their professional dispositions, specifically collaboration and openness to diversity. Therefore, the researchers gave participants open-ended questions to respond to in writing. This technique produced brainstormed perceptions regarding the concept and activated prior knowledge before beginning the more structured questions of the focus group.

Nine schools were involved in the middle level internship program at the Texas university. All teacher candidates who completed their internship during the previous two semesters were chosen by the researchers for participation. Data were gathered from the perceptions shared during the group interview process through verbal responses to questions and written responses in free listing. The researchers examined the information gathered from the interviews to determine the teacher candidates' perceptions of how their field experience impacted their professional dispositions.

Participants. All teacher candidates who completed an internship in the past two semesters were invited to participate in this study. From the number of participants who volunteered to participate in this study, four focus groups were organized. Each of the focus groups consisted of approximately 10 teacher candidates who were majoring in the Middle Level Grades (4-8) program.

The participants interviewed consisted of 44 senior-level undergraduate students, 38 were females and 6 were males. The ethnic makeup of the group was 35 White students, six African American students, and three Hispanic students

Data collection. The interviews were tape recorded and the tapes transcribed by the researchers. The researchers also took notes during the interview. Questions focused on perceptions of interns concerning the impact of the field experience on the dispositions of collaboration and openness to diversity. Sample questions included: How have your field experiences impacted your understanding of collaboration? How will your openness to diversity influence your classroom in the future? Two free listing questions were also given to the candidates to complete.

Data analysis. Following the transcription of the interviews, the researchers carefully reviewed the transcripts and entered the data into an Excel spreadsheet. Categories and common themes were determined through examining the data. Each participant response was coded by using a theme or category (Creswell, 2007). Comments were sorted into categories so that all comments on a topic could be viewed together. To increase credibility (Creswell, 2007), a second researcher reviewed the coding and categorization and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved.

Findings

The purpose of our study was to determine teacher candidates' perceptions of their field experiences and their impact of the development of teacher professional dispositions. It was guided by the question of what were teacher candidates'

perceptions of the field experience and what the impact of those field experiences were on the candidates' professional dispositions of collaboration and openness to diversity. We also examined what experiences helped develop those dispositions.

Collaboration. The term "collaboration" had a variety of meanings for pre-service teachers. Definitions included working together, partnerships, community, sharing, teamwork, and bouncing ideas back and forth. Those descriptions were classified by the researchers into the following subgroups: teaming, mentoring, networking, and classroom environment.

Teaming. Throughout the middle level program pre-service teachers were introduced to the concept of teaming as a foundation for middle level education. Terry described team meetings during field experiences where "various people such as principals, counselors, and content area teachers met with academic teams to discuss student performance and assisted the team teachers with student success." Sherry said the team teachers got together and discussed how to help students with problems at home, discipline issues, and student learning styles. Stacey described teachers becoming a support network for each other when they felt overwhelmed or frustrated, and she emphasized that collaboration "helped with discipline. The rules were more consistent when discussed in team meetings." Mark stated strongly his support of teaming:

If you go into teaching thinking that you are going to do it all by yourself, you are going to fail. It takes so many people to actually teach a child, and you are just one facilitator who makes it possible for the kids to learn. [Field experience] showed a lot of people that you cannot just go in and say "This is how we are going to do it." You have to work with others, collaborate, and keep an open mind.

Overall, all but one student intern participating in the study reported field experience solidified their belief in the importance of teaming in the middle school and looked forward to teaming when they had their own classroom. Rachel explained the school where she planned to teach did not use teaming, but because of her experiences during field experiences she would suggest her school investigate the possibility of teaming in the future.

Mentoring. Another factor which surfaced during the focus groups was the collaborative nature of mentoring. Marie said, "Collaboration was critical, especially for beginning teachers. Having a mentor with more experience than you have can really offer tremendous support." Sherry described the relationship with her field experience mentor. She said:

My mentor teacher collaborated with me about ideas when I taught. She brought her ideas and ways for me to improve my lesson. When [interns] came in they may not know how to teach a particular class, but [the mentor] had a feel for how the class learns, how to get the classes' attention, and how to make the lesson better.

Marie also compared her experience this semester with her field experience from the previous semester. She noted,

In my first internship I had zero collaboration, and I was just doing my own thing. Now, getting guidance and being

able to collaborate has made me more accepting. Seeing both ends of the spectrum really brought collaboration to light and will make me a better educator.

The relationship with the mentor was described by one candidate as interactive with both the student and mentor teacher growing in skill. Mark stated this well:

There were a couple of times where the teacher I worked with would ask, "Well, what do you think?" Even experienced teachers are collaborating with new people to see if they are getting the message across. I do not think if you are new to teaching or experienced that you ever stop learning or trying to modify what you are doing so you get the message across to the students.

