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ARTICLE

Developing Dispositions for Ambitious Teaching

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Critics of teacher education in recent years have argued that attempts to assess dispositions for teaching amount to a process of political indoctrination, claiming that teacher candidates are often expected to endorse ideas like “white privilege” and “social justice” as a kind of political litmus test for entering the teaching profession. In some circumstances, teacher education programs have avoided this kind of controversy by limiting their attention to dispositions such as honesty, integrity, and professional interactions. Charges and counter charges about the potential political implications of dispositions, and lack of clarity about other dimensions of dispositions, have obscured fundamental associations between personal beliefs and professional ethics, and between dispositions and ambitious conceptions of teaching. At the same time, little attention has been devoted to gaining a deeper understanding of dispositions for teaching, how they play a role in learning to teach, and how teacher education programs can support teacher candidates in developing dispositions for the kinds of challenging and complex teaching needed to do well by all children. This essay examines these issues and proposes ways in which teacher education can both support and assess the development of dispositions among teacher candidates.

Educational philosopher, Margret Buchmann, argues that becoming a teacher involves a professional role orientation that takes precedence over personal beliefs and preferences (Buchmann, 1993, p. 147). To be a teacher means to put the well-being of one’s students ahead of oneself. Buchmann refers to this professional role orientation as the fundamental disposition of teaching. It is this distinction between personal interests and professional responsibilities that is at the heart of issues of ethics in teaching and that establishes the purpose behind identifying dispositions as a dimension of teaching practice.

The tension between personal beliefs and professional ethics is easily understood in relation to curriculum responsibilities: Teachers can’t simply choose not to teach subjects they are not fond of. Similarly, teachers who hold particular religious beliefs are charged with maintaining a separation between holding such beliefs internally and espousing them in the context of teaching. This separation works in reverse, also: Teachers may not agree with the idea of “white privilege” in their personal lives, but in considering the welfare of their students, they must still be prepared to examine how their own prior experience and values influence how they interact with children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and to strive to make their classrooms inclusive for all learners.

Role orientation is also the underpinning of professional practice. Aligning oneself with a larger professional community of practitioners is what takes powerful teaching beyond the instinctive reactions of persons who enjoy being with children. It commits them to engage with colleagues to meet the dynamic challenges of understanding a diverse array of learners in complex contexts, and to develop and enact a flexible repertoire of interactive practices. Teachers who fulfill their role obligations as professional educators have commitments and responsibilities beyond themselves toward learners, subject matter domains, issues of equity and fairness, their own professional development, colleagues, and the larger well-being of children and families.

To understand how to prepare teacher candidates for assuming and enacting the professional responsibilities associated with the teaching role, it is important to understand just what are dispositions and how they came to be associated with teaching in recent years.

What Are Dispositions For Teaching?

Dispositions emerged as a widely recognized dimension of teaching in the United States in the context of the movement to professionalize teaching during the 1980s and 1990s (Carnegie, 1986; Holmes Group, 1986; Shulman, 1987). The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) generated standards for teaching that were an effort to shift views about teaching away from ideas about “generic or context-free teaching behaviors,” and to bring new attention to teachers’ capacities for performance in particular contexts of teaching (INTASC, 1992). Up until this time, interest in dispositions had been limited mainly to concerns about personal deportment and integrity associated with such things as dress, speech, personal habits, honesty, and moral behavior (Goodlad, 1990). According to the INTASC standards, now widely in use, dispositions include such things as “The teacher realizes that subject matter knowledge is not a fixed body of facts but is complex and ever-evolving. S/he seeks to keep abreast of new ideas and understandings in the field” (INTASC, 1992). This quote from Principle #1 of the INTASC standards, focusing on content pedagogy, illustrates the way that INTASC identified dispositional factors associated with each of the ten dimensions of teaching outlined in the standards.

In general terms, Siegel (1999, p. 209) captures the widely understood meaning for a disposition as “a tendency, propensity, or inclination to behave or act in certain ways under certain circumstances.” In the previous example, a teacher exhibiting that disposition associated with content pedagogy could be relied upon to investigate subject matter ideas thoroughly as part of planning for teaching. Ritchhart (2002, p. 21) has proposed a more detailed definition for dispositions that can be summarized as follows:

Dispositions are

- acquired patterns of behavior
- under one’s control & will
- overarching sets of behavior, rather than specific actions
- dynamic and idiosyncratic, rather than prescribed
- coupled with ability; they motivate, activate, and direct ability
- contextualized rather than generic.

