

What Are the Fairest Dispositions of Them All? A Secondary Education Faculty Reflects on the Nature and Impact of Candidate Dispositions

**Austin M. Hitt
Emory C. Helms
Patricia Hardee
Carol D. Osborne**

Coastal Carolina University

Introduction

Mirror, mirror, on the wall, what are the most worthy, fair, and objective dispositions for all? This paraphrase of a line from *Snow White* is a useful analogy for the problems that teacher educators face when assessing candidates' performances on the professional dispositions. In the fairy tale, the queen determines that Snow White's beauty is unacceptable and decides to eliminate her with a poison apple. In an analogous situation, teacher educators must decide if candidates will be admitted or be denied access to the teaching profession. Expulsion from an education program is analogous to taking a bite out of a poison apple. It is the termination of a potential teaching career.

However, the fictional queen has one advantage over real-life teacher educators. The queen can trust that her information is definitive and can confidently act on it. In contrast, teacher educators are human and make decisions based on their personal experience, values, and beliefs. As a result candidate dispositions are not absolute and are subject to multiple interpretations.

This paper presents examples of the diverse views on dispositions of faculty in a Secondary M.A.T. Program. The purpose of these essays is to stimulate thinking about the interpretation, assessment and enforcement of dispositions. The views expressed by the faculty members are the product of their unique experiences teaching in high school and in college.

Dispositions from the Perspective of a Program Chair

Whatever happened to that young idealist who distrusted authority and who insisted that the rights of the individual supersede the needs of an orderly society? I looked in the mirror this morning and noticed that young man was missing. In his place was an experienced college administrator. This insight was followed by a question, Have the changes in my life affected the way I evaluate other people? The answer is yes!

The young college student, middle and high social studies teacher, and the program chair have very different world views. I have reprimanded candidates for behaviors I would have supported or ignored five, ten, or twenty years ago. Knowing this, I have to question the legitimacy and morality of my ratings of candidates on dispositions. If my interpretations of appropriate behavior change over time, then it means my assessment of teacher dispositions has also changed. In order to demonstrate how people's outlook on the dispositions change, I will summarize my experiences in education.

The 1960s were turbulent times in which young people were rebelling against the status quo of American Society. On my college campus, like many others across the nation, protestors called for equal rights, more individual freedom, and an end to the Vietnam War. As a young college student majoring in education, I believed in those causes and participated in many student demonstrations. If asked back then about the characteristics of great teachers, I would say it was their ability to inspire students to question the “conventional wisdom” and to strive for a more just social order.

When I graduated from college and started my first teaching job in 1971, my views began to change. I started teaching social studies in an inner city middle school in Montgomery, Alabama. I was an outsider due to the fact that I was the only white teacher in a school that was predominately African American. The situation seemed the perfect opportunity to fight for social justice, but that did not happen. Instead, as I became acclimated to the school, I found myself becoming just as structured and rigid in my actions and beliefs as my more experienced colleagues. My classroom goal was to achieve conformity among my students. My views about quality teachers became more control oriented. The best teachers were those individuals who established clear, rigid classroom rules that were consistently enforced. Students in an excellent teacher’s classroom followed routines and respected authority. I maintained this view over the rest of my career as a middle and high school social studies teacher. Even today I find myself evaluating candidates in the field based primarily on their ability to control and manage students.

As a university professor and later chair of several education programs, my view of what makes a quality teacher changed again. I evolved from a pragmatic public school teacher into a realist administrator. In my present position I define a quality teacher as one who meets the college’s dispositions.

Occasionally, after dealing with an infraction of the dispositions, I think about what my past personas would say to the candidate. The rebellious college student might say, “I remember doing that. Keep questioning and challenging authority!” The young teacher might respond, “I vaguely remember doing that, but it was a youthful mistake. Remember, we need to create and enforce rules to maintain order. I don’t want to see this behavior again.” The college professor would say, “I don’t remember doing anything like that. This is not the way a teacher candidate should behave. Teachers must have ethical and moral standards and live by them. Your behavior is inappropriate and it must change.” Finally, in my position as a program chair, I state, “That never happened to me. I cannot comprehend acting in such a manner. What’s wrong with you and other young people today! Don’t you understand that professionalism means submitting to moral and ethical standards that we define as the professional dispositions? You must embrace the dispositions without question if you want to become a teacher.”

