The Importance of Professional Dispositions: A Survey of Diverse Teacher Educators

Kelly M. Benson
Central Washington University

Naomi Jeffery Petersen
Central Washington University

The Importance of Professional Dispositions: A Survey of Diverse Teacher Educators

Kelly M. Benson and Naomi Jeffery Petersen

Central Washington University

Abstract

Dispositions are undisputedly crucial for teaching success and academic achievement, but what are they and which ones are most important for candidates to develop before student teaching? Can we identify, define, influence or assess dispositions for a common language among all stakeholders in teacher education? In order to find out if stakeholders from 30 certification areas share common definitions of essential teacher dispositions, and whether their range of opinions can be reduced to major constructs, we surveyed faculty and staff in 30 NCATE-accredited certification programs housed in three colleges of a large public comprehensive university. This article presents the qualitative and quantitative findings in the first phase of the study, in which we identify subscales and refine the instrument.

As teacher educators in the United States, we prepare candidates for certification governed by state and national accreditation. We believe, and the literature supports, teaching is a developmental profession with candidates advancing from novice to expert status more quickly when informed by research and theory, monitored, and provided feedback. Although teacher educators are tasked with monitoring professional dispositions, they work in a wide range of academic disciplines. One major challenge for education preparation programs is the lack of a cohesive perception regarding candidates' professional competence. Even more troubling, the research conducted so far has been limited in the scope of representation for this great range of academic traditions, each with its own culture and logic. This leads to a resultant need for a collaborative process in defining a shared understanding of this crucial topic. Lund, Wayda, Woodard and Buck (2007) serve as an exception to the norm for having polled faculty first to define dispositions, but the population was limited to one discipline. This highlights a systemic complication: education serves multiple disciplines, some of which are unfamiliar with educational theories, and the need for consistent disposition modeling as well as assessment in teacher education programs. Concurrent with this disconnect is the potential for program legal challenges and disposition controversies which have arisen regarding their origins, definitions and applications (Diez, 2007).

Literature Review

The focus on effective teaching has increased with mounting political and business pressures combined with federal legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to collect, aggregate and disaggregate data demonstrating effective teaching outcomes. Critical to the

qualities needed of effective teachers are those of dispositions. The variety of definitions and terms utilized in studies of dispositions are typically compatible with other working definitions of dispositions developed by professional groups (Katz, Hindin, Meuller, May and McFadden, 2008). Examples of these definitions are seen with the Interstate New Teacher Assessment Support Consortium (INTASC, 2010) and the National Board for Professional Teacher Standards (Whitsett, Roberson, Julian and Beckham, 2007). Defining or distinguishing what effective teaching attitudes are; however, is difficult to do, especially when trying to measure an effective teaching attitude.

One theoretical, working definition is set forth by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2006), a professional accreditation council for schools, colleges and departments of education, which defines professional dispositions as:

> Professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities. These positive behaviors support student learning and development. (p. 10).

Along with accreditation, performance-based licensure programs utilize the ten standards and indicators articulated in the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) performance standards which reflect agreement of what new teachers should know and do as beginning professionals. These indicators, derived from national standards developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO, 2010), are disseminated as three separate constructs (knowledge, skills and dispositions) in a framework to help express the differences which may exist between dispositions and the needed skills to be developed by teacher candidates. Further support for dispositions is recognized in the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 1994) which speak to five core propositions forming the foundation for the knowledge, skills and dispositions/beliefs that frame the National Board Certification of teachers.

In the midst of competing perspectives regarding the definition and assessment of dispositions in teacher education, we are seeing a renewed commitment and an escalating interest in the nature of teaching (Burant, Chubbuck and Whipp, 2007) with many state accreditation agencies using the term disposition as part of their standards. Sparking the demand to hold teacher education programs accountable for outcomes, states issue mandates including requisite teacher candidate dispositions and qualities of effective teachers. For instance, Washington State's Standard 5.4, Understanding Teaching as a Profession, notes:

> Candidates understand professional responsibilities and model professional dispositions delineate in professional, state, and institutional standards. Their classroom behaviors are consistent with the ideal of fairness and the belief that all students can learn. They are aware of current research and policies related to schooling, teaching, learning, and best practices. They are aware of the roles that teachers play outside the classroom and the opportunities for engagement in the larger professional community (WAC 181-29A-270).

