Building new teachers' dispositions and aptitudes

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Abstract

Dispositions are the values, beliefs and attitudes that guide behaviors, both personal and professional. While the assessment of dispositions is common practice in teacher education programs, their deliberate development is less frequent. This study used two complementary, self-administered instruments to examine the dispositions and related aptitudes of beginning teachers in special education. Teachers rated themselves highly on dispositions tied to their professional ethics, and a majority had strengths in the aptitudes of empathy, developing strengths in others, and looking for common ground when collaborating with others.

Good teaching is often defined as the intersection of three competencies: content knowledge, pedagogical skill, and an ethical disposition, or strong character (Osguthorpe, 2008; Splitter, 2010). Typically teacher preparation programs stress the first two: coursework and field experiences are designed to increase teacher candidates' knowledge of their designated content and pedagogical skills. There remains, however, a great deal of debate regarding the third critical element of good teaching: professional dispositions (Borko, Liston, & Whitcomb, 2007). "Dispositions are the values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors towards students, families, colleagues, and communities that affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator's own professional growth (CAEP, 2015)." Some in teacher education dispute the value of including dispositions in their programs, citing reasons such as: the abstract, ambiguous nature of defining correct teacher dispositions (Murray, 2007); the lack of agreed-upon standards for institutions (Damon, 2007); and the dearth of validated assessments for measuring the construct (Borko et al., 2007).

Despite this debate, teacher preparation accrediting bodies have maintained a concern with the dispositions of preservice and early service teachers. The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) has continued this focus in their Accreditation Standards (2013), which state that teacher preparation programs should "establish and monitor attributes and dispositions beyond academic ability and that candidates must demonstrate these at admission and during the program." (p. 9). However, teacher performance assessments required in a growing number of states do not assess the dispositions that guide teachers' decisions, although the Common Core State Standards ask teachers to guide their students towards certain habits of mind that include dispositions (Hochstetler, 2014).

The effects of dispositions have been connected to key components of effective teaching. For example, Wadlington and Wadlington (2011) found a correlation between dispositions and such behaviors as differentiating instruction for diverse learners, willingly collaborating with others, and finding satisfaction with their job. These outcomes demonstrate the importance of addressing dispositions early in teachers' careers. Creating awareness that one possesses dispositions and that they guide one's teaching has to be the first step (Schussler and Knarr, 2013).

Much of the research about incorporating dispositions into teacher preparation programs has addressed creating and administering assessments. Results have been used as a determiner of program admission or program retention. This "gateway" use of dispositional data may divert attention from the potential for thoughtful and committed development of productive, successful teacher traits.   Using dispositions as a learning tool has not received as much attention as the assessment function. Teacher educators who believe that dispositions and related attributes are dynamic rather than static prefer to develop candidates' dispositions over time as they participate in professional education programs with a deliberate focus (Reiman & Johnson, 2003). From this perspective, disposition assessments can serve as developmental tools to facilitate growth of candidates' self-awareness and dispositional knowledge. In addition, careful assessment throughout the program can highlight which pedagogical and clinical experiences are most formative in the development of the dispositions that guide their actions and decisions (Jong et al., 2015).

Teacher preparation programs that take an active role in developing these attributes do so in a variety of ways. Wadlington and Wadlington (2011) recommend facilitating a learning environment in which teacher candidates become more aware of their own dispositional identity and learn about the effects of dispositions on teaching. Rose (2009), in a survey of teacher education faculty, found that dispositions have been addressed through direct instruction, formal self-analysis, informal group discussions, observations of experienced teachers and examination of case studies. Bercaw, Schussler, and Stooksberry (2010) used journaling as self-assessments of preservice teachers' dispositions and their underlying assumptions about the purposes and practices of education. Using simulated situations has also been shown to increase preservice teachers' ability to put their ethical and dispositional understandings into practice (Dotger, 2010).

Although research on disposition development in beginning teachers is limited, there is evidence for its value. Johnson and Reiman (2007), using a case study method, found that through the use of discussions and journaling, the teachers they studied not only became more analytical and reflective about teaching, they also demonstrated increases in prompting inquiry with students and self-assessing the impact of their instruction.

Another focus of interest in this study that has had sparse research is the development of dispositions and professional attributes in special education teachers. Teachers of students with special needs must have a wide repertoire of abilities and knowledge of evidence-based teaching methods (Torres, Farley, & Cook, 2012). Special education teachers must also navigate issues of inclusion, collaboration, individualization and differentiation, and must advocate for students with disabilities (LePage, Nielsen, & Fearn, 2008). Harris (2015), in her use of literature to prepare early childhood educators, promotes the development of dispositions and aptitudes that advance collaboration with families of children with disabilities and the perspective that all children in their classrooms can learn together. In addition, since general education teachers now have much more instructional responsibility for students with disabilities, it is essential that they develop positive dispositions toward inclusion, collaboration, and co-teaching (Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011). One study of preservice special education teachers (Beverly, Santos & Kyger, 2006) showed that desired dispositions can be explicitly taught and supported, with a resulting increase in desirable behaviors.

