Building Professional Dispositions in Pre-Service Special Educators: Assessment and Instructional Tactics

K. Stoddard
University of South Florida, USA

B. Braun
University of South Florida, USA

L. Dukes III
University of South Florida, USA

M. A. Koorland
University of South Florida, USA

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Teacher preparation programs, in part due to national accreditation mandates, are beginning to examine assessment and instruction of teacher trainees' professional behavior and dispositions more carefully than in the past. The faculty at University of South Florida St. Petersburg developed the Professional Behavior Assessment tool (PBA) for rating levels of competence within six professional behavior domains; punctuality, reaction to supervision, collaboration with colleagues, effort, enthusiasm, and ethical professionalism. Four pre-service teachers (PST) were taught the characteristics of the six domains employing written scenarios and rubrics of the PBA. Initially, the pre-service teachers held very different perceptions than faculty regarding behavior expected within each domain. After instruction the PST's were able to use the PBA to rate scenarios similarly to faculty. Following training, PST's reported better understanding regarding the level of expected professional behavior in the schools. As the semester progressed, faculty noted improvement in pre-service professional behavior in field settings.

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Kim Stoddard

Bonnie Braun

Lyman Dukes III

Mark A. Koorland

University of South Florida
St. Petersburg
stoddard@stpt.usf.edu

Abstract

Teacher preparation programs, in part due to national accreditation mandates, are beginning to examine assessment and instruction of teacher trainees' professional behavior and dispositions more carefully than in the past. The faculty at University of South Florida St. Petersburg developed the Professional Behavior Assessment tool (PBA) for rating levels of competence within six professional behavior domains; punctuality, reaction to supervision, collaboration with colleagues, effort, enthusiasm, and ethical professionalism. Four pre-service teachers (PST) were taught the characteristics of the six domains employing written scenarios and rubrics of the PBA. Initially, the pre-service teachers held very different perceptions than faculty regarding behavior expected within each domain. After instruction the PST's were able to use the PBA to rate scenarios similarly to faculty. Following training, PST's reported better understanding regarding the level of expected professional behavior in the schools. As the semester progressed, faculty noted improvement in pre-service professional behavior in field settings.

Contemporary teacher education programs are charged with preparing teachers who are knowledgeable in both pedagogy and a content area. Additionally, the teacher candidates should possess the dispositions (i.e., personal characteristics, beliefs, attitudes and skills) considered necessary for a successful career in education. Moreover, teacher preparation programs must also document the outcomes of their pre-service teachers in the aforementioned dispositional clusters. Measuring knowledge in content areas and pedagogical skills tends to be rather straightforward, however, dispositions are much more elusive. Although the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and other accreditation bodies have chosen to include dispositions as an important component of all teacher education programs, they have not provided any clear guidance regarding the assessment of dispositions. The NCATE glossary (2003) does provide the following global definition:

> *Dispositions. 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 (pg.53).*

The specific instructional skills and strategies necessary to positively influence student performance have been well documented (Moore, 2000). Likewise, effective teaching practices for diverse student populations have also been effectively investigated (Dillon, l989; Lucas, Henze & Donato, l990). Because of recent mandates by accreditation agencies, the spotlight has turned to the measurement of dispositions. Those interested in developing or influencing dispositions in teacher candidates must grapple with how to teach what many believe are intrinsic characteristics. Teacher preparation programs must influence professional behavior and ethics by planned experiences in the teacher preparation program. However, we may discover that an individual's past experience and cultural background so strongly shapes teacher candidates' that little dispositional change is ever evident (Noddings, l996).

Instructional Methods for Developing/Assessing Professional Behavior

Several approaches are currently used to assess dispositions. What follows are descriptions of various methods grouped by programmatic approach.

Professional Organizations

Stewart and Davis (2005) suggest PST's participate in professional organizations in order to promote essential teacher dispositions. Many teacher education programs not only promote student membership in national professional organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), but also maintain local campus chapters of these organizations (e.g., Student Council for Exceptional Children, or SCEC). Benninga (2003) suggests that profession-specific service activities promote opportunities to develop one's character and moral motivation. In essence, professional organizations provide authentic opportunities to practice professionalism. Stewart and Davis (2005) suggest that participation in professional organizations become an integral component of any teacher education program.

