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Why is the Study of Dispositions a Necessary Component of an Effective Educator Preparation Program?

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Abstract

We've all had teachers we've loved and teachers we've hated. In almost all cases, this is due, not to their knowledge of subject matter, but to how they interact with us—their disposition to teach. Educator preparation programs in the United States reflect high expectations for Professional Educator Candidates in the area of dispositions. This paper discusses various definitions of dispositions and shows how four very different universities, from both the private and public sectors, implement their programs for determining the disposition to teach in their professional education candidates. In this paper we have used the term “Professional Educator” rather than teacher because we are including counselors and librarians as well as teachers in our discussion of dispositions.

Introduction

The study of dispositions in educator preparation is critical for two reasons. First, the disposition to teach is commonly identified as the primary quality of successful educators (Taylor and Wasicsko, 2000). Second, addressing dispositions in educator preparation programs is required at state and national levels as an element of the accreditation process.

In this paper, we will define dispositions, clarify why they are important in the preparation of educators, and present several models of how dispositions are addressed by educator preparation institutions.

What are Dispositions?

There are various approaches to, and definitions of, dispositions. According to National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), dispositions are:

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. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice. For example, they might include a belief that all students can learn, a vision of high and challenging standards, or a commitment to a safe

and supportive learning environment. (NCATE Glossary of Terms at, <http://www.ncate.org/search/glossary.htm>)

The Kentucky Education Professional Standards Board, in its New Teacher Standards (1999), further addresses dispositions as follows:

The [Kentucky] New Teacher Standards describe what first year educators should know and be able to do in authentic teaching situations and the academic content, teaching behaviors, and instructional processes that are necessary to promote effective student learning. They imply more than the mere demonstration of teaching competence. They imply a current and sufficient academic content understanding that promotes consistent quality performance on teaching tasks. Authentic teaching tasks provide opportunities and contexts for performances by beginning teachers. Dispositions are addressed in the nine teaching standards, particularly in Standard Two: Creates and maintains learning climates. The beliefs and attitudes of caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility and social justice contribute significantly to teachers' abilities to create a successful learning environment. Standard II is measured by the teacher's ability to create a learning climate that supports the development of student abilities to use communication skills, apply core concepts, become self-sufficient individuals, become responsible team members, think and solve problems and integrate knowledge.

Dispositions have been described as the personality, attitudes, values, or beliefs of effective educators. In Zhixin's study, those interviewed considered a "good educator" to be either "1) a good person, with a desirable [personality] characterized by love of children, dedication to teaching, and intuition in exciting children to learn or 2) a learned person, who knows both subject matter and how to convey [it] to children" (1990, ¶ 53). Some descriptions "dance" around the idea of dispositions without quite defining it. Arnstine states:

We may point to particular behaviors as evidence of the dispositions we ascribe, but those behaviors are simply evidence, not the disposition itself. We cannot teach the behaviors that exemplify a disposition in the hopes that the disposition will follow, any more than we can teach a child how to use a ruler and then conclude that he is now disposed to measure carefully. (1990, ¶16)

According to Bruner (1996) the language of dispositions allows us "...to talk not simply about programmable behaviors, but about a flexible range of tendencies to act that persist after schooling has been completed, and that will occur in a future that is essentially unknown." Arnstine states, "Dispositional language enables us to predict how a person might properly behave under a certain range of conditions at some future time" (Arnstine, 1967). Taylor & Wasicsko use the term disposition "...to describe the attitudes, perceptions and/or beliefs that form the basis for behavior" (2000, p. 2).

With a diversity of definitions and perspectives evident in the literature, agencies and institutions have begun to address the subject of dispositions in various ways.

Why are “dispositions” necessary in an effective educator preparation program?

State and national accrediting agencies have included dispositions as an essential element of professional educator preparation. In Kentucky, the two agencies responsible for the accreditation of professional education units are NCATE and the Kentucky Education Professional Standards Board (EPSB). Comparable accreditation agencies can also be found in other states. These agencies are the vehicles used by the professional education community to establish and maintain high quality educator preparation through review and accreditation of schools, colleges and departments of education. The NCATE Standards published in 2002 and accepted by the EPSB as its standard include, along with content knowledge and pedagogical skills, an emphasis on dispositions. These standards describe the requirement for dispositions within the educator preparation program and the requirement for assessment.

