Dispositions in Pre-Service Teacher Preparation

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Abstract

This position paper discusses the role that dispositions play in classrooms today and why dispositions should be infused into undergraduate teacher education programs. Dispositions are defined as the attitudes, values and beliefs that teachers hold, which are measurable through analysis of behavior. Understanding what dispositions successful practicing teachers display can help shape the formation of dispositions of pre-service teacher candidates. The formation of appropriate dispositions is a developmental process which emerges over time.
Introduction

Early in my research career, a professor casually remarked to me that we teach what we know and who we are. With little further commentary, our conversation then drifted on to other topics of mutual interest. It was only later during the process of reflection that I realized a seed had been planted, though I did not recognize at the time what an important and fundamental seed it really was.

So begins my story of how my interest in the topic of teacher development and learning began. I had an immediate understanding of the first part of the phrase – we teach what we know – for subject matter plays such a primary role in the organization and functions of a classroom. Teachers need to have a strong grounding in the subject areas they teach, and an ability to reason and think critically about the content being taught.

The second part of the professor’s phrase – we teach who we are – also seemed immediately familiar to me, though more because of stereotypical views than scientific research. In the early history of American public education, teachers were simply expected and presumed to be knowledgeable, patient, understanding, and to act intuitively in a “motherly” way toward their students (Herbst, 1999). By definition, they were supposed to be able to effectively motivate the less-than-willing students, support the shy ones, discipline their more aggressive pupils and command respect from all. These characteristics, or dispositions, which were so much a part of the definition of “teacher” throughout the United States, were powerful images (Joseph & Burnaford, 1994). Books, and later with the advancement of technology, television promoted these stereotypical images; stereotypical images not just of teachers, but of adults in any occupation which serviced the public such as doctor, police officer, or judge (Joseph, 1994). The recent focus on dispositions in teacher preparation comes about because we believe that dispositions play a role in how subject matter is delivered to P-12 students, and because we see teachers as role models (Maylone, 2002). “Different learners perceive the same opportunities differently and react towards them differently, because of their differing dispositions” (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004, p. 176). Thus, dispositions play a central role in what happens day in and day out in classrooms.

This position paper will specifically look at why “who we are” in terms of professional dispositions is important, and consider implications in determining whether individual pre-service teacher candidates also demonstrate the beginnings of these dispositions. For if we know what aspects of “who we are” work in the classroom, then we can better prepare future teachers to display these dispositional behaviors as well.

Dispositions in Education

Dispositions in the field of education have taken on greater meaning since the 2001 publication of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education
NCATE's website glossary provides a definition of professional teacher dispositions:

Professional attitudes, 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. NCATE expects institutions to assess professional dispositions based on observable behaviors in educational settings. The two professional dispositions that NCATE expects institutions to assess are 

| fairness | all students can learn |

Based on their mission and conceptual framework, professional education units can identify, define, and operationalize additional professional dispositions. ([http://www.ncate.org/public/glossary.asp?ch=143#P](http://www.ncate.org/public/glossary.asp?ch=143#P))

The NCATE definition poses a challenge for teacher educators, and provides the impetus behind promoting lifelong learning and the desire to meet the needs of P-12 students in classrooms today. An argument can be made that dispositions are not merely attitudes or habits (see Katz & Raths, 1986), because attitude is a predisposition to act and habits come from unconscious motivations. In assessing dispositions, attention is given to conscious behavior observable in the individual. Jung and Rhodes (2008) make a distinction between “character-related dispositions” (desirable teacher characteristics and work ethics) and “competence-related” dispositions (competency in teaching pedagogies) and argued that both should be assessed in teacher candidates. Sockett (2009) used the language “disposition-as-personality” trait and “disposition-as-virtue” to delineate the types of dispositions teachers possess.

There are advantages to assessing dispositions in pre-service teacher candidates. From a financial perspective, Fallon and Ackley (2003) believed that assessing dispositions will help institutions determine which candidates are potentially more committed to the profession, and thus will potentially become better teachers, which in turn allows institutions to maximize their faculty resources, money and field placements. On the academic side, Collinson (1996) developed the concept of beginning and experienced teachers needing to have a triad of knowledge: professional knowledge, interpersonal knowledge and intrapersonal knowledge, with the latter two being tied to dispositions. Eberly, Rand and O’Connor (2007) postulated that dispositions come from an “underlying psychological meaning-making structure” (p. 2) and proposed that attention be given to the developmental aspects of dispositional behavior which dovetails into pre-service preparation. Similarly, Damon (2005) argued that “the NCATE standard brings under the examiner’s purview a key element of the candidate’s very personality” (p. 4, emphasis in original). In other words, we teach who we are.