Dispositions from the Perspective of a Former Principal

The scene is a familiar one to principals on every school level. A prospective teacher sits before you and you are listening carefully to answers to prepared questions, assessing documentation of knowledge, and searching for indications of dispositions within a brief time period. As a principal who has supervised teachers from K-4 to Grade 12, I have reflected upon the dispositions exhibited by excellent teachers. Are there dispositions that are critical to teachers on ALL levels and settings and can one size really

fit all? Personal reflection on teacher supervision and classroom observations has revealed two dispositions that I deem preferred on all levels of instruction. They are high self-efficacy and empathy.

Self-efficacy is defined by Bandura as a person's belief in his/her ability to produce effects (Bandura, 1994). Teacher efficacy is defined as belief in one's ability to be successful in getting students to learn (Wiseman, Hunt, 2001). I have observed that teachers with high self-efficacy tend to have high expectations, motivate students, create classrooms conducive to development of cognitive skills, and foster high self-efficacy in students through modeling. Cognitive experiences in childhood as well as coping skills in adolescence and young adulthood are more successfully developed in students by teachers who have high self-efficacy. I have noted that there seem to be fewer problems in the areas of classroom management and higher student achievement in classrooms of teachers with high self-efficacy. Teachers with high self-efficacy work well collaboratively on grade level teams in lower grades and content and interdisciplinary teams on higher levels. The school, students and community benefit from the leadership and support roles of teachers with high self-efficacy. Cooperation and collaboration among staff and faculty in a school provide a positive environment for learning and empathy.

Empathy, defined as seeing and accepting the other person's point of view, includes respect for and awareness of each person's values, beliefs, and attitudes (Usher, Usher & Usher, 2003). Teachers who actively practice empathy are more likely to demonstrate fairness, create an atmosphere of acceptance, and form connections leading to students' sense of belonging. Teacher openness to diversity and uniqueness nurtures students' engagement in learning experiences and attention to student needs and interests. Diversities, including gender, social class, ethnic origin, race, language, religion, and cultural characteristics, build understanding which hopefully leads to integration of diversities in content, curriculum, extracurricular activities and testing (Banks & Banks, 2005). Beginning and tenured teachers who practice empathy with students are highly respected by both students and faculty and are more successful motivators.

High self-efficacy and empathy are preferred dispositions I seek when interviewing and hiring new teachers. It is the responsibility of the school principal to provide a safe environment that fosters affective and cognitive growth. Teachers who have high self-efficacy and empathy produce higher student achievement and keep principal stress and frustration at a minimum. Unfortunately, documentation, personal interviews and recommendations do not guarantee that self-efficacy and empathy are deeply rooted dispositions. So, as the interview process takes place, I listen, observe body language, and make a decision that will have a cognitive and affective impact on students. Hopefully, my own self-efficacy and empathy enable me as principal to discern excellence. Perhaps one size does fit all, including administrators!

Dispositions from the Perspective of an Associate Professor of English Education

If we are to evaluate teacher candidates on their dispositions, I favor a system that identifies candidates when they are in clear violation of established rules rather than a system that seeks to measure candidates' values or beliefs. In designing and using rubrics in the past, I have noted how difficult it is to assign a number or phrase (e.g., "developing," "needs improvement") to some of the more abstract qualities accrediting

agencies require teacher education programs to measure. “Providing feedback to students,” for example, can encompass many acts, and what is judged an effective comment on a student’s paper may depend on the student’s prior performance, the personalities of student and teacher, their relationship, the goals the teacher has in terms of improving this student’s performance, and the objective of the assignment or lesson. Therefore, an evaluator, in assessing the performance of a teacher candidate in this area, must understand the context and look at the collective evidence to determine a score, and even then, that score may differ drastically, depending on the perspective and philosophy of the evaluator. How much more difficult it proves to be in assigning a number to the more abstract qualities represented under the term “disposition.”

