

# Integrating Dispositions into the Conceptual Framework: four *a priori* questions\*

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## Abstract

This article presents essential questions and informed answers related to the incorporation of dispositions in professional education programs. The authors have gained critical insight from five years of implementing dispositions training and assessment in a large teacher education program. As a result of analyzing their own implementation process, studying the presentations at the national dispositions symposiums, and through training and interacting with colleagues from across the country, the authors propose four critical questions which can guide institutions in their implementation of the dispositions requirement. The four questions deal with defining a dispositions construct, integrating it into existing conceptual frameworks, assessing dispositions, and gaining commitment from stakeholders.

## Introduction

Since the passage of the NCATE 2000 Standards, institutions across the nation have grappled with the need to make more explicit the role of *teacher dispositions* in the preparation of future educators. To have a successful integration of *dispositions* into the conceptual framework, faculty must think through and find adequate answers for at least four key questions. Clarifying the questions that must be resolved prior to integrating dispositions into a program is the challenge this article addresses. The questions and answers were distilled from the experiences of institutions that integrated *dispositions* elements and underwent reaccreditation under the new standards.<sup>1</sup>

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## The Four *A Priori* Questions

### Question One: What is meant by *dispositions*?

NCATE 2000 Standards require evidence to demonstrate that teacher candidates are gaining the knowledge, skills, and *dispositions* necessary to their having a positive impact on P-12 student learning. The first issue faced when preparing to incorporate dispositions into a program's conceptual framework is, "What is meant by *dispositions*?" Answering this question is not a simple task. In the NCATE Standards, *dispositions* are defined in a nebulous manner that simultaneously touts their importance yet provides little guidance as to their implementation. Such lack of specificity, however, allows institutions tremendous liberty in how they interpret and implement the requirement.

A simple way to begin defining *dispositions* is to assume that the term will encompass anything not falling in the areas of *knowledge* or *skills*. This conceptualization would keep the three components somewhat distinct thus allowing for the use of preexisting components for knowledge and skills but still recognizing that the "effective educator" is an amalgamation of all three.

The optimal operational definition of *dispositions* would be a construct that is clear, useful, and easily understandable by students and faculty, that flows from a program's mission or value statements, and that has a strong theoretical and research base. The difficulty most frequently encountered comes with limiting the definition to a reasonable number of variables with a clearly defined scope. Many attempts to operationally define dispositions result in fuzzy constructs that overlap with pedagogical skills, that have too many and/or too complex elements that would make valid and reliable assessment nearly impossible, or that lack a sufficient research base. Fortunately, the teacher effectiveness literature spanning several decades is replete with theory and research that can serve as a starting point for building a construct.

Present attempts to operationally define dispositions tend to fall along the continuum ranging from specific observable behaviors to inferable personality traits. Most models address one or more of the following three categories:

- Teacher Behaviors - Observable activities of candidates during class activities or with children, including behaviors such as writes and speaks standard English, punctual, smiles, neat/orderly appearance, etc.

- Teacher characteristics - Attributes or tendencies of candidates that are persistently demonstrated, such as tolerance of differences, open-mindedness, patience, enthusiasm, critical thinking, etc.
- Teacher perceptions - The attitudes, values, and belief systems that lie beneath teacher behaviors and teacher characteristics, such as self-concept, seeing students as able, a people v. thing orientation, etc.

The construct elements can range from the more easily observable, “objective” *teacher behaviors*, through moderate inferences needed to evaluate *teacher characteristics*, to high inferences needed to assess *teacher perceptions*. Each category presents its own unique advantages and disadvantages that must be considered prior to finalizing the definition to be used. For example, having a definition of dispositions that focuses on behaviors might provide for more “objective” assessment but may have less predictive value or may lead to a compendium-type check list of desired but probably insufficient behaviors. Drilling down into the personality to the values or perceptions level could lead to a more manageable number of variables and possibly more predictive value, but will require the use of more subjective, high inference measurement tools.