Research Questions
The purpose of this study was to learn about beginning special education teachers' self-identification of their dispositions and aptitudes while also examining the efficacy of the process for doing so. This study took a multi-dimensional approach to developing dispositions and the related aptitudes of teachers. We pursued the following research questions:
1. How do beginning special education teachers rate and describe their professional dispositions?
2. Which professional aptitudes emerge most often for beginning special education teachers?
3. How might reflection and discussion enable beginning special education teachers to connect those dispositions and aptitudes to practice?

Methods
Participants and Setting
Early career teachers in a special education credential induction program participated in activities that included self-assessing their dispositions and aptitudes from fall, 2013 through fall, 2014. All were students

at the graduate level who had completed their initial level of preparation and most were in their first or second year of teaching. The program is in a very large public university, located in an urban area in southern California. The purpose of the induction program is to provide support and continued professional development while teachers are in their early years of teaching.

Instruments

We gathered data from two instruments that focused on different but complementary aspects of beginning teacher disposition and identity formation. The instruments promote self-assessment and reflection, provoke thoughtful comments on aspects of their development as teachers, and provide them an opportunity to consider characteristics that were not often addressed in other parts of the credential program. These instruments were also convenient to administer and their results easy to summarize, making them useful catalysts for class discussions and individual reflections.

Disposition Self-Assessment

The disposition self-assessment, completed in the first semester of the program, was developed by department faculty based on the Council for Exceptional Children's Ethical Principles (2010). The items, ranked on a 1-4 scale (1=an area that is a struggle or challenge for the teacher, 4=an area in which the teacher feels comfortable and confident) are:
1. Personal Characteristics: Strives to achieve and maintain a high degree of competence and integrity in all professional practices.
2. Interpersonal Characteristics: Strives to develop rapport and collaborate with others in the work environment.
3. Commitment to Professional Growth: Values creativity and thinks critically about work-related practices.
4. Commitment to Diversity: Believes all individuals can learn, despite severity of disability, and is committed to serving students with diverse needs, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and developmental levels
5. Commitment to Ethical Practices: Committed to ethical professional activities that benefit individuals with exceptionalities and their families.

Each item also has a comment box for candidates' brief explanations of their ratings. For this study, 43 students in the Education Specialist: Mild/Moderate Disabilities specialization completed the Disposition Self-Assessment in the 2013-2014 academic year.

Strengths Finder 2.0 Instrument

The final class in the induction program requires teachers to apply learning in their teaching positions at school sites. This class includes teachers in mild/moderate, moderate/severe, and Deaf/hard of hearing classrooms. A key component of the course is the use of an instrument that assesses candidates' aptitudes with a strengths-based tool. Candidates reflect on how the results might influence practice. Data were collected over 4 semesters with 118 participants. Strengths Finder 2.0 (Rath, 2007) was developed to help individuals identify and utilize their innate and learned strengths in their personal and professional lives. Tests of rigor have demonstrated moderate to strong test-retest reliability and content validity (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, Harter, 2007). The assessment is comprised of 177 questions with two self-describing statements in each question from which participants must select one as being "most true". Participants must also determine the extent to which it is true by indicating on a continuum the relative weight of the item. At the conclusion of the assessment, a "Top 5 Strengths" report is computer-generated for each candidate, including a rank-order of aptitudes. A complete list of the 34 strengths and brief descriptions can be found at: http://www.strengthstest.com/ strengthsfinderthemes/strengths-themes.html.

Procedures and Analysis

The candidates in the first induction course responded to the Disposition Assessment instrument in an online format. The self-ratings were averaged across the respondents for each of the five questions. The accompanying comments were compiled and sorted for common themes. The Strengths Finder 2.0 instrument was administered and scored in an online format by the second author. Participants were asked to share their "Top 5" results on their online student profile through the university's learning management system. They were then asked to reflect upon their own results and how their aptitudes might influence their practice in authentic settings (schools, classrooms, with colleagues, students, and their families). Results were analyzed to determine which aptitudes occurred most frequently. Reflections

were analyzed for frequency of the aptitudes they chose to discuss, indicating their importance to the teachers, and for qualitative descriptions of implications for their teaching.

