

Do They Have the Right Dispositions? Teacher Education in the New Conceptual Age

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In 1992 the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) coined the term *Dispositions*; the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2002) defined dispositions making dispositions a part of every teacher accreditation process. Since that time educators have struggled over the inevitable challenges of identifying, infusing, and investing dispositions in teacher education programs. Dispositions have become a critical ingredient in the production of new teachers and administrators. With the dawn of the new “Conceptual Age,” dispositions are in the center of any discussion of teacher education. This paper examines the topic of teacher education dispositions, both in defining and implementing the concept and process. The Charleston Southern University School of Education’s continuing process through the dispositions milieu is addressed.

Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions: the trifecta of modern teacher education. Managing Praxis Exams and practica, teacher educators believed they had a handle on the assessment of knowledge and skills, but what about dispositions? Since the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) coined the term in 1992 and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2002, p. 53) defined it as “the values, commitments and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator’s own professional growth,” educators have struggled over the inevitable challenges of identifying, infusing, and investing dispositions in teacher education programs.

Literally entire conferences are devoted to the topic of dispositions. According to the National Network for the Study of Educator Dispositions (NNSD, 2007), dispositions have become a

critical ingredient in the production of new teachers and administrators. Moreover, the dawn of the new “Conceptual Age” (Pink, 2006) brings right brain dispositions into the center of any discussion of teacher education.

Not only must competitive teacher education programs shift programmatic thinking from left brain alone to include right brain, how to define elusive dispositions such as tolerance, empathy, and commitment to a wide and fluid constituency must now be decided. Clearly, this question is not approached without risk. Some consider the application of Dispositions within the context of teacher education programs, especially as “gate-keeping” mechanisms, to be inappropriate and even biased. For example, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, (2005, p. 1) reports “A new trend in campus censorship is emerging: this summer, Washington State University used “dispositions” theory to punish an education student for his political and religious expression. The university relented only after the

Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) became involved.”

Dispositions convey a unique set of challenges to programs and the evaluation process. There are four challenges to consider as one attempts to do something meaningful with dispositions.

- Disagreements over the meaning(s) of dispositions may lead to a broad array of problems, ranging from the risk of offending one’s sensibilities to outright legal challenges.
- The work of doing dispositions requires different kinds of cognitive energy at different points in time. For example, creating a set of dispositions requires a different skill set than modifying or applying dispositions to teaching all require time and talent.
- It can be difficult to count that which cannot be “counted.” (Thanks to Einstein for that one.)
- There is an element of stewardship in this work that has largely been ignored, but must be openly discussed. Educators hold an ethical responsibility to model appropriate dispositions in their own practice and to guide the development of solid dispositions in candidates.

Dispositions and the New Conceptual Age

The scenarios described herein seem familiar to those who work in teacher education, or indeed any of the social science or “helping” professions, but dispositions carry new weight when one considers the paradigm shift described by Pink (2006) in *A whole new mind: why right brainers will rule the future*.

For years, teacher education programs struggled to compete with the hard sciences, attempting to legitimize research and practice

through laborious exercises in counting and sorting behaviors, so that they would be measurable, and therefore authentic. However, the new logic of the “Conceptual Age”, according to Pink (2006) is that the right brain dispositions of empathy, story, meaning and others will define success now and in the future. These dispositions allow one to negotiate complex social and emotional situations that are constantly in flux, such as the classroom. Dispositions are what talented new teachers need and which competitive teacher education programs must include, but that challenge raises a number of questions, such as the following:

- How does an institution define and organize dispositions?
- Will dispositions feed into accreditation data?
- How will faculty and students communicate about dispositions?
- What decisions will rely on dispositional information?
- How can disposition assessment data be gathered and used?

Each teacher education program must face these essential questions. NCATE requires that dispositions be addressed, while new directions into right brain theory bring dispositions into the forefront.

Defining the Role of Dispositions

Have you ever had a teacher education candidate arrive at the gate of his or her student teaching internship and say to yourself that you just can’t see this person being a good teacher?

Did you ever have to moderate one of those painful conferences in which a tearful, angry candidate challenges you with his solid grades and carefully crafted lesson plans and asks: “What do you mean something is missing in my teaching?”

