

Making the NMSA Standards Come Alive for Teacher Candidates

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There is an abundance of professional literature, derived both from studies of education in general, and from studies of middle level education in particular, that inextricably links knowledge, dispositions, and performance, the three foundational elements of the National Middle School Association (NMSA) Performance-based Standards for Initial Middle Level Teacher Preparation. *This We Believe* (2003), the position paper of NMSA, is written in two basic parts—what we know and believe about middle level education (knowledge and dispositions) and the results achieved as we manifest what we know and believe in classroom practice (performance). The whole premise of *This We Believe...Now We Must Act* (2001) is that beliefs about teaching and learning in the middle level (dispositions) and what we know to be true about middle level education (knowledge) must be translated into action (performance) in order to affect student learning. In the classic *Pygmalion in the Classroom* study (Rosenthal, 1968), the influence of teacher beliefs about student potential (dispositions) is documented to affect student achievement (performance). Erb (2001) differentiates between the planned curriculum with standards and goals (knowledge) and what teachers actually teach (performance). The knowledge influences, yet is different from, the performance. McEwin (2001) conveys little doubt that teacher commitment to young adolescents (disposition) cannot be separated from teaching and learning (performance).

Teacher candidates have limited knowledge of the actual work of teachers, while their

knowledge of, and beliefs about, teaching and learning theory forms what they anticipate their careers will involve. Once in the classroom, novice teachers often perceive that their preparation to actually do the tasks of teaching (performances) may be inadequate. “Establishing the self in the first years of teaching can be a challenging experience as the newcomers find their long-held beliefs challenged, their perceptions of the work of teachers incomplete, and their preparation inadequate for the tasks of teaching” (Schempp, Sparkes, & Templin, 1999, p.157). The NMSA standards provide an excellent tool for teacher educators to use to give teacher candidates a comprehensive view of the tasks of teaching and help them gain realistic confidence.

The seven standards for the preparation of teachers include benchmarks for, and target descriptors of, the knowledge, dispositions, and performances to which our teacher candidates should aspire. They address the areas of young adolescent development, middle level philosophy and school organization, curriculum, instruction, assessment, teaching fields, family/community involvement, and the professional roles of middle level teachers. One of the significant and meaningful challenges/responsibilities of teacher educators is to present the NMSA standards in ways that make them relevant philosophically and practically to teacher candidates. In doing so we are helping teacher candidates mesh knowledge, dispositions, and performance into a cohesive package that will enable them to be effective classroom teachers.

Through the following six exercises teacher candidates explore the standards using Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of learning as a framework. Teacher candidates are prompted to gain knowledge and comprehension, encouraged to analyze and apply the standards, synthesize their knowledge, and then evaluate the standards. Through this process they are exposed to scenarios that ground the knowledge, dispositions, and performances in the standards. They are drawn to, and required to compare, the elements of the standards to foundational literature related to middle level philosophy.

Assignment #1 Bloom's Knowledge and Comprehension Levels

1. Ask teacher candidates to access and print the NMSA Performance-Based Standards for Initial Middle Level Teacher Preparation from the NMSA website. If they haven't visited the site, the experience of navigating their way to the standards will be beneficial in and of itself. (www.nmsa.org)

2. Ask teacher candidates to read the standards.

3. Assign teacher candidates one or more question stems and ask them to write questions based on the standards to share in class. Small groups may share questions and answers and then rewrite their questions as needed and exchange them with another group.

Sample question stems:

- How does Standard ___ relate to ___?
- How are Standards ___ and ___ related to ___?
- What does Standard ___ have to say about ___?
- Which Standard has the most elements classified as ___ (knowledge, dispositions, performances)? ___ Why do you think this is the case? _____

Assignment #2 Bloom's Comprehension Level

1. Ask teacher candidates to suggest prominent middle school documents that are based on characteristics and/or tenets of effective teachers or schools. The likely choices include *Turning Points* (1989), *Turning Points 2000*, *This We Believe* (2003), and the National Board on Professional Teaching Standards Young Adolescence Generalist Standards.

2. Discuss the benefits of comparing documents that address exemplary practices in middle level education.

3. Either provide matrices similar to the one in Figure 1 or ask teacher candidates to create them individually or in groups.

4. Ask teacher candidates to comment within each cell on how the two characteristics/tenets/standards relate and/or support one another.

