

# Analyzing Teachers' Dispositions towards Diversity: Using Adult Development Theory

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Why do some teachers demonstrate great cultural sensitivity in their work with children while others seem mired in stereotypes, perpetuating a view of diversity as exotic or denying that race is an issue in their classrooms? Why is it so difficult to change these dispositions of teachers? And what can we do in teacher education to further the cultural responsiveness we claim we want teachers to develop?

Dispositions of teachers strongly affect the impact they have on student learning and development (Collinson, et al., 1999; Combs, Blume, Newman, & Wass, 1974). Recent research has led to dispositions playing a prominent role in the accreditation of teacher education programs, including the requirement to effectively measure dispositions of teacher candidates (NCATE, 2000). The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2001) also requires teachers to demonstrate dispositions and the standards are rife with the language of dispositions: value, belief, commitment, passion. There is less consensus however, on the particular dispositions associated with effective teaching, or on the role that dispositions might play in the educational reform movement (McKnight, 2004).

In this research, we try to address these questions by using the adult developmental theory of Robert Kegan (1998) to analyze the foundation of the dispositions teachers bring to issues of racial and cultural diversity. We believe that

dispositions stem from an underlying psychological meaning-making structure and that we need a deeper understanding of that structure so that we can identify the developmental level of our students' dispositional thinking and therefore provide learning environments that support students' growth in changing dispositions.

The term *disposition* traditionally refers to the tendency or propensity to respond in specific ways to particular circumstances. The philosopher, Ryle, writing in 1949, suggested that to possess a dispositional property "is not to be in a particular state, or to undergo a particular change; it is to be bound or liable to be in a particular state, or undergo a particular change, when a particular condition is realized" (Ryle, 1949).

Therefore, Ryle explains, glass might have a brittle disposition even if it is not broken into pieces at a given moment. Or a person can have the disposition to criticize, given the right condition, but not exhibit it all the time. Salomon (1994) describes a disposition as a cluster of preferences, attitudes, and intentions, but also adds that the concept includes a set of capabilities that allow the preferences to become realized in a particular way.

Other researchers have offered a conception of dispositions that includes three aspects (Perkins, Jay, & Tishman, 1993). They use the example of "thinking dispositions" to show that the basic underlying psychology has three components which are necessary to induce dispositional behavior. These three elements are: (1) *sensitivity*: the perception of the appropriateness of a particular behavior; (2) *inclination*: the felt impetus toward a behavior; and (3) *ability*: the basic capacity to follow through with the behavior.

In their analysis, someone who is disposed to seek balanced reasons in an argument is: (1) sensitive to occasions to do so (for instance while reading a newspaper editorial); (2) feels inclined to do so; and

(3) has the basic ability to follow through with the behavior, for instance, he or she can actually identify pro and con reasons for both sides of an argument.

We believe these conceptions of dispositions are inadequate in that they focus only on surface behavioral characteristics. Variation in responses, especially to instruction in dispositions, cannot be consistently explained at this level. In order to understand dispositions more deeply we need to examine the psychological meaning-making system that underlies and holds together the behavioral characteristics that these researchers have identified. Kegan states:

What is it we want of our students? One answer is that it is a behavior, a way of acting. But a little reflection reveals that it is more than a behavior we want. We are also asking for a certain attitude. We don't want them to do the right thing for whatever reason. We want them to do so out of their feelings for others. The "something" we want is for them to feel differently about others, their willingness to help, and their responsibility towards others. What seemed to be a claim about outer behavior appears to really be expectations about inner feelings. And where do these feelings come from? They come from the way they understand what the world is all about, the way they know. In order to change the feelings and the behaviors they cause, we are therefore expecting that they change the way they know; we expect them to change their consciousness. (1998, 16-17)

To examine this deeper conceptualization of dispositions, we looked at how researchers have previously assessed dispositions and evaluated their potential for identifying developmental levels underlying the dispositions.

The literature shows that assessing dispositions has been challenging. Traditional assessments typically measure ability, but don't tell us much about one's propensity for using that ability. The difficulty in measuring dispositions is partly

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due to the fact that, by nature, dispositional behavior is voluntary and cannot be demanded or guided.

