

Apples and Fishes: The Debate over Dispositions in Teacher Education

In 2000, the adoption of new standards by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) unleashed a feisty debate on the role of dispositions in teacher preparation. With the ratification of the 2000 *Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Schools, Colleges, and Departments of Education* (NCATE, 2002), NCATE identified the development of professional dispositions as an explicit obligation of teacher educators.¹ NCATE included expectations regarding candidate dispositions, because, as Wise (2006) explained, the organization “believed that the time had come for teacher educators to pay attention not merely to knowledge and skill development and teaching and learning but also to the moral and ethical development of teachers” (p. 5). At the same time, Wise and his colleagues were aware that the profession lacked consensus regarding the moral and ethical dimension of teaching. They anticipated that by including dispositions in the *Standards*, they were “unleashing a search by all institutions for the moral and ethical foundation of the profession of teaching” (p. 5) – a search that, they hoped, would result in the profession adopting a code of ethics to guide the development and assessment of teacher dispositions.

Given the high stakes nature of program accreditation and the relatively swift migration of dispositions from the NCATE *Standards* into state rules and regulations for teacher preparation, we are not surprised by the flurry of activity around the role of dispositions in teaching and teacher education (Freeman, 2007). This activity includes a wide range of endeavors such as debates on definitions of dispositions and the appropriateness of including

¹ We note that NCATE was in many ways reflecting and capturing The INTASC (Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium) standard’s attention to dispositions in its *Model Standards for Beginning Teachers Licensing and Development: A Resource for State Dialogue* (INTASC, 1992). See the article by Mary Diez in this issue and Freeman (2007) for helpful historical overviews to the introduction of dispositions in teacher education.

candidate dispositions in the *Standards*, the development of both instruments to assess candidates' "dispositional fit" (Wasicsko, 2007) for a career in education and materials to help college students make decisions regarding educational career paths, and research about the impact of teacher dispositions on student learning.

Many issues related to the role of dispositions in teacher education remain unresolved. For example, Frederick Hess (2006) argued that there is not a body of rigorous empirical evidence demonstrating that certain beliefs or dispositions improve teacher effectiveness. In contrast, Taylor and Wasicsko (2000) claimed, "there is a significant body of research indicating that teachers' attitudes, values, and beliefs about students, about teaching, and about themselves, strongly influence the impact they will have on student learning and development." Similarly, whereas the National Network for the Study of Educator Dispositions (NNSSED) offers a research-based, pilot-tested instrument with which prospective teachers can self-assess their disposition to teach (<http://www.educatordispositions.org/moodle/moodle/>), Johnson and colleagues (2005) write that "nowhere in the literature can one find a reliable and valid measure of a candidate's (or anyone's) dispositions" (p. 193).

In our view, the controversies around dispositions are not so much quibbles over apples and oranges, but rather apples and fishes. Those opposed to including dispositions in the assessment or certification of teacher candidates rarely address the views held by those in favor, and those in favor tend not to address the arguments of detractors. Before we characterize the central features of this apples and fishes debate, we first outline the evolving definitions of dispositions in the NCATE

In the 2002 and 2006 edition of the *Standards*, the Glossary of NCATE Terms provides the following definition for dispositions:

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. (p. 2002, p. 53; 2006, p. 53)

Several oft-repeated stories in the public press, describing how different institutions attended to social justice, have sparked considerable attention and controversy. In one case, a teacher candidate wrote a paper for his classroom-management course advocating the use of corporal punishment. The college he was attending tried to remove him from their teacher education program, citing differences between his personal beliefs and the goals of the program. The state Court of Appeals ruled that this decision violated the student's due process rights, and he was reinstated into the program (Wilkerson, 2006). In another university, a student failed four "professional disposition evaluations" and was offered a choice between signing a contract with the college of education and being expelled. The contract specified several assignments including mandatory diversity training. When the student contacted the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education rather than signing the contract, he was told he did not have to sign the contract and would not be expelled (Leo, 2005). At issue in these and similar cases are the beliefs teacher education programs expected teacher candidates to hold and the ways they expected the candidates to act.