With an escalating need for teacher preparation programs to both measure and assess effective teaching, Mark Wasicsko, Director of the National Network for the Study of Educator Dispositions (NNSED), states "There's research going back more than 50 years that shows there are dispositions that have a positive effect on student success" (Hallam, 2009, p. 27). Because not all dispositions are favorable, teacher prep programs must strive to strengthen effective teaching dispositions which lead to student success and minimize those dispositions which are

less desirable. Some dispositional examples include teacher beliefs in the:

- importance of using many methods and strategies to help students learn
- importance of mutual relationship building (Katz et al.,2008)
- nurturing of essential values and beliefs necessary to help families in their efforts to develop skills and strategies to help their children succeed (Baum et al., 2008).
- need to respect for all cultures; value multiculturalism and diversity; be sensitive to individuals with learning differences; and be a positive role model (Thompson, 2009).

According to Alger (2006), undesirable attitudes may come from a variety of teacher candidates' own experience such as elementary and secondary instruction, negative family history, less positive background information from colleagues and other faculty at a school site, or negative interactions with a student that may impact their perceptions and interactions with students. Alger (2006) further notes the importance of continued research to discern whether teacher candidates are able to develop effective teaching dispositions. If we want to move beyond the acquisition of skills and knowledge to that of acquiring positive and effective dispositions, we need to be more proactive in teaching and modeling what effective teaching dispositions are. Although content knowledge and pedagogical skill necessary for successful teaching are already well-defined and measured; dispositions, undisputedly crucial for effective teaching, are not. As pointed out by the American Educational Research Association's Panel on Research and Teacher Education (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2006), there is a lack of data for comprehensive causal comparative studies, limited primarily to academic achievement and crude demographic measures.

This leads us to our inquiry: *Can we identify, define, influence or assess professional dispositions for a common language among all stakeholders in teacher education?* Because our concern is for their functioning as a member of a school community, and we recognize the crucial role of administrative and other support staff, we think it is important to consider candidates' interactions with all personnel. Once the language is defined, it will be possible to test whether their behavior at the university is correlated with their behavior in K-12 schools.

Method

In order to find out, we surveyed faculty and staff in 30 NCATE-accredited certification programs housed in three colleges of a large public comprehensive university. This study presents the qualitative and quantitative findings in the first phase of our research agenda in which we identify subscales and refine an instrument well-grounded in the perceptions and language of the broadest possible population of teacher educators and support staff who interact routinely with candidates including secretaries, administrative assistants, and certification personnel.

Participants

We recruited all faculty and support staff from 30 departments providing teacher certification programs accredited by the state. There are over 150 such faculty in three colleges: the College of Arts and Humanities (approximately 30); College of the Sciences (approximately 30); and the College of Education and Professional Studies (approximately 80 plus other faculty who serve as field supervisors and lecturers). Invitations to faculty and staff in contact with teacher candidates were extended via university e-mail after permission was granted through the

Center for Teaching and Learning Advisory Board. The respondents (N=43) represented all teacher educator roles: 31% were full professors, 21% associate professors, 26% assistant professors, 7% lecturers, 10% field supervisors and 5% staff members.

Procedure

This survey research, while looking to identify patterns of response utilizing rigorous analysis methods, incorporated consensus building between the faculties and staff in rating the importance of 39 dispositions commonly noted in the literature. In order to find out if a) stakeholders from all certification areas shared common definitions of essential teacher dispositions, and b) whether their range of opinions could be reduced to major constructs, faculty and staff were surveyed from 30 NCATE-accredited certification programs housed in three colleges of a large (10,000 students) regional comprehensive university. Participant privacy was maintained by configuring *Qualtrics* options as per Human Subject Review approval: participants accessed the online survey via secured weblink, but no name, email, or IP address were stored associated with the online survey responses.

Instruments

The data collected were measures of both dependent (survey response) and independent (demographic characteristics) variables. Following the informed consent page, a demographic questionnaire asked participants for information of interest to our study, e.g., academic discipline; K-12 teaching, mentoring, and supervision experience; teacher education teaching, advising, and supervision experience. Demographic questions in this first phase were open-ended in order to discover the most appropriate codes to identify distinguishing stakeholder characteristics. This qualitative data was reduced to codes entered into the database for correlation with participant responses; this analysis was also used to reconfigure the demographic portion of the survey to yield more quantitative data in the next phases of the study.