Several approaches have been used to meet this difficult challenge. Unstructured student journals have been used to examine the contextual understanding of the thinking that underlies perceptions held by preservice teachers (Wilson & Cameron, 1996). Perceptual scales and rubrics have been applied to classroom observations, written accounts of incidences, and interviews (Combs, et al., 1974; Dunn, Forest, Burnley, & McDonald, 2004; Graue, 2005; Wasicsko, 1978). Recently, Stevens and Olivarez (2005) effectively used an interest inventory to measure dispositions towards mathematics, and Clifton, Perry, Stubbs, and Roberts (2004) measured the mediating effects of psychosocial dispositions on academic achievement through a Likert-scale questionnaire.

Ennis argues that the most promising way to assess critical thinking dispositions is through guided open-ended opportunities (Ennis, 1994). These are opportunities for students to pursue any pattern of thinking they want, in response to a specific problem situation. Norris (1994) has explored assessments that challenge students with an open-ended yet focused problem situation, such as a search for living creatures on another planet. The problem provides students with some information from which it is possible to derive hypotheses, interpretations, and conclusions, although students are not explicitly directed to do so. According to Norris, an analysis of students' responses can reveal the critical thinking dispositions they bring to the task.

Much of the work on assessing dispositions comes from research on efforts to change dispositions. Although there is evidence that dispositions are difficult to change (Goodlad, 1990; Kegan, 1998; Wilbur, 2000), some success has been found through coursework, specialized curriculum activities, clinical experiences, modeling by professors and mentors, and discussion forums (Stevens & Charles, 2005; Wakefield, 1993; Yost, 1997).

A growing body of literature suggests that analysis of teaching cases is a promising way of changing dispositions (Campbell, 1997; Luckowski, 1997; Shulman, 1992; Strike, 1993; Strike & Soltis, 1985; Wasserman, 1994). Teaching cases present an open-ended problem to students and ask them to reflect on the issues to determine what they would do in a similar situation. This seems to be

a valuable method for giving candidates feedback, provoking important discussions, and evaluating the effectiveness of teacher education programs in promoting culturally responsive dispositions (Berliner, 1994; Eberly & Rand, 2003; Moje & Wade, 1996; Rand, 1998; Weiner, Rand, Pagano, Obi, Hall, Eberly, & Bloom, 2000).

As important, the analysis of written responses has proven to be a reliable method for determining what order of consciousness adults use to organize their approach to the issue (Kegan, 1998). This method is similar to ways that Kegan's predecessor, William Perry, also attempted to study the developmental transitions of college students (Dawson, 2004). Analysis of student responses to prompts reveals the type of cognitive organization used to formulate the approach to the issue and allows researchers to identify the levels of development used by the study group.

### Applying Kegan's Developmental Theory

In this study we use teaching cases to operationalize dispositions by having students respond to vignettes that illustrate a multicultural conflict they might experience in teaching. We then evaluate the responses of students using Kegan's constructive-developmental model which

provides a structure for understanding the deeper developmental process of dispositions (Kegan, 1980, 1998).

In his framework, Kegan posits five orders of meaning-making or consciousness with which all of us approach the problems and challenges in our lives. He argues that the complexity of modern life requires us to often function at the fourth order of consciousness but many of us do not have the mental structures to do so. Because of this, our students often do not learn what we think we are teaching, and we often misinterpret the motivation and learning needs of students who make meaning of their experiences at the second or third order of consciousness. Kegan's five orders of consciousness are outlined in Table 1.

Loosely, one can think of the first and second orders as egocentric (me), the third order as ethnocentric (us), and the fourth and fifth orders as worldcentric (all of us). If teachers grow from egocentric to ethnocentric, they don't stop caring about oneself, but that care and concern is now extended to families, the community, nation, and so on. With the growth from ethnocentric to worldcentric, that care and understanding is now extended to all people regardless of race, class, creed, gender, etc. The higher level of development offers teachers greater flexibility in navigating