There are a number of important implications for teacher education in this definition. The kinds of dispositions associated with complex and ambitious teaching are not simply born into teacher candidates, as some would claim. They are acquired patterns of behavior achieved through learning. Dispositions don’t come into play automatically; they are under our control and will. They are asserted or withheld in different circumstances. They can’t be reduced to specific practices to be applied in all circumstances. Rather, they represent larger overarching sets of behavior or perspectives on the world, such as the appreciation for seeing a situation from varied perspectives. Dispositions are messy and elusive; they are dynamic and idiosyncratic and play out in different ways in different situations. A particular disposition, such as to be caring, might be manifested in many different behaviors. Dispositions can be present to different degrees. Sometimes we live up to our best intentions with our actions; sometimes we don’t do as well. Dispositions also require ability and some repertoire of practices for enacting requisite understandings. Finally, dispositions play out in particular contexts. One must be able to read the context if the disposition is to be evoked.

Dispositions for Teaching Build on What Teacher Candidates Bring with Them to Teacher Education

Teacher candidates come to teacher education with experiences as learners behind them and various personal orientations such as values, beliefs, ideals, and ideas that help guide their understandings about people and learning, and about a host of other important perspectives about how the world should work. As they learn to teach, however, they need help in mediating their personal orientations

in relation to professional contexts and practices. It is these orientations that will influence their decisions and judgments on a daily basis as teachers, and they must learn to transcend personal preferences to achieve dispositions with the durability and inclusiveness to guide teaching more generally in light of professional responsibilities.

I identify these four basic orientations because they seem to point in practice to usefully distinguishable categories of inheritances that teacher candidates bring to the teacher education classroom. They have 1) *values* that emerge out of their family lives, cultures, and previous experience, such as having a strong work ethic, or valuing teamwork or community. They have 2) *beliefs* that guide them in considering what is true or right – emanating from either their religious backgrounds or elsewhere – about such things as human nature, and appropriate family roles and expectations. They have 3) *ideals* about what the world ought to be like, or about what they hope to make happen as teachers. And they have 4) *ideas*, concepts and understandings about human learning, pedagogy, curriculum, and classrooms based upon their prior experience as students.

How Do Dispositions Play a Role in Learning to Teach?

Dispositions for teaching are under construction at all times and they have a significant impact on how teacher candidates perceive, come to understand, and learn to enact the role of teacher. It is essential that teacher education programs recognize this process and take steps to guide it on behalf of the well-being of P-12 students and to ensure the full development of their teacher candidates toward the norms and expectations identified by the profession. Dispositions interpreted in this light are not simply latent potentials that are triggered by events. Rather, they are volitional and subject to learning and development. Candidates need assistance in building on the foundation of values, personal beliefs, ideals, and ideas they bring to teacher education, to construct a responsible professional identity and repertoire of practices.

Dispositions play a key role in determining whether and how teachers mobilize their intellectual resources and professional commitments in impacting student learning. Will the teacher candidate learn habits of mind and action that lead him to genuinely investigate the subject matter behind what he is learning to teach, as INTASC Principle #1 intends? Will he approach curriculum with an open mind and intellectual curiosity? Will he stretch himself to discover engaging approaches to making important ideas understandable to his students? Will he have the courage to speak up or express uncertainty when he doesn't understand something important in his classes?

Dispositions affect how teachers handle the cross-cultural dimensions of teaching. Will the teacher candidate be ready to consider how her own cultural background predisposes her to perceive the world in particular ways, to notice some things and overlook others, to see some behaviors as appropriate and expected, and to disapprove of others? Will she feel responsible to educate herself about the lives of children and families whose background is unfamiliar to her? Will she exert the effort to take such steps to educate herself?

Dispositions affect how teachers function as moral educators of children, as they model ways of being and interacting in the world, whether consciously or unconsciously. We bring who we are to teaching, and students are influenced by that. Will the teacher candidate demonstrate respect for the individual integrity of students, and appreciate their strengths and vulnerabilities? Will he be prepared to monitor the tensions and dilemmas of balancing power and authority with democratic aims? Will he be concerned about the social fabric of his classroom and how different children are included or excluded?

Dispositions affect how teachers function as professional educators and colleagues who are part of

school communities. Will the teacher candidate be prepared to work with colleagues in a reciprocal fashion, making her teaching public and open to constructive critique? Will she develop respectful habits for drawing on the knowledge and experience of parents on behalf of their children? Will she be inclined to play her part in carrying on the chores and duties of maintaining schools as caring learning communities for staff, parents, and children alike?

The different orientations that teacher candidates absorb in growing up influence how they interact with other people and assume an identity in the world. As candidates move through the experiences of learning to teach -- attending classes, completing assignments, participating in practicum experiences in schools, collaborating with peers, responding to advice and mentoring from instructors, and simply taking part in the culture of teacher education and schooling in which they find themselves -- they are developing dispositions for teaching, rooted in these different orientations and the foundation of life experiences they brought to teacher education.

What is the Role of Teacher Education Programs in Developing and Assessing Dispositions?