Intervention Plans / Disposition Checklists

In some instances, an improvement or intervention plan is employed to address concerns about the dispositions of pre-service teachers. The Columbus State University and Bellarmine University education programs use intervention plans. Prior, to using an intervention plan, the goal of the programs is to promote the awareness of dispositions desirable in teachers, as well as nurture and mentor pre-service teachers in the development of dispositions. Necessary dispositions are encouraged by making pre-service teachers aware of expectations early in the curriculum through program coursework and evaluation and counseling them, as necessary, in areas of weakness. If coursework and counseling are inadequate, then an intervention plan is developed to address weaknesses.

Another approach, similar to intervention plans, is the dispositional checklist used by the University of Southern Indiana (USI) (Slavkin & Thomas, 2003). USI uses the checklist to obtain information that allows both the faculty and the PSTto address dispositions that may hinder performance as teaching professionals. An examination of the effectiveness of the USI checklist found 4 out of 5 PST's were able to remedy dispositional concerns within one semester of use of the dispositional form (Slavkin & Thomas, 2003).

Journals

A study by Wilson and Cameron (as cited in Taylor & Wasicsko, 2000) assessed dispositions through the use of unstructured pre-service teacher journals. The intent was to assist the pre-service teacher to develop an understanding of context and to reflect upon the beliefs that support their perceptions. Ndura (2005) described a program at the University of Nevada, Reno in which reflective journals are used to address dispositions of PST's. The intent is to access "a set of professional behaviors or dispositions that we feel are essential to prospective teachers. Failure to demonstrate one or more of the dispositions may lead to an individualized plan for improvement and, in extreme cases, could lead to removal from the teacher preparation program" (Ndura, 2005, p. 4).

Interviews

Programs such as the one at the University of Arkansas Little Rock conduct pre-admission interviews in order to assess dispositions prior to entry into their education programs. In order to be admitted, candidates should demonstrate characteristics such as empathy and warmth, and the ability to treat others with respect and dignity.

Self-Instruction Materials

Wasicko (n.d.) has employed self-instructional materials to assist pre-service teachers in the assessment of their dispositions. Through assignments such as the examination of human relations incidents and writing an essay about a favorite teacher, PST's are prompted to reflect about whether teaching is an appropriate career match.

Clinical Assessments

Researchers such as Combs (as cited in Wasicsko, n.d.) pioneered the use of research tools to assess dispositions. Essentially, Combs suggested that behavior could be read "backwards" in order to get at dispositions. That is, PST observations could be conducted in which overt behavior was observed and then used to determine teacher "perceptions" or what we now describe as dispositions.

Portfolios

Beginning in the late 1980s, portfolios grew out of the need for an alternative form of assessment in which PST's could present evidence of their knowledge, skills and dispositions, collected over time and in multiple settings (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000; Wolf, 1991). Portfolio development has been recognized as a way to influence reflective dispositions. Moreover, the process of constructing narratives to reflect on their pre-service experiences has been frequently cited as a process by which values, knowledge and beliefs may be integrated (McCombs, 1997; Robins & Mayer, l999). Likewise, Parker (1998) has suggested using the portfolio process, not just as an assessment tool to measure standards, but also as way to encourage teacher candidates to "draw out their own knowledge" and discover how such knowledge will give you "control of your teaching life" (p. 2).

In summary, numerous techniques and tools have been used to promote the awareness and development of professional dispositions. Techniques have included participation in professional organizations and the development and implementation of intervention plans in the case of students who have demonstrated continued weakness in specific dispositional areas. Tools used to date include dispositional checklists, journals in which students reflect regarding dispositional matters, PST interviews to determine whether teacher candidates possess the necessary characteristics of a teacher, self-instructional materials, clinical assessments conducted in teaching settings, and the use of portfolios intended to demonstrate, over time, the development of appropriate skills and dispositions. The authors developed a professional behavior assessment tool to examine the evolution of professional dispositions in our teacher candidates.

