

Using Dispositions in the Teacher Admission Process

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This article focuses on using dispositions as a gate in the admission process. It describes the rationale, pragmatic considerations, and preliminary findings for using dispositions in the admission process for prospective teachers. Three questions are explored. Should dispositions be used as an admission criterion? Is it reasonable to expect major dispositional change in the time-span associated with program completion? Is the use of dispositions for admission decisions defensible? Findings indicate that the use of dispositions screening improves the quality of the student, and a small number of students are resistant to deselection themselves from pursuing teaching credentials.

Since the inclusion of dispositions in the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards for accreditation, institutions have devised an assortment of approaches to demonstrate that program completers "...can apply their knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions in a manner that facilitates student learning" (NCATE, 2007). In preparation for an NCATE visit, faculty at a large, regional, comprehensive teacher preparation institution decided to make the intentional, thoughtful, and research-based implementation of a dispositions construct the foundational element of the program's conceptual framework. A core element in this initiative included using dispositions as a key component in the admission process.

The use of dispositions as the core element in the conceptual framework and admissions process was motivated by dissatisfaction with previous candidates who generated both angst during their time in the program and ethical concerns about

their impact on future students. It became evident that: (a) most candidates who failed, or should have failed, student teaching could typically demonstrate sufficient knowledge and skills but lacked the dispositions to be successful; (b) students with significant dispositional mismatch were usually discernable by faculty early in a program; and (c) students' dispositions did not change radically during the short time period of a teacher preparation program. Additionally, it was observed that (d) efforts to counsel these students out of the program through alternative career exploration strategies, such as class and individual discussions, career counseling, and self-reflection, proved ineffective. These students were either unwilling or unable to reflect on evidence that indicated a mismatch between their dispositional characteristics and those associated with effective teaching. Consequently, it was decided that dispositions must be taken into account at the time of admission, and that a minimal level of appropriate dispositions is a reasonable and necessary admission criterion.

Defining Dispositions

Current approaches to dispositions (Diez & Raths, 2007) often wrestle with one or more of the following debates: are they changeable or fixed; do they exist because of internal impetus or external stimulus; are they measurable using qualitative or quantitative instruments; and are they keys to admission, or tied to instruction? Some approaches envision dispositions as summaries of act frequencies; patterns of actions; moral development that centers upon character, intellect, or care; intrapersonal knowledge; and internal existence (Buss & Craik, 1983; Collinson, 1996; Katz & Raths, 1985; McKnight, 2004; Sockett, 2006). Others describe dispositions as intentional (as opposed to unconscious) and habitual (Wenzlaff, 1998), while yet others point to dispositions as inherent characteristics (Diez, 2006). While Freeman (2007) cited both the positive and negative aspects of the ambiguous and inconsistent usage of the term disposition, what is clear is that it has led to significant thinking, debate, and research.

Many assessment strategies for gauging dispositions have been developed, ranging from simple observation of behaviors through inventories or checklists, to rubric rating systems meant to assess personality or teaching characteristics, to high inference or clinical assessments focusing on core values and beliefs. Given sufficient time, valid assessment methods, and enough sampling of candidate behavior, virtually any approach can provide important information about candidate dispositions. However, there is never enough time to get to know all students well; valid and reliable measurement instruments are hard to come by; and the number of candidates limits opportunities for meaningful interaction and observation.

Perceptual Psychological Model

To avoid many of the concerns enumerated above, it was decided to use a construct of

dispositions that encompasses only elements that do not fall into the areas of knowledge or skills and to limit the scope to as few elements as necessary. This led to an adoption of a dispositions model based on the work of Combs, Richards, and Richards (1976). Unlike behavioral or characteristics models, the Perceptual Dispositions Model drills down to the attitudes, values, beliefs, or perceptions level of the personality. This allows for a more manageable number of variables to define and measure, and more predictive value, but with the trade-off of requiring the use of more qualitative assessment measures. The major focus of Combs' research was the human qualities that permit some teachers and other helping professionals to facilitate greater than average positive change in students, clients, and other individuals with whom they interact. Combs, a contemporary and colleague of Maslow and Rogers, postulated that (a) behaviors are based on perceptions; (b) core perceptions are formed over a lifetime and change slowly; (c) behavior can be understood and predicted if one can determine how people perceive themselves, their world, and their goals; (d) and other's perceptions are readily available by inferring from behaviors to core perceptions (Combs & Snygg, 1949).

Over the course of 40 years, Combs and others explored the implications of a perceptual psychology for understanding and improving the education professions (Combs & Snygg, 1949; Combs, Soper, Gooding, Benton, Dickman, & Usher, 1969; Combs et al., 1976). Most of the studies investigated the perceptual characteristics of educators who were able to significantly and positively affect others. Results of these studies found modest correlation between particular teacher behaviors or methodologies and effectiveness, but consistently found that four general areas of perceptions can serve to differentiate effective from ineffective teachers. These are perceptions about self, perceptions about other people, perceptions about the teaching task, and general frame of reference.

