DISPOSITIONS AND TEACHER ASSESSMENT
THE NEED FOR A MORE RIGOROUS DEFINITION

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This article discusses the use of dispositions as a basis for evaluating candidates for teaching credentials. It begins with the assumption that any evaluation process must rely on clearly defined constructs that cannot be interpreted in open-ended ways to suit the subjective biases of the evaluator. It then argues that present uses of the disposition construct in teacher education risk this kind of biased application. It makes the point that fairness in assessment procedures requires rigorous and unambiguous definitions of assessment standards by criteria drawn from science and other systematic areas of scholarship. A definition of disposition drawn from the behavioral sciences is offered, and principles for using dispositions as a standard in teacher assessment are offered.

**Keywords:** personality dispositions; teacher assessment; subjective bias

History has shown time and again the power of words to shape human thought and action. Consider how many battles have been fought over freedom and justice, words signifying what people all over the world have lived and died for. Words, of course, can be used in multiple ways, with wisdom or foolishness, with sincerity or guile, and even to indicate the opposite of their original meaning. During the French Revolution, Maximilien Robespierre (1974) sent legions of fellow citizens to the guillotine in the name of his Committee on Public Safety, defining justice and virtue as “terror—prompt, swift, and inflexible.” Two centuries later, in the novel 1984, British social critic George Orwell (1949) imagined manipulative leaders telling subjugated masses that freedom is actually slavery. In such ways, benign words, such as safety, justice, virtue, and freedom, can be appropriated for inhumane purposes by twisting their definitions.

A CONTESTED NEW WORD IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION

In an effort to upgrade and professionalize the ancient craft of teaching, educators have begun doing what all respected professions try to do sooner or later: define standards for assessing whether aspiring candidates are capable of performing the work well enough to be certified for practice. In 2000, the largest established agency that accredits teacher education programs—the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE; 2001)—announced a revised set of standards for evaluating candidates’ performances. Central
to the focus of these standards are the “knowledge, skills, and dispositions” of teaching candidates.

There is not much doubt as to the meanings of the words *knowledge* and *skills*. These terms have had long and broad use in education and the learning sciences; moreover, they have been thoroughly examined in cognitive and behavioral research. The term *disposition*, however, has not been used as frequently in any of these fields. Perhaps sensing that the word requires some further definition, NCATE (2001) provided the following in its glossary:

**Dispositions.** The values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors towards students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator’s own professional growth. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice. For example, they might include a belief that all students can learn, a vision of high and challenging standards, or a commitment to a safe and supportive learning environment.1 (p. 30)

It is clear from this definition that NCATE intended the term *dispositions* to signify “beliefs and attitudes” that reflect stances toward moral issues large and small, from “caring” on an interpersonal level to “social justice” on a broader societal scale. It also seems from the construction “Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes” that the candidate must not only have such beliefs and attitudes but be guided by them. Thus, the definition uses the word *disposition* for dual purposes, to indicate kinds of moral beliefs and attitudes as well as to indicate a tendency to be guided by them. This double meaning gives the definition a long reach as well as a certain looseness.

Predictably, where far-reaching and loosely defined matters of moral belief, attitude, and behaviors are concerned, it did not take long for contention over NCATE’s disposition standard to arise. A *New York Sun* story in May 2005 reported that “‘disposition’ emerges as issue at Brooklyn College” (Gershman, 2005, p. 1). According to the *Sun* story, students in the Brooklyn College School of Education have complained that the college uses the disposition standard to foist upon them ideological beliefs that they disagree with. In one class, according to one student’s complaint, the instructor insisted that English must be considered the language of oppressors. In the course materials, the instructor linked this claim to the theme of social justice, one of NCATE’s examples of a dispositional standard. The student objected not only that the course material was illegitimate but also that students were discouraged from expressing their own opinions on the matter. Another instructor, in response to this student’s complaint, retorted that the very act of making the complaint could be considered a violation of the college’s dispositional standard, because it represented “aggressive and bullying behavior towards his professor” (p. 1).

In reaction, another professor in the college, angered by what appeared to be an Orwellian use of the disposition language, told the newspaper, “All these buzz words don’t mean anything until you look and see how they’re being implemented . . . . Dispositions is an empty vessel that could be filled with any agenda you want” (Gershman, 2005, p. 1).

**DISPOSITIONS IN THE TERMINOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE**

When dealing with concepts such as knowledge, skills, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and dispositions, we do not need to rely on our intuitions alone. For well over a century, there has been deep and systematic study of such concepts, including a thoughtful array of efforts to define them in precise and consistent manners. Such study has occurred in fields of behavioral science such as psychology, sociology, cognition and linguistics, and neuroscience. It is not that these relatively young scientific fields are without blind spots or disputes (nor, even, are older fields, such as medicine); rather, it is the case that analytic work done in these fields tends to be careful and based on evidence. Professional educators who wish to employ behavioral concepts for their own work would do well to apprise themselves of what the behavioral sciences have to say about these concepts—how such concepts may be defined and interpreted and how they
may be sensibly put to use in professional applications.

The concept of dispositions in the behavioral sciences has a particular meaning that, as far as I know, has never been contested. For the present purposes, I use as my source the four-volume compendium of theory and research in human development entitled *The Handbook of Child Psychology* (Damon & Lerner, 2006). The 70 lengthy chapters in the handbook cover every psychological process currently known to the field. For disclosure’s sake, I must admit to being editor of the last two editions of this compendium (1998 and 2006)—it is my familiarity with its contents that entices me to refer to it here. Nonetheless, I can say without exaggeration that the handbook is widely seen as the definitive and authoritative source for what is presently known in the field (see, e.g., Cole, 2000).

