

## The Need for Clear Definition of Principles to Guide Research on Teacher Professional Development

This fact sheet offers key definitions of promising developmental principles that have major implications for teacher education practice and research on teacher development as sponsored by NC State's Model Clinical Teaching Program (MCTP).

**Cognitive-Developmental Education.** In general, cognitive-developmental theory has a number of theoretical assumptions. Among them are the following: All humans progress through stages or levels of cognitive, ethical, and interpersonal complexity as they construct meaning from experience. The sequence is from less complex to more complex levels or plateaus in the use of problem-solving strategies, more flexibility in modes of thought and action, and more moral complexity in judgment and action as democratic principles are applied to conflicting professional situations. As such, this theory views human development across a variety of domains of growth including conceptual, ego, and moral/ethical domains.

**Role-taking/Reflection Experiences.** Role-taking/reflection experiences are direct experiences in natural settings that require the person to employ helping strategies and clinical processes with the students or clients. Such experiences are not simulated, however they are controlled in the respect that structured reflection is built into the clinical process, typically supported by a clinical staff. The reflection enlarges the clinical process by including active consideration of both cognitive and affective concerns. Thus, the participant is encouraged to record main learnings, questions, and feelings associated with a complex new role. This constructivist approach permits the clinical staff to maintain a reflective dialogue with the novice, and to better understand how the person is constructing meaning from the experience. Role-taking/reflection experiences require that the experience and the reflective process occur for at least six months. An emerging body of research suggests that such experiences promote conceptual, moral, and self-understanding in prospective teachers (Oja & Reiman, 1998; Sprinthall, Reiman, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1996).

**Support and Challenge** (Zone of Proximal Development). Support and challenge, the related process of equilibration (accommodation/assimilation), and the zone of proximal

development (Vygotsky, 1978) have been essentially rediscovered in teacher education. How a teacher educator assists others calls for attention to support and challenge of the novice. The MCTP is interested in research on student development in the cognitive and affective realms, how it is enhanced, and when there is a good fit between the nature of the student characteristics and the nature of the educational experiences. The special case of disequilibrium is an emerging area of investigation.

**Continuity.** There is an old learning truism that spaced practice is superior to massed. When teacher educators hope to achieve the complex goal of impacting the structure of cognitions in conceptual, ego, and moral domains, then careful attention must be given to continuous interplay of action and reflection. The MCTP explores the role of continuity in teacher education interventions, as it relates to significant structural growth.

Devising and testing the curricula (i.e., those systematic educational experiences that help persons grow), learning and applying appropriate clinical and reflective pedagogies, and then altering the educational programs, constitute a triangulated approach to the study of teacher professional development.

The term developmental can be applied appropriately to either laboratory, field, or clinical experiences if the participants are in a new complex "human-helping setting" supported by clinical staff who are versed in principles of cognitive-developmental education. Neither laboratory nor field experiences are inherently developmental, combined with role-taking, guided reflection, continuity in an atmosphere of support and challenge, however, the model transforms training into true teacher development.

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Reviewed by Norman Sprinthall and Lois Thies-Sprinthall, September 10, 1998

Additional information on teacher development can be found in *Research on Teacher Professional Development* and in G. Firth and E. Pajak (Eds.) *Handbook of research on school supervision*. New York: Macmillan, Chapter 16: *Supervision for teacher development across the career span* by Sharon Nodie Oja and Alan J. Reiman.