Networking. The pre-service teachers also discussed the importance of networking as a form of collaboration during their focus groups. Marie described networking as "critical" for curriculum planning. She stated, "I see teachers coming together and bringing their ideas to the table. It makes planning so much easier."

Several teacher candidates found working with parents a key component of networking. Many discussed how principals, teachers, and parents collaborated together on discipline problems. They compromised and made a plan. One student said, "I have learned to be more open-minded and be able to change my mind about something." Bob noted he learned different points of view. By watching several teachers, he saw a variety of ideas and had a very positive experience. Carrie commented, "I realized that working together with other teachers makes [teaching] a lot easier."

Classroom Environment. Prospective teachers frequently identified cooperative learning as collaboration. Hillary recalled a wealth of collaboration and cooperative learning in her classes at the university. "We bounced ideas off each other and collaborated that way," she stated.

Classroom design was addressed when candidates mentioned round tables, groups of four, and students working together, helping each other. Stephanie envisioned projects being completed by members of student groups and commented, "I realize the importance of teaching my students to work together and how this skill will follow them throughout their lives."

Openness to diversity. The term "diversity" brought multiple examples to the minds of the teacher candidates. The future teachers identified cultural diversity as well as economic diversity, religious diversity, learning styles, and gender diversity. Betty felt diversity was a broad term to define. She recalled that diversity dealt with how to bring people together, but also recognized the negative aspects. The candidates cited segregation, racism, stereotypes, prejudice, intolerance, and bias as negative aspects of diversity, but also noted inclusion, integration, tolerance, multiculturalism, and differentiation as more positive aspects of diversity. The researchers classified the teacher candidates' examples into the following categories: cultural diversity, socioeconomic status, learning styles, special populations, and building relationships.

Cultural diversity. Pre-service teachers identified examples of cultural diversity witnessed during their field experiences. Stephanie related her experience at a charter school during her first internship in the following way:

The teacher would incorporate different cultures into the students' reading. As students read about new cultures they would say, 'We do that, too!' [The mentor teacher] would help them see the similarities between their culture and other cultures. The students would find more similarities than differences.

The candidates indicated openness to diversity would be modelled in their future classrooms. Strategies students intended to use included multicultural books, and display of a holiday wall that described students' cultural customs. Another student discussed her plans to get to know her students and their background.

She plans to:

give [students] a little bit of me. I want to open up and share about my culture so they can be open to share with me. There are some who will not be open to talking about their private life or how they were raised, but you cannot force them. If you provide a comfortable environment, then maybe they will open up to you and you will have a better relationship with them.

Socioeconomic status. Teacher candidates found the socioeconomic diversity observed during their field experiences made a great impact on their understanding of students' diversity. Sherry noted:

I became more aware of the socio-economic status during field experience. As a student, I used to think everyone's life was like mine. Being aware that everyone does not go home to the same thing you go home to is important. The students have different situations and responsibilities. Teachers need to have a heart and understand.

Terry reflected:

Socioeconomic diversity is what hits me the most – not ethnicity. I thought I had seen a lot of diversity in the Marine Corp, but I was not aware of how it really was until I got into the schools. In the Marines there was diversity, but everyone looked the same, acted the same. In the classroom you see the socioeconomic differences – kids that do not have anything; kids that are not eating. There are a lot of them – even more than you would know. I was surprised at the socioeconomic differences which were very apparent. I like the dress code that minimizes differences, but you still see the haves and have nots.

Bob agreed with Terry saying, "you can tell the first thing in the morning when the students walk in – those who are neatly dressed, good mannered, and ready for school and those that had no sleep last night or a lot of different issues."

Rachel added:

I was just so shocked by the number of students who were so poor. You could tell by their clothes. And there were so many. I learned that they were not different. They just have

different needs. Maybe they did not sleep last night. You learn to be more open and allow different things to happen.

Learning Styles. Denise stated that learning styles were a huge factor in middle schools. Sherry described how her mentor teacher used various methods to appeal to each child's learning style so they could learn effectively. Jill agreed that learning styles activities helped students learn better. Prior to this class, Stephanie admitted learning styles was "something I was not aware of, and it took field experience to help me understand how important it is to be familiar with the different learning styles."

Sherry committed to:

use different learning styles in my classroom. I will make sure each student is accommodated. By putting [learning styles] to use in your classroom you will be a better teacher, and the students will learn more, too. Classrooms are so diverse, and there are so many things to deal with."

Special populations. Betty said the first thing she thought of with diversity was "the wide range of needs you need to accommodate in each lesson. I knew I had to accommodate, but I didn't know what all the accommodations were." Carrie discussed aides who helped translate for Spanish speaking students. Juanita added that her mentor teacher was completing ELL certification and said the techniques she learned really helped as she worked with her diverse students.