Candidates for all professional education roles develop and model dispositions that are expected of educators. The unit articulates candidate dispositions as part of its conceptual framework(s). The unit systematically assesses the development of appropriate professional dispositions by candidates. Dispositions are not usually assessed directly; instead they are assessed along with other performances in candidates' work with students, families, and communities. Candidates for all professional education roles are expected to demonstrate positive effects on student learning. Teachers and teacher candidates have student learning as the focus of their work. Other professional school personnel are able to create and maintain positive environments [a positive disposition to teach], as appropriate to their professional responsibilities, which support student learning in the educational setting. (NCATE, 2002, p. 19)

Assessment

Of the three competencies, content knowledge, pedagogical skill, and disposition, disposition is the most difficult to assess. However, through the direction of the accrediting agencies, it has become necessary to explore how dispositions to teach can be measured and assured for candidates seeking admission to an educator preparation program. According to NCATE's president, Arthur Wise, “The...logical outcome of the standards movement [is] developing and using appropriate assessments”(Wise & Leibbrand, 2001, p. 246).

As institutions think about how to address the dispositions accreditation requirement, they should consider their own institutional characteristics, mission, and focus. What follows are approaches taken by a selected set of institutions.

Approaches Taken by Four Institutions

Educator preparation institutions have taken varied approaches to defining and assessing dispositions. The approaches have varied in their philosophical emphases and their assessment methodology.

Asbury College

Asbury College is a small, private, faith-based liberal arts institution in Kentucky and approaches disposition through a tie to their institutional mission, NCATE conceptual framework, and unique goals as a Christian institution. They describe their initiative as a systems-approach in which they not only address the standards for certification of all Kentucky institutions, but in addition have the following standards:

The teacher candidate demonstrates moral and ethical character.
The teacher candidate pursues commitment to Christ-like dispositions.

In addition, their systems-approach includes assessing teacher candidate progress through curriculum integration, co-curricular experiences, and unit assessments. What makes Asbury College distinctive as a model for other institutions is that Asbury developed their approach to dispositions as an extension of the features already in place at their institution and in their educator preparation programs.

This approach of drawing the dispositions emphasis out of the institutional structure is really considered to be one of the primary recommendations of the NCATE planning and assessment process.

College of Charleston

Another approach to developing disposition requirements for a program is that of analyzing best practices and theoretical concepts. This was the approach taken by the College of Charleston. The development of their dispositions plan can best be described as research-based. That is, teams of faculty gathered information on best practices concerning educator effectiveness, educator qualities, and related topics. Through lengthy discussion, analysis, and decision-making, the faculty identified their dispositions concept focus. It parallels other types of education candidate assessments. That is, the disposition of candidates is being assessed along with other knowledge and skills candidate demonstrate.

College of Charleston: Implementation Plan Elements

- Disposition documents were piloted.
- Model dispositions in our own teaching
- Have a “developing” picture of where our students are going including a picture of the master teacher
- Embedding those/tying those into our individual courses
- Dialogue with all faculty who teach our students
- Have a language by which all can talk about dispositions, candidates, and issues throughout their program.
- Use cross-discipline expertise to refine discussions and our models
- Early measures of dispositions to be fair to students and allow them to explore other areas or refine/develop dispositions needed
- Institutions could look at dispositions as an institution
- Importance of student self-assessment and reflection as it pertains to dispositions and the decision to teach

- Legal issues and strategies for dealing with those issues must be considered (set of professional standards, training on how to measure)
- Interaction early in the program is critical to raising student's awareness
- Involvement of stakeholders in development of disposition piece

Dispositions are used as recruitment tools for Future Teacher Clubs in the high schools of the service areas, open houses for second career options, summer camps for students interested in teaching, and AmeriCorps. When dispositions are included in summer camps, open houses, etc., full integration of the disposition concept into the total program is demonstrated.

The dispositions included by the College of Charleston are:

1. Belief that all students can learn
2. To value and respect for individual differences
3. Value positive human interaction.
4. Intellectual curiosity, enthusiasm about new learning, and willingness to learn new ideas.
5. Commitment to inquiry, reflection, and self-assessment.
6. Value collaborative and cooperative work.
7. Sensitivity to community and cultural context.
8. Responsible and ethical practice.