Development of the Professional Behavior Assessment (PBA)

The Professional Behavior Assessment rubric was designed to assist our PST's in differentiating levels of professional growth. As faculty, we made assumptions about types of behavior we should expect from our PST's when they are in their pre-service teaching settings and while enrolled in university courses. Our expectations of professional behavior and what we often observed in the PST were incongruous. The PST's expressed dismay at our feedback when we believed that a particular action required our constructive criticism. The PST's contended that they exhibited professional behavior and they could readily "explain away" any discrepancies that existed between faculty expectations and PST performance.

PST justifications often rationalized what faculty perceived as unprofessional behavior (e.g., arriving late, uncompleted field site tasks, or unprofessional verbal exchanges with site supervisors) as being due to some external situation beyond their control (e.g., car trouble, no one explained the expectations clearly, other PST's engaged in the same kind of behavior, the supervisor was rude to them, teachers at school all make unprofessional comments and they just joined in, and that they couldn't be expected to do all that work). We were left with the impression that the PST's were merely making poor choices rather than taking responsibility for their professional indiscretions. Circumstances of this nature prompted the authors to carefully examine the entry-level professional behavior of our PST's.

Bridges (as cited in Ben-Peretz, 2001) contends that teachers must follow an implied professional code of conduct. Many of our PST's appeared to be unaware of an implied professional code, and also seemed to make choices without carefully weighing the effects of those actions on others. Our teacher preparation program had never systematically addressed these necessary "entry level" professional behaviors since we thought them to be understood.

During coursework, we typically addressed ethical decision-making that involved multiple layers and many perspectives; however, we rarely addressed what we considered to be apparent entry – level professional behaviors.

The Professional Behavior Assessment rubric (see Figure 1) was designed to assist us in providing instruction about the entry-level professional code essential for the PST. The PBA's six behavior domains were developed using feedback from university faculty and teachers in the field, as well as written evaluations from teachers supervising our PST's. University faculty and the supervising teachers met twice a semester during the student internship experience to discuss the expectations and progress of the PST in the teaching setting. During the orientation meeting expectations for the student internship were delineated. In addition, the orientation meeting provided a forum for the experienced supervising teachers to share insights based on their previous experiences supervising PST's. Strategies on coaching, supervising, and evaluating the PST were shared. At the mid-semester point, the supervising teachers and university faculty again met to discuss the progress of the PST's and develop strategies for any PST who seemed to be struggling during the student teaching experience.

The concerns of the supervising teachers included PST's who lacked initiative, had a defensive attitude when given suggestions, and PST's who did not seem to demonstrate even basic professional behaviors, such as arriving on time. The written concerns of the supervising teachers were taken to a collaborative planning session which included personnel in the school district administration and university faculty. During this planning session, the group agreed on six domains of professional behavior that would be expected of beginning teachers. To enable the faculty to teach and evaluate the domains within the internship experience, competency levels were developed and titled – "competent plus", "competent", and "does not meet competency".

The six PBA domains represent professional behaviors that the PST can acquire. In order to delineate levels of acquisition, faculty established three possible competency ratings for each domain and described clearly what a student at each level would demonstrate in terms of overt actions. Descriptive directions about what behavior to expect or rubrics for each competency level for each domain are provided on the PBA protocol. These rubrics enable teaching using both examples and non examples of possible overt actions (or the lack thereof). The competency levels were titled – "competent plus", "competent", and "does not meet competency".

The PBA rubric was designed originally, as an assessment tool for school-based supervising teachers, and as a self-assessment tool for the PST's. The supervising teachers and the PST's completed the PBA every two weeks and submitted it to the university faculty supervisor. The self-assessment allowed the university faculty supervisor to determine if the PST's self-ratings differed significantly from the ratings of the supervising teacher. If differences were present, university faculty supervisors met with the PST to discuss the discrepancy, and, if necessary, develop an action plan. Unfortunately, the supervisor corrective strategy was not always as successful as we had hoped.

Thus, we determined that our PST's would benefit from explicit instruction regarding entry-level professional behavior. Seminar meetings on campus to address the six professional behavior domains were implemented during the semester the PST's were interning in the schools. What follow are descriptions of the seminar meetings.

Focused Instruction on Professional Behavior

Seven 30–45 minute seminars focused on knowledge and skill about the six PBA domains and the associated competency rubrics.

