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GIFTED CHILD TODAY

The nation's leading resource for nurturing gifted and talented children.

Evaluating Gifted Education Programs and Services



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GIFTED CHILD TODAY

Volume 42 Number 4 October 2019

Special Issue: Evaluating Gifted Education Programs and Services

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FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

From the Guest Editor

Evaluating Gifted Education Programs and Services

Joyce VanTassel-Baska, EdD¹

Keywords: program evaluation, evaluation, gifted education

This special issue of *Gifted Child Today* was a brainchild I had at last year's NAGC (National Association for Gifted Children) conference in Minneapolis. It occurred to me that as a field we have paid scant attention to the evidence of progress in programming and services to this population. Even as states and local districts require numbers and descriptions of programs to document that gifted services are being provided to gifted students, rarely do we show evidence of growth in these students as a result of running programs for them. Nor do we often document new program development methods that have worked well such as a new tool for reviewing curriculum or a way of monitoring classroom practice that is effective. And finally, we have not demonstrated the extent to which our national program standards are being used and addressed in programs for the gifted.

How do we know that gifted students are receiving the services they need? A strong annual *internal* evaluation can provide some of the answers needed. It can tap into stakeholder perceptions to get a reading on the attitudes that prevail about the program by key individuals in the system—parents, students, teachers, and administrators. It can demonstrate through pre–post measures, product accomplishments including Science Fair and History Day, and portfolios that student growth has occurred in selected


areas of the curriculum for these learners. Finally, such annual internal evaluations can also judge the efficacy of the instruments and processes being used to identify and assess gifted students. Are we finding the right students and how do we know? Are we assessing higher level outcomes for these students or only ones that meet the grade-level standards required? Do we have a handle on the fidelity of implementation of the curriculum used? Were teachers prepared to implement it faithfully and fully?

Annual evaluations conducted internally must be matched, however, by *external* evaluations every 3 to 5 years to assess objectively at a broader and deeper level the extent to which gifted programs are dynamic and progressive rather than stagnant or losing ground. For example, what are the trend lines for gifted student performance in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate, our secondary hallmarks for successful rigorous programs for the college-bound? These external evaluations should also be able to answer the questions we have about progress on including more children of color and poverty to the rolls of the gifted in our districts. Even if we are using the best instruments, are the identification processes too restrictive or too lenient,

given the nature and extent of programs? External evaluations should also seek to validate the models we employ to serve the gifted—the grouping models, the accelerative options employed, and the counseling approaches. Evaluations also can provide an outsider's view into the political problems of operating gifted programs and how they might be addressed.

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Teacher Dispositions and Their Impact on Implementation Practices for the Gifted

Kristen R. Stephens, PhD¹ 

Abstract: Teacher dispositions have become an important consideration in the preparation and evaluation of teachers. Often considered in combination with demonstrated knowledge and skills, educator preparation programs across the country have been tasked by accrediting bodies to both identify the essential dispositions required of licensed teachers and develop means for cultivating and assessing these dispositions. Dispositions often address a broad swath of areas and are assumed to be of uniform importance regardless of the teacher's grade level and content area; however, is it possible that certain dispositions are more essential for teachers of the gifted? Likewise, are there dispositions that have not been considered in our assessment of general education teachers that are critical for teachers of the gifted to possess? A thorough consideration of both these questions is necessary to ensure a cadre of teachers who are highly effective in working with gifted students.

Keywords: gifted education, dispositions, teacher education, instructional strategies, standards

Introduction

Teacher dispositions have become an important consideration in the preparation and evaluation of teachers. Often considered in combination with demonstrated knowledge and skills, educator preparation programs across the country have been tasked by accrediting bodies to both identify the essential dispositions required of licensed teachers and develop means for cultivating and assessing these

dispositions. Dispositions often address a broad swath of areas and are assumed to be of uniform importance regardless of the teacher's grade level and content area; however, is it possible that certain dispositions are more essential for teachers of the gifted? Likewise, are there dispositions that we have not considered in our assessment of general education teachers that are critical for teachers of the gifted to possess? Are there dispositions that teacher evaluators of practice can discern to suggest improvement or to provide acclaim?