Given the definition, how can dispositions be measured throughout a pre-service candidate’s university experience? Maylone (2002) stated quite clearly that relying on a list of desirable teacher dispositions with “our minds focused on lists as our end product” (p. 6) is not the way to go about measuring a candidate’s disposition. Additionally,
understanding dispositions goes beyond just knowing how a person perceives things (Taylor & Wasicsko, 2000). Learning from and with others challenges one’s perspective, putting it under the spotlight for examination (Collinson, 1996). Teachers need to develop a career-long habit of reflecting on their practice. One argument for including the assessment of dispositions for undergraduates is that dispositions are central to teaching, and this includes character virtues as well (Damon, 2005). Osguthorpe (2008) described this as desiring teachers of good disposition and moral character because of the desire to have P-12 students develop good dispositions and moral character (see p. 292). Secondly, as teacher educators we need to “know what qualities allow some persons to be effective teachers” (Wasicsko, 1977, p. 2) in order to encourage our pre-service candidates to develop these qualities. Thirdly, we need to uncover the beliefs and values candidates bring with them so as to better understand how to guide them in developing positive dispositional traits (Abernathy, 2002). Lastly, if we believe “that the teacher is the filter for whatever happens in the classroom” (Whitaker, 2004, p. 125), then as teacher educators we need to examine the dispositional filters, both personal and professional, our pre-service teacher candidates bring to us.

**Experienced Teachers**

Personal and professional dispositions are central in the classroom experience. Those who stay in the profession learn from their experiences and are responsive to student needs. Collinson (1996) did research in the area of dispositions with elementary, middle school and secondary teachers. She concluded

[T]heir understanding of what it means to be a teacher involves developing and integrating professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge in ways that allow them to structure the physical, social and intellectual environment of their classrooms. These teachers understand that students need to learn more than subject matter in order to be ready for life beyond the classroom. (p. 10)

Teaching and learning are fundamentally an exchange, interchange and, in the best of circumstances, an intrachange of self and knowledge among participants. These are the human elements of teaching. These elements are complex, multi-dimensional and personal. The ways we describe and interpret our experiences are intimately connected to our sense of self. This is a feature of our humanness. Consider a formal learning environment, such as a seventh grade, for example. In the constructivist, postmodern model, there are both teachers and learners in that classroom. Within one school day, there are an infinite number of exchanges and interchanges among and between teacher and students. These interactions revolve around subject matter knowledge and exploration, the naturally occurring give-and-take social negotiations associated with peer groups, the perceived balance of power between child and adult, the psychological striving for competition weighed against the desire to fit in, the emotional swings of friendship and the surge of physical development, among others. All of these interactions and more weave their way in and out amongst themselves throughout the educational day. Even if one were able to isolate and study but one of these
interactions, it would be nearly impossible to predict its effect given the infinite number of variables available to interact with it. In this context, education is clearly more than the simple learning of traditionally-defined subject matter groupings. Teaching and learning involves more than just sharing what we know: it also involves who we are.

Effective educators are people-oriented (Wasicsko, 2005), have a sense of self-efficacy (Singh & Stoloff, 2007), share a cluster of mindsets toward student ability (Chandler, 1999), are caring (Demmon-Berger, 1986) and reflective (Collinson, 1996), among others. Traits such as these form a teacher identity which is intimately connected to one’s personal identity. Teacher identity includes not only the influences of teachers’ own K-12 experience (Lortie, 1975), but also the values, beliefs and goals formed in the process of daily living. Teacher identity influences curricular decisions and pedagogical behavior, as well as represents an important contextual definition. For these reasons, school administrators and teacher education faculty are in error when they consider professional development devoid of personal development. Teachers are adults. Changes in professional circumstances impact changes in personal circumstances and vice versa. The two inform each other, and viewing them in tandem is the only way to gain a full perspective of their interaction. Teaching is dependent to a large degree on how a person acts, and lives; thus, dispositional and ethical development are important in teacher education programs in general (Collinson, 1996) and to pre-service teacher programs specifically.

