The Critical Role of Dispositions: What's Missing in Measurements of English Teacher Candidate Effectiveness

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The Critical Role of Dispositions: What’s Missing in Measurements of English Teacher Candidate Effectiveness

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Abstract: This article explores a fundamental indicator missing from current assessments of preservice teacher effectiveness, namely the importance of competencies central to professionalism and to impact on student learning. Drawing from her classroom experiences and relevant research, the author makes the case that evaluation of English teacher candidates’ “dispositions” is necessary in measures of professional readiness.

Keywords: disposition, edTPA, English education, professional readiness, teacher candidate assessment

To depend wholly, or even chiefly, upon the knowledge and use of “methods”, is an error fatal to the best interests of education. (Dewey 1964)

In conjunction with the integration of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), many states have begun to legislate assessments of preservice and practicing teachers’ effectiveness. Additionally, influential groups such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have sponsored large-scale investigations of teaching aimed at identifying indicators that result in student achievement gains. During the past three years, the state of Illinois, where I live and work, has become a lead state in the implementation of edTPA, a teacher performance assessment developed by the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity and evaluated by the Pearson corporation. By fall 2015, in accordance with state law, the licensure of all teacher candidates in Illinois will be determined not by internal measures such as academic grades and performance during student teaching but, rather, by students’ scores on an online external assessment completed during their student-teaching semester. The states of New York and Washington have linked a passing score on edTPA to university program completion, positioning the test as the determiner of candidate readiness as well as eligibility for graduation. Thankfully, Illinois recently amended its mandate to remove the graduation stipulation. But the threat remains: More than 20 other states have linked the assessment to state licensure. The increasing reliance on the edTPA as a measure of preservice teachers’ effectiveness, in some states the sole arbiter, begs interest in the design and evaluation of this high-stakes evaluation instrument. In this article I explore a fundamental indicator missing from current assessments of preservice teacher effectiveness, namely the importance of competencies central to professionalism and to impact on student learning.

Highlighting the Importance of Disposition: One Case Study

Recently, my program added a new course at the beginning of the English education sequence in response to certain curricular gaps. One of those gaps included the matriculation of teacher candidates who demonstrated low behavioral, emotional, or communicative competencies. For example, students displaying chronic inattentiveness or significant immaturities would enter the methods courses in their junior and senior years and struggle, often earning poor grades for teaching demonstrations or clinical experiences as a result of those negative dispositions. My colleagues and I noticed this pattern and, in an effort to address other programmatic and curricular concerns, proposed a class for which I am currently the primary instructor. Situated in...
sophomore year, this additional requirement seeks to introduce students to the major and begin cultivating their professional identities. The course is framed by sociocultural theories of language, culture, curriculum, and schooling, and addresses key issues in teaching English in diverse settings. More specifically, through guided inquiry and a reflective stance we discuss relevant research and publications on topics including culturally responsive pedagogy, teacher identity, adolescent literacy practices, and the politics of education. Although the course has several goals, one aim is to identify students with weak disposition indicators for the purposes of monitoring their performance over the progression of their coursework while providing them mentorship and opportunities to improve their developing professional ethos.

The university’s college of education disposition policy guides the monitoring of teacher candidates in my program. The college cites the following categories as dispositions we seek to nurture in candidates: collaboration, professionalism, authenticity, respect, emotional maturity, reflection, flexibility, and responsibility. In addition to “behavior,” the three areas of disposition for which the English education program monitors includes affective, communicative, and academic competence. Other framings of disposition and competency that inform my understanding of teacher effectiveness include guidelines established by the field. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) defines professional dispositions as “professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities. These positive behaviors support student learning and development” (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, n.d.). The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), in its 2006 guidelines for English language arts (ELA) teacher preparation, summarizes in detail the beliefs and attitudes “essential” for English teacher candidates (National Council of Teachers of English 2006). They are condensed into core values that speak to, among other things, the need for candidates to demonstrate reverence for learning, openness to new ideas, sensitivity to the needs of others, appreciation for diversity, and investment in professional development. While teaching the introductory English education course, I use these descriptions to guide my measure of preservice teacher readiness.