The dispositions required for ambitious, standards-based teaching don't develop automatically; they are acquired through a socio-cultural learning process influenced by modeling and assisted performance (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Tomlinson, 1995; Feiman-Nemser & Beasley, 1997). Dispositions are also culturally constituted; a candidate's dispositions are influenced implicitly and explicitly by the interactions she has with other persons and the institutional character of teacher education. Teacher education programs have an inherent hidden curriculum that is always at work shaping the developing dispositions of teacher candidates. The ways in which program personnel interact with the candidate and the kinds of educational values, beliefs, ideals, and ideas that are enacted in program experiences shape the candidate's evolving understandings about teaching and learning. Dispositions are thus always under construction in a process that merges personal orientations with social and institutional interactions. The question is, toward what end?

Teacher candidates' dispositions influence learners whether we attend to them or not. Teacher education programs influence the developing dispositions of teacher candidates whether they intend to or not. It is essential that candidates develop the dispositional foundation for making wise decisions and judgments in teaching. The challenge for teacher education programs is to articulate a vision of professional practice and the dispositions that animate it, and to work to align the overt and hidden dimensions of teacher education experiences around that vision.

In shaping a vision of professional practice, most teacher education programs turn to professional standards, whether from INTASC or some other source. Recently, teacher education programs are also paying more attention to the welfare and learning of P-12 students as a foundation for shaping visions of good practice. Recognition of the increasing diversity of school populations has prompted both regulatory agencies in teacher education and teacher education programs to devote more attention to preparing teachers for culturally responsive teaching. Buchmann (1993, p. 155) argues that the idea of a profession presupposes a moral community oriented around a set of normative expectations that members are expected to live up to. Thus, from her perspective, teacher education programs, as well as the wider education profession, serve as a kind of moral community of practice for inducting prospective teachers into the field. Buchmann quotes Thelen (1973, pp. 200-201) in describing this moral dimension of professional communities as seeking to "clarify and live up to what they mean by being a professional." Standards are one tool that teacher education programs use for guiding this induction process in light of the moral values expressed by the professional community.

Some recent criticisms of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education's (NCATE's) role in promoting dispositions for teaching have attacked the inclusion of ideas about

“social justice” in frameworks for assessing dispositions. This is a good example of the delicate interplay between personal beliefs and professional ethics and responsibilities. Individual teacher candidates might reasonably have different viewpoints about various social justice issues in political contexts, such as ideas about affirmative action. However, social justice as a classroom issue is directly relevant to the responsibilities and moral purposes of teacher education in promoting dispositions for high-quality, ambitious teaching. Students in public schools have no choice about attending, and they deserve to be taught by teachers who are disposed to appreciate, and prepared to teach, all of them. They deserve to attend schools that have adequate resources to fulfill their obligations. Teacher education programs also have a responsibility, as moral communities of practice, to identify norms and expectations associated with professional practice and to be concerned about the welfare of all children and their learning. It seems basic to ideas about public education in a democratic society to address issues of diversity, inclusion, differentiation, community, and resources to support schools, as they impact learners.

In this light, teacher education programs have a responsibility to promote dialogue and debate about the purposes, challenges, and dilemmas of public education associated with these fundamental democratic values. It is also essential that teacher education programs take responsibility for preparing teacher candidates to teach everybody’s children to their fullest capacity and potential, guided by the ongoing and collective examination of norms for professional practice. Teacher candidates leaving teacher education programs can reasonably be expected to understand and be able to enact practice aligned with such norms of the profession.

Much less controversy has surrounded the efforts across teacher education programs to identify and assess certain “minimum” dispositions that are required in order for further development to take place. This is common sense that basic qualities of honesty, integrity, and caring must be in place as a foundation for further teacher education work. These qualities usually find their way into admissions screening procedures for teacher education programs. Through such efforts, those who are obviously unqualified to teach are prevented from gaining access to teacher education. Estimates by Wasicsko and Resor (2005, p. 7) put this group at about 2%-5% of overall admissions. Determining whether and how a teacher candidate expresses such dispositions can be a murky undertaking and must be augmented by due process safeguards around gate-keeping activities. However, too little attention has been devoted to the other 95% of teacher candidates, whom we are trying to prepare for rigorous and challenging teaching, to meet the needs of all learners. If one accepts the idea that dispositions for ambitious teaching do not arise spontaneously with sufficient reliability, then teacher educators have a responsibility to help prospective teachers develop dispositions. Drawing upon ideas about teacher learning in communities of practice can inform the development of dispositions for teaching.

