

DISPOSITIONAL SUITABILITY TO THE
FIELD OF SPECIAL EDUCATION:
AN INITIAL VALIDITY STUDY

John Hoover
University of North Dakota

Lynne Chalmers Myrna Olson
University of North Dakota University of North Dakota

Peggy Schaeffer Steve Street
University of North Dakota University of North Dakota

Abstract

One-hundred nineteen educators and school administrators responded to a social suitability scale used with preservice special education teachers. The scale was designed to provide information about prospective special educators' dispositions with an eye toward helping students determine whether the field of education was a good one for them. The term "social suitability" reflected the fact that the instrument was designed to provide information beyond academic performance which was thought to be related to performance in the field (e.g., demeanor, work, habits, attitudes toward children, language use). A preliminary round of validity analysis supported the intent and use of the scale. Items that special educators and administrators in the field believed were missing were added to the scale. Factors such as shows enthusiasm for the field, respect for others (both adults and children), interpersonal responsiveness, and communication skills were rated as the most important dispositional factors predicting future success of special education teachers.

As the public microscope is increasingly pointed toward the preparation of teachers, it has become evident that predicting in vivo success for these individuals is a difficult but salient task. Knowledge of subject matter is recognized as crucial, as evidenced by increasing requirement for degrees and liberal education for preservice educators. Attempting to ensure that the field admits only the best and brightest, teacher education programs have raised admission standards, toughened retention policies, and enhanced graduation requirements.

Typically, grade point averages and standardized test scores are employed as benchmarks for assessing the quality of prospective teachers. Unfortunately, the relationship between such intellectual attainments and ratings of effectiveness in the field is equivocal (Dyb-

dahl, Shaw, & Edwards, 1997; Riggs & Riggs, 1991; Salzman, 1991). Clearly, academic performance alone does not predict performance in the field.

In recognition of the importance of factors beyond academic ability in predicting the effectiveness of future educators, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) recently promulgated standards published as NCATE 2000 Standards Revision (NCATE, 2000). In these standards, critical interpersonal and attitudinal traits of preservice educators were recognized under the heading of “dispositions.” NCATE recognized non-academic factors in the selection and training of educators. Prospective teachers must “know the content of their field, demonstrate professional and pedagogical knowledge, skills and dispositions and apply them so that all students learn” (NCATE, 2000, p. 8). These dispositions are to be evaluated as part of the overall assessment process for colleges of education. Likewise, in the Council for Exceptional Children’s (1998) *What Every Special Educator Must Know: The International Standards for the Preparation and Licensure of Special Educators*, special educators are expected to “strive to develop positive attitudes . . .” and “maintain effective interpersonal relations with colleagues and other professionals . . .” (p. 4).

While not singled out as a specific evaluation domain, it is assumed that assessment of dispositions will be woven throughout teacher education programs. It is preferred that teacher educators carefully examine the professional and ethical standards of the various professional organizations to identify criteria for ensuring dispositions (NCATE, 2000). For example, the Council for Exceptional Children (1997) in its *Code of Ethics for Educators of Persons with Exceptionalities* described expected professional conduct of special educators. However complete these descriptors might be, no advice was forthcoming regarding the collection of pertinent data—nor what might constitute salient information regarding prospective professionals’ dispositions.

Not only do we observe a dearth of assessment methods, but little clarity has been achieved regarding the non-academic variables that predict success in the field. Several research teams have, however, obliquely addressed the issue. For example, Marso and Pigge (1997) examined persistence, an attribute somewhat related to disposition. They identified indicators that could be used to determine persistence. Candidates who were defined as being persistent were still employed after seven years of teaching. The authors concluded that “the making of teachers appears to be a high-risk and costly business when just 29% of a class of candidates makes the transition to full time teaching” (p. 247).

In another study, it was found that the success of women in education was based on characteristics related to disposition. An author reported that the marketability of female teachers was influenced by characteristics such as candidates’ initial commitment to teaching, career satisfaction, successful integration into teaching, and personal characteristics.

From a different perspective, one study surveyed students’ perceptions of characteristics of successful teachers. A student survey was administered by members of the National Association of Secondary School Principals to determine teacher effectiveness. Student respondents selected the following success indicators: having a good sense of humor, making the class interesting, and demonstrating subject knowledge. In contrast, students saw the poorest teachers as being dull, poor explainers of material, playing favorites with selected students, and having poor attitudes. The aforementioned studies addressed issues and characteristics related to disposition, yet did not address the aspect of disposition directly. No studies were found that focused on the relationship of disposition to the success of special education teachers.