It was the midpoint of the semester in one section of this introductory course and we were concluding the reading-heavy portion of our curriculum to prepare for classroom observations and teaching presentations. To initiate this move from theory to practice, I announced that we would discontinue the weekly reading response assignments. Sam (not his real name) threw his arms in the air and shouted, “Finally!” In response to my raised eyebrows he stated: “Those responses are pretty much just busy work.” My initial reaction was to Sam’s behavior. I was surprised: I might expect a frustrated outburst from a high school student, but I didn’t expect one from a teacher candidate in the context of a professional development seminar. My second thought was about the content of the comment, which demonstrated that Sam had difficulties identifying value in critical responses to reading. This was especially worrisome given our recent discussions on writing as a learning tool.

This was not Sam’s first contentious moment in this class, nor would it be his last. From consistent interruptions to his peers during discussions to more troubling factors such as his proudly shared story from previous field work of publically shaming a student for use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Sam demonstrated several negative dispositions. More specifically, Sam’s interruptions were disrespectful to his classmates, and his insistence that standard English held more value than a student’s primary discourse showed—at the very least—a certain closed mindedness, an undesirable trait that is clearly in conflict with my understanding of characteristics of effective English teachers.

At the end of the term I had serious doubts about Sam’s readiness for the classroom and, frankly, his aptitude for a successful, long-term career in education. Yes, Sam had a strong grade point average in the content area and impressive scores on his licensure exams, but experience told me that Sam would struggle in his clinical placements, not because of a lack of pedagogical or content-area knowledge, but because of the negative dispositions I saw evidenced in the introductory course. As a teacher candidate Sam may be fully capable of aligning the CCSS with an engaging ELA curriculum (as well as Pearson’s view, as it clearly endorses their use), but his behavior alone would likely cause tension during his student teaching and beyond. And while I recognize that Sam’s version of himself as “student” can differ from how he signifies “teacher” in the future, I felt that his collective behavior and line of thinking about teaching English was troubling enough to identify him as someone who could benefit from intervention early in the teacher education program.

The edTPA and the Absence of Attention to Disposition

To ready my future students and me for the full implementation of edTPA in 2015, I investigated the limited public tool available for learning about this assessment: the edTPA website. Here I learned of the history and purpose of this performance-based assessment of teacher candidate quality and effectiveness that seeks to answer the essential question, “Is a new teacher ready for the job?”

According to the website’s official “Welcome” page, edTPA began of a desire to “create a nationally available...
assessment for new entrants to teaching—designed by teachers and teacher educators to reflect the real work of teaching, to support the learning of candidates, and to give useful feedback to programs that prepare teachers.” The developers sought to build a “valid, reliable measure that would respect the complexity of teaching, [and] reflect the academic knowledge and intellectual abilities required to advance student learning” (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. n.d.). The result is an online assessment requiring candidates to demonstrate skill in:

- planning around student learning standards, adapting plans for students based on their specific needs, implementing and assessing instruction, developing academic language, evaluating student learning, and reflecting on how to improve student outcomes by continuing to refine teaching plans and strategies. (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. n.d.)

As I reviewed the website’s many pages, I was struck by the absence of attention to candidate dispositions in the description of professional readiness or in the overviews of what the assessment evaluated. I read through the more than 20 links on the FAQs page (http://edtpa.aacte.org/faq#17) several times looking for mentions or even implications of affective, behavioral, or communicative competencies. I used the search tool for phrases such as “teacher behavior,” “teacher affect,” and “candidate communication.” I also expanded the search to include terms pulled from NCTE’s descriptions of positive disposition, such as “openness” or “responsibility.” I found zero results.