In a January 2006 column for *Newsweek*, George Will critiqued “Ed School’s” attention to dispositions. NCATE responded swiftly, issuing a response to George Will’s column (Wise, 2006) and soliciting commentary from its membership on social justice. Then at its April 2007 meeting, the Unit Accreditation Board (UAB) recommended a substantially revised definition of professional dispositions: All candidates are expected to demonstrate, through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors, “classroom behaviors that are consistent with the ideas of fairness and the belief that all students can learn.” The Glossary of Additions and Edits defines fairness as “the commitment demonstrated in striving to meet the educational needs of all students in a caring, non-discriminatory, and equitable manner” (p. 46). The option of determining other professional dispositions “such as caring, honesty, responsibility, and social justice,” based on program mission and conceptual framework was provided to NCATE institutions. This latest round of revisions was taken up by NCATE’s Executive Board on May 11, 2007. The Board did not accept the revised definition for professional dispositions. Instead, the Board approved the creation of a Task Force on Professional Dispositions and requested that this task force examine social justice and related concerns and make an initial report in October 2007. As this goes to press, the Glossary indicates that the definition is “To be determined” (p. 45) (NCATE, 2007).

Given all this attention and controversy, it appears that NCATE’s goal to initiate conversations about the moral and ethical development of teachers was achieved. But what, exactly, has been unleashed? Was this move on the part of NCATE brilliance or folly? And, perhaps most centrally, do dispositions have a place in the professional standards for teachers or programs to prepare teacher candidates?

JTE’s Role

As an editorial team, we decided to engage our readership in an exploration of these questions. We began by planning an invitational Major Forum on “Dispositions for Teacher Education” for the 2007 AACTE Annual Meeting and a special issue of *JTE* devoted to the

arguments for and against the role of dispositions in teacher education. In the following paragraphs, we briefly outline some of the central themes in these two sets of arguments.

The Case for Dispositions in Teacher Education

Proponents of including dispositions in the NCATE *Standards* build their case around the claim that dispositions are essential to effective teaching. Dispositions are an individual's tendencies to act in a particular manner. As such, they are predictive of patterns of action. They help to answer the question of whether teachers are likely to apply the knowledge and skills they learn in teacher preparation programs to their own classroom teaching, whether they are "likely to do what we taught them to do when we are no longer watching them" (Wilkerson, 2006, p. 2). Thus, as Wilkerson goes on to argue, "dispositions are, in the long run, more important than knowledge and skills."

We can think of dispositions as contingent on knowledge and skills; that is, teachers who lack the skills to carry out particular actions will be unable to do so, regardless of their desires. Having the knowledge and skills to teach particular content in particular ways is necessary but not sufficient to ensure that a teacher will employ them in the classroom. The teacher must also have the disposition to do so. Therefore, proponents argue, to not include dispositions in the preparation of teachers "is unconscionable and dangerous, since we need to ensure that teachers are *likely* to apply the skills they have learned in our colleges" (Wilkerson, 2006, p. 3).

Proponents typically stick close to the language of the *Standards*, arguing that the purpose of including dispositions in accreditation standards is to ensure that people who are licensed to teach will be committed to fostering growth and learning in all students. It is not to screen teachers on the basis of their social or political ideologies. Citing Wise's (2006) response

to an editorial column by George Will, a posting on the NCATE News (2/7/2006) supports this position:

As an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan accreditation agency, recognized by the federal government and nearly every state, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education does not itself espouse nor expect or require its institutions to espouse any particular political or social ideologies. (<http://www.ncate.org/public/>)

Many proponents acknowledge unsettled issues related to the psychometric soundness of methods for assessing dispositions. While recognizing the importance of developing reliable, valid and fair measures of dispositions, and of conducting research on the relationship between dispositions and teacher effectiveness, they also argue the field cannot sidestep dispositions while such instruments are being developed. Conversations about dispositions are central to the ongoing work of teacher educators, and must occur, even if psychometrically sound measures are not yet widely available.