Developing Dispositions Is A Teacher Learning Issue

Dispositions are “inclinations relating to the social and moral qualities of one’s actions”(Buchmann, 1993, p. 151). They are rooted in experience, knowledge, personal beliefs, and values, but they are culturally constituted and shaped by interactions with others in social contexts, just as other dimensions of learning to teach are. The social, moral, and cultural nature of dispositions thus suggests strongly that understanding the process by which dispositions develop can be informed by scholarship about learning in communities of practice. Wenger’s work on developing competence in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 137) identifies work around three ideas that can be applied to teacher candidates’ development of dispositions:

- **Mutuality of engagement:** Are candidates working with others to make sense of ideas and experiences and participating wholeheartedly in the practice?
- **Accountability to the enterprise:** Are candidates working to understand the nature of and

responsibilities associated with the teaching role and contributing to investigating and reflecting on what standards-based practice entails?

- Negotiability of the repertoire: Are candidates developing a repertoire of practice and learning to use it meaningfully with increasing flexibility and intentionality?

Combining Wenger's ideas above on developing competence in communities of practice, with the ideas introduced previously from Ritchhart (2002) about the nature of dispositions and how they develop, points toward ways that teacher education can support the development of dispositions for teaching. According to Ritchhart, for dispositions to affect action, one must be able to interpret specific educational contexts as implicating particular ideas, values, or beliefs; one must activate a personal commitment, engage will or effort, and deploy a relevant repertoire of practice. For example, it is common in my experience with supervising student teachers that they find themselves using mathematics curriculum materials that feature manipulatives intended to illustrate larger mathematical ideas. It is not always easy to interpret the intentions of curriculum designers when using such materials with children, and some student teachers become focused upon successfully managing the activity with children and don't adequately prepare themselves for using the materials to get at the mathematical ideas. For those candidates who have internalized the disposition associated with content pedagogy, this situation will trigger their responsibility to understand content deeply, and prompt them to exert effort to study the teacher's manual, consult colleagues, and perhaps re-visit ideas they learned in their mathematics methods course to prepare themselves to enact the curriculum authentically.

Connecting that example of dispositions in action, drawing on Ritchhart's ideas, with Wenger's ideas on developing competence, teacher education plays a role in supporting candidates' learning by prompting them to engage with colleagues to analyze educational contexts with respect to explicit and implicit ideas, beliefs, and values. Teacher education also inducts candidates into a sense of accountability for the profession by having them investigate and debate visions of quality teaching informed by professional standards. This process also serves to help candidates develop identities of practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 149) as teachers who aspire to those visions. Finally, teacher education helps candidates develop repertoires of practice for enacting visions of teaching in different educational contexts. Thus, with their attention on fostering commitment to the various dimensions of the professional role in teaching, teacher education programs, as well as the wider educational profession, serve as moral communities of practice for inducting prospective teachers into the field.

What Counts As Evidence of Developing Dispositions For Ambitious Teaching?

Dispositions for teaching are ultimately observable in acts of teaching. How could one take a developmental view? What could one look for during the course of pre-service teacher education, in addition to performances in practicum situations, to suggest that dispositions for teaching are under construction in productive ways? The idea of performances of understanding can be useful here:

[Performances of understanding are] activities that require students to use knowledge in new ways or situations. In such activities students reshape, expand on, extrapolate from, apply, and build on what they already know. Performances of understanding help students to build as well as demonstrate understanding. (Blythe, 1998, p. 120)

Connecting the ideas of Buchmann, Ritchhart, Wenger, and Blythe, et. al., one could expect teacher candidates who were making progress in developing dispositions for teaching to demonstrate the ability to

- articulate connections between educational contexts and values, beliefs, ideals, and ideas about teaching;

- demonstrate will or effort in working on learning to teach;
- engage wholeheartedly with others in the community of practice to make sense of ideas and to develop a vision of expert teaching;
- develop a repertoire of teaching practices and use it with increasing flexibility and intentionality;
- recognize and work to fulfill the role obligations of teachers and to be concerned about the larger well-being of children and families.

These dimensions might serve as design principles for constructing assignments that involve students individually and collectively in making examined connections between the orientations they bring to teacher education and those they encounter in the process of learning to teach. Each of these dimensions offers a window of opportunity for assessing the development of performances of understanding related to dispositions for teaching. Each can also provide a context for examining a candidate's efforts in developing professional identities where commitments to role obligations take precedence over personal beliefs and values. Finding such a balance is rarely clear-cut and definitive, but candidates can be expected to be whole-heartedly working on recognizing connections among beliefs, values, and ideas, and acts of teaching, and to be engaging with others in determining a vision of expert teaching. With those foundational expectations, teacher education programs should have public and defensible opportunities for making judgments about the suitability of any particular candidate.

Conclusion

Attempts to develop and assess dispositions for teaching should not be seen as a political indoctrination activity on the part of teacher education programs. When conducted appropriately, these efforts to cultivate and assess dispositions for ambitious teaching serve to orient teacher candidates to the nature and responsibilities of the professional role in teaching. They are essential for developing the decision-making and judgment capacities necessary for enacting teaching that is guided by the wisdom of the professional community and that promotes the well-being of children.

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