**Table 1.**  
**Summary of Kegan's Orders of Consciousness (Kegan, 1998).**

Order	Subject/Object Relationship			Underlying Structure
	Cognitive Tool	Inter-personal View	Intra-personal Feelings	
<b>1st</b>	Perceptions (fantasy)	Social Perceptions	Impulses	Single Point/ Immediate/Atomistic
<b>2nd</b>	Concrete (actuality)	Simple Reciprocity	Needs, Self Concept	Durable Category
<b>3rd</b>	Abstractions (ideality)	Role Consciousness Mutual Reciprocity	Subjectivity, Self Consciousness	Cross-Categorical, Trans-Categorical
<b>4th</b>	Abstract Systems (ideology)	Multiple Role Consciousness	Individuation, Autonomy	System/Complex
<b>5th</b>	Dialectical (trans-ideological)	Interpenetration of Self and Other	Inter- Individuation	Trans-System Trans-Complex

the increasingly complex territory of our educational system.

One-half to two-thirds of the adult population appear not to have fully reached the fourth order of consciousness (Wilbur, 2000). Generally college students fall somewhere between the second and the fourth levels. Kegan argues that children make the transition from the first to the second order sometime before adolescence. With respect to the fifth order, Kegan argues "it is rare to see people moving beyond the fourth order, but when they do, it is never before their forties" (1998, p. 352). Kegan believes that many people, therefore, are "in over their heads" by being asked to understand their reality at the fourth order when they cannot mentally do that.

Tinberg and Weisenberger (1998) use Kegan's theory to show the problems that arise from students being "in over their heads" with respect to their instructor's expectations. Their analysis of the students' reflections of readings showed a disconnect between what the teacher was asking and what the students were capable of understanding.

In a similar way, the concern to educate teachers to address multicultural issues often fails to recognize the students' readiness for the instruction. For example, many instructional approaches to multicultural conflict rely on interpersonal negotiation or familiarity with others who are different from us. Students who are not developmentally ready to conceptualize the problem in this way will not understand the meaning of these strategies.

Our claim is that the cognitive challenges generated by multicultural conflict are moments for transformation of self as much or more than they are times to discuss technique. It is this deeper transformation that will engender the perspective and ability (and therefore the disposition) to respond positively to those who are different. Our critique is that other approaches recommend knowledge and skills that most likely end up in the hands of college students who are not developmentally capable of using them effectively.

This claim, however, assumes that professors know the developmental readiness of their students. To create settings that challenge students to make developmental growth demands, at the least, that professors have some model of development and some way to recognize the students' developmental level. By knowing which order of consciousness our students are using to make meaning of issues in their professional lives, we can next move towards

identifying how and when students make developmental changes.

Moving from one order to another requires examination and deconstruction of one's "big assumptions" (Kegan & Lahey, 2002). This process leads to change in thought and ultimately in behavior. Underlying this process of change is the fundamental belief that each of us holds onto assumptions because of our fear of the consequences of change.

As an example, Kegan and Lahey describe one manager's desire that his staff exhibit more individual initiative. However, the competing assumption that held back his progress is his fear that if he lets go of his control, quality of work will fall. This fear inhibits him from realizing his desire of having subordinates demonstrate more initiative. When a teacher is able to help the learner openly examine such assumptions, cognitive conflict is created which functions as the mechanism from one developmental level to the next.

In order to plan such instruction effectively, professors need to know which order of development their students rely on to interpret the world and their actions. In this study, we attempt to illustrate the power of developmental approaches to multicultural education by examining the students' comments in terms of Kegan's orders of meaning making.

## Method

Sixty students enrolled in two different 4-year colleges in the northeast were asked to read a teaching case and respond to it in writing. Twenty of these students were graduate students in an early childhood/elementary education masters pro-

gram and attended a large open-access university located in a large city with an urban mission. The ethnicities of these students were as follows: 10 White, three Hispanic/Latino, one Black, and six who did not self-identify.

These students were enrolled in an online curriculum class and responded to a case entitled "White Faces Don't Want to be my Friend" (Rand & Shelton-Colangelo, 2003). The other 40 students were undergraduate secondary education students and attended a small selective public liberal arts college located in a suburb of another larger city. Thirty-seven of these students were White and three were Black. These students responded to a case entitled "Them and Us" (Rand & Shelton-Colangelo, 2003). See Table 2 for description of the data set.