Results

Disposition Self-Assessment

Average self-ratings across respondents on the Disposition Self-Assessment Instrument were:

Question 1 Personal Characteristics = 3.5
Question 2 Interpersonal Characteristics = 3.3
Question 3 Commitment to Professional Growth = 3.5
Question 4 Commitment to Diversity = 3.5
Question 5 Commitment to Ethical Practices = 3.5.

There was a narrow range of ratings, 3.1-3.9, and a high overall average of 3.4 across two semesters and the five questions. An analysis of the comments indicated that in addition to rationales for their ratings many candidates identified challenges and areas in which they wanted to improve. These remarks contained many specifics about skills, knowledge and understandings of their role.

Sample statements included

Personal Characteristics:
- o My students' physical, psychological, and emotional well-being is important to me.
- o I feel that I am still at the point of asking for lots of advice, trying new strategies, and seeing what works for me.

Interpersonal Characteristics:
- o This area is a strength of mine. I do feel like a team player when working with my colleagues.
- o Sometimes with so many things due, IEP's, taking role 15 ways, and prepping for class, endless school meetings, I feel overwhelmed by going the extra mile to make connections with co-workers.

Commitment to Professional Growth:
- o I rated myself a 4 in this area because I base a great deal of my teaching practices on my own creativity, the creativity of my co-workers, classmates, and my own students.
- o The greatest challenge I face in this regard is finding times to change or revamp programs and practices in a way that meshes with the general education curriculum, as all of my services are delivered in that setting.

Commitment to Diversity:
- o I believe I have a responsibility to create opportunities for our students to demonstrate their abilities in different ways.
- o I could use more development in understanding the diverse linguistic backgrounds of the students.

Commitment to Ethical Practices:
- o I strive to be thought of as a resource to my students and the families, not only academically but in terms of navigating the special education system as well.
- o I communicate with my caseload families to inform them about how they are doing, however I still feel uncomfortable when doing it.

One candidate added a suggestion, "Just wondering if we may want to add an area around resiliency or self- care. We have a serious issue with teacher retention among special educators. Resiliency and emotional intelligence/care are key indicators of retention."

Strengths Finder Aptitudes

Early career teachers' results from the Strengths Finder 2.0 instrument produced a relatively small cluster of aptitudes, each given a descriptive title. The "Top 5" most frequently occurring aptitudes were:
- o 36% Input (n = 42)
- o 32% Learner (n = 38)
- o 28% Empathy (n = 33)
- o 28% Developer (n = 33)
- o 27% Harmony (n = 31)

Two aptitudes had the strongest representation. Input, defined as people with an inquisitive nature who are collectors of objects, ideas, and information, was the most frequently occurring aptitude and also the most frequently placed in the #1 position as the strongest aptitude for that person. The second most frequent aptitude was Learner, characterized by a love of learning and particularly the process of learning.

Taken together, nearly three-quarters of all participants had profile results that included Input or Learner aptitudes in their top 5.   The remaining highest occurring aptitudes were Empathy (feels others' emotions as if they were their own), Developer (recognizes and wants to develop strengths in others), and Harmony (looks for areas of agreement and seeks common ground when collaborating with others). The lowest occurrence of the 34 aptitudes was Command (<3%), described as a leader. Focus (goal setters, good at prioritizing and keeping others on task), Significance (wishes to be successful and recognized for their work), and Self-Assurance (confident in their own abilities and judgment) were next lowest in representation at 3%.

Several themes emerged from the analysis of participants' reflections. Representative comments are presented in the order of most frequently discussed aptitudes. The majority of written reflections addressed aptitudes that facilitated relationships and collaboration with other people. However, these comments more often reflected directly upon effective teaching skills when working with students with special needs rather than collaboration with other adults.

- o Strategic: I like the ability I have to take on a situation, for example, a difficult student who refuses to work during writing time.
- o Empathy: I feel that empathy is one of the most important traits that a teacher can have. Students sometimes just need somebody that will just listen and understand them.
- o Relator: I do think that this strength helps me to work with students on an individual level as they might maneuver through difficult times in their lives. I was once told that I would make a good counselor for students.

Several participants focused on how aptitudes helped or might help them effectively manage their current responsibilities and take on new roles.

- o Analytical: Although I knew this was an area of strength for me before, I would not have really thought about using it in some other way than I already do in everyday life. An opportunity just came up at my school for me to be the FBA (Functional Behavior Assessment) facilitator at my school site, and I accepted the responsibility because our special education team will be able to benefit from my strength in that area.
- o Intellection: I'm introspective and am almost always asking questions, such as: how I can improve as a teacher, how can I teach students better, how can I teach this topic so that students understand it well, etc.
- o Learner: I think this is another important trait for a teacher. Especially when differentiation is critical for our diverse students, a teacher must be willing to research, learn new things and bring out those new things to his/her students.

