

Minnesota Association of Colleges for Teacher Education

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MACTE Minute: Assessing Teacher Dispositions May 13, 2011 Delivered by Misty Sato, University of MN-Twin Cities

For many years, both of the major accrediting organizations in the country, the National Council for Accreditation of Colleges of Teachers Education (NCATE) and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC), have organized its unit evaluation system around knowledge, skills, and *dispositions* for teaching. The new *Model Core Teaching Standards* from the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) identifies *critical dispositions* within each of its 10 standards for teaching. In both of these instances, the expectations of teacher candidates' dispositions refer to their fundamental belief that all students can learn . . . and, I would add, can learn rigorous, academic content. The InTASC standards call for teachers who *respect* students' differing strengths, teachers who are *committed* to using students' strengths as a basis for growth, teachers who will take *responsibility* for promoting students' growth and development, and teachers who value the *contributions* of families, colleagues and other professionals to their understanding of each student's development. We applaud our professional field on the development of these guiding principles for our ongoing program development.

In recent years, teacher preparation has become more sophisticated in its understanding and practices of framing dispositions as professional commitments to children, not as political stances or religious values. Teacher preparation is working through what it means to assess these dispositions in careful, robust ways for beginning teachers. In 1997, the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) assembled a task force to explore the role of dispositions in teacher education programs. Their work was sustained through the years, and in 2006 this task force began work on a publication that resulted in the 2010 book *Teaching as a moral practice: Defining, developing, and assessing professional dispositions in teacher education*. In this book, seven teacher education programs from across the nation offer cases of their efforts to define, develop, and assess professional dispositions for teaching in their programs. The lessons learned from these cases include how to use formative assessment of a candidate's dispositions as a process for guiding development, processes for connecting candidates' moral and ethical commitments to their actions in candidate assessment practices, and how preparation programs navigate policies and curriculum change when designing assessments for dispositions.

This task force defines dispositions as "habits of professional action or moral commitments that spur such actions. In effect, dispositions refer to a teaching stance, a way of orienting oneself to the work and responsibilities of teachers" (p. 9). In this definition, we see that dispositions are not viewed solely as a set of values or beliefs, but are directly related to practice in the classroom.

The editors of the book offer these five frames for how to think about developing assessments of professional dispositions in teaching.

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- 1. Dispositions depend upon knowledge and skills.** In other words, desire must be linked with the knowledge and skills for being able to carry out those desires. It is not enough for teacher preparation to consider dispositions as only a set of beliefs or values espoused by a teacher candidate. The teachers' commitments must be tied together with the skills to act and the knowledge to act well.
- 2. Dispositions are about ethical, moral actions.** Dispositions are more complex than habits of timeliness and abiding by professional dress codes. "All professions have ethical codes that serve as guides to practice . . . Codes of ethics for teachers explicitly address commitment to students, the profession, and society, and spell out expectations for appropriate and positive actions as well as proscriptions against improper actions" (p. 11-12). At the basic level, we can agree that that we do not want teachers to harm children in any way. The challenge for teacher preparation is to help teacher candidates understand how their values and belief systems—their moral stance—contribute to their decisions and actions. This is a process of reflection that takes time and practice.
- 3. Dispositions relate to teachers' professional identity.** Teacher candidates bring with them their early constructions of their professional identities—how they see themselves in the role of teacher and what they ought to do. Teacher preparation must help these candidates to understand how their ethical agency—what they choose to do in classrooms—is part of how they build respectful relationships with learners and take on responsibilities of being a teacher.
- 4. Context influences the enactment of professional dispositions in practice.** The context—the school norms, the professional culture, the community expectations—shape what a teacher feels he /she is able to do as a teacher. The teaching context can either support or suppress a teacher's actions, either allowing her to live out her moral purposes or calling her commitments into question. Thus, the teaching context contributes to the development of a teacher's professional identity. Teacher preparation currently has little influence on school teaching contexts and must help candidates understand how varying contexts will influence what and how they are able to teach.
- 5. Dispositions can be cultivated / developed.** Here, I quote directly from the book. "Dispositions are neither invisible aspects of a teacher's psyche nor fixed personality traits. They are commitments and habits of thought and action that grow as the teacher learns, acts, and reflects under the guidance of teachers and mentors in a preparation program and in the first year of practice. They are visible in a teacher's decisions and actions over time and especially in the teacher's reflections about the consequences of those decisions and actions. Because dispositions are interdependent with knowledge

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and skills, their cultivation is tied to the conceptual understanding, refinement of skills in guided application, and thoughtful reflection on practice” (pp. 14-15).

We know that we need to prepare teachers who are committed to ensuring that **all** children **will** learn. We want to reaffirm here that we already document attainment of dispositions and meet our national accreditation standards and that we are not bringing this forward as a way of asking for more program regulations in the area of dispositions assessment. Our purpose here is to engage you in thinking about the critical role that the development of a teacher’s dispositions is in becoming a teacher who is committed to helping all children learn and to share some of the current thinking from within the professional field of teacher preparation on this issue. We are glad that our professional association, AACTE, has supported the ongoing discussion and debate about how to define and assess these critical components of learning to teach. We take pride in how teacher preparation takes the time to face these tough conversations with thought and care.

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