The implication for teacher preparation is clear. There are identifiable perceptual characteristics associated with teacher effectiveness that can and should be taken into account in teacher education programs. The results of this extensive research can be viewed at www.educatordispositions.org (Wasicsko, 2005a).

Assessing Dispositions

The Perceptual Dispositions Model was chosen because it is straightforward, it is easily understood by students and faculty, and it is built upon a strong theoretical and research base. The model also has a readily available research-based assessment tool that provides valid information that can be used for predictive purposes, but it does require significant training due to its qualitative nature. Numerous studies demonstrated that perceptual rubrics can be taught and used with a high degree of validity and reliability (Combs et al., 1969).

Wasicsko (1977a) as part of a doctoral study supervised by Combs, studied the teachability of perceptual factors and found that four could be rapidly acquired in training sessions. The four factors were perceptions of self as identified with a broad range of people, rather than unidentified; perceptions of others as able to deal with the problems they face, rather than unable; perceptions of purpose in terms of larger implications, rather than smaller insignificant outcomes; and a frame of reference that focuses on people concerns, rather than things. This subsequently led to the development of self-instructional training materials for the four perceptual factors (Wasicsko, 1977b; 2005b).

The four factors above were selected as the elements for the dispositions construct in the Perceptual Rating Scale (Appendix). Each factor was placed on a seven point Likert Scale with the dispositions of effective teachers on one end (7) and those of ineffective teachers on the other (1). Prior to using the scales, raters were provided

with systematic training and had to demonstrate acceptable proficiency. The minimum acceptable level of proficiency was an 80% inter-rater agreement on a 13-item posttest. Faculty who did not achieve the 80% level, as well as others interested in additional training, were directed to *Assessing Dispositions: A Perceptual Psychological Approach* (Wasicsko, 2005a), free, self-instructional materials available at www.educatordispositions.org.

Dispositions as Admission Criteria

Arguments for using dispositions in admission decisions have theoretical as well as practical roots. Most teacher educators agree that some elements related to effective teaching are more easily learned than others. For example, there is good evidence that content knowledge is among the easier elements to learn and measure, and that dispositions such as caring or warmth are among the hardest. Many question whether it is even possible to teach dispositional elements, or if it is reasonable to think that major shifts in these characteristics can happen during the course of a two to four year program. General tenets of perceptual and behavioral psychology support these concerns.

From a perceptual psychological perspective, dispositions are formed over a lifetime and are slow to change. However, the fact that people can, and do, change cannot be disputed. The essential questions are how much dispositional change is reasonable to expect with the time and resources allotted, and should candidates who do not possess a minimum level of dispositions be admitted with the expectation that they will change sufficiently?

Perceptual Admission Model

Faculty had to create a dispositional admission plan that, in addition to having a research base, was both humane and fair, and would stand up to procedural and legal

challenges. It was determined that a well-developed admission strategy that included a minimum level of required dispositions at the time of admission could be created to meet these criteria.

In the Perceptual Admission Model, undergraduate students considering a career in education are provided with a structured opportunity to make self-assessments about their dispositional fit. This is followed by a period of mentoring and guided reflection with education advisors. The process culminates with applicants providing evidence of meeting a required minimum level of dispositions prior to formal admission to the program. Candidates who cannot demonstrate the minimum level of acceptable dispositions are deferred until such time as they can supply sufficient evidence.

The first two elements--self-assessing and self-selecting, and mentoring and counseling--were integrated into freshman and sophomore foundations courses. It was decided that students should have knowledge about teaching careers, opportunities to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, and P-12 field experiences prior to requesting admission to the teacher education program.

Self-assessing and Self-selecting

Perceptual Theory purports that people are generally able to make good decisions about career fit if they are given adequate information and opportunities for self-reflection. The experience gained from having over 2,000 students complete the introductory course confirms this assumption for the vast majority of students. Only the relatively few with major dispositional mismatch had difficulty with the task.

To help students assess their fit for a teaching career, four dispositions reflection assignments were developed and tested in the introductory

course. The assignments were used for self-reflection/self-assessment by the students. Responses were only included in the portfolio if students entered the teacher preparation program. The course assignments can be viewed at www.educatordispositions.org (Wasicsko, 2005a).

Mentoring and Counseling

The second foundations course in the admission sequence included embedded dispositions related assignments. The course incorporated lectures, reflective exercises, and a field placement tutoring a special needs P-12 student. The course instructors, who were proficient with the dispositions scales, helped mentor and guide students with continued self-assessment. In those few cases of severe dispositional mismatch, alternative career counseling was provided. By the end of the course, the instructors had a good assessment of the students' capabilities and potential for a career in teaching.

Admitting or Deferring

In addition to assigning a course grade, instructors in the second course were required to assess each student's dispositions and indicate on a recommendation form if the student had met the minimal level of dispositions required for admission. If sufficient evidence was accumulated during the course, the instructor could recommend the student for admission, and the admission committee could waive an admission interview. It was possible for a student to pass the course (exhibit sufficient knowledge), but not demonstrate the needed level of dispositions. If the evidence for having the required minimum level of dispositions was not clear and compelling, the student went before the admission committee for a structured, dispositional interview using the same dispositional scoring criteria. If the admission committee did not find evidence that the student possessed the minimum level of dispositions, the student was deferred and could

try to bring other evidence for a re-interview at a later date.