Analyzing the literature pertaining to dispositions is critical in determining the desired characteristics of highly effective teachers—including those who work with gifted students. For the purpose of this investigation, a thorough review of the literature pertaining to teacher dispositions and the characteristics of effective teachers of the gifted was conducted. Several databases were searched (e.g., ERIC, Education Full Text, Academic Search Complete) with the publication date restricted to articles between 2000 and

2019. More than 400 articles were returned, with journal articles that addressed dispositions of K-12 teachers in the United States prioritized within these results. Ultimately, just over 50 journal articles pertaining to teacher dispositions were reviewed.

What Are Dispositions?

In examining dispositions, one of the first challenges is reaching consensus as to what the term even means. From a theoretical perspective, dispositions can be seen as closely associated with personality theory, viewed from a behavioral perspective, or considered a component of professional judgment and action (Shields & Edens, 2009). The Council for

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the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) has adopted the definition proposed by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), which defines dispositions as the “habits of professional action and moral commitments . . .” that “. . . play a key role in how teachers do, in fact, act in practice” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 6.). Wilkerson and Lang (2007) provide a few more parameters and define dispositions as “a pattern of behavior that is exhibited frequently in the absence of coercion and constituting a habit of mind under some conscious and voluntary control, and that is intentional and oriented to broad goals” (p. 9). Sockett (2009) emphasizes that dispositions “manifest only in intentional action” and “function as predictions about human actions but are not the causes of them” (p. 292). These definitions illustrate the symbiotic relationship between dispositions (being) and skills (doing) while also highlighting the importance of “action” in revealing dispositions. Although various definitions for dispositions have been proposed in the literature, confusion remains regarding how to best operationalize dispositions, so they can effectively be cultivated and assessed.

Dispositions typically span a variety of areas such as personality traits, attitudes, values, and beliefs. The assumption is that consideration of one’s dispositions in these areas provides information regarding one’s character, code of ethics, personal virtues, and ultimately one’s practice. To better organize targeted dispositions for measurement and ensure a robust sampling across dispositional dimensions, some have attempted to categorize or group dispositions. For example, Wasiczko (2007) organizes dispositions into three broad categories: (a) observable teacher behaviors, (b) teacher attitudes, and (c) teacher perceptions. Mpofu and Nthontho (2017) classify dispositions as those that are (a) self-related, (b) learner-related, or (c) professional-related. Diez (2007) simply classifies dispositions as (a) moral and (b) professional, while Misco and Shiveley (2007) offer a slightly more abstract system and group dispositions by (a) personal virtues (i.e., caring), (b) educational virtues (i.e., ability to reflect), and (c) societal transformation (i.e., commitment to equity and democratic values). Taking a different perspective, Rike and Sharp (2008) consider the timing within a preservice teachers’ training in which the disposition should be observed in their classification (i.e., class behaviors, practicum behaviors). From the literature, it is evident that while dispositions may be conceptualized in different ways, the view that dispositions are multifaceted—encompassing an array of dimensions—is consistently noted across the literature. Furthermore, the categorization or grouping of dispositions aids in the development of measures for assessing them.

A listing of those desired dispositions commonly acknowledged in dispositional assessments and checklists and within teaching standards is provided in Table 1. In perusing the list, it is evident that most dispositions appear to be character-based (i.e., how teachers feel) rather than competency-based (i.e., how competently teachers enact; Choi,

Benson, & Shudak, 2016). Traditionally, educator preparation programs have leaned toward a competency-based approach in assessing dispositions, as the evidence to support ratings is often more tangible (i.e., observable) and less subjective. This approach also avoids potential criticisms related to social and political indoctrination or ideological bias that polarizing constructs (i.e., social justice) can often generate when assessing dispositions (Borko, Liston, & Whitcomb, 2007).

Is it possible that certain dispositions are more essential for teachers of the gifted? Given that gifted students do have unique characteristics and learning needs, those teacher dispositions that complement and/or counteract those characteristics are worth considering. For example, one characteristic of gifted students is idealism and a sense of justice (Webb, Gore, Amend, & DeVries, 2007). Potential teacher dispositions that might complement this characteristic include honesty, integrity, and fairness while the teacher dispositions of empathy, compassion, and caring may serve to counteract concomitant problems associated with this student characteristic (i.e., sense of helplessness in resolving injustices). Future research should seek to align gifted student characteristics with potentially desirable teacher dispositions that serve to nurture common characteristics associated with gifted children or counteract the concomitant problems that may also be associated with these characteristics.