Context of the Study

In the Spring of 1993, members of the Special Education Program at the University of North Dakota embarked on a new student evaluation method. The university developed a rating scale for documenting the social-emotional suitability of individuals pursuing licensure as special education teachers. What triggered the desire to broaden the evaluation process was

years of observing students, some of whom produced excellent written work and who could write solid lesson plans and create well-organized curricular units, but were not effective in their interpersonal interactions with students or supervisors in their field experiences.

Based on information informally collected from teachers and administrators in the field, a list of “social suitability” items was developed. After taking these through several evaluative iterations with faculty members and students, they were put into place in the form of an evaluation scale. In all methods courses, faculty members filled out the social suitability form for each student. These, in turn, were copied, filed, and distributed to students. Students were informed verbally and in writing that they could discuss the ratings with the instructor and utilize the university’s appeals process if they disagreed with a rating.

Cumulative results of the social suitability scales are considered when students apply for the internship/practicum (the capstone field experience). In addition, students’ forms are reviewed several times during their first two semesters in the program (note that the program is at the graduate level). The university has found the cumulative results of the scales useful in providing feedback to students who are experiencing difficulties in school settings, and in encouraging students to explore alternative career options.

The way in which the university initially used the scale was for the purpose of summative evaluation at the end of each semester. When students accrued ratings that were of concern to faculty for more than one semester, or in more than one class, we would use this data as a counseling device. One example of how this process unfolded involved a graduate student named “Molly.”

Molly entered our program to become certified in learning disabilities and emotional disturbance. At the time, two practica were required of students in these areas, and Molly was at the end of her two-year program. She had an excellent academic record and had produced very organized and explicit lesson plans and written work. The faculty member assigned to supervise Molly was immediately concerned, however, with Molly’s interaction with students. She not only lacked a sense of direction in the midst of a lesson “gone bad,” but she also had difficulty engaging students’ attention and cooperation. The faculty supervisor and the cooperating teacher felt that a large part of her problem with this group of children related to her “flat affect.”

After several additional supervisory visits were made and suggestions for ways to improve were offered, Molly continued to struggle in her teaching. The faculty supervisor met with her to review the feedback she had been giving Molly that semester, as well as the rating sheets that had been turned in by other faculty throughout Molly’s time in the program. As a result of that meeting, Molly realized that her personality may not be suitable for someone working with children with emotional and learning disabilities.

The outcome of the meeting was that Molly chose to drop the practicum and abandon her goal of becoming a special education teacher. The university supervisor found that the consistency of concerns provided by the rating sheets over time were absolutely the “key” in helping Molly come to her own conclusion about her lack of suitability to the field of special education.

Results of using the scale over the next few years was very positive. However, no evidence regarding the reliability or validity of the items was available. To initiate the process of validating the instrument, the content validity study described below was undertaken. Special educators, school administrators, and related service personnel (speech clinicians, occupational therapists, and physical therapists) in the field were asked to respond to item content.

Method

Respondents

One-hundred-nineteen educators representing a local district served as respondents in the investigation. Of these, 71 were special education teachers, 27 were administrators, and 21

represented the support fields of occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech-language therapy.

As they were not considered pertinent to the investigation, neither age nor gender were collected. However, the sample proved to be very experienced, with a mean of 9.56 years experience in their current positions ($SD = 8.21$, range = 1-44 years, median = 6.00).

Instrumentation

The Social Suitability for the Field of Special Education (SSSE) format had passed through several modifications. Ultimately, it was decided that students would be rated on a 4-point scale, with 3 indicating a superior level of performance, 2 an acceptable level, 1 reflected "some concern," and 0 was used to indicate an unacceptable level.

For the sake of the validity study, however, an alternative version of the SSSE instrument was designed. In this case, the numerical ratings of students were replaced by a Thurstone Scale, running from 1 (no importance) to 5 (very important). A designation of "don't know" was also offered to respondents. The aim was to determine the level of importance "to performance in the field of special education" of individual items. Space was added for participants to write in responses that they saw as missing from the original survey.

Procedure

Surveys, cover letters, and prepaid mailers were sent to special education teachers, related service personnel, and administrators serving a local education agency, through the school districts' internal mail system (to which university faculty enjoy access through a district unit housed on campus). Of the 205 surveys sent out, 119 usable instruments were returned, a response rate of 58.0%.

