

Measuring Teacher Dispositions

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Abstract

Teacher quality has become a top priority of our national agenda. There is empirical evidence that suggests that teacher inputs have impact on student outcomes. It is also believed that teacher dispositions are as crucial for student achievement as a teacher's pedagogical and content knowledge/skills. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) require that teacher preparation programs assess the dispositions of their teacher candidates. Given that it is difficult to define and measure dispositions, we assessed the dispositions of our teacher candidates. We developed a dispositions tool, Eastern Teacher Dispositions Index (ESTDI) and administered it to 85 (N=85) of our teacher candidates. The analyses of data indicate that generally speaking our teacher candidates have positive teacher dispositions. However, the generalizability of our study findings is limited because of unknown reliability and validity of the ESTDI at this time and also due to a sample of convenience. Despite caveats, our study is significant. It has attempted to define and shed light on the rather vague construct of dispositions. It has the potential to contribute to the emerging dispositions literature.

(References 16)

Measuring Teacher Dispositions

Teacher quality has become a top priority of our national agenda. The empirical evidence suggests that there is a significant correlation between teacher quality and student achievement. This correlation is stronger than that exists between students' socio-economic status (SES), other background characteristics and achievement (Wenglinsky, 2002). In endeavors to identify indicators of teacher quality, the researchers have looked at teachers' intellectual competence, academic ability and achievement as evident in college GPA, SAT, ACT and PRAXIS scores. They have discovered a positive relationship between teacher's verbal ability, content knowledge and pupil achievement (Ehrenberg & Brewer 1995; Ferguson & Ladd, 1996; Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

On the basis of their findings, researchers have advocated higher standards for entrance and exit out of teacher education programs (Lanier & Little, 1986). The researchers have also examined the quality of institutions, the quality of programs that prepare teachers (Lewis, Prasad, Carey, Bartfai, & Farris, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2000) and teacher's certification status as it impacts pupil achievement (Ingersoll, 1996).

Researchers have even gone to the extent of ascertaining that teacher effectiveness is negatively impacted by the mismatch between teachers' race and ethnicity and the increasingly diverse student population. Finding a balance between teacher quality and quantity in establishing teacher education policy is a considerable challenge. In the context of literature that is primarily inconclusive about all the quality variables that impact teaching practice and in turn pupil achievement, professionals are proposing varied approaches (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005).

The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher accreditation (NCATE) and Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support consortium (INTASC) require that teacher

preparation programs assess the dispositions of their teacher candidates. It is believed that teacher dispositions play as critical a role in teacher effectiveness as do teacher's pedagogical and content knowledge/skills (Wasicsko, 2002).

Despite all the emphasis on dispositions, professionals believe that dispositions are a vague construct that is hard to define and measure. In an attempt to define dispositions, professionals have put forth several dispositions. Wasicsko (2002) maintains that dispositions lie inside us and are not available for direct measurement.

According to the NCATE (2006), dispositions are values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence a teacher's behavior toward his/her students, families, colleagues, and communities. The dispositions affect student learning, student motivation, and student development. They also impact an educator's own professional growth. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility and social justice. For example, dispositions might include a belief that all students can learn. Further, dispositions might include a vision of high and challenging standards, or an intense commitment to safe and supportive learning environments.

Back in 1960s, in an effort to discover the principles that govern the nature and effective practice of helping professions, Combs and colleagues mentioned that teachers are required to use "self" as an instrument in doing their job. Further, at any moment, a person's behavior is a consequence of all the perceptions that are available to him/her. Once established, perceptions have the quality of belief and tend to impact behavior and determine further perceptions.

Combs, Soper, Goodling, Benton, Dickman, & Usher (1969) used the terms "dispositions" and "perceptions" interchangeably. They believed that people who have learned to use themselves as effective instruments in the production of helping relationships can be

distinguished from those who are ineffective on the basis of their characteristic perceptual organizations. More specifically, “helpers” can be distinguished from “non-helpers” with regard to their characteristic way of perceiving.

Combs et al. (1969) ascertained that perceptions exist on a continuum and they can be sorted into five categories. These categories are: (1) Perceptions about self, (2) Perceptions about other people, (3) Perceptions about subject field, (4) Perceptions about the purpose of education and process of education, and (5) General frame of reference perceptions.

Combs, Blame, Newman, & Wass (1974) believed that a teacher’s **perceptions about self** affect his or her relationships with colleagues and students. Teachers who have a sense of self-efficacy would persist and persevere and those who do not believe in their competence would avoid responsibilities. Teachers who perceive that their students admire them would behave differently from those who do not have such a belief. Teachers who believe that their administration values them would act differently as opposed to those who believe their administration does not care for them. And finally, those teachers who perceive that teaching profession has dignity and integrity would behave in ways that are professional as opposed to apologetic and aggressive ways in which teachers who lack such a belief would present themselves.