This dearth of attention to disposition was alarming to me in many ways. One such concern was focused on the CCSS. While I don’t generally endorse the CCSS, I do acknowledge that they are an active component of most teacher and teacher candidate assessments and I will limit my critique to that context. In my research I discovered a significant disposition-related gap between the otherwise connected CCSS and edTPA. For example, the edTPA disregards teacher disposition yet aligns with CCSS, which require teachers to guide students toward certain “habits of mind.” These habits of mind, or “capacities,” linked to the ELA standards are described as “knowledge, skills, and dispositions that operate in tandem with the academic content in the standards” (Council of Chief State School Officers 2011, 5, emphasis added). How is it that the standards that drive many teachers’ instruction require candidates to cultivate certain positive dispositions in their students, yet the edTPA does not evaluate the candidates’ own dispositions? To provide a specific example, the seventh “habit of mind” outlined in the ELA CCSS requires teachers to help their students achieve the following: “They [the learners] come to understand other perspectives and cultures” (Council of Chief State School Officers 2011, 5). If the teacher candidate is incapable of this habit of mind, can he or she effectively guide students toward this kind of understanding, let alone model it on a daily basis?

The primary aim of the edTPA and tests like it seems to be weighing quantitative factors like the effects of particular lesson plans as judged by evidence of student learning. However, many scholars have suggested that teacher disposition is indeed measurable. For example, Wilkerson and Lang (2011) argue, based on an extensive review of related research, that “dispositions can be defined and measured validly and reliably using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods (both selected and constructed response formats), teacher standards (as the content domain), and research-based measurement theory and practice” (36). I do not mean to suggest that the edTPA completely ignores the affective or behavioral component of candidate effectiveness if it is defined as a general sense of “awareness”; the assessment likely seeks to gauge, for instance, how well candidates can modify teaching to accommodate a variety of learners. But writing about one’s intention to make adjustments to a classroom activity in a reflective piece for the edTPA and modulating one’s emotions or commenting appropriately while in the act of teaching are very different abilities and would likely require different measures to assess. As an example of such a tool, Wilkerson and Lang (2011) point to the Situational Reflection Assessment (SRA), which uses storytelling, future projections, and ambiguous pictures to uncover beliefs about teaching of which the teacher him or herself may not be aware (40).

Perhaps one reason why the edTPA and similar measurements fail to account for preservice teacher disposition is because of the sticky history of emotion in education. The academy has a long tradition of discomfort with feelings and the bodies they come from, as intellectual work is stereotypically motivated by the life of the mind. While many scholars, such as bell hooks (1994), have worked to disrupt this epistemological tradition of mind and body as two unrelated parts, some in higher education continue to resist exploration of the personal—in this case, the beliefs and behaviors of teacher candidates. Further, in a space built to promote individuality and identity growth we avoid making judgments about the person and personal. While assuming instructors in all content areas seek to cultivate college graduates who can make well-informed contributions to civil discourse, perhaps some feel they are not in a position to evaluate specific teacher candidates’ capacity to demonstrate kindness to others. Plainly, some feel it is not their jobs to do so, even if they do claim expertise in pedagogy. Based on anecdotal evidence from my own department, I know there is some reluctance in this area. Another consideration in the hesitancy to evaluate disposition may be, in part, fear of it turning into an opportunity to eliminate candidates who do not subscribe to certain social or political ideologies. An article in The Chronicle of Higher Education describes just such
a situation, where a New York appeals court ordered an education program to reinstate a teacher candidate who had been expelled for advocating for corporal punishment (Jacobson 2006). Illustrated in this example is the fine line between respecting an individual’s right to nontraditional pedagogies and sending those best aligned with normative educational ideals (and least likely to strike a student?) into the classroom. There is also the issue of differing opinions on how to define disposition—if it is indeed behaviors, attitudes, values, or a combination of each. The categorization alone can be confounding, and the subjectivity of it all can add to the sometimes amorphous, ungrounded sense of the issue. Lastly, there is an ongoing debate in the field of teacher education itself over whether candidate dispositions should be measured. As a case in point, an entire issue of the Journal of Teacher Education—perhaps the top journal in the field—was dedicated to the topic, with the introductory article outlining the split in opinion among teacher educators (Borko, Liston, and Whitcomb 2007).