### "White Faces Don't Want To Be My Friend" Case

The teaching case is about a student teacher in elementary health education who has difficulty managing one of her first-grade classes, primarily because of one challenging student. Toward the end of the case, the student teacher describes the following scene:

As part of a dental unit, I was reading the class a book about a missing tooth. The book told about two best friends who were always alike until one of them lost a tooth and the other experienced profound disappointment over being different. As I led the class in a discussion about how people did not have to be the same to be friends, I was struck by the fact that Jasmine was leaning forward and listening intently. I saw her slowly raise her hand and hesitantly begin to speak. She

**Table 2.**  
**Data Set.**

	<i>Data Set A</i>	<i>Data Set B</i>
<b>Case Read</b>	"White Faces Don't Want to be my Friend"	"Them and Us"
<b>Program Enrolled</b>	Early Childhood/Elementary Education	Secondary Education
<b>Level of Student</b>	Graduate	Undergraduate
<b>Description of Institution</b>	Large, Public, Open-Access University with an Urban Mission	Small, Public, Selective Liberal Arts 4-year College
<b>Student Demographics</b>	10 White, 3 Hispanic/Latino 1 Black and 6 did not self-identify	37 White, 3 Black



said, "I get upset because I have a black face, and white faces don't want to be my friend." (p. 81).

## "Them and Us" Case

The teaching case is about a student teacher in a suburban high school who learns that there is a racial issue behind the isolation of a group of newcomers in her class. These three Latina students always choose to sit together and work together on group projects. The student teacher creates a jigsaw activity whereby the students will be forced to work in other groups separate from each other.

After class the three girls approach the teacher explaining that they prefer to work together because they are not wanted at the school: "They call us names and make fun of us because we are Latinas." At the end of the case, the student teacher describes her dilemma:

I knew this conflict could escalate further and needed to cease now. How could I prevent the name calling in the halls and cafeteria from happening in the future? How could I find a way to get the three students integrated into my classroom?

Students were asked to read the assigned case and respond to the following questions: (1) What are the major issues in the case? (2) What should the teacher do?

## Findings

Kegan (1998) claims that the challenges of modern life require a level of cognitive development that many adults, included well-educated ones, have not achieved. Addressing issues of diversity is exactly the kind of demand that requires that adults develop more complex mental orientations to the world (1998, 198-233).

More specifically, Kegan contends that most adults operate at third order consciousness, while responding effectively to interactions among socially different groups requires at least a fourth order. As will be illustrated, the response our students made to these cases clearly demonstrated that they are functioning at third order. If our teachers are to learn how to respond effectively to the expectations of the multicultural classroom, they will need to take the steps needed to gain the more complex world views found in fourth order consciousness. It is our role to understand how to help them take these steps.

The model of cognitive development that Kegan proposes is a complex one. It may be best characterized by understand-

ing that each level of awareness has, as its center of meaning-making a focal strategy for constructing sense. At each order of development, this focal strategy becomes more complex; in fact, it become complex by incorporating the constructs of the earlier stage as the building blocks for the next stage. In a second order of consciousness, for example, the focusing strategy is to explain the world in terms of a single entity. A child at this stage explains the world in terms of his or her ego-centric position. He or she explains what is wrong with the world by focusing on what is wrong with his or her "self."

In a third order of consciousness, the adolescent has mastered the child's explanation of self and can begin to understand the world better by focusing on the relationship between selves. Fourth order consciousness allows the individual to switch attention away from the nature of the relationship itself in order to focus on the systemic context that organizes these relationships.

In our sample, the students consistently focus on the relationship between the characters. Few are inclined to rest on explanations that emerge from a second order consciousness. Such a response would claim that the minority children are the problem because they refuse to follow the ego-centric expectations of the individual who is speaking. Instead, our respondents typically acknowledge that the minorities have a right to feel alienated because they are placed in bad interpersonal positions. Respondents empathize with them because they have experienced the same feelings in similar situations. Their suggestions primarily target ways that the relationships within the classroom could be ameliorated.