West Virginia State College

In this study of disposition measurement, Levine (2002) defines Dispositions as follows:

By the phrase, 'dispositions toward teaching' we mean the attitudes, inclinations, and personal attributes or qualities that candidates hold toward teaching, learning, working with children and adolescents, and being a part of the professional field of education. These "dispositions toward teaching" are the inner views, the values, and propensities that support people becoming strong and effective teachers. Compassion toward others, curiosity, attention to detail, and perseverance could be examples of such dispositions.

Using this definition as a guide, Levine and her colleagues held focus groups to determine when and how dispositions should be measured. Table 1 shows a partial summary of the outcomes from Levine's study and the method used to evaluate dispositions. The use of focus groups at West Virginia State is an example of fostering stakeholder involvement in planning in order to gain "buy-in" when the program is put into practice.

Table 1
Small Group Brainstorming Feedback (Example)

WHEN	HOW	USES	RESULTS
·The assessment should occur 1 st in the Introduction to Education class and then after each field experience.	· Self reflection and by coordinating teacher, student, college supervisor.	· These assessments should be one more tool the faculty uses to evaluate the candidate's position in the program.	· The student and the faculty advisor should receive the results
· Also pre and post student teaching. Each semester.	· Cooperating teacher does one at each field experience.	·These assessments will be discussed with students and their advisors at the college.	·Results goes to student and student advisor (remains in student folder).
·During Panel Interviews.	·Peer evaluation mentioned as a possibility.	·The assessment should be used for:	· Determine whether to continue in the profession
·Several times in all education classes..	· Combination of student self-evaluation, faculty and field experience teachers evaluation, peers Self-evaluation	(a) personal growth	· Advisor shares information with advisees.
· When students first declare a major	·Self-assessment at beginning – when major declared.	(b) identifying areas of concern.	· Student and Advisor receive copies of each assessment.
· During orientation	·Self-evaluation at end of semester by student.	(d) Included in academic advising folder.	· Used to determine acceptance into program at panel interview process
· In all education courses.	·Feedback from each teacher under which observation/placement made.	(e) Academic advisor should receive the results	· Student and advisor should receive copy of each assessment.

From: Levine, Phoebe M., (2002, November).

Lander University

Lander University faculty began with a comprehensive review of the literature to determine characteristics of effective educators. However, they went beyond to gather extensive information through several thousand surveys of educators and administrators in schools to determine priority rankings on key attributes drawn from those identified by the teacher preparation faculty. The result of this approach was a set of attributes across numerous professional groups.

Taylor and Walsh (2002) summarized data on the 3000 in-service educators surveyed to establish patterns of preferred educator dispositions. The data collected was analyzed by gender, years of teaching experience, subject(s) taught, and level of advanced professional development. Some of the results of this effort reported below suggest discernable patterns with implications

for educators and educator preparation programs. Table 2 is an example of one of the data summaries and includes some of the dispositional descriptors found.

Table 2
Comparisons Across Indicators: Hierarchical Order (Example)

Overall Results:	Administrators:	Gender		Grade Levels:		
		Male	Female	Elementary (K-5)	Middle (6-8)	High (9-12)
N=2576	N=57	(N=361)	(N=2013)	N=810	N=824	N=718
Enthusiastic	Hardworking	Hardworking	Enthusiastic	Enthusiastic	Enthusiastic	Enthusiastic
Effective Communicator	Effective Communicator	Enthusiastic	Effective Communicator	Life-Long Learner	Effective Communicator	Effective Communicator
Adaptable to Change	Caring	Effective Communicator	Adaptable to Change	Adaptable to Change	Adaptable to Change	Adaptable to Change
Life-Long Learner	Enthusiastic	Competent	Life-Long Learner	Effective Communicator	Competent	Competent
Competent	Patient	Disciplined	Accepting of Others	Accepting of Others	Life Long Learner	Accepting of Others

From: Taylor, B. & Walsh, P. (2002).

The research conducted at Lander University demonstrates a connection between dispositional theory and what practitioners see as important attributes of candidates.