Another angle to consider when critiquing the role of dispositions in the edTPA and other standardized teacher candidate assessments is the argument that “professional” dispositions develop once teachers are exactly that—professionals. Haberman and Post (1998) suggest in their research on the preparation of teachers for diverse and high poverty areas that many teachers in those contexts point to the field as the location where they developed their professional dispositions. While the authors contend that certain ideological indicators—such as the ability to work with students in “respectful and caring” ways—must be in place for candidates to later be effective educators, they also argue that teacher candidates who demonstrate appropriate dispositions in the role of student or student teacher may not always be the most successful as full-time teachers. Further, their research implies that certain “star” students or student teachers may not maintain appropriate dispositions after certification. Once in the classroom, some teachers may use their experiences with students in certain contexts to rationalize growing prejudices. This important perspective on the role of disposition further complicates the issue of candidate assessment because it highlights the dynamic nature of the self and how dispositions can shift over time.

Regardless of the reasons for edTPA’s dismissal of disposition, I argue that there will be significant consequences in its absence. I fear that when teacher effectiveness is reduced to the assessment of a collection of materials, candidates’ understandings of what it means to be a professional are significantly minimized. Further, I worry that this will change students’ definitions of professionalism in ways that orient toward self-achievement and away from dispositions central to teaching the whole student.

The Impact of Disposition on Student Learning and the Profession

Although it may seem obvious that positive teacher disposition impacts student learning and, more broadly, contributes to a thriving profession, I will highlight research that supports these arguments. Several studies have shown the high correlation between positive teacher disposition and student success. Harme and Pi-anta (2001) conducted a study that pointed to the importance of teacher relationships with students, finding that students who had significant behavior issues early in their schooling were less likely to repeat those behavioral problems in later grades if they interacted with teachers who were sensitive to their emotional, physical, and intellectual needs and who provided feedback that was consistent and positive. In an article that reviewed several professional recommendations for ideal teacher characteristics, Carroll Helm (2007) suggests a model for excellence that includes traits such as “dispositions of caring and empathy” (110). While content area and pedagogical knowledge were cited as indicators of strong teachers in both publications, dispositions were included with equal attention, yet the edTPA does not account for these indicators of teacher effectiveness.

Based on this research and my knowledge of the field, I suggest that positive dispositions are a necessary component of successful English teachers. English teachers are charged with fostering the emotional intelligences of students: It is common curriculum in the English classroom for teachers to prepare students to write for creative self-exploration, or compose persuasive essays about controversial issues, while simultaneously exploring texts that take up topics such as death, sexuality, and race. In each of these cases, and in ones concerning far less complicated social issues, it is imperative that teachers are capable of managing their own reactions to student-generated and curricular texts and guiding sensitive in-class discussions.

I try to imagine Sam the teacher facilitating a dialog about complex subjects reflected in the readings of his high school curriculum. Based on his performance in my course and reports from other faculty confirming similar affective, behavioral, and communicative weaknesses, I see a high likelihood that Sam will, for example, make an inappropriate joke to ease his own discomfort instead of talking with students about the myriad reactions he or they may have to a text. Sadly, I could also see Sam teasing students who may have different views from his own in the same vein as his self-reported public critique of a student employing AAVE in a classroom he visited. These behaviors are not only ineffective pedagogical strategies but also damaging and dangerous. While the edTPA requires candidates to describe major teaching events, and to reflect on the impact of those events, those teaching materials and reflections...
are still manipulated by the candidate who is motivated to present his or her best teacher self. So, while evaluators of the edTPA (individuals hired and trained through Pearson) may be looking for professional missteps such as the hypothetical ones offered previously, savvy students like Sam could easily massage the submitted materials to highlight his instructional strengths.