What is missing, however, is a focus on the system of relationships within a racist/sexist/classist society that create conditions that support these relationship breakdowns. With the exception of a general allusion to the label of culture or race or the acceptance that race and class add a new dimension to interpersonal relationships, students were not focused on explaining or ameliorating the social structures that create these relationship dynamics.

A review of student responses illustrates how the focus on relationships allows an approach to making meaning of multicultural events that operates within the range of Kegan's third order adults. While our students ranged from those who were just beginning to understand how to conceive the problem in terms of

relationships to those who were recognizing the cross-cultural dimensions of relationships, they remained working within the developmental parameters of Kegan's third order of consciousness. Below, typical responses in each area are listed by order of consciousness.

## Order 2 Responses

In general, order 2 responses interpret the case as a personal problem that needs to be resolved by the individual. Systemic issues are invisible because the focus is on how the individual student feels and what can be done to help the learner feel good enough to get back on task, either by overcoming negative feelings (such as self-centeredness) or by gaining support from the teacher.

## Transition to Order 3 Responses

Kegan's analysis of development recognizes that there are transitional stages when the adult is just beginning to recognize issues in the new order of consciousness but still struggles to formulate them using the old. The following responses suggested to us that some students are only starting to recognize that racial issues are embedded in the lived interactions between people while still emphasizing the individual's position as the grounding for the explanation (rather than an interactional one).

In the "Them or Us" case, the respondents begin to recognize the effects of the group interactions on their feeling: For student 7 the girls

want to feel as comfortable as possible in school, and the only way they think they can feel this way is by not interacting with the rest of the students. They don't like feeling badly about themselves, so by remaining isolated, they are with people who support them.

The problem caused by this separation is conceptualized as one of limited social abilities:

when working in groups of friends, students do not have the opportunity to expand their social circle. They are not put in a position where they have to work through personal conflicts to get the job done. When students get older, they are going to be put in life situations where they work with people they don't like.

Her/his response was to introduce cultural information and insist on social skill development. Cultural information would help students respect people with other cultural

backgrounds. Yet, the solutions continue to trust the 'fix them' personally approach of 2<sup>nd</sup> order thinker. While 3<sup>rd</sup> order students respond by discuss things like team-building strategies, this particular student targeted the minority students, she/he would "continue to force the three Latina students to integrate. Even though they will feel uncomfortable at first, if they are forced to do this everyday, there is a good chance that with time, things will change."

### Order 3 Responses

These responses reflect the largest group of students. They organize the issues as interpersonal ones. The problem is embedded in the relationship between the characters in the case. They can abstract some aspects of effective relationships in order to diagnose the relational issues.

In the "White Faces" case, the problem is viewed as one in which the minority students feel bad as a result of negative interpersonal relationships. Student K. summarizes the situation: "Jasmine is not behaving well because White faces don't want to be her friend." Her solutions are to scaffold these young students into trusting relationships. Her ideas are worth quoting in entirety:

If I'm the teacher, I will assure Jasmine that Black is a beautiful color, and she should not be ashamed of her color. If there are other African-American children in that class, I'll show her how well they are behaving and how they are friendly with White faces. In the long term, I will bring stories for Jasmine about African-Americans, and how successful they were. Also, I'll bring Black dolls to the class, so that White faces could play with them and she could see that White faces love the color black. I'll bring pictures and tapes of Black and White faces playing together. Crayons could be very helpful, too. She could see that each crayon is unique and different, but they all have beautiful colors, same as the color of people.

The "Them or Us" scenario is defined by 3<sup>rd</sup> order thinkers as primarily a problem of social relations.

### Transition to Order 4 Responses

In the transition to 4<sup>th</sup> order consciousness, adults begin to see the dilemma within a systemic context. They have yet to construct a language for understanding and analyzing the system. Their reaction is to enhance and extend the interpersonal solutions that emerged in 3<sup>rd</sup> order thinking. In particular, they will often argue

that individuals, like the teacher, are not aware of this as a systemic problem and part of the solution is to help them "see" the problems. Frequently, issues of social justice begin to emerge, given that the system itself unfair.