Truly, a candidate may demonstrate satisfactory knowledge and even skills, but something can be missing in his or her practice. We know it when we don't see it...the dispositions necessary for teaching.

No pre-service checklist of behaviors can fully reveal or predict what a new teacher will do, positively or negatively in the field. We need more. We need to do something with dispositions before unfortunate circumstances occur in real classrooms.

This threat helps to explain why our profession has elevated dispositions to equal status with knowledge and skills. The assessment of dispositions helps, to a degree, to answer such questions as:

- “Does the candidate really believe in what he or she is doing?”
- “Can we trust the candidate to conduct him or herself with integrity and compassion when we are no longer watching?”
- “Will the candidate respond professionally in real world settings when a grade or the issuing of a certificate is not his or her motivation?”

As indicated by the definition provided for dispositions, we can see that dispositions are about the tendencies to act in a predictable way rather than the knowledge and skills themselves that a teacher candidate may possess. See Figure 1.

Lessons Learned from the Charleston Southern University Dispositions Journey

Over the course of four years, a focus group, aptly named “The Dispositions Committee” labored to define dispositions and determine the role that they would take in our CSU program(s). Truthfully, this committee was formed in response to an impending NCATE visit, but its work quickly became glued to the benchmarks of the

unit and core beliefs and decisions made by the faculty.

The potential for dispositions to shape our program fueled many lively philosophical discussions within the committee and bled over into the full department and subsequently into the teacher education committee, a group representing arts and science faculty, and then into the entire education community. From the beginning we involved representatives of all stakeholders in this process; the number and diversity of stakeholders brought assorted viewpoints to the table.

Asking the essential question: “What measurable, meaningful dispositions do we want to see in all candidates?” while guided by our Conceptual Framework and other national and state standards, we began to create lists of possible dispositions that were, over time, culled and cleaned to become usable and reliable in our program.

To insure validity, we constantly compared our emerging list with dispositional standards already in place nationally. INTASC was one sure source, as well as the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and our own South Carolina system for assisting, developing, and evaluating professional teaching (ADEPT) standards. This cacophony of dispositional voices was blended into a matrix that fed our final product.

Six overarching dispositions emerged from the synthesis, each with a comprehensive description of its meaning to describe our teacher education candidates and organized within the three standards of the conceptual framework, competent, caring, and committed. They include the following:

- Professional Responsibility
- School and Technical Operations

- Learning Community
- Communication and Collaboration
- Responsive to Diversity
- Professional Commitment and Integrity

Once the primary list of dispositions and descriptions emerged, we unpacked them into observable and measurable behaviors.

The CSU committee asked: “What is it that one sees or hears that makes one conclude a candidate is professionally responsible?” Our goal was to cite patterns of observable behaviors that our candidates would demonstrate, breathing action into our vision for “Competent, Caring, Committed teachers, our conceptual model.

For example, if we envision *teaching as a profession where practitioners demonstrate respect for human diversity*, what could we observe candidates doing that would be consistent with this vision? What actual behaviors would we see or hear that would lead one to conclude the student has respect for human diversity?

Concurrently, as we proceeded, the descriptions naturally fell into developmental levels of expectations. A sophomore would not necessarily have the same expectations as a junior in a practicum or the same as a student teacher. It was at this juncture that a developmental programmatic rubric was created to serve as a road map of expectations for candidates at different points in their programs.

The dispositions rubric and the dispositions themselves fuel class discussions providing opportunities for candidates to process the multiple meanings, causes, and responses to and for events in the classroom, giving their professors and themselves a common language with which to deconstruct their own beliefs and practices.

For example, candidates in upper level methods courses apply the dispositional rubric to

every case study analyzed. There are twenty case studies each semester. Similar applications of the dispositions can be found throughout the graduate and undergraduate programs, providing insight to candidates’ professional growth.

What do we do if a candidate demonstrates a poor pattern in a set of dispositions? The operative word is *pattern*, defined at CSU as three significant violations of the dispositional rubric, documented by faculty or cooperating teachers. For each violation, the student must write a remediation plan approved and monitored by a supervising faculty member. In addition, advising, conferences, and extended experiences based on their specific dispositional deficiencies are available and personalized for candidates. The faculty finds that our “three strikes and you are out” procedure is effective in helping candidates to understand the importance of proper dispositions. A document has been developed for faculty use and is included here as Figure 2.