First Seminar. The purpose of the first seminar was to introduce the PBA and its rubric. The instructor explained that the purpose of the PBA was to ensure that the PST's understood program expectations about professional behavior. Additionally, the instructor described the development of the six PBA domains and corresponding rubric. Next, the instructor reviewed each domain and each level of expectation from "does not meet competency" to "competent plus." To model what each competency level meant, the instructor read the description of "does not meet competency" for the first domain, and asked one of the PST's to provide an example of someone displaying that competency level. The instructor then read the description for "competent" and asked for another description of someone demonstrating "competent" behavior. Finally, the instructor read the description for "competent plus" and asked for an example that demonstrated "competent plus" behavior. This procedure was followed for each domain.

Subsequently, the PST's read the case study of Patrick (see Figure 2) and then ranked Patrick's competency in each domain. Next, the instructor facilitated discussion regarding the PST's rating selections. They were asked to specify what behavior indicators prompted them to select a particular competency level. When discrepancies occurred, differences were addressed through discussion. Interestingly, the PST's often based their decisions on what they believed Patrick felt, rather than the behavior Patrick exhibited. Our goal was to ensure the pre-service teachers understood that the key is actual behavior, not inference about intentions, motives, or perceptions.

Second and Third Seminar. The second and third seminars required PST's to rate a case study. Again, the discussion method was used to establish why the PST's chose various competency ratings. They had difficulty discerning differences between "competent" and "competent plus." If the character in the case study engaged in only the typically expected behaviors for a particular domain, and did not go above and beyond what was typically expected, then the ranking would be "competent," and not "competent plus." Interestingly, many PST's initially rated "competent" behavior in the case study as "competent plus." Further discussion also highlighted the fact that a competent rating would be assigned, even if the character had not exceeded the "competent" level due to extenuating circumstances. Last, pre-service teachers were asked to prepare their own case study for the next seminar meeting.

Fourth Seminar. In this meeting, a case study authored by one of the PST's was discussed. The PST's began to recognize that a "competent" ranking could only be provided if explicit evidence of the behavior was present. In one particular domain, the case study author argued for a "competent plus" ranking while the case study readers thought a "competent" rating was appropriate. Ultimately, the author stated that the case study described her, and noted that she was capable of "competent plus" behavior, but was limited by her teaching situation. Consequently, she believed she deserved a "competent plus" rating given her intentions. The readers referred to class discussion regarding intentions versus actual behavior to support their ratings.

Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Seminars. The remaining three meetings were identical to the format of seminar four. Across these meetings, the PST's became more skillful at rating professional behavior and explaining their ratings. The seven seminar discussions contributed to progressively greater understanding regarding the level of professional behavior expected in the teaching profession.

Anecdotal Findings from the PBA Seminars for each Domain

Individuals choose our teacher preparation program (a combined elementary and special education program culminating in both a Bachelor's and Master's degree) based upon its reputation for exceptional rigor. The PST's were beginning the second semester of their education major during the time of the professional behavior seminars, and were also in their second semester participating in P-12 school settings.

The shift in the PST's behavior rating skills following the PBA seminars is illustrated in Table 2. Interestingly, the PST's initially held perceptions that clearly differed from the instructor regarding expected behavior for a rating of "competent plus." In many cases what the candidates considered "competent plus" for a professional behavior domain, the instructor rated as "competent." Instructor explanation elicited comments such as: "We're just beginning the program, how can we be expected to demonstrate that behavior as beginning teachers?" On the other hand, pre-service teachers rapidly understood the rating of "does not meet" competency. Ultimately, the PST's gained an understanding of the differences among the three rankings.

What follows are examples, by each PBA domain, that illustrate differences in perceptions between pre-service teachers and instructor, and how the pre-service teachers perceptions changed over time.

Attendance/Punctuality

The PST's believed that an on time arrival and departure at the P-12 school site should be awarded a "competent plus" rating. The instructor explained that a "competent plus rating could be earned by arriving early or staying past the official end of the teacher school day.