Pre-service Teachers

Pre-service teacher candidates need to be given the skill to not only teach their subject matter, but also develop effective personal and professional dispositions. The two are connected in theory and in practice. “The possession of positive dispositions helps to insure that teachers are better able to deliver instructional services to children” (Maylone, 2002, p. 8). One of the challenges teacher educators face in working with teacher candidates is helping them make the transition from thinking like a student to thinking like a teacher. “Having experienced schooling from the perspective of the student, pre-service teachers have to learn to view the classroom from the perspective of the teacher” (Parkison, 2009). It is a time when they jumpstart their understanding of personal and professional dispositions for their new context. For most of their lives they have been in “student mode” but that all changes when they begin their field experiences and subsequently move into the student teaching experience. The field experiences, even though they are limited, provide a backdrop for a better understanding of self in this new context. Rather than focusing on a pre-service candidate’s deficit in displaying dispositional behavior, Mullin (2003) recommended that teacher educators focus instead on the candidate’s assets first as a building block. Their burgeoning development of self can then expand outward from strengths that they have identified.

 Ideally, the assessment of dispositional traits is infused into the pre-service teacher training experience. Rather than making it a one-time discussion in one selected class, it should be treated as a developmental process that is carried through
from their introductory education class up to their senior level practicum course and student teaching. Integrating dispositions into the teacher education program allows for the effective behaviors to not only be identified, but also mature over the course of time. Learning should not be viewed as a straight line, with teacher candidates simply moving from Point A to Point B. Instead, it is best viewed as a spiral, where the candidates move up in a circular fashion, revisiting topics to deepen their understanding. Thus, pre-service candidates are first introduced to the concept of teacher dispositions in their introductory class and then revisit it in their sophomore, junior and senior years so that by the time student teaching comes around, the positive dispositions they have cultivated will bear out in practice.

**Models for Teacher Education Programs**

“Present attempts to operationally define dispositions tend to fall along the continuum ranging from specific observable behaviors to inferable personality traits” (Wasicsko, Callahan & Wirtz, 2004, p. 2). Most of the models for assessing dispositions address at least one of the following three categories: teacher behaviors, teacher characteristics and teacher perceptions (see Wasicsko et al., p. 2-3). Numerous models have been developed for the assessment of dispositions (Abernathy, 2002; Clifton, Perry, Stubbs & Roberts, 2004; Eberly, Rand & O’Connor, 2007; Fallon & Ackley, 2003; Jung, Rhodes & Vogt, 2006; Mullin, 2003; Rike & Sharp, 2008; Singh & Stoloff, 2007; Wasicsko, 1977; Yost, 1997; among others). These models consist of a variety of methods to assess pre-service teachers’ dispositions. They include “behavior and characteristic checklists, ratings from observations of candidates in a variety of settings, inferences drawn from course assignments and class participations, evaluation of student journals and self-reflections, and letters of reference” (Wasicko et al., p. 5). Some institutions assess dispositions as part of the department application process, some do it through structured in-class activities, while others assess it in action when the teacher candidate goes out to practicum. Whichever method or delivery model is utilized, the assessment of dispositions is an important undertaking because “effective educators possess discernable attitudes” (Wasicsko, 2005, p. 1).

**Conclusion**

We teach not only what we know but who we are. Because of this, dispositions have an impact on teaching and learning in P-12 education. These beliefs are very central and often resistant to change (Raths, 2001). During the formation stage, teacher candidates need to understand the importance of “a positive school climate [which] is [created by] the teacher’s empathy, rapport, and personal interaction with students” (Percy, 1990, p. 15). By studying experienced teachers’ dispositions, teacher educators can better prepare pre-service candidates for the profession.

There are a number of models currently being used to help assess dispositions in undergraduate teacher education programs. While all pre-service teacher candidates have a potential for the development of dispositional traits when they begin their teacher preparation programs, not all will be able to successfully engage in dispositional change
(see Bogotch & Piggot, 1992). Dispositions need to be explicitly taught, rather than assuming they will develop on their own in time. Teacher education programs need to create a culture that supports the teacher candidate in the development of dispositions (Dottin, 2009). Throughout a teacher candidate’s program, identification of dispositional behavior and the subsequent practice of displaying the behavior may be two different things. Candidates will likely not be challenged until they get out into classrooms and experience teaching first hand. Mastery comes only with practice, but the stakes are high. Because “children respond directly to the dispositions and attitudes of the teacher” (Richardson & Onwuegbuzie, 2003), teacher educators need to give teacher candidates all the tools necessary for a successful career. Developing appropriate dispositions is one of those important tools.
References