Other frequent themes were the importance of understanding children's contexts, being sensitive to inclusion, and meeting each student's individual needs.

- o Context: Regarding our work in the classroom, I think that Context is a helpful trait because it helps me to look at the overall environment in which certain events take place. For instance, if a student is acting out in class, my strengths for Intellection and Context can help me to pull back and examine the context in which that acting out took place—perhaps being able to improve the environment.
- o Includer: I feel very uncomfortable when I feel like someone is being excluded, forgotten or left out. I look for opportunities to draw others in or help bridge or build relationships.
- o Individualization: Too often, I hear people boast about how they "treat everyone the same". This is just one of my pet peeves. In my humble opinion, that is not something to be boasting about. We are all individuals, with a variety of strengths and needs. If we pretend not to notice those differences, then I believe we are missing out on the essence of the individual. We aren't really "seeing" them at all.

A final common theme touched on participants' beliefs about being a special education teacher and why they feel the work they do benefits children.

- o Connectedness: It's very important to me that I find meaning in my job; it's why I selected it. I believe helping kids learn and helping them learn how they learn is a very important job.
- o Positivity: Positivity is a special quality a teacher can utilize to make a difference in children's lives and education. Teachers can turn small achievements into huge achievements by acknowledging students' growth. This will motivate and encourage students to be positive and to be high achievers.

Conclusions

This study embedded two instruments in a sequential process to develop different facets of beginning teachers' understanding of their professional dispositions and aptitudes. The emphasis was on gaining professional self-knowledge and tying this knowledge to practice.

The first research question yielded an impression of these beginning teachers as comfortable and confident in the dispositions considered essential in special education. The majority of candidates gave themselves high self-ratings on the disposition instrument, accompanied by logical philosophical rationales and salient examples. Their certitude may indicate that they had thought about them in previous coursework and fieldwork. It is also possible that the items were perceived as aspirational in nature, skewing their ratings toward how they would like to be rather than describing their current levels. In addition, they were responding to pre-written items and descriptors, which were all worded in a positive light. Even though they were not graded on their ratings or comments, knowing that their instructor would see them was another factor to consider.

Strengths Finder, as with other personality instruments, is not a self-assessment, but rather a probing of how respondents predict they would typically act when given two choices. The resulting clusters of attributes clearly favored interpersonal strengths. In addition, the candidates chose to discuss these attributes most frequently, although their comments notably addressed their direct work with students more than collaboration with other adults. These teachers are adept at collecting a variety of strategies for working with diverse learners and have a high commitment to being lifelong learners; both aptitudes that are fundamental for teaching students with disabilities. However, one of the most critical roles of special education teachers is being an advocate for students and their families, which can require assertiveness. Yet the Command and Self-Assurance aptitudes were under-represented in this group of teachers. It is possible that low identification of these strengths accurately reflects the self-perception and the reality of many beginning teachers. The aptitude results imply that while teaching their students are relative strengths, working with more experienced teachers and with families would be more difficult at this stage of their careers.

The two instruments revealed different aspects of the candidates' values and reasoning, and gave them insights into their inclinations and abilities as teachers. There are also dissimilarities between the two, especially as they are extended in course discussions and activities. The self-rating of the generic dispositions on the self-assessment are followed by an analysis and problem solving discussion of simulated ethical dilemmas. However, the Strengths Finder instrument is much less value-laden and requires teachers to consider how they might alter their professional practices. As one candidate said, "Here's what I learned about myself and here's what I'm going to do differently."

Limitations
Establishing the validity of the content of these two instruments for beginning special education teachers was not part of this study. In addition, because dispositions and aptitudes are bound to a large degree to teachers' contexts, the results have limited generalizability.

Implications
This study investigated dispositions and aptitudes in the particular context of beginning special education teachers. This two-semester process is highly relevant to their new roles and responsibilities. The self-assessment of the five dispositions and simulated discussions in the first course prepares them developmentally for the more specific conversations of how their individual aptitudes might be applied in practice in the second course. Forging an identity as a teacher and learning how to harness one's strengths and dispositions to become an excellent one could be an important process for early career teachers. Using a developmental and constructivist process to increase self-knowledge can promote persistence and feelings of competence. Induction programs could thread considerations of dispositions and strengths, and how to act on them, throughout their support and mentoring activities.

Other implications of this work include the need for more research into the connection between teacher self-knowledge and the operationalization of this knowledge in practice, and the creation of more opportunities for beginning teachers to develop self-knowledge.

Endnotes
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