

Thoughts of One Former Elementary School Principal on Teacher Dispositions, Hiring Practices and No Child Left Behind

Dr. Dina Pacis and Dr. Mary Anne Weegar
School of Education
National University
San Diego, CA, USA

Abstract

Teachers are a touchstone for students throughout their academic journey. They are a reliable and consistent presence in the daily school life of a student. But the school principal is the person who is accountable for ensuring that all students have access to a high quality education. Concern over student achievement has increased awareness by the American Public over U.S. education. This led to the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) by the U.S. Congress, and the call for highly qualified teachers in the U.S. Current teacher preparation programs are built on the premise of content and pedagogy grounded in the mandates of No Child Left Behind (2001) and the highly qualified teacher, but have fallen short in addressing the critical aspect of teacher dispositions. The challenge of addressing teacher dispositions have fallen on teacher preparation programs. These programs have struggled to define what effective teacher dispositions are to be effective classrooms teachers in a linguistically and culturally diverse society. In addition, there is a disconnect between what school principals are seeking when hiring new teachers with regards to dispositions. Teachers are expected to leave teacher preparation programs well grounded in content and pedagogy, yet principals are expecting this and much more. The ability to problem solve to support teaching and learning with the increasing diversity of the U.S. student population has made visible this gap in teacher preparation programs. This paper will examine teacher preparation programs in relation to dispositions, and focus on the perceptions of one former elementary school principal with regards to the challenges of hiring in today's era of NCLB and increased accountability.

Purpose of Teacher Preparation Programs

The purpose of teacher preparation programs is to prepare highly qualified teachers. Therefore, society and government has focused on raising student achievement. This led to one of many reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The most current reauthorization of this act is "No Child Left behind", the statute which defines the federal

government's role in public education, it shifted the accountability from the superintendent and district office to the school site with principal and teachers (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002).

Current Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States

Pre-service preparation programs traditionally contain coursework which contributes to subject-matter competency as well as pedagogical training. Supported in the literature is the notion that teachers who have explicit and organized knowledge provide better instruction to their students. In other words, teachers with subject matter expertise are better prepared to assist students to develop conceptual connections. Students are then better able to engage in appropriate and meaningful dialogue and discussions. The teacher's ability to organize knowledge benefits their students' ability to understand the course content (Wlodkowski, 1990; Ball & Wilson, 1990).

With the inception of the *No Child Left Behind Act* came an increase in accountability for raising student achievement. Teacher quality became widely recognized by policymakers, practitioners, and researchers as a powerful school-related influence on a child's academic performance. Included in this legislation was the definition of a highly qualified teacher. NCLB defined a highly qualified teacher as a person, who possessed a bachelor's degree, met the minimum requirements for state teacher certification or licensure, which included demonstrating subject matter competency. Subject matter competency was developed by each state and proof may consist of a combination of teaching experience, professional development, and knowledge in the subject garnered over time. Beginning with the 2002-2003 school year, the NCLB Act began an aggressive movement to guarantee that a highly qualified teacher taught in every classroom. All teachers hired as of the 2002-2003 school year in a Title I, Part A funded program were required to be highly qualified. To meet the 2005-2006 mandated deadline, all Local Education Agencies (LEAs) were required to spend between 5 and 10 percent of Title I

funds to ensure that all teachers became highly qualified (*No Child Left Behind Act*, 2002).

Teacher preparation programs have a responsibility to include the mandates found in the *No Child Left Behind Act* which identify tangible teacher attributes desired in a highly qualified teacher. No single attribute guarantees teacher effectiveness, and few teachers are likely to display all of the attributes of effective teachers. Instructional quality has little or no relationship with the attributes typically used to regulate teacher quality. In other words, hiring a highly qualified teacher does not always result in high quality instruction. Intangible traits, such as teacher disposition and attitudes, play an equally strong role in teacher effectiveness as tangible traits (Goodwin, 2008).

Outstanding Teacher Education Programs

A review of the literature suggested that in light of the NCLB legislation, many teacher education programs are working at a “feverish” pitch to ensure that their graduates are highly qualified (Amobi, 2006; Nieto, 2002). A consequence of this zeal has been the tendency by some teacher preparation programs to assess teacher competency through state mandated tests, and/or completing a requisite number of courses in the content area. In and of itself, Amobi (2006) suggested that there is nothing wrong with this requirement. The concern is recognizing that there is more to high quality teaching than subject matter competence. There is the component of engaging pre-service teachers in continual reflection on self, subject, and students (Amobi, 2006). In concert with Amobi (2006), Nieto (2003) pointed out, “excellent teachers do not emerge full blown at graduation” (p. 395). Given the dynamics of the work, teachers need to continuously rediscover who they are and what they stand for by reflecting on their craft (Nieto, 2003).