Perceptions about other people require that teachers hold their colleagues and students in a positive light. They perceive them to be able, dependable, worthy, friendly, enhancing and well intentioned. The beliefs teachers hold about their students have a considerable impact on the students’ behavior. Giving an example, Wasicsko (2002) states that if a teacher perceives a student as misbehaved and troublemaker, it is likely that the student is aware of his/her teacher’s perceptions. The student’s awareness would result in student’s feeling angry and threatened

which in turn would lead to disruptive behavior. A case such as this would strengthen teacher's belief and the cycle of mistrust and disruptive behavior would continue in the classroom. Combs et al., 1969 stated teachers need to view others as supports rather than as threats to self.

Perceptions about subject field focus on teacher's knowledge of subject matter (Wascisko, 2002). The positive dispositions in this area mandate that the teachers are enthusiastic about their subject field, they engage in research based instructional strategies, they seek out growth opportunities and stay current. There is also need for teachers to create connections to subject matter that are meaningful to students.

Perceptions about the purpose of education and the process of education imply that teachers believe all students can learn. They also mandate that teachers define education as a means of nurturing and supporting individuals so that they can reach their maximum potential. It is a belief that education can produce able citizens and efficient workers who can enrich our world (Wascisko, 2002). These dispositions presuppose that teachers would believe in open communication and that they would view cooperation as more effective in achieving goals than competition.

General frame of reference perceptions imply that effective educators would be growth oriented. They would be optimistic. They would have heightened sensitivity to the feelings of their students and to those perceptions of their students that involve school experiences. Combs et al. (1969) believed that to inculcate healthy general frame of reference perceptions in future teachers, teacher candidates should have abundant opportunities to develop more personal, meaningful relationships with their peers, faculty and the pupils they would teach.

In the backdrop of numerous definitions of educator dispositions, **we set out to examine the dispositions of our teacher candidates.** We tried to look at what kind of dispositions our

teacher candidates have towards self, towards other people, towards their subject field, towards the purpose and process of education, and general frame of reference.

Methodology

Sample

Our study was carried out at a state university located in the rural part of Eastern Connecticut. The University has medium sized graduate and undergraduate certification programs in elementary education, secondary education, physical education, and early childhood/special education. A total of 86 (N=86) graduate and undergraduate teacher candidates participated in the study. The undergraduate teacher candidates were enrolled in a pre-professional course, “Child and Adolescent Development and Exceptionalities” and graduate students were enrolled in an introductory graduate course in educational technology. In our sample, approximately 62.7% of the undergraduate teacher candidates represented elementary, secondary, and physical education programs and the remaining 37.2% represented graduate program. Majority of the sample that is, 85% represented female teacher candidates and 15% represented male teacher candidates. The age range for the participants was 20-35 years. All of the sample members were White.

Instrumentation

To collect the needed data, we developed a dispositions instrument, Eastern Teacher Dispositions Index (ESTDI). It is a self assessment tool. The construction of the ESTDI is based on existing definitions of educator dispositions, existing indices of dispositions (e. g., Combs 1969; Koeppen & Davidson-Jenkins, 2004; Thompson, Randsell, & Rousseau, 2004; Wasicsko, 2002) as well as on INTASC 2001 principles. The ESTDI has 55 Likert-type items that address the teacher dispositions. As shown in Figure 1, The ESTDI has five scales. These

scales are: (1) **P**erceptions about self, (2) **P**erceptions about others, (3) **P**erceptions about subject field, (4) **P**erceptions about the purpose of education and the process of education and (5)

General frame of reference **p**erceptions.

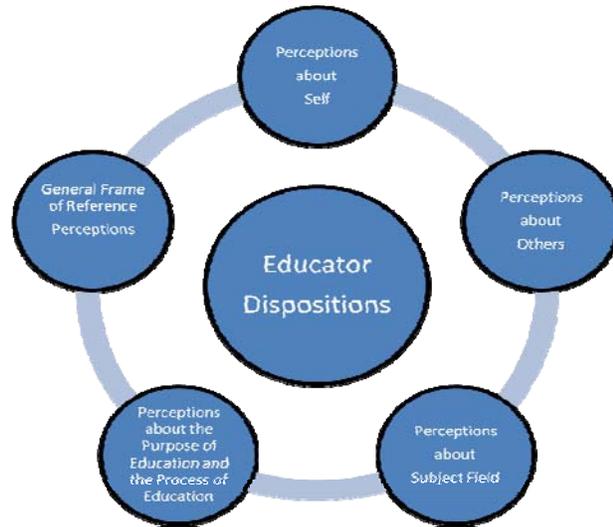


Figure1. Scales of the ESTDI

Findings

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. As far as **perceptions about self** are concerned, a large majority of our teacher candidates have positive dispositions. As shown in Table 1, 96.5% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should maintain emotional control; 97.7% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should adapt to unexpected new situations. Approximately, 95% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should understand how students develop; 94.2% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should be proficient in reading, writing and mathematics. Again approximately 97% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that

