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CONSOLIDATING PERCEPTIONS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHING THROUGH PARTICIPATORY-TYPE EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCES

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It is entirely possible that prospective teachers whose early school exposures are limited to the short student teaching endeavor will have an inaccurate or distorted perception of the problems and frustrations they will actually encounter when they begin their initial teaching assignment. This study was designed to determine the impact that extensive early field experiences had on the ranking of middle school teacher characteristics at specific stages of maturation during the teacher preparation program. Of the 10 teacher characteristics ranked, half showed significant changes in priorities across the three assessments of the opinionnaire. Evidence from this study seems to suggest that additional and varied earlier field experiences in the teacher preparation program would enable prospective teachers to enter their initial teaching assignment with a more realistic perception of the kinds of problems they will actually face when they become practicing teachers in the middle grades.

As a result of many years of experimentation, educators have traditionally settled for a teacher preparation program sequence that generally consisted of a variety of required core courses, specific professional education courses (usually mandated by state departments of education), and concludes with the opportunity to do student teaching. Student teaching is usually done under the guidance and supervision of an experienced classroom teacher who may or may not be considered an effective teacher. Although the student teaching experience is considered to be the most influential component in the preparation of teachers at any level (Ethridge, James, and Bryant, 1961), it seems that a gap exists between the traditional college classroom and the real world of teaching middle school students. One of the most prevalent criticisms of undergraduate teacher preparation programs is their lack of relevance to

the needs and/or interests of students and the realities of the middle school classroom. A survey of newly licensed teachers indicated to the authors that more realism in the form of exposure to middle school classrooms prior to the student teaching experience should be included in education courses.

In reviewing the literature related to teacher preparation specifically focused on the middle school years, little emphasis on early field experiences, other than student teaching, was found. However, a number of studies related to the opinions, attitudes, and perceptions of student teachers have been conducted. In one particular study, Callahan (1980) examined how the attitudes of apprentice teachers shifted from pre- to post-student teaching. He concluded that after the student teaching experience, these attitudes generally became more positive.

Campbell (1967) used the Minnesota Teacher Attitude Inventory (MTAI) to discover whether measured attitudes or preferences change over the period of student teaching. Within the limits of that study, no significant differences were found in attitude scores as a result of the student teaching experience. However, the attitude responses varied significantly among the five dimensions which constitute the inventory. Moreover, only one of the five dimensions (Principles of Child Development and Behavior) was found to have a significant shift in attitude toward the negative direction. The importance of one's perceptions or attitudes also has been given priority by Adams (1982). He examined how these changes over the period of time from student teacher to first, third, and fifth-year teachers. Generally, concerns about all phases of instruction tended to increase over time.

Gage (1963) noted a significant change in attitudes toward students when comparing students at various levels of their teacher education program with beginning teachers as well as their more experienced colleagues. These findings indicated very clearly that the longer college students stayed in their teacher training programs the more positive and warm their attitudes toward students became. However, among beginning teachers there was a sharp drop in positive attitudes toward students. It appears that the direct involvement with the "real world" of the classroom resulted in the significant shift in teacher attitudes.

The literature further reflects a major concern among the proponents of the middle school concept that very few state departments place emphasis on certification for teachers of these grades. In one study (Alexander and McEwin, 1982), a survey was made of all 1981-82 member institutions of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education. Of the 774

institutions responding, only 30 percent indicated they provided any kind of teacher preparation that focused on the middle school level.

This study was designed to explore the priorities among prospective middle school teachers and of teacher characteristics at specific stages of maturation during the teacher preparation program. Evidence was obtained relevant to the general hypothesis that there would be a significant difference in the rankings among prospective middle school teachers on 10 teacher characteristics with respect to their progression or maturation in their teacher preparation programs. The following questions also seemed relevant to this investigation:

1. What priorities do prospective middle school teachers assign to effective teacher characteristics at the onset of their teacher education program?
2. Do the priorities change after most all teacher education coursework that included early field experiences has been completed?
3. Is further maturation, as a result of the student teaching experience, associated with additional changes in priorities?

Method

In order to gather information relevant to the questions posed, an instrument was designed in which students at various stages of their teacher preparation program were asked to rank 10 teaching characteristics in order of importance to a middle school teacher. The list of teacher characteristics, while not all-encompassing, attempts to address some of the most highly recognized and research-based behaviors that have been linked to effective teaching.

In keeping with a desire to make the

instrument concise, it seemed reasonable to select items having to do with important aspects of middle school teacher preparation as viewed by contemporary and traditional authorities. A list of good teacher characteristics compiled by Hamacheck (1969) was used in deciding on certain

items on the questionnaire. The authors further relied on their own experience with student teachers plus input from colleagues in the final listing of 10 teacher characteristics for the instrument. These items are displayed in Table 1.