Reacts Favorably to Criticism

Initially, the pre-service teachers thought that simply following through on suggestions was enough to be rated as "competent plus." The instructor explained that a "competent plus" rating in this domain would require them to seek further clarification or additional feedback from the university supervisor. That is, PST's would need to seek a more thorough understanding of the feedback in order to be certain they could translate the feedback into action.

Collaboration with Colleagues

The PST's believed that, as individuals just beginning their program, they only need to participate in group problem-solving to receive "competent plus" rating, not initiate any solutions. The instructor explained that participation is commendable; however, to be rated as "competent plus" the individual would need to focus actively on problems and demonstrate the initiative to share ideas with other teachers. Generally, PST's felt tentative about making contributions in their field sites because they feared criticism from other teachers. As the semester progressed, the PST's began to demonstrate initiative in their school placements that included sharing at meetings and receiving support for their ideas from their supervising teachers. Ultimately, PST's expressed satisfaction regarding their ability to make decisions and share advice without the assistance from their teacher supervisors.

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Organization & Effort in Assignments

The PST's easily understood the difference between "competent" and "competent plus" ratings in completion of field-site related assignments. After a few weeks of sharing case studies in the seminar, several PST's provided actual examples of their resourceful, reflective, and creative strategies used in their teaching placements. The PST's indicated that the discussion of the PBA prompted them to take greater initiative and risk in implementing teaching strategies in their placement settings.

Enthusiasm for Teaching

The PST's understood the need for enthusiasm while teaching. This became evident upon review of their case studies. However, they initially indicated that the individual in the case study character should be rated as "competent plus" if she/he talked enthusiastically about teaching. The instructor explained that the PST would have to demonstrate the enthusiasm and passion through his/her behavior, rather than just speak about enthusiasm and care for students. The instructor and PST's subsequently discussed what observable teacher behavior or indicators might demonstrate enthusiasm and passion for teaching.

Ethical and Professional Behavior

The PST's struggled to differentiate among levels of competency for the ethical and professional domain. "Competent Plus" status required advocacy for P-12 students. Again, the PST's did not understand how they could be expected to be advocates because they were just beginning their student teaching experience. The instructor described the issues of advocacy, and how each educator has a responsibility to advocate for students, regardless of experience level. The instructor also discussed being aware of the potential consequences of advocacy, and that one must be willing to accept the consequences when selecting a particular path in advocating for students. The PST's were more hesitant in the beginning of the semester to seek proactive solutions for their students' challenges. As case study discussions continued, however, the PST's provided actual examples from their teaching settings about their advocacy attempts for a particular child. Again, the PBA seemed to provide a prompt for what should occur in the teaching setting. Consequently, the PST's were willing to take a risk in advocating for their students.

Summary

The pre-service teachers' perceptions about "does not meet" competency were clear and continued to be consistent over the semester. As faculty, we were startled, however, that the PST's (who were considered in the Top 10% of their college) initially held such different perceptions than faculty regarding "expected" behavior (competent) and "outstanding" (competent plus) behavior. After the practice of evaluating and discussing case studies, the PST's modified their perception about "competent" and "competent plus" behavior over the course of the semester.

The PST's also repeatedly expressed that the review of case studies should be provided to all teacher candidates. They stated that the case study method employed in the seminars contributed to their understanding of professional expectations. Additionally, the seminar experience helped the PST's better appreciate the expectations of faculty regarding professional behavior in practicum settings. In sum, PST's reported improved understanding of the level of expected behavior, and, throughout the semester, the instructor witnessed how pre-service teachers sought to achieve these higher expectations.

The concept and instructional procedures for building professional disposition may have applicability across other disciplines where professional values and ethics are an issue. For example other professional disciplines such as business or counseling psychology make use of case studies. What we sought to add to this practice was specification of professional behaviors that we believed were essential for success in the workplace. To that end, we developed and employed an evaluation tool for determining the level of success in adhering to professional behaviors we specified. Subsequently we determined that we could impact our students' judgments so they aligned with the standards for professional behavior that we valued. This process, appeared to be instructive and contributed to raising the probability that our students would act differently than before receiving professional behavior instruction and experience with the PBA. We believe that the specification of professional behaviors that are profession specific is a useful endeavor that would apply to other professions. Likewise, once specified, development of an evaluation tool for assessing ascending levels of competency is possible.

