

Teacher Dispositions

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Each of us has visited a classroom where the teacher was very knowledgeable in his/her content area, had skills in managing their classroom, and knew how to teach, yet there was just something missing. The teacher was going through all the motions, but learning was not taking place. What secret ingredient distinguished the effective teacher from the ineffectual one? Perhaps the missing ingredient was teacher dispositions.

Dispositions have been identified as an important component of effective teaching. In the last few years teacher education programs have been challenged to assess and prepare teachers in the area of teacher dispositions. Lund, Wayda, Woodard, and Buck (2007) have acknowledged that in the past there has been a lack of emphasis on dispositions contributing to the challenge of defining and measuring these traits in teacher candidates. With the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandating schools provide highly qualified teachers in all academic areas, there has been an increased emphasis on the quality of teacher preparation programs (Darling-Hammond, 2006). The National Middle School Association (NMSA) as well as both the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Council (INTASC) have challenged colleges and universities to train teachers in content, pedagogy, and dispositions.

NCATE defines dispositions as the “values and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities. These positive behaviors support student learning and development” (pp. 89-90). Certainly these behaviors are supportive of *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) and are characteristics colleges and universities seek to develop in pre-service middle level teachers.

Definition of Teacher Dispositions

Professional literature highlights conflict and confusion about what dispositions really are. Singh and Stoloff (2008) stated a disposition was a vague construct which was difficult to define and measure. Wasicsko (2004) maintained dispositions formed the basis of teacher behavior. He determined dispositions were guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values.

The two professional dispositions NCATE (2008) expects institutions to assess are *fairness* and the belief all students can learn. These dispositions are also highlighted in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) and fall under the essential attribute of equitable instruction. Based on the NCATE mission and conceptual framework, colleges of education were allowed to identify, define, and develop additional professional dispositions. As colleges and universities seek to define dispositions, many interpretations impact their deliberations.

Eberly, Rand, and O’Conner (2007) defined dispositions as the tendency to respond in specific ways to certain conditions. Usher, Usher, and Usher (2003) referred to empathy, the views of others, the views of self, authenticity, and meaningful purpose and vision to define dispositions.

Burant, Chubbuck, and Whipp (2007) defined dispositions by suggesting the understanding of dispositions depended upon the lens through which they were examined. They identified three lenses of defining dispositions: beliefs and attitudes; personality traits; and inferences from observable behaviors. The lens of beliefs and attitudes examined what teacher candidates believed, the lens of personality traits reflected the concept of schema in teacher candidates, and the lens of inferences from observable behaviors addressed the concept that teacher candidates' dispositions were reflected in their actions and decisions.

Wasicsko, Callahan, and Wirtz (2004) suggested dispositions were defined as anything not covered in knowledge and skills. They elaborated on their definition by classifying dispositions into three categories: teacher behaviors, teacher characteristics, and teacher perceptions. Each of these aspects entered into the understanding of dispositions in terms of teacher education programs and progressed along a continuum from specific to inferable.

Regardless of the specific terminology used, most researchers agree dispositions are those affective qualities which impact the decisions effective teachers make in their classrooms on a daily basis. Although the use of the term *dispositions* is relatively new to the field of teacher preparation, the concept has roots in seminal research.

Theoretical Foundation

Dispositions appear to be based upon several theoretical perspectives from noted educational leaders such as Dewey, Combs, Kohlberg, Vygotsky, Bandura, and Piaget. Dewey (1922) described a construct called *habits of mind* which had many similarities to today's construct of teacher dispositions (Ritchhart, 2001). Dewey's (1922) writings emphasized the

learnability of dispositions, the distinction between habits and traits, and the descriptive nature of dispositions. He stated dispositions were the “readiness to act overtly in a specific fashion whenever opportunity is presented” (p. 41). Dewey connected habit or disposition to intellectual character (Ritchhart, 2001).

The Florida Studies led by Combs in the 1960’s explored dispositions. Wasicsko (2004) found The Florida Studies examined which dispositions separated effective educators from ineffective educators. The Florida Studies findings could be classified into three categories: dispositions toward self, dispositions toward students, and dispositions toward teaching.

According to Johnson, Evers, and Vare (2009), the theories of moral development had significant impact on dispositions research. Kohlberg’s (1984) Stages of Moral Development explained how teacher education programs influenced and enhanced pre-service teachers’ dispositions. Rest (1986) continued Kohlberg’s work by identifying stages of developmental schemas. He suggested teacher candidates developed and comprehended moral or ethical situations in their classrooms through developmental schema (Johnson, 2009). An example of how stages of developmental schemas functioned was suggested by Vare and Evers (2009) in their Matrix of Equity Indicators for the Moral Domain. In this matrix pre-service teachers observed multiple perspectives on how to achieve equity in their classrooms through field experiences. The pre-service teachers then modified instruction based on a variety of learner needs (Vare & Evers, 2009).