5. Allow time for discussion and comparison of matrices.

Assignment #3 Bloom's Application Level

1. If possible, arrange for teacher candidates to visit several middle schools. While there are many reasons to visit schools, and students may already be involved in schools through field experiences or in volunteer capacities, we know that observation is most beneficial when it is guided/directed. Choose, or let the candidates choose, specific parts of the standards to look for in the schools with real kids and real teachers.

2. It is helpful for candidates to visit schools in pairs. Two sets of eyes looking for the same things make for a richer experience.

3. Armed with observation forms and copies of the Standards, have candidates not only

observe classroom instruction, but also team planning time. If the teachers are amenable, some interview time with the candidates will allow them to ask about things they observe and maybe ask about areas that wouldn't necessarily be evident in a brief classroom visit.

4. Ask pairs to take notes and then fill out an observation form similar to the sample provided in Figure 2. There are few experiences in a college classroom that generate as much excitement and interaction as when candidates eagerly share what they have seen, heard, and experienced in middle schools.

**Assignment #4
Bloom's Analysis Level**

1. Ask teacher candidates to locate (or instructors may provide) scenarios involving middle school teachers. These may be articles from *Middle School Journal* or *Middle Ground*. Case studies and scenarios are included in books such as *Voices of Student Teachers* by Rand and Shelton-Colangelo, and *Middle School Case Studies: Challenges, Perceptions, and Practices* by Watson, both published by Merrill Prentice Hall. Praxis II Principles of Learning and Teaching practice tests provide excellent scenarios.

2. Assign as many case studies/scenarios as appropriate. Ask teacher candidates to look for examples of knowledge, dispositions, and performances that either exemplify an element of a standard or show a need for a particular standard element. On a chart similar to Figure 3, ask candidates to briefly describe a knowledge, disposition, and/or performance and then state the standard that is either exemplified or needed. Standards may be referred to by Roman numeral, K/D/P and a number and then briefly paraphrased. For instance, Standard IV Disposition #2 would be noted as simply: IVD2-committed to integrating curriculum

While some standards will be quite obvious for certain scenarios, there will always be more subtle points to be made in this exercise. The learning culminates with teacher candidates justifying their choices.

**Assignment #5
Bloom's Synthesis Level**

1. Assign a standard knowledge, disposition, and/or performance, or a combination, to each teacher candidate.

2. Ask each candidate to write a scenario that either exemplifies or shows a need for the assigned standard element(s).

3. Allow ample time for candidates to share their scenarios and justify their choices. This provides fertile discussion material.

**Assignment #6
Bloom's Evaluation Level**

1. Assign each candidate a standard.

2. Ask candidates to find articles and books with credible excerpts from the literature that speak directly to the value and importance of the assigned standard.

3. Have candidates write brief explanations of the contents of the literature cited.

4. Ask candidates to make copies of their "finds" for each class member. This sharing will no doubt introduce valuable resources to candidates. If possible, candidates should bring the actual literature to class.

The six assignments combine two very important elements of teacher effectiveness, the NMSA standards and the use of levels of learning. The levels of the taxonomy prompt teacher candidates to interact with the standards in ways that they normally would not. The

exercises may be used consecutively over either a short or long time period, or they may be used as stand-alone activities to examine specific standards. The six assignments can be time consuming and should be implemented in a course that preferably addresses middle level philosophy. After interacting with the standards through the assignments, teacher candidates are much more likely to support an opinion

or analyze a field experience from a standards perspective. Their grasp of the standards includes comprehension, analysis, application, synthesis, and evaluation rather than knowledge alone.

Figure 1. Relating Documents to Standards (use with Assignment #2)

Turning Points 2000	Standard I Young Adolescent Development	Standard II Middle Level Philosophy and School Organization	Standard III Middle Level Curriculum and Assessment
Teach a curriculum grounded in standards, relevant to adolescents' concerns, and based on how students learn best, and use a mix of assessment methods			
Use instructional methods that prepare all students to achieve high standards			
Organize relationships for learning			

Figure 2. Observation/Interview Form (use with Assignment #3)

Name:	Partner:	Observation or Interview?
School:	Teacher:	
Date/Time:		
Focus Standard __ Knowledge # __, Performance # __, Disposition # __		
Focus Standard __ Knowledge # __, Performance # __, Disposition # __		
Focus Standard __ Knowledge # __, Performance # __, Disposition # __		
People involved in experience:		
Observation notes and/or interview notes:		

Figure 3. Matching Standards to Case Studies/Scenarios (Assignment #4)

Case study/scenario_____

Example from case study/scenario	Standard exemplified or needed
Example from case study/scenario	Standard exemplified or needed

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