Building relationships. Betty stressed the importance of needing to know her students and understanding how to address their needs. Sherry described how her mentor teacher allowed students to share things on their mind at the beginning of the class period. She did this by providing an opportunity during advisory period for students to tell about themselves. This practice allowed students to build relationships with the teacher and each other. Terry said, "You really have to know your students' personalities." Jill believed, "You have to show respect. If the students have respect for you, they will work for you."

Discussion

The focus groups where teacher candidates discussed the importance of dispositions and how field experiences impacted those dispositions were beneficial to understanding the importance of field experiences to the middle level program. Students indicated their field experiences allowed them to see the dispositions of collaboration and openness to cultural diversity in action. They allowed them to develop a deeper understanding of those dispositions while also demonstrating how teachers in the field used (or did not use) dispositions to make educational decisions.

Students expanded their understanding of collaboration through field experiences. They saw the importance of teaming through the interaction of teams as they made decisions about curriculum, discipline, and worked together to impact their students' lives. While teaming was an abstract idea prior to field experience, students solidified their understanding of teaming and became advocates for the process.

Mentoring as a collaborative process was also identified by students as a practice observed during their field experiences. As they grew in their understanding of the complexities of planning and teaching, they realized how valuable a good mentor could be. The students indicated they hoped to utilize a mentor as they began their new careers.

Teacher candidates discovered the benefits of networking in curriculum planning to save valuable classroom time and also to help ensure quality instruction for all students. These discoveries led the future teachers to understand they benefitted by collaboratively working with their colleagues to improve instruction. Students also observed the importance of networking with parents to gain their support in the education process.

Collaboration was modelled for pre-service teachers as mentors developed their classroom environment. Teacher candidates saw cooperative learning as an effective tool in the middle level classroom because not only did it enhance students' academic skills, but also their development of collaboration. Field experience solidified teacher candidates' determination to use cooperative learning in their future classrooms.

Openness to diversity was also demonstrated through field experiences. Since many of the pre-service teachers came from urban school districts with little ethnic and economic diversity, their field experiences opened their eyes to the challenges they might face in their future classrooms. Teacher candidates noted growth in understanding of ethnic diversity, economic diversity, special populations, and learning styles.

Evidence that teacher candidates planned to utilize their dispositions in their classrooms in the future was encouraging. The focus groups confirmed the importance of field experience to the enhancement of teacher candidates' dispositions.

Teacher candidates identified specific strategies that enhanced their understanding of collaboration, such as observation and participation in team meetings. They were able to observe team dynamics and learned how team members supported each other in curriculum planning and discipline. In addition they saw how the administrators and support personnel implemented teaming and worked with teams to solve problems.

Teacher candidates also identified specific strategies that increased their openness to diversity. Modelled strategies, such as the use of multicultural literature, allowed pre-service teachers to see increased understanding among different cultural groups. Forums and discussions highlighted pre-service teachers' awareness of cultural biases and racism. Observation of team meetings and parent conferences helped pre-service teachers see all families were not similar to their own. For many being placed in a field experience at a school with a high percentage of students from low socio-economic households was their first experience with economic diversity.

Some chose to stay in these schools for student teaching because of this new experience and the realization that they may face similar experiences when they are assigned their first classroom as a beginning teacher.

The NCATE requirements for teacher education programs recognized the need for teacher candidates to develop dispositions (NCATE, 2002). The focus groups conducted during this study indicated that the university is making strides in accomplishing this goal. Programmatic changes may enhance the awareness and development of teacher dispositions.

Implications for Practice

Program implications from the findings of this study included the need to increase opportunities for interns to discuss specific issues such as collaboration and cultural diversity. They appeared to enjoy the opportunity to discuss these issues, and the discussions led them to understand different perspectives. Additional discussions could also be beneficial to the interns' university supervisors as they evaluate the interns' dispositions. Observations alone were not always sufficient to determine the dispositions of teacher candidates.

Another implication for practice is that the university needs to monitor mentor teacher placements very carefully. While the majority of the pre-service teachers had excellent placements, the conversations indicated that some of the mentors were not modelling the appropriate dispositions for the candidates. Although pre-service teachers can learn what not to do from mentors who are poor models, they deserve to have the best mentors available.

Conclusion

Field experiences allowed teacher candidates to enhance the dispositions of collaboration and openness to diversity. One intern summarized her internship this way:

I have observed teachers meeting and collaborating in teams and seen the struggles they face in making team decisions. Demonstrating respect for peers and administrators is critical to working effectively with others. I have developed even more openness to diversity after interning in such diverse classrooms/schools and have developed an appreciation of the many cultures/ethnicities represented in our schools. After working with two amazing mentor teachers, I have seen examples of integrity and academic excellence displayed in the classroom and behind the scenes. I feel that as a teacher, it is so important to model these dispositions to not only the students, but also parents and co-workers.

The words of this student indicated that field experiences were indeed making a difference in the development of pre-service teachers' dispositions.

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