Results

In an initial phase of the investigation, Cronbach's (1951) alpha was calculated in order to determine the degree to which the items were internally consistent across the three groups of respondents. The resulting figure of .80 revealed that whatever was assessed via the SSSE, the instrument measured this entity in an internally consistent manner. "Don't know" responses (of which very few accrued) were re-coded as missing data for inferential and descriptive analyses.

An "importance" scale was calculated via combining all SSSE items. The resulting instrument served as a dependent measure in an initial comparison of the three groups. A one-way, between-groups ANOVA was calculated with overall SSSE serving as the dependent measure, and GROUP (3 levels, administrators, special education teachers, and related-service personnel) serving as a fixed, between-subjects independent variable. The resulting ANOVA ($F_{2, 116} = 3.82$, $p = .025$) proved significant. Via a post-hoc Bonferroni post-hoc test it was ascertained that administrators ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 0.29$) rated the items significantly higher than did special educators ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 0.27$). Related service personnel occupied a medial position between special educators and administrators ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 0.32$), but did not differ from either group. Because absolute differences were so small, with a relatively small effect size (beta squared = .06), no further between-group comparisons were undertaken.

All items were rated as important for the field of special education, as can be seen in Table 1. Items in the table are listed in descending order by mean rating, once more with "DK" responses re-coded as missing data.

Table 1
Mean Importance Ratings In Descending Order, Across Groups

Item Description	N	Mean	SD
Awareness of student needs	119	4.92	.28
Respects adults and children	119	4.90	.30
Interpersonal skills with children	119	4.87	.33
Demonstrates potential as educator	117	4.85	.40
Shows enthusiasm	119	4.76	.46
Interpersonal skills/adults	119	4.75	.49
Self motivated	119	4.73	.52
Appears sincere	119	4.64	.56
Accepts work willingly	119	4.61	.57
Good time management	119	4.61	.57
Good verbal expressiveness	119	4.57	.59
Positive body language	119	4.54	.66
Speaks with correct grammar	119	4.54	.58
Verbalizes interest in field	119	4.36	.79
Attends class regularly	116	4.28	.73
Not affected by personal issues	116	4.15	.91
Participates willingly in class	119	3.92	.87

In addition to items already on the survey, several respondents added additional responses, all of which, as might be expected since respondents felt strongly enough to add them, were highly rated. Flexibility was added by 15.0% of all respondents ($n = 19$) as either the first or second additional item. Teamwork was added to the survey by 17 respondents (14.3%), while writing skills was added, either as a first or second choice, by 10.1% of those responding ($n = 7$).

Discussion

Results support that items selected for inclusion on the social suitability instrument closely matched the views of school personnel regarding importance, over and above traditional views of academic performance. The highest-scoring items were those reflecting inter- personal relationships, communication, and regard for others. In fact one item added by participants, "teamwork," also fit the theme that might be called, "willingness and ability to work with others."

Items scoring lower on the list, though still generally receiving agreement from participants, included such characteristics as not being affected by personal issues and attendance in class. It may be that certain professionals saw these issues as being somewhat out of the control of students.

The authors initiated the validity study first in order to determine whether they were on the right track at all in terms of behaviors that (a) could potentially be assessed during the

preservice period, and that (b) would attain agreement that they were important to professional development. What has been established here is a degree of content validity for the subject matter of items. What remains is studies of reliability and predictive validity. Our first priority is the former, followed by the latter. It is not clear that these traits can be reliably assessed in classroom and practicum environments. The authors are planning to undertake a preliminary reliability study by employing the suitability assessment system in team teaching situations where two ratings can be attained on each participating student (reliability).

Predictive validity studies will entail following a cohort of teachers into their careers and determining the degree to which items, subscales (if any evolve), and total score predict success metrics. As more students are evaluated via the suitability scale, it will be important to determine the structural properties of the instrument. This can be achieved by subject reliable data to factor and cluster analyses.

As we developed the suitability/dispositional assessment system, the authors came to see that it was important to involve students "up front"; this was true from both a pedagogical and ethical standpoint. Pedagogically, it is important for students to be aware of the standards they are expected to attain. Ethically, it is important that students have a due process system for responding to disagreement over dispositional evaluations, just as they can appeal capricious grading. Perhaps an appeal and communication system for dispositional evaluations are more important and openness about methods are highly salient because of the potential for viewing these as highly subjective. This is probably the case even when data are available to demonstrate that assessment methods are reliable and valid (Brim, 1965).

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