Teaching is hard work and requires reflection about that hard work. Wenzlaff (1998) suggested that if teachers focused only on teaching methods, classroom management, and lesson

design and assessment, they risk becoming cogs in the technical process of education. If the focus is solely on these technical processes, there may be an ill advised tendency to perpetuate the belief that competence through professional knowledge and skills is sufficient for producing teacher excellence (Thornton, 2006). Thornton (2006) stated that such a reductionism definition of teaching as “content coverage” is too narrow; and that a focus on “teaching as pedagogical skill” may lead to a technical or robotic” how to” version of knowledge. If teacher preparation programs focus on tools to survive in the classroom to meet the requirements of highly qualified teachers which include both tangible and intangible attributes, they need to simultaneously teach students the tools necessary for self-renewing growth in reflective teaching. Amobi (2006) stated, “Our immediate charge is to prepare them to teach; our enduring mission is to empower them to personalize and own the craft of teaching” (p. 23). In other words, teacher preparation programs should move pre-service teachers beyond competence and practice to excellence in the profession.

Preparing Quality Teachers

Effective teachers are defined not only by their quantifiable and tangible traits, but also by their intangible personality traits. Together the tangible and intangible traits of a teacher determine his/her effectiveness in the classroom. By focusing only on the tangible traits that appear in a teacher’s resumé, school leaders may overlook the importance of intangible traits that influence student achievement. Despite the importance of intangible teacher attributes playing a significant role in student achievement, tangible attributes as defined in the *No Child Left Behind Act* remain the benchmark by which teachers are judged.

A quality teacher possesses the intangible attributes of ethical behaviors that are easily recognizable and obvious. These behaviors, each called a disposition, include kindness, caring, and having high expectations for students and teachers. A disposition as posited by Katz (1986),

is a behavior exhibited frequently in the absence of force, and results in a behavior that is voluntary and adapted to achieve broader outcomes. A disposition is used to describe an attitude that triggers a behavior and is assessable (Wasicsko, 2007). The challenge of addressing teacher dispositions have fallen on teacher preparation programs. These programs have struggled to define what effective teacher dispositions are to be effective classrooms teachers in a linguistically and culturally diverse society.

What Teacher Disposition are Principals Seeking Regardless of the Experience Level of the Teacher?

According to Pellegrino (2010), administrators employ teachers who have the necessary dispositions to assist in establishing a positive and harmonious school culture. In this ideal culture, teachers have the responsibility to establish learning environments that promote academic achievement. According to the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2001), dispositions are commitments, values, and professional ethics. These dispositions influence behaviors towards members of the school community, which is composed of students, peers, parents, administrators, classified staff, and members of the neighborhood community.

In a recent study conducted by Jiang (n.d.), who surveyed 104 principals from eight school districts in Georgia, found that most school principals hiring new teachers focused on the intangible attributes of commitment, enthusiasm, and passion for learning. Jiang (n.d.) found that in addition to the minimum requirements for highly qualified teachers under NCLB, principals actively sought out teachers who showed a commitment and a passion for teaching, learning and working with kids as well as an open mindedness which allowed them to be lifelong learners willing to reflect, evolve and change.

In this era of high stakes accountability the work of teachers has become more highly scrutinized. Teachers who utilize effective instructional strategies which they can flexibly adapt

to meet the needs of their students, have good communication skills, and show an openness and willingness to collaborate with others are teachers principals of today want for their students and school sites.

Thoughts of One Former Elementary School Principal

The authors of this paper are both former school administrators, one a very recent former elementary school principal. What follows are the author's perceptions as a former elementary school principal with regards to the implementation of NCLB and what she valued when hiring new teachers for her school site.