Dispositional Characteristics of Effective Teachers of the Gifted

In examining the research pertaining to the characteristics of effective teachers in gifted education, it is clear that some of these identified traits may be dispositional in nature. An exploration of characteristics is a good starting point in identifying those dispositions that may be unique to teachers of the gifted and are not captured through traditional dispositional assessments.

Videregor (2015) summarized the characteristics of teachers of the gifted into two categories: (a) personal traits of teachers and (b) teaching competencies/skills. Based on accumulated knowledge (Chan, 2001; Croft, 2003; Feldhusen, 1997; Mills, 2003; Roberts, 2006; Van Tassel-Baska, 2005; Van Tassel-Baska, Quek, & Feng, 2007; Vialle & Quigley, 2002; Videregor, 2010; Videregor & Eilam, 2011), Videregor (2015) concluded that teachers of the gifted should possess some unique qualities to ensure their effectiveness in working with gifted students. Of the five qualities cited by Videregor, three are dispositional in nature:

- ability to interact well with gifted students;
- sensitivity for individual and cultural differences; and
- enthusiasm and willingness to learn new things.

Vialle and Quigley (2002) synthesized the research pertaining to what teachers’ perceptions were related to the desired characteristics of teachers of the gifted. Of these, several are dispositional or require a dispositional component:

Table 1. Desired Dispositions in Teachers

Dispositions pertaining to teacher attitudes	Cited in . . .
Willingness to tailor teaching to individual student's needs ^a	Choi, Benson, and Shudak (2016); Harrison, McAfee, Smithey, and Weiner (2006); Johnston, Almerico, Henriott, and Shapiro (2011); Rike and Sharp (2008); Taylor and Wasicsko (2000)
Enthusiasm for working with children and youth	Rike and Sharp (2008)
Treats all students equally and fairly; respects individual differences ^a	Choi et al. (2016); Rike and Sharp (2008); Thomas, Bush, and Bucalos (2012)
Committed to the development of the whole child	Rike and Sharp (2008)
Persistent in helping children be successful; believes all children can learn	Harrison et al. (2006); Rike and Sharp (2008); Shiveley and Misco (2010)
Poised, maintains appropriate professional appearance	Notar, Riley, Taylor, Thornburg, and Cargill (2009); Johnston et al. (2011)
Feels accountable for their students learning and development; accepts responsibility for actions	Rike and Sharp (2008); Thomas et al. (2012)
Solicits, values, and is responsive to feedback	Choi et al. (2016); Johnston et al. (2011); Notar et al. (2009); Shiveley and Misco (2010); Thomas et al. (2012)
Positive and enthusiastic	Johnston et al. (2011); Johnston, Wilson, and Almerico (2018)
Holds high expectations of students and themselves; values learning beyond minimal expectations	Choi et al. (2016); Harrison et al. (2006); Taylor and Wasicsko (2000); Thomas et al. (2012)
Respects self and others	Taylor and Wasicsko (2000); Johnston et al. (2011); Thomas et al. (2012)
Is approachable for academic help and social guidance	Choi et al. (2016)
Actively and respectfully listens to students, family members, and colleagues	Thomas et al. (2012)
Flexible; open-minded	Shiveley and Misco (2010); Taylor and Wasicsko (2000); Thomas et al. (2012)
Committed to ensuring all students have the opportunity to achieve to the best of their potential	Rike and Sharp (2008)
Willingness to compromise, seeks to resolve conflicts ^a	Shiveley and Misco (2010); Thomas et al. (2012)
Appreciates and values human and academic diversity; believes diversity enhances learning ^a	Rike and Sharp (2008); Johnston et al. (2018); Shiveley and Misco (2010); Thomas et al. (2012)
Actively involved in continuous learning; seeks opportunities to learn; lifelong learner ^a	Harrison et al. (2006); Shiveley and Misco (2010); Wasicsko (2000); Thomas et al. (2012)
Dispositions pertaining to personal virtues	Cited in . . .
Honest, has integrity, maintains confidentiality ^a	Choi et al. (2016); Rike and Sharp (2008); Thomas et al. (2012)