The Case Against Explicit Attention to Dispositions

At the heart of the argument against including dispositions in the Standards is a concern that there is no agreed-upon definition of the construct. Some critics go farther, suggesting that the construct is inherently fuzzy and difficult, if not impossible to define operationally (Johnson et al., 2005). From this, it follows that dispositions cannot be measured reliably and validly. Without an operational definition or psychometrically sound measures, we cannot gather empirical evidence to determine the impact of teacher dispositions on student achievement. James Rath, a supporter of NCATE who argues strongly for the importance of attention to values and beliefs in education, eloquently captures these concerns. In a letter to the NCATE committee on accreditation Rath (1999) writes about his own research on the topic:

I have been unable to scale dispositions reliably – and my research program is essentially a failure. I have searched the literature and appealed to measurement specialists on a national scale for help, but there is little out there. So much of what is written in these standards calls on our colleagues to measure dispositions and their strengths. Can it be done? I consider it a strategic and grave error to include this language This language requires units to do something that cannot be done. Please take this technical problem into account when considering a revision of the document.

In addition to these methodological issues, opponents warn that by including dispositions in the NCATE Standards the educational community becomes vulnerable to the danger of ideological bias. The commitment to creating learning opportunities for all students is commendable, and addressing issues related to social justice does not necessarily imply endorsement of particular ideological perspectives. However, by incorporating dispositions in a curriculum or assessment system, a teacher education program runs the risk of supporting a social or political agenda of indoctrination. As Hess (2006) pointedly suggests, “Ultimately, screening on ‘dispositions’ serves primarily to cloak academia’s biases in the garb of professional necessity.”

A Common Ground for Discussion?

Given the nature and intensity of the two positions, how might the teacher education community move forward in its consideration of dispositions? What might be a productive starting point for discussion? One possibility is to focus on issues explicitly addressed by both constituencies, for example, whether or not to include dispositions related to social justice in the NCATE Standards. Indeed, this is one area where steps are being taken. NCATE has removed the term “social justice” in the Standards document, and as we noted above, an NCATE Task

Force on Professional Dispositions has been created and charged with examining issues related to social justice in the accreditation system. Whether or not the Task Force is successful in helping the field diffuse the heat the term generates is hard to predict. Finding common ground for discussions is not going to be easy. Arguments supporting the role of dispositions in teacher education curricula and accreditation standards are, at the core, arguments about what we value in the teaching profession. What drives these arguments is the programmatic necessity to prepare teachers who will be committed to *all* learners learning and growth. In this sense, it is like medical schools' commitment to prepare physicians who seek to heal all patients. This position is reflected in several articles in this issue. For example, Ana-Maria Vilegas argues that "teachers ... have a moral and ethical responsibility to teach all their pupils fairly and equitably" and that this moral and ethical dimension of teaching makes attention to dispositions related to fair and equitable teaching in the preparation of teachers and assessment of teaching (sd ethilart the mm)8(ybeca fietentio

dispositions is too loose and far-reaching. Similarly, Frank Murray (this issue) suggests that for the construct *disposition* to be of value to teacher education, a number of methodological obstacles must be overcome so that the research required to establish the construct's meaning can be conducted.

As the articles in this issue illustrate, arguments about dispositions draw upon two fundamentally different types of claims – those based on values and those based on empirical measurement. When it comes to the bottom line, the opposing camps rely on different types of claims. As a result, weighing their arguments is like comparing the qualities of apples and fishes. Unfortunately, this situation provides little potential for actual dialogue about the moral and ethical foundations of teaching. Although powerful forces have been unleashed, they are not necessarily moving us closer to adopting a code of ethics for the teaching profession. It appears that all involved in the debate would agree that we need to prepare teachers who can teach all children fairly and equitably, and in the belief that all children have the potential to learn. And further we agree that real obstacles exist that impede fair and equitable schooling. We think some key questions follow. Do we need to agree on the force and nature of those obstacles? Within the broader intellectual arena these obstacles are read with distinctly different political and moral lenses. For some our impoverished urban schools are the outcome of structural economic and racist forces. For others these settings are mostly created by poor choices of urban inhabitants. For others poverty is a complex mix of both. Our field does not have a history of tolerating this plurality of views and readings. If we are to educate teacher candidates to believe that all children can learn, and to teach fairly and equitably, should we also encourage our schools of education to present these varied political positions. And if so, how will doing so affect how we frame and assess our candidate's ability to teach

move us closer to our profession's shared goal to educate teachers and most importantly *all* children and youth?

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