The Use of Dispositions in Eastern Kentucky University’s Educator Preparation Program

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework has been developed for the College of Education at Eastern Kentucky University. The conceptual framework model illustrates three areas of educator competency; content, pedagogy, and disposition. The concept of the three competencies is based on the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (2002) Standard One: Candidate Knowledge, Skills, and Disposition. Goals at EKV regarding dispositions are two-fold. The first goal is to infuse the teaching of dispositions throughout the curriculum so that students have a clear understanding of dispositions and what is expected prior to admission. The second goal is to ensure that students demonstrate the dispositional qualities before admission to Teacher Education.

EDF 103 Introduction to Education

The Dispositions materials are now in use at Eastern Kentucky University with faculty and education candidates. EDF 103 is a one hour exploratory course in which students determine their interest in pursuing a career in education, through observation and reflection. In EDF 103 the education candidates explore the four perceptual factors representing the basis of the EKV model of educator dispositions. Additionally, the candidates are trained to rate student writing, using this model. Rating previous EDF 103 student writing along with participation in class discussions and school observations provide a basis for students’ self- reflective writing about their experiences in the education process. At the conclusion of the course, students will

decide if they wish to pursue a career in education. An explanation of the four dispositional categories follows along with research findings which support each category.

Perception of self

The educator feels oneness with all people. He perceives himself as deeply and meaningfully related to persons of every description (Wasicsko, 2002, p. 12). Vivienne Collinson lists understanding of self and others as a necessary disposition (1996b, p. 17, Table 1.4). Kegan (1982, p. 70) described maturity as having “affection toward something else, toward something that looks more like the human community, the community of all persons.” “This definition suggests that mature adults are other-centered and have affection for those beyond their own peer group. ‘Other-centeredness’ is the hallmark of maturity...” (Dill, Hayes, and Johnson, 1999, p. 12).

Perception of others as able

The educator sees others as having capacities to deal with their problems (Wasicsko, 2002, p. 11). He believes others are basically able to find adequate solutions to events in their own lives. Nel Noddings demonstrates this with the example of an educator, the one-caring, having the capacity to see the best possible motive for a student not to follow the rules (1988, p. 178).

Perception of purpose

The educator views events in a broad perspective. His goals extend beyond the immediate to larger implications and contexts (Wasicsko, 2002, p. 12). Collinson states (1996a), “... exemplary teachers...begin to see increasingly complex issues and perspectives: from the district level to state, national, and global levels” (Collinson, 1994). Dill, Hayes, & Johnson define a person with this quality as mature (1999, p. 12).

People frame of reference

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

Stone’s 1987 study indicates that Outstanding Teachers of the Year “love people and care about their needs” (Collinson, 1996b, p. 14).

Admission to and Exit from the ECU College of Education

Faculty members have been trained to assess dispositions of students through rating student writings and through contact with students throughout the program. In order to be admitted into the program, a student must have four faculty recommendations certifying that they have seen the student demonstrate behaviors that indicate they possess the dispositions. Educator preparation faculties have the responsibility to admit candidates who have the dispositions and not to admit those who cannot demonstrate that they possess the dispositions (Wasicsko, 2003, ¶ 2). Students are again assessed in the area of disposition prior to student teaching and prior to exiting the program. It is interesting to note that Idaho State University has a process similar to the one in use at Eastern Kentucky University (Denner, Salzman, & Newsome, 2001).

Conclusion

Because of recent NCATE guidelines, agencies such as the Kentucky Professional Education Professional Standards Board (EPSB) teacher standards and educator preparation programs are exploring the importance of dispositional attributes of candidates. The four colleges discussed in this article are just a few examples. The Asbury College model used their longstanding mission as a springboard to developing a dispositional framework. The College of Charleston, after developing their framework, has included their dispositional focus in every facet of their program, even into recruitment. West Virginia State College sought the input of more than 3000 in-service educators in order to determine what dispositional characteristics practitioners see as important then included those characteristics in their model. The Eastern Kentucky University model encourages candidates to take responsibility in developing expertise in their four areas of disposition. As other institutions strive to integrate the development of dispositions into their programs, ideas presented in this article can be helpful and encourage others to share in this growing body of knowledge of research.

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