Specifically, should a student receive three documented dispositions violations during a candidate’s progression through the program, action is required. Candidates may be required to repeat specific courses, extend clinical experiences, attend counseling or tutoring sessions through the office of the Student Success Center, or even be recommended to the Teacher Education Committee for removal from the program.

The following key points emerged as the dispositions became rooted in practice.

- While candidates receive copies of dispositions in classes, on syllabi, on websites, and in handbooks, they seldom attend to them until there is a question or concern related to their own practice. Faculty cannot assume compliance.
- Dispositions matter to good teaching and to pupil performance and emotional well-being, but the degree to which dispositions

will matter rests with one's willingness to agree on and assess that role.

- The challenges and tests regarding dispositions will take up much more time, energy, and human resources than one might imagine, but by holding firm, a better quality candidate will eventually emerge from the program.
- Public schools want teacher education programs to produce candidates with the "right" dispositions, the process flows seamlessly when stakeholders work together. Many critical dispositions remain hidden or passive until they are activated by a mistake or mis-step in clinical practice.
- Dispositions is a highly charged term. Remain alert and responsive while dealing with this potentially explosive topic.
- Dispositions don't have to be fancy nor fanatical. They should be fair and focused, both in what they say and how they are assessed. Dispositions must have "teeth" to be effective which means specifics: points, grades, or other values. Keep in mind, a simple instrument and an accessible assessment plan work best and will more likely be used by faculty and clinical staff than a highly complex, ostentatious model.
- Common language should flow across all elements of the teacher education or educational administration program. Therefore, it will take time to appropriately add dispositions to syllabi, observation forms, benchmarks, and program assessments. We are continuing to put these key points into practice at CSU and try to learn from the journey.

At the program level, dispositional data have already helped us to:

- Make informed changes in coursework,
- Track cohorts of candidates,
- "Red flag" weak candidates and provide assistance,

- Meet the needs of our educational communities, by improving candidates' understanding of diversity and special needs, and
- Provide a common language with which faculty and clinical instructors may discuss important, previously ambiguous issues.

Conclusions

The story of dispositions is different in every program and in every candidate's experience. In fact, it is an indication of a quality program. As John Dewey wisely noted in 1893, "The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action" (Dewey, 1893, p.652). What is common and critical is the need to make dispositions come alive in the teaching and learning experience, so that attributes such as compassion, fairness, curiosity, respect, and integrity are available to every student in every classroom as they encounter teachers and administrators who know what they are doing, with knowledge, skills, and dispositions. This kind of thinking requires a paradigm shift, a shift to include the right brain. Teachers and those who prepare teachers for classrooms are challenged to make the right kinds of dispositional decisions, using the right side of the brain. Thinking and behaving this way, we prepare students to be successful in the new Conceptual Age.

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Appendix

Figure 1

PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY (COMPETENT/KNOWLEGE)

Believes and takes responsibility in that all children can learn at high levels and persists in helping children achieve success; appreciates multiple perspectives and conveys to learners how knowledge is developed from the vantage point of the knower in a constructivist philosophy that values systematic inquiry; realizes that subject matter knowledge is not a fixed body of facts but is complex and ever-evolving that considers the cultural background of each student; believes in ongoing assessment as essential to the instructional process and recognizes that many different assessment strategies, accurately and systematically used in purposeful meaningful ways, are necessary for monitoring and promoting student learning; values both long and short term planning in collaboration with colleagues in a demonstration of initiative, flexibility, and openness.

Figure 2

**CHARLESTON SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY CANDIDATE REMEDIATION
TEACHER EDUCATION PROFESSIONAL DISPOSITIONS
AND DISPOSITIONAL BEHAVIORS**

Student Name _____ Date _____

Disposition of Concern: Professional Responsibility School and Classroom Technical Operations
 Learning Community Communication & Collaboration Responsive to Diversity Professional
Integrity & Commitment

Number of Offensives (Inclusive) 1 2 3 4 5 6

Describe Observable and/or Measurable Behavior/s:

Plan of Action:

Validation of Adjustments Made:

Date of Meeting with Professor/Director of UG Studies in Education

Professor Signature _____

Director's Signature _____

Teacher Candidate Signature (Indicating Understanding of Meeting Discussion and Possible
Consequences) _____