To focus the argument, let us examine three traits that commonly fall under the designation of “dispositions”: fairness, belief that all students can learn, and professionalism. If we were to design a rubric for each of these, how would I, as a supervisor, distinguish between someone who is “developing” and someone who is “proficient” in fairness? How do I measure a belief? If I base my rating on the expressed opinion of the candidates, who know the criteria by which I am evaluating them, what candidate would not claim to believe that all students can learn? If I examine lesson plans or observe the candidate teaching, I can note instances of differentiated instruction, which reflect this belief, but then, I am evaluating planning and instruction, not dispositions. Finally, on whose interpretation of professional behavior do I base my evaluation, and how do I measure the achievement? Would I count the number of meetings and workshops attended or the number of journals read, or would I judge a candidate on appearance, communication skills, and attitude, based entirely on my own sense of what a teacher should be? Both approaches seem problematic. In the first, if a candidate is simply jumping through hoops for our benefit, how engrained is this “professional” attitude? In the second, more subjective estimation, what will ensure fairness in our rating system?

While rubrics do not seem to work well in measuring dispositions, I am reluctant to ignore this area of teacher training completely. Some individuals lack the judgment, work ethic, or integrity needed in our profession, and schools of education must have a system that will enable them to identify those who may do more harm than good in a classroom. To be fair, we must first communicate clearly to candidates the legal guidelines and community standards that dictate their behavior, recognizing that these often vary from school to school. We have an obligation not only to prepare candidates for the schools they will enter during their training, but we should also teach them the process and importance of determining these parameters for themselves so that they may avoid conflicts with students, parents, colleagues, or administrators in any future placement. Once the guidelines are established, they serve as a reference point for candidate performance. If candidates act in a way that could result in a reprimand from a principal, or even worse, legal proceedings against them, then we must address the violation of the rules on a case-by-case basis.

In other words, we should make clear the expected behaviors for teachers, and we should address candidates at any point they fall short of these behaviors, but we should let the candidate, the situation, and the behavior determine our course of action. In some cases, counseling and close observation can help improve the candidate’s dispositions; in other cases, the action can be too flagrant to risk granting a “second chance.” For

instance, if a teacher candidate crosses the line in student/teacher relations, by sending suggestive e-mails or by dating a student, then just as the consequences are dire for those in the profession who engage in this behavior, this conduct should result in swift and certain consequences for a candidate: expulsion from the program. If the candidate is simply dressing provocatively, following fashion rather than what the education faculty and community feel is more appropriate clothing for a professional, a far more sensible course of action would be for a faculty member to discuss the possible ramifications of such dress: the perceptions students, colleagues, administrators, and parents may have as a result of differences in expectations.

We do not have to wait until a candidate begins teaching to address the candidate's dispositions. By observing the candidate's interaction with others in any scenario, we can identify behavior that may lead future students, parents, colleagues, or administrators to view a teacher as unfair, biased, or unprofessional. Our knowledge of the climate of the schools and our knowledge of our candidates will enable us to determine, on an individual basis, the best strategy for helping candidates develop the dispositions they need to be successful. Just as we expect candidates to differentiate instruction, so should we. We can be more effective in helping future teachers think deeply about all aspects of teaching, including the dispositions, if we establish a process of counseling candidates individually, helping them see the possible ramifications of their actions, not by filling out rubrics that only communicate how well a candidate appears to reflect the values of the evaluator.

Dispositions from the Perspective of an Assistant Professor of Science Education

My main objection to dispositions is that there is no objective method for creating, assessing, and enforcing them. Unless a college of education clearly identifies its specific social and political agenda, then it must be assumed its dispositions represent universal human values. This stance is particularly critical for public institutions because they are required to provide a quality education to all eligible students.