The *Faculty Survey of Teacher Candidate Dispositions* then asked participants to rate (Likert-style) the importance of dispositions described in 39 statements. The concepts in the statements were commonly mentioned in the literature (e.g. Brock, Waples and Mumford, 2008; Lund et al., 2007; NCATE, 2002; Singh and Stoloff, 2008). Once the data set was found adequately reliable, an exploratory components analysis was done to identify any patterns of responses which might suggest a parsimonious set of subscales. Factor analysis was appropriate because statistical assumptions of adequate size, skewness and kurtosis were not egregiously violated. Internal consistency measures established reasonable reliability; Item analysis suggested statistical significance. Principal Component Analysis reduced the data to subscales (Thompson, 2004), which were then named based on theoretical models in professional literature and in consultation with experts. Effect size established a measure of statistical power for multivariate analyses that may be used to identify different trends within and across respondent groups (Grimm & Yarnold, (2005). Respondent ratings can then be correlated with personal characteristics and experiences to discover possible influences on values (Thompson, 2008).

Results

A Principal Component Analysis was conducted to maximize variance. Oblimin rotation

with Kaiser Normalization was performed because there were some correlations between variables. The analysis was forced into three factors to preserve the minimum requirement of ten participants per factor. When the analysis was run without forcing factors, scree plots demonstrated a leveling effect (though eigenvalues remained above 1) after the third component was extracted. Together the three factors accounted for 56.2% of the variance (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Principal components of the Faculty Survey of Teacher Candidate Dispositions

Component	Theme	Variance
1	Civility and Compliance	32.8%
2	Diversity and Tolerance	11.2%
3	Emotional and Social Maturity	10.2%

Some items overlapped between components. However, correlations between components were minimal, ranging from 0.18 (components 2 and 3) to 0.25 (components 1 and 2). This suggests that each component represents a robust theme. The items were examined to identify those themes, resulting in tentative names of 1) Civility and Compliance, 2) Diversity and Tolerance, and 3) Emotional and Social Maturity.

Discussion

With only 43 participants, there was concern about having more factors than the data would support. However, the respondents did represent the range of disciplines among the certification programs as well as different roles and ranks. The modest response rate certainly highlights the difficulty of aligning opinions among different academic disciplines. This in turn has suggested ways to improve communication amongst the stakeholders and will inform the next phases of this research agenda. Additionally, it is important to point out this study is unusual because teacher educators across campus were invited to participate. Most studies are limited to one discipline and much of the literature is theoretical and anecdotal.

In this study, three themes emerged. The first component, "Civility and Compliance," is certainly of great interest, given that an uncooperative and disdainful attitude is not welcome in any professional setting. Part of the orientation to the profession is seeing oneself in the context of a large organization requiring well-defined protocols for efficient and effective administration of its mission, that is, one is expected to follow rules with a positive attitude. In addition, if one wants to change things, one is expected to use the democratic procedures embraced by the organization. This theme is perhaps a 'negative option', meaning that it is assumed people will follow policies and precedents with civility, but someone who does not is conspicuous for disturbing a peaceful working relationship. The challenge is typically revealed by efforts to control incivility. Use of coercion undermines the intrinsic value of cooperation, but behaviors are far more easily recognized and prohibited than dispositions. Hence there is a need for common language that empowers teacher educators to recognize these important elements of the social institution of school.

It is worth noting that the second component, "Diversity and Tolerance," is aligned with state mandates and professional ethics regarding the treatment of individual students relative to

SPRING 2012   95

their cultural backgrounds and racial differences. Legal guidelines have focused on guaranteeing equitable access to public education and equitable treatment within the institution. This means prevention of impropriety has received more attention than the development of cultural competency and the attitudes that govern it.

The third component, "Emotional and Social Maturity," is more personally focused on the individual candidate's capacity to integrate all aspects of teaching when confronted with the ambiguities and isolation of typical classroom environments. Teachers' demeanor and judgment is affected by their personal lives and the stages of development they are navigating, so candidates do need to learn strategies for controlling their vulnerability to stress and distraction. This suggests a need for mentors that can monitor the whole candidate, not just pedagogical skills and academic knowledge. It also suggests the need for interactive environments in the teacher education courses in order to reveal patterns of irrationality and overreaction when confronted by frustration. While reflective practice is promoted in teacher education programs, candidates are not always encouraged to factor in the emotional and social issues which are key to understanding their effectiveness.

