Dispositions of Exemplary School Librarians as Identified by Graduate Students

To earn the master’s degree in library science at East Carolina University (ECU), students in the school library concentration are required to complete LIBS 6144, Instructional Strategies and Leadership for School Librarians, as a concluding course in the 39-credit program.

In this course, students consider a variety of important concepts, such as collaboration, leadership, inquiry, creativity, emotional intelligence, and dispositions, which requires reading articles and books, watching digital media from organizations such as TED: Ideas Worth Spreading and Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, posting weekly to a class blog, and working collaboratively to complete assignments. Assignments on leadership, inquiry, and dispositions allowed students to grapple with and apply these important concepts to practical situations.

In preparation for the dispositions assignment, students read The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children by Gloria Ladson-Billings, the Kellner Family Professor of Urban Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, as well as articles on the topic. In addition, students watch videos of exemplary educators to glean their important qualities.

During the first week of the three-part dispositions assignment, students respond to a blog prompt by communicating their written understanding of these behaviors based on required readings. During the second week, students individually suggest five dispositions of exemplary school librarians and describe what these look like in practice. During week three, students “negotiate” as a group to generate a class list of the five most important dispositions for school librarians. Students work together to tally responses from week two, construct new groupings by combining similar dispositions, and suggest additional dispositions. These lists of dispositions from 11 semesters of coursework from spring 2012 through fall 2015 provide data that is presented in this article. These lists represent the input of 223 students.

WHAT ARE DISPOSITIONS?

Progressive educational philosopher Dewey’s (1922) contemplation of the question, “Why do some well-educated people function at higher levels than others?” laid the foundation for the study of dispositions. He attributed this higher functioning to dispositions, or a “readiness to act overtly in a specific fashion whenever opportunity is presented” (p. 41). Dewey recognized that “knowledge of methods alone will not suffice; there must be the desire, the will to employ them,” which he identified as a personal disposition that one wants to exercise (p. 41).

In his book Philosophy of Education: Learning and Schooling, Arnstine (1967) constructed a theory of dispositions in education by initiating a conversation regarding the “behaviors, knowledge,
skills, habits, and attitudes” (p. 13) of effective learning. Whereas Arnstine characterizes dispositions as predictive of future actions based on “a tendency to behave in certain ways when certain conditions are realized” (p. 32), Buss and Craik (1983) view dispositions as “summary statements about behaviors up to the present; they are not predictions, although they carry the normal implication that [the individual’s] character is so far continuing the same” (p. 106).

Arnstine (1967) explains that dispositions are verifiable but “only after the occurrence of several relevant tests or observations . . . that is, the more varied the situations during which we observe an ascribed disposition being exercised, the more likely we are to assign credibility to the ascription” (p. 32).

Building on Dewey’s and Arnstine’s characterizations of dispositions as behaviors that are purposely employed in certain situations and can be assessed, Katz and Raths (1986) propose that a goal of teacher education programs “should include a class of outcomes we call professional dispositions” that focuses “exclusively upon behaviors of teachers related to effective teaching in the classroom” (p. 302). They describe these behaviors as a “pattern of acts that were chosen by the teacher in particular contexts and at particular times” (p. 7). Katz (1993) defines disposition as a “tendency to exhibit frequently, consciously, and voluntarily a pattern of behavior that is directed toward a broad goal” (p. 2).

Even though professional organizations such as the National Council on the Accreditation of Teacher Education/Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards have fueled recent interest in dispositions (Bush & Jones, 2010), confusion is evident in three areas. One area of concern is the identification of dispositions. Identifying too many dispositions can be problematic and muddy the waters as to the specific behaviors and actions relevant to a particular profession. A second area of concern is the attainment of dispositions and whether these are inborn qualities or acquired developmentally through modeling. If dispositions are viewed as inborn traits, then discussion about professional dispositions is moot. Kimmel, Dickinson, and Doll (2012) write that “it’s not a matter of having or not having a particular disposition but of degree and process” (p. 117), thus it entails developing these behaviors and actions. Sackett (2006) purports that modeling is the preferred method for dispositional attainment, and “if faculty model the dispositions they want candidates to hold, then the candidates are more likely to develop them” (p. 65). A third concern is the assessment of professional dispositions. Research to identify dispositions of beginning professional education teachers illustrates the difficulty of assessment. Although dispositions such as trustworthiness, dedication, and taking initiative were identified as important in the pedagogical and theoretical literature of physical education, these behaviors were difficult to define and thus to assess (Lund, Wayda, Woodward, & Buck, 2007). It is with these challenges in mind that graduate students at ECU identified dispositions of exemplary school librarians and described these behaviors in practice.

