Preservice Teacher Traits, States, and Teacher-Student Interactions

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This study is one of the first attempts in the field to investigate individual teacher characteristics in depth as a way to more fully describe the types of people becoming teachers and how their individual characteristics may relate to their effectiveness in the classroom.

Given the interactive nature of teaching, dispositional characteristics like assertiveness and openness or emotional states such as sadness, worry, and stress may play important roles in a teacher's ability to interact in meaningful, engaging, and effective ways with students. Preliminary work in the teaching field has found associations between teacher beliefs and attitudes and their effectiveness in their interactions with students. Teachers' performance in the classroom has been linked with emotional states, particularly levels of depression and stress. In one study investigating personality and its relation to teaching, distinguished teachers were shown to differ from typical teachers, tending to be more optimistic, active, imaginative, and sensitive. Studies such as this suggest that exceptional teachers may possess a distinct personality profile. Researchers are increasingly recognizing the need to study these and other psychological traits of preservice teachers, as they may be predictive of future success in the classroom.

The Study

Researchers in the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning examined data regarding two dispositional traits (personality characteristics, specifically, neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness; and adult attachment style, or the way an adult interacts with and responds to others' emotional needs) that hold particular promise in predicting teacher effectiveness and three emotional states (levels of depression, anxiety, and stress). They compared these qualities of 67 preservice teachers in one university's five-year teacher education program to personality trait and emotional state data from similar-age peers collected by other researchers in the 1990s. The CASTL researchers looked at whether the qualities remained stable over time during the three years of teacher preparation and whether the qualities predicted preservice teachers' interactions with students in their student-teaching experience.

Data were collected at three time points: (a) when individuals entered the teacher preparation program during their third year of school, (b) during their student teaching placement at one site in their specialty area during the fall of their fifth year, and (c) in the spring of their fifth year of their teacher preparation program. The intake and exit surveys included a demographic questionnaire, along with three other self-report measures: the NEO Five-Factor Inventory, the Relationship Scales Questionnaire, and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales. Teacher-student interactions during student teaching were evaluated using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS™) developed at the University of Virginia.

Results

Overall, preservice teachers in this study reported positive personality traits and emotions. Preservice teachers' personality dimensions were less neurotic, more extraverted, more open, more agreeable, and more conscientious than their peers in the 1990s study. All of their personality dimensions scored in the direction likely to be beneficial for individuals entering the teaching profession. They reported lower levels of anxiety, depression, and stress.
This apparent self-selection of emotionally healthy individuals is promising for the profession. Teachers with low levels of neuroticism also tend to be less reactive and less impaired by the stressful challenges of teaching. High negative emotions are predictive of diminished professional work performance and poorer interactions between children and teachers. Moreover, teaching is one of the most stressful professions. Teacher stress is related to burnout and negative teacher reactivity toward students. Given these links between negative emotions and poor work outcomes, it is an encouraging finding that individuals entering the profession at this university report low levels of these emotions.

In examining stability of personality, attachment traits, and emotional states, only one dispositional trait—extraversion—changed significantly (it decreased) during individuals’ time in the teacher education program. This finding is consistent with previous findings that extraversion decreased from age 18 to 21, which may reflect the important adjustments and maturational development of young adults. As individuals take on added responsibility, begin to have early experiences in the classroom, and become more secure in their identity, their need for a high degree of social interaction may wane.

Otherwise, preservice teachers’ remaining traits and states remained stable. Overall, this finding indicates that, while many things may change during a college experience, the personalities, attachment, and emotions with which students begin a program remained fairly stable in this group. The implications of this finding is that preservice teachers will not likely “grow out of” their general pattern of interactions as a consequence of teacher preparation.

Finally, only preservice teachers’ extraversion and depression levels at intake were related to the quality of teacher-student interactions in their student teaching experience, specifically to instructional support interactions. Instructional support as defined by the CLASS observational instrument refers to the interactions that teach students to think, provide ongoing feedback and support, and facilitate language and vocabulary development. Preservice teachers who reported high levels of either extraversion or depression or both when they began a teacher education program were more likely to show lower quality instruction two years later during their student teaching experience.

Given that depression has been linked to harshness and withdrawal on the part of caretakers, the constancy of depressive symptoms during teacher training and the association of depression with the quality of preservice teachers’ interactions with students is cause for concern. This finding suggests that teacher educators should pay attention to possible signs of depression and consider intervention strategies that target individuals who seem to be experiencing this negative mood state.

There was no correlation between any of the other qualities (personality characteristics, adult attachment style, or levels of depression, anxiety, and stress) and either the CLASS dimension of instructional support or the dimensions of emotional support or classroom organization. It may be that the effects of dispositional characteristics of preservice teachers was masked by the professional preparation and support they were receiving at the time when observations of their teaching were conducted.

Implications

The results of this study have important implications for teacher education and for understanding the characteristics of those individuals who are entering the teaching profession and who may show early promise as effective teachers. Given the link between depression and poor teacher-student interactions found here, interventions designed to support individuals who may show low mood or depressive symptoms may be important for those entering the field.