While it is possible that the chosen dispositions construct is unique to an institution, in most cases there are existing models that can prove useful in building an institutional-specific construct. Since this is such a timely topic, there are many recent publications as well as presentations at regional and national conferences (see footnote #1) that could prove beneficial to beginning the process. Creating teams to review literature or attend conferences is a way to begin building the energy and enthusiasm necessary for sustaining the endeavor, and may be the mechanism through which the “champion” surfaces who will lead the institution’s efforts.

#### Question Two: How will the definition be used in the conceptual framework?

While deciding on the operational definition of dispositions, due consideration must be given to the extent and type of revisions that will be required in the conceptual framework. Here again, there is great latitude provided by NCATE regarding where and how the construct can be used. In the best of all applications, the dispositions construct would be integrated from the start of the program in the recruitment and selection of

teacher education candidates, then into the curriculum design with the intent of enhancing dispositions, and finally into exit criteria for program completers, the end result being increased student learning. At a minimum, program completers must be able to demonstrate that they possess the dispositions specified by the conceptual framework. This, of course, is an assessment issue, but it also is one of clearly defining the steps or “gates” that candidates must traverse as they move into and through the program.

There are at least three ways that dispositions can be used in the conceptual framework that deserve consideration. First, the construct of dispositions can be used in admission criteria. For example, if the definition of dispositions focuses on personality factors that are relatively stable and appear difficult to change (e.g., attitudes, values), the program may choose to screen for these prior to formal admission. Admission criteria would be created that admits candidates who can demonstrate that they possess the desired dispositions and defer<sup>2</sup> those who cannot. Second, the construct can be used as a way to gauge how candidate dispositions are changed or enhanced by the curriculum as they move through the program. In this case, pre- and post-measures of candidate dispositions are important. Finding or developing tools and methodologies for measuring this change would be a major consideration. Third, the construct can be used as part of the exit criteria. All program completers would be expected to demonstrate that they possess the dispositional attributes described in the conceptual framework. In all likelihood, the candidate’s dispositions would be measured and recorded during student teaching through the use of the student teacher evaluation instruments, which may need to be revised to include the agreed upon elements. In the best of all worlds, all three of these areas would be incorporated into the conceptual framework. However, due to time, energy and resource constraints, it is probably best to start with one.

The dispositions construct should always be made as simple as possible. There is good evidence to suggest that when the number of elements exceeds seven, the human mind balks and the potential for meaningful manipulation of the variables declines significantly. Furthermore, it is important that students and faculty know *all* elements of the conceptual framework. An overly complex or cumbersome construct

reduces the probability of obtaining the required level of understanding by all constituents.

### Question Three: How will *dispositions* be assessed?

With the current emphasis on continuous improvement, assessment becomes of paramount importance. When choosing an operational definition of *dispositions*, a major consideration must be the availability of assessment instruments that can provide valid and reliable measures. A major challenge encountered when choosing any assessment instrument is balancing the complexity of the instrument and its training requirements with validity and reliability concerns. Here again it is important to link the dispositions construct, the theoretical/research base, and the assessment tools.

A variety of approaches to assess dispositions are being developed. Examples include behavior and characteristic checklists, ratings from observations of candidates in a variety of settings, inferences drawn from course assignments and classroom participation, evaluation of student journals and self-reflections, and letters of reference. Persons responsible for the assessment typically rely on one or more of the following: student self-reflections and self-reports, ratings by trained raters, and ratings by educator preparers and P-12 practitioners.

Many institutions rely on student self-reflections to assess dispositions and their change over time. Behavioral checklists, observation reflections, journaling, and rating scale rubrics provide opportunities for self-assessment. These self-report approaches have proven valuable for a large number of teacher candidates. However, self-report instruments may not work well with individuals who cannot demonstrate the desired dispositions. Candidates who appear to be “dispositional misfits” seem to be the most resistant to making accurate self-reflections that would lead to self-selecting out of programs, or to realistically see themselves as others perceive them. Combining student self-assessment with professional faculty judgment significantly increases the probability of obtaining valid data.