Further research

The next steps in this research agenda involves surveying teacher educators regarding the refined instrument and developing an assessment protocol for using it to measure dispositions in teacher candidates. We expect to correlate observations with self-reports and eventually have a robust means to correlate dispositions with proficiency. Although we think it is important to consider the voices of non-teaching staff with whom teachers interact, it complicates the findings. Perhaps a separate study of non-teaching stakeholders would serve as a useful companion study to our primary focus on synthesizing teacher educators' opinions about preservice teachers developing dispositions. Thus, in subsequent phases of developing this instrument, we will confine the study to faculty with knowledge of teaching and learning, expanding the sample to include other institutions.

Merit

There is considerable merit in contributing psychometrically valid instrumentation featuring cross-disciplinary collaboration and consensus building that provides a common language for addressing a systemically challenging and ambiguous objective. We extend the work of Lund et al. (2007) who polled faculty to define the construct, but only in one discipline, highlighting a systemic complication and need to serve multiple disciplines, many unfamiliar with educational theories that nonetheless inform their practice.

The overall findings of this study hold much promise in providing a compendium of previous research study analyses and insight into the identification and influence of dispositions for professional educators, teacher education programs, and teacher candidates. This is of interest to thousands of programs and agencies across the nation responding to accountability reforms and the need to identify characteristics of effectiveness. This research can be applied to the curriculum of teacher education programs. Once there is a consensus regarding the dispositions of most worth, the teacher educator community must address the need to define, introduce, model, coach, and monitor those dispositions in the candidates.

6

References

Alger, C. (2006). What went well, what didn't go so well: growth of reflection in pre-service teachers. *Reflective Practice*. 7(3) 287-301.

Baum, A. & Swick, K. (2008). Dispositions Toward Families and Family Involvement: Supporting Preservice Teacher Development. *Early Childhood Education Journal,* 35: 579-584.

Brock, M., Waples, E., & Mumford, M. (2008). Mental models: an alternative evaluation of sense-making approach to ethics instruction. *Science English Ethics, 14*, 449-472. Doi: 10.1007/sll948-008-9076-3

Burant, T., Chubbuck, S. & Whipp, J. (2007). Reclaiming the moral in dispositions debate. *Journal of teacher education,* Retrieved March 11, 2010 from http://jte.sagepub.com

Council of Chief State School Officers (July, 2010). Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) *Model core teaching standards: A resource for state dialogue*. Washington, DC

Cochrane-Smith, M. & Zeichner, K. (2006). *Studying teacher education.* Lawrence Earlbaum. Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Model core teaching standards: A resource for state dialogue*: http://www.ccsso.org/Resources/Programs/ Interstate_Teacher_Assessment_Consortium_%28InTASC%29.html

Diez, M. (2007). Looking back and moving forward; three tensions in the teacher dispositions discourse. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *58*; 388.

Grimm, L. & Yarnold, P. (2005). *Reading and understanding multivariate statistics*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Hallam, M. (2009). Why teacher dispositions are a crucial aspect of student success. *The Language Educator*. Retrieved January 15, 2010 from http://www.actfl.org/files/TLE_Jan09_Article.pdf

Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (2010). The INTASC Standards. Retrieved January 17, 2010 from http://www.ccsso.org/resources/programs/interstate_ teacher_assessment_consortium_(intasc).html

Katz, D., Hindin, A., Mueller, M., May, G., & McFadden, L. (2008). Measuring social consciousness: Using multiples of evidence to examine teacher dispositions. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, *2*(2), 129-137.

Lund, J., Wayda, V., Woodard, R., & Buck, M. (2007). Professional dispositions: What are we teaching prospective physical education teachers? *Physical Educator*, *64*(1), 38-47.

National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2006). *Professional standards for the accreditation of teacher preparation institutions.* Washington, DC: Author.

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. (1994). *What teachers should know and be able to do*. Washington, D.C.: Author.

No Child Left Behind Act (2002). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml.

Singh, D., & Stoloff, D. (2008). Assessment of teacher dispositions. *College Student Journal*, *42*(4), 1169-1180.

Thompson, B. (2004). Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis: Understanding concepts and applications. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Thompson, B. (2008). Standards in conducting and publishing research in education. *MidWestern Educational Researcher*, *21*(1), 10-16.

Thompson, F. (2009) The Instruction and assessment of multicultural dispositions in teacher and counselor education, *Journal of Invitational Theory and Practice,* Vol. 15, p. 32-54.

Washington State Legislature (2011). WAC: Professional educator standards board, Title 181-79A-207. http://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=181-79A-207

Whitsett, G., Roberson, T., Julian, K., & Beckham, L. (2007). First year teachers reported levels of functioning on selected professional dispositions. *Education*, *128*(1), 95-102.