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Professional—punctual, dependable, prepared, responsible, organized (strong work ethic)	Notar et al. (2009); Johnston et al. (2011); Johnston et al. (2018); Shiveley and Misco (2010); Stewart and Davis (2005); Thomas et al. (2012)
Creative, imaginative	Stewart and Davis (2005); Taylor and Wasicsko (2000)
Empathetic, caring, and compassionate	Johnston et al. (2011); Shiveley and Misco (2010); Stewart and Davis (2005); Taylor and Wasicsko (2000); Thomas et al. (2012)
Sense of efficacy	Shiveley and Misco (2010); Taylor and Wasicsko (2000)
Patient	Shiveley and Misco (2010)
Tolerates ambiguity	Shiveley and Misco (2010)
Regulates emotions, steady temperate, prudent	Johnston et al. (2011); Johnston et al. (2018); Shiveley and Misco (2010); Thomas et al. (2012)
Recognizes the value of intrinsic motivation	Rike and Sharp (2008)
Passion for teaching	Rike and Sharp (2008)
Dispositions pertaining to teachers' skills	Cited in . . .
Communicates effectively (oral and written) ^a	Johnston et al. (2018); Thomas et al. (2012)
Accurately reads nonverbal, behavior	Johnston et al. (2011)
Collaborates effectively with colleagues, peers, parents, and community agencies (rapport); shares information and ideas willingly to others ^a	Johnston et al. (2011); Johnston et al. (2018); Notar et al. (2009); Rike and Sharp (2008); Shiveley and Misco (2010); Thomas et al. (2012)
Reflects on their own teaching and learning	Rike and Sharp (2008); Johnston et al. (2011)
Supports and mentors colleagues ^a	Thomas et al. (2012)
Comfortable interacting with others, effective interpersonal skills	Choi et al. (2016); Taylor and Wasicsko (2000); Thomas et al. (2012)
Demonstrates leadership, takes initiative in goal setting, is self-directed ^a	Choi et al. (2016); Johnston et al. (2011); Johnston et al. (2018); Notar et al. (2009); Thomas et al. (2012)

Note. NAGC = National Association for Gifted Children; CEC = Council for Exceptional Children.

^aDispositions that specifically align with NAGC-CEC Standards.

- encouraging students to be independent learners (high expectations);
- being a lifelong learner;
- thinking creatively;
- being willing to make mistakes;
- possessing a sense of humor; and
- being enthusiastic.

Likewise, Miedijensky (2018) also examined the characteristics of effective teachers of the gifted as perceived by teachers and found similar personal qualities that are dispositional in nature: flexibility and openness, sense of humor,

enthusiasm, and the ability to accept gifted students (respect and love).

Recognizing that students of color have traditionally been underrepresented in gifted programs, dispositions pertaining to cultural responsiveness should be strongly considered when preparing teachers of the gifted (Wright, Ford, & Young, 2017). Respect for individual differences, appreciation for cultural and academic diversity, equity, and fairness are critical in ensuring we eliminate racial disparities in representation within gifted programs. Jensen, Whiting, and Chapman (2018), through an extant literature review, identified five multicultural dispositions that were essential for teachers to possess:

- Empathy—sensitivity, acceptance, humility;
- Meekness—openness, appreciate other perspectives, seek opportunities to learn;
- Social awareness—awareness of own beliefs and values, willingness to critically examine one's own assumptions;
- Inclusion—value student differences, “see diversity as a means to unity and richness in the classroom” (p. 123); and
- Advocacy—work for social justice, “regularly concern themselves with issues like privilege, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression, and are willing to confront personal vulnerability and discomfort to advocate” (p. 123).

When articulating the desired dispositions of teachers of the gifted, studies pertaining to the characteristics of effective teachers of the gifted should be considered in tandem with those dispositions determined to be essential for culturally competent practice.

In comparing the dispositional characteristics of effective teachers of the gifted with those dispositions commonly desired in general educators, there is considerable overlap, for example, sensitivity to student differences, holding high expectations for students, and seeking opportunities to learn. Are there dispositions that we have not considered in our assessment of general education teachers that are critical for teachers of the gifted to possess? Two dispositions noted for effective teachers of the gifted, not mentioned in the broader dispositional literature, were possessing a sense of humor and a willingness to make mistakes. In considering some of the characteristics commonly associated with gifted students (i.e., keen/unusual sense of humor, sensitivity, perfectionism), it is clear why these two dispositions might be particularly important for teachers of the gifted to possess, as they may serve to complement (e.g., humor) and/or counteract (e.g., perfectionism) these student characteristics. In terms of multicultural dispositions, social awareness is not specifically mentioned in the dispositional literature for general educators; however, the willingness to critically examine one's own assumptions and beliefs may be particularly beneficial in ensuring that high expectations are set for ALL students and that implicit or explicit bias toward a student or group of students is ameliorated when nominating, screening, and identifying students for gifted programs.