Sixty-six (66) students preparing to teach

Table 1
Teacher Characteristics

Number	Items	Abbreviations
1.***	Use proper oral and written communication	Oral and written communication
2.**	Organize a classroom for instruction	Organization of classroom
3.***	Display adequate subject matter knowledge	Subject matter knowledge
4.***	Demonstrate enthusiasm and an appreciative attitude	Enthusiasm and appreciative attitude
5.*	Plan innovate and interesting lessons	Interesting lessons
6.**	Adequately discipline a class	Discipline
7.***	Getting along well with students	Getting along well with students
8.*	Properly evaluate students' knowledge	Evaluation
9.**	Show flexibility in the teaching process	Flexibility in teaching
10.***	Demonstrate proper classroom management skills	Classroom management

- * - represents the academic background construct
- ** - represents the management skills construct
- *** - represents the personal qualities construct

in the middle grades participated in the initial survey. Upon enrolling in their first college education course, entitled Introduction to Teaching, they were asked to rank the 10 teacher characteristics (Table 1). Several education courses to be taken later, especially the methods courses, would include observational and participatory-type field experiences in middle school classrooms. A second group of 54 prospective middle school student teachers ranked the same 10 characteristics after completion of their education coursework, but prior to

their student teaching experience. This same group then gave the characteristics a final ranking upon completion of their student teaching. In all three rankings, some questionnaires were invalidated and rendered not usable as a result of inappropriate or unreadable responses. These problems led the authors to reduce the number of valid student responses on all administrations of the questionnaire. The resulting number of valid responses were 55, 49, and 43 respectively for each administration. Of the 147 respondents, all but two were

females and the age categories were 20-25 (77%), 26-30 (11%), over 30 (10%), while only 2% did not respond to the age category question.

The rankings of the prospective teachers resulted from three stages of maturity within their teacher preparation sequence. In order to compare these three sets of rankings and test the general hypothesis, a chi-square test of independence was performed. As a result the authors were able to identify those teacher characteristics which showed the most dynamic changes across the teacher preparation sequence.

Although there were only 10 items within the instrument, there was an insufficient number of students available to warrant a complete classification for every subcategory. Therefore, rankings of the items were collapsed into three new categories: high, medium, and low. Ranks 1, 2, and 3 were presented as high rankings; ranks 4, 5, and 6 were designated as medium; whereas, 7 through 10 were established as low. This procedure permitted adequate sample size in each category to meet chi-square distribution requirements (Table 2).

Results and Discussion

Of the 10 teacher characteristics used, half showed significant changes in priorities across the three administrations of the opinionnaire as measured by the chi-square test. Among the teacher traits there appeared to be three groupings of items typifying specific dimensions in the repertoire of personal qualities for the middle school teacher (Table 1).

Items five and eight, interesting lessons and evaluation, appeared to indicate an academic dimension. These items showed stability across the three administrations of the opinionnaire. Interesting lessons obtained a modestly high priority while evaluation stayed low.

The next factor consisting of items two,

six, nine, and ten seemed to represent a management construct. All of these items demonstrated gains in priorities across the three major milestones of the middle school teacher preparation program. Items six and ten, discipline and classroom management, revealed the most dynamic shift in priorities between the start and the termination of the student teaching experience. They were reasonably low in ranking before and after the teacher education college classroom experience. After the student teaching experience, however, both items showed a marked rise in priority. A similar pattern of change was noted for item nine, flexibility in teaching; however, it was less dynamic. The remaining item in the management construct, item two, organization of the classroom, indicated a sharp rise in priority at the conclusion of the teacher education classroom experience and remained rather stable throughout the student teaching experience.

The final dimension contained items one, three, four, and seven. These items appear to illustrate a group of personal traits that constitute a major dimension of the total set of middle school teacher qualities. The student teachers reduced all of these items in order of importance at the end of the student teaching experience. Subject matter knowledge, item three, and enthusiasm, item four, showed the most marked downward trend in ranking. This trend, however, did not materialize until the conclusion of the student teaching experience. Items one and seven, communication and getting along well, started with medium rankings and declined in priority at the conclusion.

Conclusions

The findings of this study reflect an association between idealism often represented by the college classroom and reality provided by the middle school classroom set-

Table 2
Ranking of Items by Prospective Teachers

Abbreviated Items	Assessment	Rankings			
		High	Med	Low	Ttl
Oral and written communication	PRE	14	27	14	55
	MID	12	17	20	49
	POS	11	12	20	43
Organization of classroom*	PRE	16	15	24	55
	MID	27	12	10	49
	POS	21	11	11	43
Subject matter knowledge	PRE	25	18	12	55
	MID	19	17	13	49
	POS	11	14	18	43
Enthusiasm and appreciative attitude*	PRE	37	7	11	55
	MID	22	14	13	49
	POS	11	17	15	43
Interesting lessons	PRE	27	20	8	55
	MID	21	21	7	49
	POS	18	18	7	43
Discipline*	PRE	6	19	30	55
	MID	11	10	28	49
	POS	16	17	19	43
Getting along well with students*	PRE	17	13	25	55
	MID	9	14	26	49
	POS	6	5	32	43
Evaluation	PRE	7	15	33	55
	MID	9	12	28	49
	POS	6	11	26	43
Flexibility in teaching	PRE	8	21	26	55
	MID	10	18	21	49
	POS	13	15	15	43
Classroom management*	PRE	8	10	37	55
	MID	7	14	28	49
	POS	16	9	18	43

* Changed significantly from pre- to post-assessment, $\alpha = .05$

PRE - denotes ranking before professional education coursework began.

MID - denotes rankings after professional education coursework and before student teaching.

POS - denotes rankings at the completion of student teaching.

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