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DISPOSITIONS

Since the mid-1980s there has been growing consensus about the use of programmatic themes to guide the nature and direction of teacher education programs. In essence, researchers have contended that programs structured around particular themes (e.g., social justice) would be in a better position to foster value-added professional skills than would programs characterized by a loosely coupled set of courses. Connected to this idea of themes was the notion that pre-service teachers should necessarily demonstrate certain dispositions in order to be successful in both learning requisite professional skills and then using those skills in a professional context. Although the idea of themes has not fostered significant controversy, the use of dispositions has been the focus of acrimonious debate. Those committed to teacher education reform argue for both clear themes and thoughtfully developed dispositions related to those themes. Critics of such reform argue that reliance on the dispositions may limit the talent pool of potential teachers who might have an interest in classroom teaching.

Schools, colleges, and departments of education are under attack for their failure to identify and implement a performance-based system for assessing candidates' dispositions as they impact the learning outcomes of students in K-12 classrooms. Because it is evident that a teacher's disposition may affect the academic performance of students in K-12 classrooms, it is important that attempts

be made to measure and assess those dispositions in the context of a thoughtfully developed teacher education program.

The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education standards lists the requirements for the development of candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Dispositions—which include the attitudes, values, and beliefs that are demonstrated through teacher interactions with students, families, colleagues, and communities—are pertinent to ensuring that teachers are effective in the classroom. These arguably observable, verbal, and nonverbal behaviors support K–12 student learning and development.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandates that candidates become highly qualified in their content area and possess the pedagogical skills to work effectively with all students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, functioning level, or gifts and talents. In essence, the belief is that all children should have access to a highly qualified teacher (a No Child Left Behind mandate) who possesses the appropriate knowledge and skills; however, consideration must be given to the impact of those interrelated variables or “elusive qualities” that evolve and are attributed to those observable behaviors in the classroom. These behaviors are referred to as the dispositions that are essential to effective teaching, which impact the unique academic, behavioral, emotional, and social development of K–12 students. Research suggests that when teachers possess the appropriate dispositions, effective teaching can and will occur because there is an intersection between content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and teacher dispositions, which results in meaningful teaching and learning.

The research on teaching links teacher behaviors to the dispositions that teachers should possess in order to be effective. Effective teaching ensures that high-quality teachers possess the requisite skills to demonstrate fairness in educational settings and to address the educational needs of all students in a caring, compassionate, nondiscriminatory, and equitable manner. These characteristics assist in the establishment of a meaningful relationship with students. Effective teachers believe that all students can learn; this is evident in their behaviors, as they know how to interact with a diverse group of students in a positive, affirming manner.

In addition, researchers have found that effective teachers tend to be culturally responsive (with cultural responsiveness as a dispositional quality) to the needs of the student population they are teaching. They evidence a disposition toward social justice that permits them to be more culturally responsive. In essence, the argument of those asserting the need for reform around dispositions is that culturally responsive teachers can foster learning in ways that culturally unresponsive teachers are not able to do.

Teachers who evidence culturally responsive dispositions build positive and supportive classrooms in which students feel safe and are able to perform at optimal levels. All members of the classroom are valued and affirmed for their efforts. Ultimately, there is a feeling of hope and optimism that every child will be successful. These teachers ensure that learning outcomes are meaningful, relevant, useful, and important to each child. Those promoting the use of dispositions would use this line of reasoning to argue for developing themed programs around social justice with pre-service teacher dispositional qualities that relate to cultural responsiveness.

There continues to be much debate regarding a specific definition for dispositions and the appropriateness of assessing candidates' dispositions. Many unresolved issues exist regarding the best way to measure dispositions in teacher education and even the degree to which dispositions should be considered in admitting and matriculating students. Neoconservatives tend to argue against the use of dispositions. They assert that reliance on dispositions may artificially influence the type and quality of candidates attracted into teaching. Proponents of dispositions assert that without dispositional considerations, the types of teachers completing programs may be counter to the real needs of the students they teach.

The essential idea is that dispositions are most closely associated with personal characteristics, ethical conduct, and relational aspects of teaching. Dispositions refer to the teachers' abilities to conduct themselves in a certain way when they interact with students, in what they say, do, or convey in other ways in a certain moment. As the debate continues regarding the role of dispositions, the dialogue must ensure that equitable teaching practices are encouraged in the classrooms of tomorrow.

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See also Character Education; Differentiated Instruction; Diversity; Equal Educational Opportunity; Equity; Multicultural Education

Further Readings

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