The school district is a large ethnically diverse district in the state of California. Student achievement has always been important, but has grown significantly more important over time. The days of teachers who could teach a one size fits all student body had all but disappeared. When students today do not achieve the focus goes directly to the teacher for what went wrong and then ultimately to the school principal. The increasing diversity of the nation's school population adds to the challenges teachers face to meet and raise student achievement. Staffing schools with high quality teachers who could meet the needs of all students has been a challenge. Although California teachers in recent years have been certified to teach second language learners through their credential programs, and veteran teachers have had to undergo specialized training to meet the needs of second language learners, from a principal's point of view it has not been enough. Too many teachers do not believe that students whose second language is English can cognitively meet their grade level standards. It is this belief system that makes instructional change and flexibility for these teachers difficult. Rather than modify their instruction to meet their students needs they seek alternatives to why their students are not meeting standards, some by incorrectly referring them to special education as students with learning deficits.

The challenge to work with these teachers increased with NCLB mandates of a highly qualified teacher. While the mandates defined the minimum qualifications needed to be identified as highly qualified, these qualifications did not take into account the intangible attributes needed to be a successful teacher. By the nature of the term “highly qualified” many teachers saw only that they had met the criteria mandated by law and were in fact “highly qualified”. Many did not see the need for ongoing training or reflective thought as they had been identified as “highly qualified”. For school principals these minimum requirements were not enough, what a teacher believed in, the intangible attributes of a teacher were critical to their effectiveness. Teachers who were not reflective and/or lifelong learners also tended to work in isolation, leaving little room for the possibility of collaboration and ongoing improvement of their instructional practice. These were the most difficult teachers to work with as they tended to be inflexible and very negative.

Unfortunately these teachers exist on every site, including the school site of this former elementary school principal. As a result whenever the opportunity to fill a position came about she knew what she did not want in a teacher and knew definitively what she did want for her students. It was this knowledge that prompted her to seek teachers that possessed a good balance of tangible attributes, knew their content and had positive intangible attributes that translated into a passion for teaching and learning, effective communication skills and a willingness to collaborate and continually improve instruction. In collaborative meetings with her fellow principals she realized she was not alone in regards to her hiring philosophy. Principals desired and actively sought to develop healthy learning communities. In order to facilitate and develop a healthy learning community principals need teachers with both intangible and tangible attributes. Unfortunately these types of teacher characteristics go well beyond what new teachers exiting teacher preparatory programs and what is mandated by NCLB in the highly qualified teachers are

required to have. Ongoing work must continue to occur to close the gap between what many principals perceive as minimum teacher requirements per successful completion of a teacher preparatory program and the mandates of NCLB versus what many principals desire and need in their teachers to create a healthy, nurturing learning environment.

References

- Amobi, F. (2006). Beyond the call: Preserving reflection in the preparation of “highly qualified” teachers , [Electronic version]. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 33, 2, 23-36.
- Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New York: Free Press.
- Beyer, L. (1991). Schooling, moral commitment, and the preparation of teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 42, 205–215.
- Boser, U. (2000, January 13). A picture of the teacher pipeline: Baccalaureate and beyond. *Education Week: Quality Counts 2000*, 16-17.
- Bowman, R. Jr. (2001). Building community in academia [Electronic version]. *Contemporary Education*, 72, 1, 29-31.
- California Department of Education (2006). *Public school summary statistics 2003-04*. Retrieved November 4, 2006, from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/sums03.asp>.
- Collinson, V. (1999). Redefining teacher excellence. *Theory into Practice*, 38, 1, 4-11.
- Dean, C., Lauer, P., and Urquhart, V. (2005, December). Outstanding teacher education programs: What do they have that others don't? [Electronic version]. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 87, 4, 284-290.
- Dewey, J. (1944). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York, NY: Macmillan Company.
- Gappa, J. M., Austin, A. E., & Trice, A. G. (2005). RETHINKING academic work and workplaces [Electronic version]. *Change*, 37, 6, pp. 32-39
- Grates, Gary F. (2005, November/December). Taking aim at information overload [Electronic version]. *Communication World*, 22, 6, 22-24.
- Henke, R. R., Chen, X., & Geis, S. (2000). *Progress through the teacher pipeline: 1992- 93 college graduates and elementary/secondary school teaching as of 1997*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Henry, M. (1986). Strengths and needs of the first year teachers. *Teacher Educator*, 2, pp.10-18.