The Relationship Between Standards and Dispositions

Professional standards and competencies often include dispositional outcomes. The National Association for Gifted Children and the Council for Exceptional Children (NAGC-CEC; 2013b) collaborated in the development of the NAGC-CEC Teacher Preparation Standards in Gifted and Talented Education. Dispositions are addressed within these standards across several areas, but notably in Standard 6 (Professional Learning and Ethical Practice). Standard 6 articulates that gifted

education professionals use professional ethical principles; model respect for and are sensitive to diversity; are aware of their own and other's attitudes, behaviors, and ways of communicating; regularly reflect on their practice; view themselves as lifelong learners; and advocate for gifted and talented students.

Some of the other NAGC-CEC standards (Standards 1-3, 5, and 7) also allude to dispositions by stating that gifted education professionals. . .

- have a respect for similarities and differences;
- are active and resourceful;
- collaborate and communicate with colleagues, families, and others;
- value and are responsive to cultural and linguistic differences;
- demonstrate fairness (i.e., selecting assessments instruments that minimize bias); and
- embrace their role as a resource to colleagues.

Dispositions are also visible within the NAGC-CEC (2013a) Advanced Standards in Gifted Education Teacher Preparation. Gifted education specialists

- “. . . continuously broaden and deepen professional knowledge, and expand expertise . . .” (p. 1);
- “. . . model respect for, and use ethical practices with all individuals with exceptionalities” (p. 3);
- advocate for appropriate policies and resources (advance the profession);
- respect all individuals;
- provide leadership;
- “. . . model high professional expectations and ethical practice” (p. 4);
- “. . . collaborate to promote understanding, resolve conflicts, and build consensus for improving program, services, and outcomes for individuals with exceptionalities.” (p. 5)

The NAGC-CEC standards are research-based (Van Tassel-Baska & Johnsen, 2007) and are meant to serve as a foundation for the development of state standards and competencies pertaining to the preparation of teachers seeking endorsement or licensure in gifted education. However, according to the most recent NAGC *State of the States in Gifted Education* report (NAGC-CEC (2015), only five of the 39 responding states indicate the existence of written competencies for teachers in gifted programs. Couple this with the fact that in terms of areas in need of attention, states ranked “specialized teaching standards for licensure/endorsement in gifted education” next to last, indicating it may not be perceived as an area of high priority or as an area that only imposes more hiring restrictions on school systems. The fact that teaching standards are given such low priority is particularly interesting considering responding states

also highlighted the importance of professional development in increasing teacher capacity to better serve gifted students. One could argue that to create high-quality professional development experiences for teachers in gifted education, it is important to first articulate desired outcomes—which are often derived from competencies and standards. However, standards also put a burden on districts in directing the nature, extent, and content of the training that teachers receive. They also are perceived to be linked to teacher education institutions as providers of the level of training needed, a linkage not met with alacrity by all states and districts.

Perhaps states are operating under the assumption that general education teacher standards and competencies have broad applicability across all licensed teachers, regardless of the specialty area. Such assumptions should be accepted cautiously. Although standards and competencies for ALL teachers provide a foundation for expectations, there may be other dispositions, not addressed in the general education teaching standards that are required—and perhaps even critical—to effectively teach children with exceptionalities—whether it be giftedness, students with emotional and behavioral disorders, or English Language Learners.

Impact on Practice

As seen within the definitions of dispositions, there is a synergistic relationship between dispositions and practice (action). In gifted education, this relationship has been examined through the lens of teachers' attitudes toward and beliefs about gifted students and their pedagogical decisions (Gallagher, Smith, & Merrotsy, 2011; Godor, 2019; Hanna, 2011; Miedijensky, 2018; Troxclair, 2013). If a teacher's perception of gifted students is influenced by some of the prevailing myths about gifted students, it is likely they will be resistant or disinclined to accommodate the educational needs of gifted students in their practice. These myths include, among others, the belief that gifted children will make it on their own and acceleration is socially harmful to gifted students (Troxclair, 2013). A teacher's beliefs about gifted students can become deeply entrenched particularly around practices that are perceived to be harmful (i.e., acceleration and ability grouping; Gallagher et al., 2011), and there is a tendency to treat these beliefs as truths—making them difficult to reverse.