teachers should have intrinsic motivation and passion for learning; 100% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should be prepared as demonstrated by their planning, organization, and attendance. Finally, approximately 97% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should engage in reflection to understand themselves and to understand their impact on the student learning and well-being.

Table 1

Percentage of sample members who agreed or strongly agreed to each item on the Perceptions about Self Scale of the ESTDI

Items	Frequency	Percent
Teachers should use appropriate language and appropriate tone of voice	86	100
Teachers should maintain emotional control	83	96.5
Teachers should be thoughtful and responsive listeners	86	100
Teachers should dress appropriately and demonstrate personal hygiene	85	98.8
Teachers should adapt to unexpected new situations	84	97.6
Personal abilities and characteristics that a teacher brings to the class can affect the lesson's success and failure	80	93
Teachers should understand how students learn and develop	82	95.4
Teachers should be proficient in reading, writing, and mathematics	81	94.2
Teachers should have intrinsic motivation and passion for learning	84	97.6
Teachers should be prepared as demonstrated by their planning, organization and regular attendance	86	100
Teachers should engage in self-reflection to capture insight into themselves and their impact on student learning and well being	84	97.6

On the scale of **perceptions about other people**, again a large majority of Eastern teacher candidates appear to have effective dispositions. As shown in Table 2, approximately 88 % of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should work well with others in implementing a common curriculum; 83.8 % of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should trust in abilities and problem solving skills of others. Further, 88.3% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should view teaching as a collaborative effort among educators and 100% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should be willing to receive feedback and evaluation of their teaching from peers, students, and supervisors. And approximately 93% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should cooperate with colleagues in planning instruction; 83.8% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should listen to the ideas and suggestions of their colleagues for improving instruction.

Table 2

Percentage of sample members who agreed or strongly agreed to each item on the Perceptions about other People Scale of the ESTDI

Items	Frequency	Percent
Teachers should work well with others in implementing a common curriculum	76	88.3
Teachers should trust in abilities and problem solving skills of others	72	83.8
Teachers should view teaching as a collaborative effort among educators	76	88.3

Table 2 (continued)		
Items	Frequency	Percent
Teachers should be willing to receive feedback and assessment of their teaching from peers, students and supervisors	86	100
Teachers should cooperate with colleagues in planning instruction	80	93.1
Teachers should listen to the ideas and suggestions of their colleagues for improving instruction	72	83.8

As shown in Table 3, on the scale of **perceptions about subject field**, all of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should demonstrate enthusiasm for subject being taught. Again, 100% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should demonstrate positive attitude towards their subject and learning in general; 94.2% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should actively seek out professional growth opportunities. Also, approximately 69% the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should engage in research based instructional strategies. As far as the teaching of subject matter is concerned, 97.7% of teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should create connections to subject matter that are meaningful to students. It is encouraging to see that 96.5% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should stay current with the evolving nature of teaching profession in general and of their own field in particular. Finally, 100% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should understand the central concepts, skills, tools of inquiry and structures of the disciplines they teach.

Table 3

Percentage of sample members who agreed or strongly agreed to each item on the Perceptions about Subject Field Scale of the ESTDI

Items	Frequency	Percent
Teachers should demonstrate enthusiasm for the subject being taught	86	100
Teachers should demonstrate positive attitude towards their subject and learning in general	86	100
Teachers should actively seek out growth opportunities	81	94.2
Teachers should engage in research based instructional practices	60	69.8
Teachers should create connections to subject matter that are meaningful to students	84	97.6
Teachers should stay current with the involving nature of teaching profession in general and their own field to be specific	83	96.5
Teachers should understand central concepts, skills, tools of inquiry and structures of the discipline they teach	86	100