In the "White Faces Don't Want to be My Friend" case, fourth order thinking focuses on how the class provides a setting for Jasmine's behavior. She is acting out because of classmates rejecting her. A better discriminator, since the classroom relations focus could indicate 3<sup>rd</sup> order thinking, is that these students conceptualized race as a systemic issue. Student M. wanted to create a discussion about race as a general construct. Her/his emphasis was to "ask the entire class if they think it is right to exclude someone because of the color of their skin?"

The solutions, however, revert to ameliorating the relationships and the effects of negative relationships on the individual. "Ask Jasmine how she feels when this is done to her ... try to make the entire class understand that Jasmine is hurt by this behavior, and if they would like to be excluded."

Student 9 demonstrates how those making the transition to 4<sup>th</sup> order consciousness will construct the "Them or Us" case. This student claimed that the isolation was not a problem but a solution that the minority students adopted because of the school context. In her/his words it was, "something that they wanted to ensure remained the same. They were being persecuted in the hallway for being different and they needed to make sure that they were at least safe in the classroom. It is a schoolwide problem..."

The concern, voiced by another student at this level, was that the teacher (and school authorities) would not recognize the behavior because "she had never been judged based on her race." The definition of the race problem is clearly in the system of the school and shaped by the society's racial divisions. In response, these students are just beginning to locate the solution in system level behaviors; yet, they still aim at resolving the interpersonal fit. She/he says

Possible solutions would be to teach Latino history or encourage the girls to join an extracurricular activity or change the permanent seats in the room. Have them [all students] do individual projects on their heritage and share with the class. Ann [the teacher] could teach about the important of Latino and Jewish community in their school. If she taught interest-

ing facts about each, maybe they would be more willing to approach each other.

The other student extended the same thought with similar limit to the interpersonal effect: "The schoolwide problem is a lack of respect and of embracing people's differences. A possible solution is to have schoolwide programs."

### Discussion

Our results indicate that there is an underlying developmental meaning-making system. Our claim is that dispositions are, in their essence, manifested in behaviors that we can see. They are seen in the actions that we take and the language that we speak. Underneath these behaviors is the meaning-making system that results in attitudes, values and beliefs.

Our data are consistent with Kegan's theory that this meaning-making system is in itself a developmental one. There are qualitative shifts in thinking that result in an understanding of race and cultural diversity in progressively different ways. These different understandings lead to predictable dispositional responses. Our students' responses tended to show dispositions to respond to these situations based on 3<sup>rd</sup> order consciousness; there was some evidence of transitions from second order and towards fourth order thinking.

As previous research has indicated, the use of narrative teaching cases provides a rich tool for the exploration of students' thoughts, ideas and beliefs. Similarly, our findings provide a window into our students' dispositions and thus their underlying meaning-making system. This information will allow us as instructors to know the order of consciousness our students' use to understand multicultural issue. It can help us prepare appropriate learning tools to coincide with those developmental levels. As Kegan's work illustrates, it is essential that the instructor's learning tools and teaching strategies do not place students in "over their heads."

This study represents our preliminary attempt to recognize the developmental level of our students as evidenced by the dispositions they demonstrate towards diversity issues. The next step is to confirm these results in more controlled, systematic research. The nature of this exploratory pilot work leads us to be tentative in our conclusions. Future research can extend this work to include student examination of their own thought processes.

We are also interested in what would assist in transformational learning; that is,

learning that results in a qualitatively different thought process and understanding or learning that results in a developmental shift in one's meaning-making system (see, for example, Adams, 2002). Analyses using different theoretical models, such as those of Maslow and Kohlberg would also illuminate our results and provide a more multi-faceted approach to the analyses.

This research provides a valuable tool for analyzing the meaning making of teachers—both pre-service and in-service. It is not until we understand the developmental stage of the reasoning our students use that we can provide the supportive environment to encourage developmental growth. Our research will continue further in looking at the meaning-making of teachers and teacher candidates across various different teaching cases. This will allow us to look at the stability of our measurements across contexts.

The next step after that is to examine the supports that we can use in higher education to move our students to higher levels of consciousness. Seeing dispositions as a manifestation of the underlying developmental structure of this consciousness or meaning making will bring us closer to helping teachers recognize their own developmental levels and to creating curricular and instructional methods to challenge that developmental growth.

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