Our professional behavior instruction and PBA tool was very useful in our goal of influencing professional dispositions or tendencies to act in a professional manner in the pre-service professionals we teach. These procedures may be helpful to others, especially where the professional preparation program's core values align with the expectation of the professional work environment.

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Professional Behavior Assessment

Please circle the appropriate observation number:

Observation:　One　Two　Three　Four　Five　Six

Instructions: 1) Please mark each domain for level of competency.

2) This information is confidential.

Professional Domain	Does Not Meet	Competent	Competent Plus
Demonstrates responsibility and punctuality to class and teaching placement	Excessive absences, frequent tardiness	Regular attendance, Does not leave early	Shows initiative by giving more time than designated for class
Reacts favorably to supervision	Tends to reject or does not follow constructive criticism	Follows through on suggestions	Receptive and responsive to suggestions / exhibits positive attitude
Demonstrates appropriate collaborative behavior with professionals and colleagues	Does not participate in team interaction / exhibits negative attitude	Participates positively in team interaction but does not initiate	Respects others opinions / supports group-problem solving / encourages positive interactions / maintains confidentiality
Demonstrates organization and effort; Strives for excellence	Assignments are generally late or incomplete	Assignments are on time and meet minimum requirements	Demonstrates initiative, resourcefulness, higher-level thinking, creativity and reflective thought in teaching and assignments
Expresses enthusiasm and interest in teaching and class work	Lack of effort, no enthusiasm in teaching or class work	Demonstrates effort and interest in teaching and class work	Consistently maintains high interest and enthusiasm for class work and teaching
Demonstrates ethical professional behavior and concern for children and their families	Engages in "gossip"; complains about school problems and issues related to students / families	Attempts to problem solve and is not involved in negative communication about school / students / families	Displays professional behavior and collegiality; acts as child advocate; proactively seeks solutions for school problems / challenging students, families

Figure 1: The Professional Behaviour Assessment Instrument

Patrick

Patrick is a pre-service teacher in a third grade classroom and has been in his placement for 6 weeks. The teacher's day starts at 7:15 am and Patrick always arrives promptly at 7:15. His mentor teacher has observed him twice and Patrick wrote all her suggestions and even asked for further explanation regarding classroom management to ensure he understood what the mentor teacher meant by "withitness". He has attended team meetings with his teacher and observes all that happens during the team meeting. He hands in assignments to his university on time and demonstrates considerable creativity and reflective thought. It was obvious Patrick spent considerable time in his efforts to complete the assignments and used the internet for additional resources on two of the projects. He has attended one family conference with his teacher regarding a student who is exhibiting aggressive behavior in the classroom. Patrick was observed by his university supervisor and was very enthusiastic in his presentation of the lesson. Clearly, Patrick is passionate about teaching. He listened to the family members' point of view and worked with the family member to create a solution which will reduce the aggressive behavior.

Table 1: Scenario of Hypothetical Pre-Service Teacher

Professional Domain	Reported Beliefs before the Seminars	Reported Beliefs after the Seminars
Attendance/ Punctuality	The requirements in the teaching setting was sufficiently met	Time in the classroom that goes above and beyond the established time requirement is essential.
Reacts Favorably to Criticism	Passive acceptance of a supervisor's feedback without defensive behavior is desired.	Pre-service teachers should probe for further understanding to ensure that the application of the behavior in the teaching setting is understood.
Collaboration with Colleagues	Participation in collaborative meetings is sufficient.	Taking initiative during the collaborative meeting is necessary.
Organization & Effort in Assignments	Meeting the established requirements of an assignment is sufficient.	Effort beyond the established requirements including resourcefulness, and reflection in creating the assignment is necessary.
Enthusiasm for Teaching	Verbally expressing a desire to be enthusiastic is sufficient.	An active demonstration of enthusiasm in the teaching setting is necessary.
Ethical and Professional Behavior	Showing advocacy behavior is not possible during a student teaching experience.	Advocacy must occur at many different levels and all professional educators have a responsibility to advocate at all times.

**Table 2: What Determines a "Competent Plus" Rating Shift in Beliefs
Resulting from the Seminars**