To expand upon these definitions, Vygotsky (1962) stressed the importance of the relationship and interaction between the student and the instructor. In order for teacher

candidates to enhance their dispositions, they experienced dispositions being modeled by their university professors and mentor teachers (Helm, 2006b). The idea of enhancing dispositions was supported by Vygotsky's (1962) zone of proximal development theory where students' potential increased given appropriate guidance. Pre-service teachers who were placed into a classroom were able to successfully teach students with the assistance of an experienced mentor (Applefield, Huber, & Moallem, 2001).

Another technique found to be effective in developing teacher dispositions was the development of pre-service teachers' self-efficacy (Coberly & Cosgrove, 2007). Candidates developed a positive, yet realistic self perception (Wasicsko, 2004). By identifying and defining the dispositions of effective teaching for teacher candidates, university professors were afforded the opportunity to facilitate the development of pre-service teachers' self-efficacy. Utilizing Bandura's (1986) social cognitive learning theory, mentors modeled dispositions in the context of the classroom (Helm, 2007; Katz, 1988). Situations which required careful reflection and discussion with cohorts reinforced self-efficacy (Phelps, 2006). Opportunities to practice the dispositions of effective teachers were supportive of Piaget's (1958) cognitive-development theory in which learning occurred through teacher candidate's actions.

Piaget (1958) elaborated on the cognitive development theory. In his theory learners constructed their own knowledge by struggling with ideas which were different from their existing schema. Applefield, Huber, and Moalem (2001) suggested this struggle illustrated discovery-oriented learning. When teacher candidates were placed in field experiences which

differed from their previous learning experiences, they struggled to reconcile the conflict with their schema. The result of this struggle was the enhancement of their dispositions.

Assessment of Dispositions

While NCATE and INTASC both require colleges and universities to assess pre-service teacher candidates' dispositions and ensure their teacher candidates develop dispositions which positively impact students, they have failed to include guidelines for assessment and development of these dispositions (Maylone, 2002). Jung and Rhodes (2009) suggested assessment systems at colleges and universities frequently categorized candidates according to their dispositional level, but rarely included the goals of teacher education. College and universities' assessment instruments tended to focus on character related dispositions rather than competence related dispositions.

Carroll (2005) suggested assessing required dispositions by making the invisible visible through active means, assessing in structured ways through ongoing observation, and assessing over time. He emphasized the criteria used in the assessment of dispositions should be public, explicit, and have moral meaning for teacher educators and their practice.

Eberly, Rand and O'Conner (2007) suggested there was difficulty in using standardized assessment to measure dispositions. In a recent study completed by Whitley (2010) non-standardized assessments were suggested to be the most frequently used methods of evaluating teacher dispositions by surveyed colleges and universities. Methods identified in the literature such as rubrics (Eberly et al., 2007), electronic portfolios (Ledoux & McHenry, 2006), and interviews (Mullin, 2003) were all being used to some degree by teacher educators who

responded to the survey. Standardized assessments were reported to be the least used method of evaluating teacher dispositions among the responding teacher educators at colleges and universities (Whitley, 2010).

Since most teacher educators at the colleges and universities were dissatisfied with the effectiveness of their assessment methods, additional investigation needs to be conducted into improved assessment methods for teacher dispositions (Whitley, 2010). Schussler (2006) suggested the way one conceived the meaning of dispositions impacted the way one assessed dispositions. Perhaps by refining the definition of teacher dispositions, new assessment methods might be indicated.

Development of Teacher Dispositions

Research conducted by Darling-Hammond (2005) indicated research-based activities should be used to develop and enhance dispositions in teacher candidates. Among the strategies identified in the literature, field experiences (Carroll, 2005), establishing professional development schools (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Ledoux & McHenry, 2006; 2008), case studies (Applefield et al., 2001; Eberly et al., 2007), developing collegial relationships (Edwards & Edick, 2006; Wasicsko, 2004), multicultural education (Alger, 2007; Garmon, 2005), and development of self efficacy (Coberly & Cosgrove, 2007; Phelps, 2006; Wasicsko, 2004) promoted the development and enhancement of teacher dispositions.

In research by Whitley (2010), field experiences and building relationships were the most frequently identified strategies being implemented by teacher educators in Texas colleges and universities. Among the other top strategies identified were modeling and observation

which might be considered components of field experiences. Professional development schools and case studies were among the strategies used least often.

Field experiences stood out as a best practice for developing and enhancing teacher dispositions (Whitley, 2010). The importance of providing quality mentors to serve as models for teacher candidates and university faculty-led reflection over the observations pre-service teachers made were considered essential components of field experience. This research supports the suggestions of the National Middle School Association that high-quality field experiences were an essential component in preparing future middle level teachers (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

In an effort to train highly qualified middle level teachers, colleges and universities today must emphasize teacher dispositions. The use of field experiences and reflection can be used to enhance pre-service teachers' development of dispositions. However, in order for teacher dispositions to truly enhance teacher's repertoire they must be utilized consistently in their daily decision making process. Middle level teachers must have not only knowledge and skills, but also possess appropriate dispositions in order to impact their students' learning and provide quality experiences for students.

As teacher educators at colleges and universities examine their instructional programs, the methods being used to identify, assess, and develop teacher candidates must be considered in order to improve the quality of their programs.

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