Traditionally, the research has examined how dispositions influence practice; however, it may be equally important to explore the inverse: how pedagogical practices cultivate dispositions. This shift in focus aligns with the belief that dispositions are “culturally constituted” or influenced by experiences (Carroll, 2007). Consider the following scenario:

Ms. Jones has a long-held belief that many of her students aren't capable of thinking at high levels, thus she rarely provides students the opportunity to engage in tasks that are student driven, require deep analysis and involve complex reasoning. However, she has been directed by her principal to implement an inquiry-based

science curriculum with her students. Over the course of several months, Ms. Jones begins to notice strengths in her students that she was completely unaware of before. She soon realizes that her expectations for her students have been far too low. This insight prompts a shift in her beliefs about student capabilities. She is now committed to ensuring all of her students have the opportunity to work towards their true potential.

In this example, a pedagogical approach (inquiry-based learning) served to influence and even alter Ms. Jones's disposition (expectations for students).

Truscott and Stenhouse (2018) examined whether pedagogical orientations foster the development of teacher dispositions. They found certain dispositions (i.e., authenticity, respect for diversity) were prevalent with a targeted pedagogical orientation—culturally relevant teaching. Although not specific to gifted education, the study raises the question as to which dispositions might be influenced from selected gifted education pedagogies. For example, could the consistent practice of differentiating learning experiences in the classrooms (the pedagogy) lead to an increased willingness to tailor instruction to the individual needs of students (the disposition)?

Considerations for Assessing Dispositions

As previously discussed, dispositions can encompass a wide variety of characteristics, some of which are easily observed while others are more difficult to “see” in an individual. Observers have a tendency to assess the more easily observed dispositions even if these dispositions are seemingly superficial. As a result, dispositions that are not straightforward and observable, but are perhaps the most critical ones for teachers to possess, may go unmeasured.

While professional standards and competencies address knowledge, skills, and dispositions, assessments have predominantly focused on measuring knowledge and skills. For example, most licensure tests required by states assess depth of knowledge in the content area for a specific licensure field. As an illustration, the Educational Testing Service's (ETS; 2018) Praxis test in Gifted Education is designed to measure a teacher's knowledge, skills, and abilities; however, the majority of the Gifted Praxis assesses content knowledge in gifted education (characteristics of gifted students, continuum of placement and services, procedures for identification). Although a section of the exam is devoted to instruction of gifted students, the assessment measures knowledge of instructional models/approaches rather than direct application of such methodologies.

A portion (17%) of the Gifted Praxis purports to assess professionalism—which on its face sounds dispositional. Foundational knowledge pertaining to law, policy, and theories are addressed within this section as well as collaboration, leadership, and professional development. However, the majority of the indicators within the professionalism section begin with “knows how to . . .” (i.e., knows how to collaborate

with colleagues). One could argue that having “how to” knowledge of something does not guarantee this knowledge will then be effectively transferred to practice. For this reason, effective dispositional assessments must discriminate between “how to” knowledge and consistent practice. As articulated by Wilkerson and Lang (2007), dispositions denote “a pattern of behavior” (p. 9); thus, consistent practice is perhaps the best indicator in identifying a teacher’s dispositions. Frequent observations of authentic instructional practice over time—like those that occur during a supervised practicum experience—are essential in reliably determining a teacher’s dispositions, but are observations enough?

Truscott and Stenhouse (2018) caution against using observations of teacher behavior “as the proxy for evidence of a desired disposition” (p. 3). It may be necessary to shift away from only observable behaviors when assessing dispositions. Although skills can readily be assessed through observation, dispositions are *not* skills; therefore, it may not be possible for dispositions to be adequately assessed in the same manner (Schussler, 2006). Of further concern regarding the reliability of observation in assessing dispositions is the “Hawthorne effect”—the phenomenon in which subjects change their behavior because of their awareness of being observed (Jensen et al., 2018).

In light of all these concerns, what is the most valid and reliable method for assessing dispositions? Since 2000, when the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) first tasked education preparation programs with articulating desired dispositions and measuring them in their licensure candidates, this question has challenged colleges of education and created quite a conundrum (Thomas, Bush, & Bucalos, 2012). Many have developed their own checklists and observational tools for assessing dispositions (Johnston, Wilson, & Almerico, 2018; Rike & Sharp, 2008; Shiveley & Misco, 2010). Others (Harrison, McAfee, Smitley, & Weiner, 2006) propose that dispositions can be demonstrated through “writing, speaking, and/or actions” (p. 74), implying alternative ways—beyond observable actions—in which one’s dispositions might be determined.