Finally, I point to how teacher disposition impacts practicing English teachers and the field at large. It is common knowledge that a significant number of novice teachers across content areas leave the classroom within the first five years. Many factors contribute to this high level of attrition, including poorly developed teacher identities, disparities in preparation, and professional frustrations (e.g., pressure to teach to the test, lack of resources) (Alsup 2005; Hirsch 2006; National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future 2002). In the context of English, specifically, it has been shown that new professionals exit because of similar reasons. In 2008 Scherff found that a lack of support and increased demands of special education requirements contributed to English teacher dissatisfaction, and McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca noted in a 2005 publication that novice teachers of English were concerned about balancing the workload, classroom management, and autonomy—all of which may influence young English teachers’ decisions to abandon the profession.

It is not a stretch to suggest that each of these factors contributing to English teacher attrition can be exacerbated by poor disposition. While it is surely difficult for resourceful, unflappable novice teachers to weather the challenges of the first few years in the classroom, it could be exceedingly difficult for those with certain negative dispositions (e.g., those who are easily frustrated or who don’t see potential in low-performing students). Therefore, when the edTPA ignores disposition and answers “yes” to their own essential question of “Is a new teacher ready for the job?” they are potentially contributing to the field’s retention problems. Put more simply, when teachers with weak affective, behavioral, and communicative competencies eventually leave, programs such as the edTPA are partially to blame. The profession and the nation’s schools would surely be better off as a result, but the moral and ethical implications of allowing a struggling teacher candidate to progress through student teaching and into the field should also be taken into consideration, especially in light of the edTPA’s stated motivation to support the current call for placing effective educators in all classrooms.

Bridging the Performance–Professionalism Divide

It seems that each semester I have at least one student like Sam in my introductory English education course: A student who is connecting with the material but otherwise displays troubling professional competencies. In those cases I work closely with the student, helping him or her develop better self-awareness and showing how their actions can affect how they are perceived by others and—more importantly—how their dispositions impact student learning. Many students who are initially identified as displaying problematic dispositions respond well to intervention and continue on in the program with few recurring issues. Sometimes students self-select for removal from the program after a period of reflection, while in rare cases they are counseled out by the program director prior to substantive clinical experiences. If students who have weak dispositions progress to student teaching, however, and the primary assessment of their readiness for the profession is a tool that dismisses disposition, I worry about the immediate and lasting consequences.

It is vital that assessments of preservice teacher effectiveness take behavioral, affective, and communicative as well as academic competencies into consideration when determining a candidate’s suitability for a long-term career teaching English. The edTPA’s oversight emphasizes the need for English educators, practicing secondary English teachers, school administrators, and individuals connected to these fields more broadly to strongly advocate for a truly all-encompassing assessment, especially if states are positioning such tests to be the sole determiner of candidate eligibility for certification. This is a problem on a wide scale: When students with weak dispositions enter into the classroom full time and struggle to the point of leaving the profession it undermines teacher and teacher educators’ authority to determine who is or isn’t prepared to enter the classroom; it impacts the quality of preservice teachers who student teach; it affects the learning experiences of students in those teacher candidates’ classrooms; it alters university relationships with K–12 teachers and administrators; and it potentially contributes to higher attrition rates. And these are only a handful of potential outcomes. They are distressing images to me as a teacher educator, as I imagine they are to anyone affiliated with and invested in teaching and learning, regardless of the grade level or content area. To ignore the impact of English teacher disposition on learners and the field is to disregard what we know is true: Dispositions make a difference in teacher effectiveness and the sustainability of our profession.

In proposing concrete solutions to address this trend, I point to the grassroots efforts being made to push back against the many troubling “reform” efforts in education. A related example would be the mandate linking edTPA performance and program completion in my home state, which was broken as a result of teacher educators and other concerned parties coming together in a common voice to send a firm message to university administrators and the Illinois State Board of Higher Education. It is my sense that if we hadn’t expressed our
united opposition to such egregious overreach the requirement would stand. Perhaps the first step in drawing attention to the importance of disposition in the evaluation of English teacher candidates is to follow a similar path. Regardless of the approach, we must continue to resist emerging teacher evaluations that divorce performance from professionalism.

REFERENCES