EXCEPTIONAL TEACHERS: A CASE STUDY THAT EMPHASISES DISPOSITIONS WHEN DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN TEACHERS

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THESIS
presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

The University of Newcastle

December, 2008
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__________________________________

G. A. Faull
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Only as high as I reach can I grow
Only as far as I seek can I go
Only as deep as I look can I see
Only as much as I dream can I be

Karen Ravn
This thesis is dedicated to
the memory of a beautiful mother
and to the living example
of a father who epitomises
what it means to be
an exceptional teacher.
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ABSTRACT

The principal aim of this study is to contribute to the debate on effective teaching and learning by investigating the role of dispositions in differentiating between 12 teachers nominated by their school principals as being “exceptional teachers”. The thesis is premised on the importance of human dispositions for high quality teaching and learning. A conceptual framework is developed as a guide to structure the investigation that is set in the context of classroom teaching in primary and secondary schools selected from an opportunity sample of independent schools in New South Wales, Australia.

The study submits the proposition that it is possible to examine and gain insight into the nexus between pedagogic and dispositional variables when considering what it means to be an “exceptional teacher”. In order to explore this proposition a case study approach is adopted. This investigation is based on a methodology that uses mixed methods, both qualitative and quantitative, to test four working hypotheses. The study is aimed at identifying what it is that distinguishes “exceptional teachers” by differentiating between teacher performances in the cohort of teachers. While emphasising dispositional variables, this process of differentiation also takes into account pedagogic variables and adopts the New South Wales Quality Teaching Model as a benchmark for pedagogic practice.

From an extensive review of the literature (Stage 1 of the study) a conceptual model, the Dispositional Cluster Model (DCM), is developed from five complementary fields of research literature, namely: effective teachers and effective teaching, giftedness and talent, intelligence, creativity, and dispositions. This comprises Stage 2 of the study. The rationale for the selection of these five fields of literature is based on the premise that if we are to gain an insightful understanding of what it means to be an exceptional teacher, then we need to gain a comprehensive, holistic view by examining different perspectives. The design of the conceptual model rests on the principles of constructivist inquiry theory and serves the purpose of organising
the plethora of dispositional variables that emanate from the literature into five clusters of dispositions that, it is proposed, are dynamically inter-related.

Four instruments are used for Stage 3 of the investigation to gather and analyse data from the case study. In addition to the Quality Teacher Model (QTM), the Teacher Behaviors Checklist (TBC), My Values Questionnaire (MVQ) and Educational Beliefs Questionnaire (EBQ) are also used. Pedagogic variables are considered in terms of the teachers’ observable classroom behaviours. These are rated using the QTM and TBC. Teachers’ personal beliefs and educational values are considered in terms of the MVQ and the EBQ. These two instruments take into account teacher self-reports based on their responses to questionnaires. The four instruments provide a rich array of data to be used for differentiating between the 12 case study teachers.

The design and application of the Interview Analysis Framework (IAF) constitutes Stage 4 of the study. Its purpose is to “operationalise” the DCM and it is used as an instrument for further differentiating between the case study cohort. This is done in the context of the case study interviews. The IAF is based on the DCM in conjunction with Freeman’s (2007b) syntax of dispositions. This syntax provides a theoretical framework for assessing the dispositions comprising the five clusters of the DCM. This is best perceived as a process involving the “activation” of the dispositions. The four syntax components used to do this are: values to be realised, intentions in action, strategies to be utilised, and awareness of the constraints and possibilities of a given teaching context.

In addition to the IAF, case study interviews are analysed using NVivo software (Stage 5 of the study). This provides a different perspective from which to differentiate between the 12 case study teachers. The NVivo analysis also provides a means of triangulating the case study data in order to establish weight of evidence in support of the IAF and, indirectly, the DCM.
The results from the application of the five instruments (i.e. QTM, TBC, MVQ, EBQ, and IAF) provide a rich array of data for differentiating between the case study teachers (Stage 6 of the study). The design of the IAF, in particular, is a key outcome of the study. The dispositional elements that differentiate most strongly between the 12 case study teachers are identified and discussed in the penultimate chapter of the thesis.

The findings and implications of the study constitute Stage 7 of the study. These findings from the process of differentiating between the case study teachers, together with the development of the IAF and the DCM, suggest ideas and direction for further research initiatives. The major outcome of this research was the development of the IAF as an instrument that not only operationalised the DCM, but that also proved to be a useful and credible tool for analysing the case study interviews. It is proposed that the IAF and the DCM have strong potential for implementation in the areas of teacher education, in-servicing practicing teachers, and teacher assessment. The IAF may prove to be a useful device for school principals to use for analysing interviews with teachers and when making decisions regarding purposes such as staff selection, providing support, and for promotion.