Portfolio development has also been used as a means for capturing dispositional evidence. Wenzlaff (1998) states that portfolios bring together diverse artifacts created and archived by teachers, including student observations, journal entries, or reflections that explore individual beliefs about teaching and learning, and authentic examples (i.e., lesson plans, instructional materials, etc.) that serve to demonstrate the connection between educational theories, beliefs, and practice. Portfolios make visible a teacher’s personal exploration and pedagogical views. While the ability to critically reflect can be considered a disposition in and of itself, written or oral reflections may also highlight other dispositions possessed by the teacher.

Cultivating Dispositions

Although considerable attention has been given to methods for assessing dispositions, it is perhaps even more important to

determine how to foster the development of targeted dispositions within teachers. Schussler (2006) suggests that educator preparation programs provide opportunities for self-exploration and reflection. Teachers should critically examine their own identity, values, and assumptions (self-exploration), and analyze their professional decisions and determine where these decisions are rooted in their schema (reflection).

One dispositional area that has been explored considerably in the literature is that of cultural competence. Similar studies could and should be replicated through the lens of gifted education. For example, in a study by Kidd, Sánchez, and Thorp (2008), preservice teachers cited the following activities and experiences they felt contributed to changes in their dispositions related to cultural responsiveness: “Readings related to issues of race, culture, poverty, and social justice; internship experiences in diverse communities; interactions with diverse families; critical reflection; and discussion and dialogue” (p. 320). These findings lead one to wonder whether readings related to issues pertaining to the characteristics and educational needs of gifted children; internships or practicum experiences with gifted children and youth, interactions with families of gifted children, and critical reflection, discussion, and dialogue around some of the most pressing issues in gifted education might similarly cultivate and/or contribute to changes in dispositions toward those characteristics that are more favorably desired in teachers of the gifted.

In cultivating dispositions, it is important to consider not only how teachers construct their understandings of the teaching learning process, but to realize that one’s dispositions are also affected by their life experiences prior to entering the classroom. For example, a teacher who has a long-standing belief that students from low-income environments will rarely if ever achieve at the same levels as their more privileged peers, must transcend this belief and adopt more inclusive professional practices, believing that all students—regardless of circumstance—can achieve at the highest level. It should be acknowledged that some dispositions may be more difficult to develop and/or change depending on prior belief, values, and ideals. In addition, while dispositions are malleable (can be changed), they are also volitional, requiring will (Carroll, 2007).

Final Thoughts: Why Do Dispositions Matter?

As we consider the importance of improving programs and services to gifted learners through evaluating current practice, it may be important to broaden our consideration of what constitutes quality teaching of the gifted. Perhaps it no longer is enough to suggest that characteristics and skill sets are sufficient; rather, we must consider the realm of conative abilities and the extent to which they may drive our capacities to perform in the classroom.

Consideration of dispositions is essential to ensure that our classrooms are led by individuals who are both passionate and compassionate in addition to being competent. To inspire a love of learning in students, teachers must see themselves as lifelong learners or scholars. In addition, teachers must authentically

care for their students and be dedicated to ensuring that high expectations are established for every child.

Attention to dispositions also elevates the profession. The teaching profession has striven for many years to convince policymakers that teaching requires more than just knowledge within a content area. A teacher must also have the pedagogical skills to impart that content in engaging and meaningful ways to students. However, when content knowledge and pedagogy are in place, the distinction between a good teacher and a great teacher may be his or her dispositions.

Dispositions matter because “we do what we value” (Welch & Napoleon, 2015, p. 587). Although different, skills and dispositions are “symbiotic constructs” (Welch & Napoleon, 2015, p. 587), making it difficult to disentangle dispositions from actual practice. Schussler (2006) conceptualizes dispositions as “a point of convergence” (p. 258) or filter from which all thinking and decisions flow and behaviors and actions emanate.

The power of dispositions should not be underestimated. The dispositions of a teacher can positively or negatively impact the learning environment and relationships with children, parents/guardians, and colleagues (Ros-Vöseles & Moss, 2007). Helping build awareness in teachers of their dispositional strengths and weaknesses is good for both teachers and their students and helps ensure that instructional habits that are favorable to the educational needs of gifted learners are embraced.


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