THE FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

Tasked with selecting and defining the top five dispositions of exemplary librarians, groups of graduate students...
in ECU’s library science program selected collaboration, leadership, lifelong learner, compassion/caring, and flexibility. Data in the form of class lists, spanning the spring 2012 through fall 2015 semesters, includes input from 223 students and identifies collaboration as the most important disposition. In all lists, across the semesters, collaboration is identified as the most important behavior of school librarians. The graduate students’ views of dispositions are identified below and provide insight into the face of school libraries, as preservice media specialists prepare for the profession.

COLLABORATION

Over the 11 semesters that data were collected, graduate students identified collaboration as the most essential disposition. Students view exemplary librarians as individuals who take the initiative to build a culture of collaboration, encouraging partnerships with classroom teachers and providing library programming that supports classroom instruction. It was viewed as “the essence of the school library media program” by students in spring 2013, and it is facilitated through building relationships with the staff, administration, faculty, and students who “seek out collaborative instructional opportunities.” Additionally, a librarian with this disposition is able to work through any collaborative planning difficulties by being creative, resourceful, and open to new perspectives. This disposition is fully realized when the school librarian believes that the library is not about the “librarian, but it is about us as a team and how we can work together to achieve goals.” When a school librarian is able to successfully collaborate with teachers and staff, student instruction is positively impacted and the librarian secures his or her role as a full partner in the education of the students.

LEADERSHIP

Leadership is another highly valued disposition selected by graduate students. Possessing the disposition to lead requires action. Students acknowledged that leadership roles may differ from school to school, but in general, school librarians who lead serve on schoolwide committees, have a voice in instructional planning opportunities, and conduct professional development at the school level and beyond. Students suggest that librarians who lead stay abreast of current educational trends and the latest examples of purposeful technology integration and share these trends with the faculty and staff at the local level. Overall, when viewed as a leader in the school, the school librarian has the opportunity to make an impact on student achievement but also to demonstrate the school librarian’s relevancy and importance to the overall school community. Librarians build influence with teachers and use this influence to improve the school.

LIFELONG LEARNING

As technology changes and educational best practices develop and improve, the school librarian must be committed to professional growth and lifelong learning. As a lifelong learner, current best practices are infused into library programming. Lifelong learners are reflective in nature, critiquing programming and instruction and making adjustments as necessary. From attending local, state, and national conferences to being an active member in a district library professional learning community, graduate students concluded that it is essential to keep learning and honing library skills in order to deliver the best instruction for the students and have the most up-to-date library programming for the local school community.

COMPASSION AND CARING

Graduate students viewed compassionate, caring librarians as powerful contributors to media center success. In the school library, building relationships, being willing to help students locate information, and fostering a culture of learning and a love of reading all positively impact instruction. Providing an open place where anyone can come for answers and where questions are encouraged demonstrates this disposition. In addition, school librarians who know the curriculum and maintain a collection that meets not only curricular needs but also independent reading interests exhibit the depth of care necessary to create a special place for students and faculty alike.

FLEXIBILITY

The ECU graduate students indicated that flexibility is a key disposition as well. These preservice librarians viewed the school library as the hub of the school. As such, the library is the place where a flexible attitude must be exhibited. Summer 2013 graduate students concluded that the role of the school librarian is dynamic and the environment must change to meet the needs of the students and the curriculum. Whether it is a change in scheduling or programming, graduate students viewed flexibility as a disposition that must be present in school librarians. In this service-oriented role, flexible
activate their own dispositional strengths and improve any weaknesses in order to hone their practice and provide the best library services to their patrons.

REFERENCES


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SPORTS, HEALTH AND FITNESS

Goodstein, Madeline. Sports Science Fair Projects (Prize-winning Science Fair Projects). Enslow, 2016. 128p. LB $37.27. ISBN: 97807660-70264. Grades 6-12. Unique projects focusing on sports balls will appeal to the student searching for something different: which bounces the highest, which have no seams, which are solid. Each experiment has a sidebar of materials needed. There is an appendix of sizes, rebound ratings, further reading, and an index.


Oren, Goldie Karpel. Yoga (Fitness for the Mind and Body). Rosen, 2015. 192p. LB $44.95. ISBN: 978147781623. Grades 7-12. After an introduction to the history and basics of yoga, the book describes poses with two-page spreads with a photo of the pose on the left and a drawing on the right of the same pose showing the muscles and fasciae. Step-by-step directions and explanations are included for each pose. A glossary and icon index conclude the title.