- Henry, M. (1986). Strengths and needs of the first year teachers. *Teacher Educator*, 2, pp. 10-18. Retrieved November 4, 2006, from ProQuest Database.
- Hussar, W. J. (1999). *Predicting the need for newly hired teachers in the United States to 2008-2009*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Issac, S. and Michael, W. (1995). *Handbook in research and evaluation for education and behavior sciences* (3rd ed). San Diego, CA: Educational and Industrial Testing Services.
- Jepson, E., & Forrest, S. (2006). Individual contributory factors to teacher stress: The roles of achievement striving and occupational commitment. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76 (1), 183-198. Retrieved November 4, 2006, from ProQuest Database.
- Kerber, Kenneth and Buono, Anthony F. (2005). Rethinking organizational change: Reframing the challenge of change management [Electronic version]. *Organizational Development Journal*, 23, 3, 23-38.
- Jiang, B. (n.d.) Working with Beginning Teachers: What Effective Strategies Do Principals Use? retrieved Sept. 10, 2010, from <http://castle.eiu.edu/~edjournal/workingwithbeginning.pdf>
- Katz, L. G., & Raths, J. D. (1986). *Dispositional goals for teacher education: Problems of identification and assessment*. Paper presented at the 33rd World Assembly of the International Council of Education for Teaching, Kingston, Ontario, 20–4. ERIC Document 272–470.
- Milbrandt, M. (2006). A collaborative model for art education teacher preparation. *Art Education Policy Review*, 107(5), 13-22. Retrieved November 3, 2006, from ProQuest Database.
- Mustafa, S. & Chiang, D. (2006). Dimensions of quality in higher education: How academic performance affects university students' teacher evaluations [Electronic version]. *The Journal of American Academy of Business*, 8, 1, 294-303.
- National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. (2000). *Digest of Education Statistics*, 1999. Washington, DC: Author, 82.
- National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2001)
- Nieto, S. (2003). Challenging notions of “highly qualified teachers” through work in teachers’ inquiry groups , [Electronic version]. *The Journal of Teacher Education*, 54, 5, 386-398.
- Nieto, S., Felix, S. & Gelzinis, K. (November 2002)“A Life of Teaching: Reflections from Teachers in an Inquiry Group”. *Urban Education*, University of Pennsylvania . Retrieved June 28, 2006 from <http://www.urbanedjournal.org/articles/article0005.html>
- Northouse, P. G. (2007). *Leadership theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications

- Pellegrino, A. (2010). Pre-Service Teachers and Classroom Authority. *American Secondary Education*, 38(3), 62-78. Retrieved September 6, 2010, from ProQuest Education Journals. (Document ID: 2091797051).
- Obiekwe, Jerry C. (2000, January 16). *Identifying the latent structure of the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI): The community, junior and technical college version* [Electronic version]. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Sacramento, CA.
- Pandey, Sanjay K., and Garnett, James L. (2006, January/February). Exploring public sector communication performance [Electronic version].: *Testing a model and drawing implications. Public Administration Review*, 66, 1, 37-51
- Roszkowski, Michael J. (2003). The nature of the importance-satisfaction relationship in ratings: Evidence from the normative data of the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory [Electronic version]. *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, 16, 211-221.
- Rusinko, A. (2005). Using quality management as a bridge for educating for sustainability in a business school [Electronic version]. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 6, 4, 340-351.
- Santo, Susan A. (2005, November/December). Knowledge management: An imperative for schools of education [Electronic version]. *Tech Trends*, 49, 6, 42-49.
- Schreiner, L. and Juillerat, S. (1993). *The student satisfaction inventory*, Iowa City, IA: Noel-Levitz.
- Sirvanci, Mete B. (2004). TQM implementation: Critical issues for TQM implementation in higher education [Electronic version]. *The TQM Magazine*, 16, 6, 382-386.
- Stinnett, T. M. (Ed.). (1970). *The teacher dropout*. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappan.
- Thornton, H. (2006). Dispositions in action: Do dispositions make a difference in practice? , [Electronic version]. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 33,2, 53-69.
- Walton, Mary (1986). *The Deming management method*. New York, NY: Putnam Publishing Group.
- Wasicsko, M. M. (2007). The perceptual approach to teacher dispositions: The effective teacher as an effective person. In M. Diez, & J. Raths, J. (Eds.), *Dispositions in teacher education* (pp. 53-89). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.
- Weymes, Ed (2005). Organizations which make a difference: A philosophical argument for the "people focused organization" [Electronic version]. *Corporate Governance*, 5, 2, 142-158.