The use of the term deferred is critical for both procedural and legal reasons. If dispositions are treated just like other admission requirements, deferring (as opposed to denying) an applicant until such time as he/she can demonstrate that all the criteria are met leaves the burden of proof with the applicant. Denying an applicant usually leads to a request for reasons, a prescription for remediation that places the burden of proof on the institution, and, to avoid legal entanglements, admission to the program.

The actual number of candidates needing deferral is relatively small, but their impact on program resources can be significant. The magnitude of their effect can be gauged by determining the number of candidates who fail, or should fail, their final field experience. In most open-admission institutions the percentage of students falling into this category is relatively small, ranging from two to five percent. However, the resource drain they create can cause a noteworthy amount of faculty and administrator angst.

Results

Almost 2,000 undergraduate students completed the introductory course by the fall of 2005. Preliminary analysis indicated that most students could understand the dispositions scales; could make accurate use of the scales in assessing written human relations incidents (HRIs); were able to make accurate self-assessments regarding their dispositional fit for a career in education; and were able to make decisions to continue or not continue to pursue admission based on their self-assessment.

One of the most interesting findings was that the small number of students who had the lowest scores on the dispositions scales, determined by trained raters blindly scoring the

four assignments, had the most trouble accurately self-assessing their dispositional fit. When these students were presented with evidence to the contrary, they continued to insist that they had the required dispositions in significant amounts and would be effective teachers. These students also had the greatest difficulty understanding and using the dispositions scales and making reflections.

These findings cast serious doubt on the efficacy of open admission to teacher education programs and on the reliance on self-deselection for applicants who do not possess the desired dispositions. In all likelihood, these would be the same students who become problematic once admitted to the program, and cause practical, ethical, and legal issues at the end of the program and in their careers.

As was expected, students receiving high dispositions scores made more accurate self-assessments, and could more accurately rate HRIs. They also made more realistic decisions about careers in teaching, even though some of them opted out of teaching in favor of careers in other helping professions. Most students scored in the middle of the dispositions scales and made reasonable judgments about their career choices.

The efficacy of mentoring and counseling students regarding their dispositional fit in the second course was dependent upon the course instructor. When the instructor was adequately trained on the scales, and committed to implementing the dispositions screening program, it helped mismatched students pursue other options, or led to students being deferred by the admission committee. In cases where the instructors lacked training or commitment, some mismatched students slipped into the program. This presents a most interesting dilemma. Can a model for dispositions be created and successfully implemented if the faculty are not committed to the model, or cannot demonstrate the dispositions themselves?

Conclusions

The Perceptual Dispositions Model shows promise for solving some of the critical pragmatic and procedural issues related to admitting teacher candidates with the dispositions associated with effective teachers. The Perceptual Dispositions Model provides students with opportunities to make accurate self-assessments regarding career fit, and offers faculty the means to admit candidates with the necessary dispositions. When implemented with adequate procedures, it provides a defensible mechanism to defer candidates who cannot demonstrate the required dispositions. Results indicate that undergraduate students can understand the definition of dispositions in the Perceptual Dispositions Model and, with the notable exception of students with severe dispositional mismatch, can make accurate self-assessments about fit for teaching careers by using structured self-reflective tasks. Further, teacher education faculty can use the dispositional scales to make judgments about dispositions for the undergraduate admission processes if they understand and are committed to the dispositions model. This leads us to two questions for further study. Can faculty be committed to and use the dispositions model if they do not possess the dispositions themselves? More importantly, should the same dispositions required of students also be required of faculty? The next step in developing the Perceptual Dispositions Model will be longitudinal studies that track program completers and determine correlates between candidate dispositions and student learning, growth, and development.

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Appendix

Perceptual Rating Scales for Perceptual Dispositions Model

PERCEPTUAL RATING SCALE

PERCEPTIONS OF SELF:

IDENTIFIED

The teacher feels an oneness with all people. S/He perceives him/herself as deeply and meaningfully related to persons of every

UNIDENTIFIED

The teacher feels generally apart from others. His/her feelings of oneness are restricted to those of similar beliefs.

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PERCEPTIONS OF OTHERS:

ABLE

The teacher sees others as having capacities to deal with their problems. S/He believes others are basically able to find adequate solutions to events in their own lives.

UNABLE

The teacher sees others as lacking the necessary capacities to deal effectively with their problems. S/He doubts their own decisions and run their own lives.

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PERCEPTIONS OF PURPOSE:

LARGER

The teacher views events in a broad perspective. His/her goals extend beyond the immediate to larger implications and contexts.

SMALLER

The teacher views events in a narrow perspective. His/her purposes focus on immediate and specific goals.

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FRAME OF REFERENCE:

PEOPLE

The teacher is concerned with the human aspects of affairs. The attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and welfare of persons are prime considerations in his/her thinking.

THINGS

The teacher is concerned with the impersonal aspects of affairs. Questions of order, management, mechanics, and details of things and events are prime considerations in his/her thinking.

7 6 5 4 3 2 1