Inference models offer a broad spectrum of insights as they attempt to provide contextual understanding into the thinking and perceptions of candidates. To be successful, inference models must have carefully researched and selected rubrics used with highly trained raters. When these conditions are met, the instrument can be used in

a variety of settings including observations, interviews, writing assignments, or other student work. Currently available high inference instruments provide useful professional judgments about dispositions, and some are showing high predictive validity for candidate effectiveness.

The key questions that must be considered when designing the dispositions assessment scheme and tools include:

What will be measured?

How will the assessment data be collected?

Are assessment tools currently available or will new ones need to be created?

When, over the course of the program, will data be collected?

Who will be responsible for conducting the assessment?

How will the data be used in regards to candidates' performance?

How will the assessment model stand up to legal challenges?

and, of course,

How will the data be used for the continuous improvement of the program?

#### Question Four: What can be done to get commitment and buy-in from faculty and administration?

A considerable amount of thought and dialog will have gone into answering questions one through three. A fourth challenge -- possibly the biggest and undoubtedly the most important -- will be how to get all the stakeholders engaged and on board. Below are a few strategies that have proven beneficial to beginning the process at other institutions.

First and foremost, support -- philosophical, human and financial -- from the administration and faculty must exist. Two powerful inducers of such support are 1) the obvious fact that reaccreditation hinges upon the successful integration of dispositions and 2) the reality that the teacher candidates who generate the most angst (emotionally and legally) are usually those discovered to be "dispositional misfits." The latter triggers an ethical dilemma faced by teacher educators: i.e., permitting individuals to invest years and significant resources preparing for a career for which they may be ill-suited, or allowing them to enter a profession in which they may have a negative impact on students.

Most institutions begin the process of implementing dispositions by creating an ad hoc task force of respected faculty members to spearhead the effort. The charge is to find preliminary answers to the questions above and design a strategy through which the entire faculty can become engaged in the decision-making process. Successful task forces have facilitated an intensive process that included at least three elements: 1) examination of the philosophical underpinnings of the program's mission and value statements, 2) presentation of current research and various approaches developed by and used at other institutions, and 3) development of an iterative process whereby a rudimentary scheme can be examined by the faculty and then honed by the task force. Through several cycles of this process, consensus usually can be obtained.

The successful integration of a dispositions construct requires a reasonable timeline for implementation. Taken into consideration should be factors such as the extent of dialog required to gain consensus, the amount of revision to the conceptual framework that will be necessary, the extent to which assessment tools and procedures will need to be developed or modified, the degree to which curriculum will need to be modified, and, after due consideration of the above, when candidates will be expected to meet the dispositions criteria. It must be realized that the old adage, "Everything takes longer than it does," will apply here.

Obtaining "buy-in" is not limited to the faculty in the education unit, so it is best to involve arts and science faculty from the outset. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a broader university community to prepare a teacher. Having arts and science faculty involved early in the process can improve collegiality and communication among faculties that will later translate into commitment and support when needed at the university level.

A final and most interesting dilemma facing any institution, the implications of which remain to be seen, is whether a definition and model of dispositions can be created and implemented if the faculty members cannot demonstrate the dispositions themselves.

## **Conclusion**

Having a fully integrated dispositions construct is an arduous, multi-year task that requires much thought, effort and commitment by the faculty and administration. A fully

implemented model that encompasses all program elements might require five or more years to complete. This would involve conducting the research and participating in extensive dialog to define the construct, incorporating and then testing the dispositions elements within the conceptual framework to see if they are workable and efficacious, and then collecting and using data for continuous program improvement.

Integrating dispositions into the conceptual framework is a challenging task, but it is one that can serve as a unifying activity for a program and its faculty. More importantly, the intentional, thoughtful and research-based implementation of a strong dispositions component into teacher preparation can significantly enhance the quality of the educators produced by our efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> More information can be found in the proceedings of the Annual Symposia on Educator Dispositions at [www.educatordispositions.org](http://www.educatordispositions.org).

<sup>2</sup> The term “defer” is critical here. Denying a candidate can lead to requests to *prove* that the candidate does not meet the criteria. Deferring a candidate until such time as he/she can demonstrate that the criteria are met, on the other hand, leaves the burden of proof with the candidate.