Research in history, sociology, and psychology reveals that the concept of eternal human truths is incorrect (Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, 1994; Pinker, 2002; Hauser, 2006). Factors such as educational level, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, culture, genes, and even brain injuries can modify human moral and ethical perspectives (Kagan, 1995; Pinker, 2002; Hauser, 2006). In this essay I use the example of how something as basic as conservative and liberal perspectives influences the interpretation of candidate dispositions. Specifically I focus on how these views impact individuals' interpretation of NCATE's preferred disposition of fairness. The example I present is just one of many possible examples of the differential interpretation of candidate dispositions.

The political scientist Thomas Sowell identifies two innate drives or "visions" that guide the thoughts and actions of conservatives and liberals (Sowell, 1987). These visions are not conscious thoughts but are subconscious algorithms that help individuals make decisions and take actions. Conservatives interact with the world through the "constrained vision" which is based on the premise that human intellectual and moral capabilities are in a constant struggle with personal desires. In order to inspire humans to behave morally and ethically, it is necessary to create external incentives such as laws and ethics codes. In contrast, the unconstrained vision is based on the concept of humans having unlimited potential for ethical, moral, and intellectual development. The key to

eliminating undesirable behaviors and improving the human condition is to identify and treat the causal factors in the environment.

The constrained and unconstrained visions have a significant impact on the assessment and evaluation of NCATE's preferred disposition of fairness. A person with a constrained vision will interpret fairness in the context of a larger process (Sowell, 1987). The attributes of a fair process are equal access for all individuals and the equitable distribution of the supplies necessary for completing the task. In the educational setting, fairness means that all students have access to quality schools, learning materials, and qualified teachers. Once these conditions are established, it is up to the students to achieve.

In the unconstrained vision, fairness means maximizing the rights and freedoms of every individual (Sowell, 1987). In the context of education, fairness means that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or gender, are guaranteed the same probability for success. Therefore, it is appropriate to disproportionately provide support for some students in order to increase their chance of success.

Imagine a scenario in which an education candidate is required to address the disposition of fairness during a teaching internship. The candidate moves throughout the rows of desks in the classroom, the students appear to be on-task, and the candidate appears to divide her attention equally among the students. If the university supervisor operates with the constrained vision, then the candidate will likely receive high marks for fairness. From the university supervisor's perspective, the candidate is providing an environment in which all students have the same opportunity to learn.

A different possibility is that the university supervisor is motivated by the unconstrained vision. Instead of taking a process-oriented view, the supervisor focuses on the rights of individual students. He observes many problems including minimal instructional modifications, no supplemental one-on-one instruction with specific students, and the absence of cooperative learning groups where higher achieving students can tutor struggling students. In this scenario the university supervisor will likely give the candidate relatively low scores on the disposition for fairness.

Differences of opinion, like the above example, are the norm among education faculty and it is highly probable that a candidate's score will vary with the faculty member. The result is that we are asking candidates to meet professional standards that are unclear and controversial even among teacher educators. What most candidates quickly figure out is that the relevant dispositions are the dispositions held by the faculty member assessing them. What emerges from this type of interaction is an insipid form of Social Darwinism in which individuals are selected based on their ability to conceal their beliefs. It is ironic that the assessment of ethical and moral dispositions can promote such deplorable behaviors. In the end perhaps the best approach for colleges of education is to avoid acting as the moral police and focus on what really matters, preparing candidates who can help students learn.

Final Thoughts

After writing these essays we realize that our divergent views significantly impact our interpretation and assessment of the dispositions. We are in agreement that professional dispositions are inherently subjective, and we all advocate assessing observable, objective behaviors rather than abstract values. As a result of our

conversations, we have come to a consensus on one overall program goal: all candidates should be able to demonstrate the ability to help students learn. The advantage of this goal is that it can be measured by examining assessments of student learning. We have not given up on assessing candidate dispositions, but for now we are taking a pragmatic stance until we find our own magic mirror.

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