As far as the **perceptions about the purpose of education and process of learning** are concerned, as shown Table 4, approximately 92% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should demonstrate and encourage democratic interaction in the class; 90.7% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should expect all

students to succeed. As far as the needs of students are concerned, 96.6% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should understand that students have certain needs which must be met before learning can take place; and 100% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should make efforts to promote educational equity for all students. For learning environment, 84.9% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that classroom environment should be positive and teachers should take responsibility for creating that supportive and positive environment. Further, 100% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should understand how students differ in their approaches to learning; 84.9% percent of the teacher candidates agreed that teachers should have high expectations for all students and 95.4% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should be concerned about all aspects of a child's well being. One hundred percent of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agree that teachers should design and deliver effective instruction and 100% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should select and/or create learning tasks that make subject matter meaningful to students. And finally, 98.8% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should establish and maintain appropriate standards of behavior and create a learning environment that shows a commitment to students and their success and 100% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should engage in efforts to promote educational equity for all students.

Table 4

Percentage of sample members who agreed or strongly agreed to each item on the Perceptions about the Purpose of education and Process of Learning Scale of the ESTDI

Items	Frequency	Percent
Teachers should demonstrate and encourage democratic interaction in the classroom	79	91.8
Teachers should expect all students to succeed	78	90.7
Teachers should understand that the students have certain needs that must be met before learning can take place	83	96.6
Teachers should make efforts to promote educational equity for all students	86	100
The classroom environment should be positive and teachers should take responsibility in creating that positivity	73	84.9
Teachers should understand how students differ in their approaches to learning	86	100
Teachers should have high expectations for all students	73	84.9
Teachers should be concerned about all aspects of a child's well being	82	95.4
Teachers should design and deliver effective instruction	86	100
Teachers should select and/or create learning tasks that make subject matter meaningful to students	86	100

Table 4

(continued)

Items	Frequency	Percent
Teachers should establish and maintain appropriate standards of behavior and create a learning environment that shows a commitment to students and their success	85	98.8
Teachers should engage in efforts to promote equity for all students	86	100

On the last scale, **general frame of reference perceptions**, all of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should be concerned about attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and welfare of other people and 100% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should communicate effectively with students, parents, and colleagues. Further 97.6% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should be sensitive to student differences. Approximately 99% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should treat students with dignity and respect at all times. Approximately 99% of the teacher candidates agreed that teachers should be patient when working with students and 97.6% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should initiate communication to resolve conflicts. Approximately 99% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers demonstrate intellectual curiosity; 96.5% of the teacher candidates agreed that teachers should know that personal abilities and characteristics that a teacher brings to the class can affect the success or failure of a lesson. Finally, 96.5% of the teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should demonstrate positive attitudes towards learning and 98.8% of the

teacher candidates agreed or strongly agreed that teachers should exhibit sensitivity to and respect for the multiple socio-cultural realities of their students.

Table 5

Percentage of sample members who agreed or strongly agreed to each item on the General frame of Reference Perceptions Scale of the ESTDI

Items	Frequency	Percent
Teachers should be concerned about attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and welfare of others	86	100
Teachers should communicate effectively with students, parents, and colleagues	86	100
Teachers should be sensitive to student differences	84	97.6
Teachers should treat students with dignity and respect at all times	85	98.8
Teachers should be patient when working with students	85	98.8
Teachers should initiate communication to resolve conflicts	84	97.6
Teachers should demonstrate intellectual and academic curiosity	85	98.8
Teachers should know that personal abilities and characteristics that a teacher brings to the class can affect the success of failure of a lesson.	83	96.5
Teachers should exhibit sensitivity to and respect for the multiple socio-cultural realities of their students	85	98.8
Teachers should demonstrate positive attitude towards learning	83	96.5

Discussion

Findings of our study indicate that generally speaking, Eastern teacher candidates appear to have dispositions of effective teachers. Their perceptions towards self, perceptions about other people, perceptions about their subject field, perceptions about the purpose of education and process of learning as well as general frame reference are positive. However, there is room for improvement in their dispositions that include collaboration and trust in the abilities and problem solving skills of others. They also need to reshape their dispositions about using research based instructional strategies.

The findings of our study should be generalized with caution. First of all, there are several definitions of dispositions and there is no consensus about the exact nature of dispositions. Secondly, like intelligence, there is no way to measure dispositions directly. There are several disposition measurement techniques such as questionnaires, interviews, observations, checklists, and role plays. We measured the dispositions of our teacher candidates with self-assessment tool and the reliability and validity of our tool remains unknown at this time. Again, we had a sample of convenience which may not be representative of the larger population of teacher candidates. We conclude that despite caveats our study is significant. We have attempted to define dispositions, devised a measurement tool and assessed the dispositions of our teacher candidates prompted by the NCATE and INTASC requirements. Our study has the potential to add to the emerging literature on teacher dispositions.

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