The psychological construct of disposition arises in two of the handbook’s chapters, and in these two places, the word is used in exactly the same way (which is both reassuring for scientific purposes and compelling for the assessment purposes that I address in this article). Both chapters deal with personality development. Personality is one of the grandest concepts in psychology, in the sense that it incorporates everything else. All of our ideas, abilities, habits, motives, virtues, vices, attitudes, traits, and dispositions are integrated at any one time into a unique personality that defines the special self that each of us has developed over time. The role that dispositions play in this all-encompassing pattern is deeply entrenched and long lasting, beginning early in life and influencing the direction of the other components of personality.

For example, one of the two handbook authors, personality theorist Avshalom Caspi (Caspi & Shiner, 2006), writes of “dispositional traits” that “show significant continuity across development” (p. 312) and that have long-term consequences for the shape of the life course. One of Caspi’s examples involves a boy who since infancy is prone to temper tantrums. The boy’s ill-temperedness (his dispositional trait) may stay with him for years and along the way may determine much of his experience and future direction in life:

> His ill temper may provoke school authorities to expel him . . . or may cause him to experience school so negatively that he quits. Leaving school may limit his future opportunities, channeling him to frustrating, low-level jobs. . . . He is likely to explode when frustrations arise on the job or when conflicts arise in his marriage. This can lead to an erratic work life and unstable marriage. (p. 314)

This, of course, is not the only possible outcome of ill-temperedness, and fortunately, most people have positive dispositional traits that benefit the course of their development. But Caspi’s analysis does indicate how fundamental and life-determining personality dispositions can be.

In a similar vein, the other handbook author who uses the term—Urie Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), one of the field’s most distinguished theorists—writes of “dispositional characteristics,” a phrase that is virtually synonymous with Caspi’s “dispositional traits” (Caspi & Shiner, 2006). Bronfenbrenner identifies two types of dispositional characteristics, those that are “developmentally generative” and those that are “developmentally disruptive.” Among the former are curiosity, sociability, and “the readiness to defer immediate gratification to pursue long-term goals”; among the latter are “impulsiveness, explosiveness, distractibility . . . [and] ready resort to aggression and violence” (p. 314).

In the scientific sense, therefore, a disposition is a trait or characteristic that is embedded in temperament and disposes a person toward certain choices and experiences that can shape his or her future. It is a deep-seated component of personality, with roots going back to the origins of our temperaments and with tentacles that bear major import for who we are and who we shall become.

**A CLOSER LOOK AT NCATE’S DISPOSITION STANDARD**

NCATE’s operational definition of disposition spills far beyond the precise semantic boundaries established in the behavioral sciences. As I have noted above, NCATE uses the term to indicate moral beliefs and attitudes—a particular set of which it deems appropriate for
teachers—as well as a behavioral tendency to be guided by such attitudes. Thus, the NCATE definition and the standard based on it focus on candidates’ values and their value-driven conduct. In contrast, the scientific definition restricts itself to a particular psychological process, albeit one with long-lasting consequences for personality development.

This definitional contrast is far more than a mere academic distinction. The effect of the NCATE definition is that it opens virtually all of a candidate’s thoughts and acts to scrutiny as part of the assessment process. It legitimizes an examination of the candidate’s moral attitudes and beliefs—and that is only a start. The NCATE standard brings under the examiner’s purview a core element of the candidate’s personality, the candidate’s behavioral predilections that are associated with (or guided by, in NCATE’s phrase) the candidate’s attitudes and beliefs. As the scientific study of personality has shown, such behavioral predilections are right at the heart of the developmental processes that determine who we are and who we shall be. In shining the examiner’s spotlight on this entire cluster of values, beliefs, and personality characteristics, the NCATE standard suggests that for teachers, all that is personal must belong to the profession. Aspiring teachers may be held accountable for their innermost beliefs and behavioral tendencies.

It is doubtful that those who designed the NCATE standards consciously presumed to take on such power over what, in nonscientific terms, might be considered the hearts and souls of all people who wish to enter the teaching field. The problem is likely the result of a sloppy definition slapped together by a committee, rather than a dictatorial effort at mind and behavior control. But, over time, the effect could readily become much the same: Those who are granted the authority to assess teaching candidates are given unbounded power over what the candidates may think and do, and those who are subjected to this authority (the candidates) must guard their every expression of belief and behavior. Guarding against mind control is not an ideal way to launch a career dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, learning, thinking, and truth.

TOWARD A MORE USEFUL AND PRUDENT APPROACH

Assessment in service of professional credentialing must be based on clearly defined principles rather than the fuzzy intuitions of whoever happens to be in charge of the process at any one time. Otherwise, the assessment process can be used not only to eliminate those who do not pass social and political litmus tests but also to indoctrinate those who are afraid of being eliminated. The only protection against such risks is to set rigorous definitional limits on the standards that are used to evaluate teaching candidates. Principles for so doing include the following:

1. It is acceptable to assess skills, knowledge, and understandings that are imparted in training and that derive from the established knowledge base of education. For example, an aspiring math teacher needs to know math and have the skill to communicate it to novices, both of which can be learned and tested. Such knowledge and skill may be examined.

2. It is not acceptable to assess attitudes and beliefs related to religious preference or political ideologies. For example, a candidate’s belief systems regarding economic redistribution, the politics of multiculturalism, the implications of religious faith and its expression, whom we should vote for in the next election, or whether we should turn Central Park into a golf course are none of the assessor’s business.

3. Beliefs that are directly related to the candidate’s capacity and motivation to teach are appropriate to examine. For example, it is reasonable to ask candidates whether they believe that all children can learn, a conviction necessary for nondiscriminatory teaching. Certainly, teachers should believe that knowledge is preferable to ignorance, and so on. But when such questioning wanders into the realm of social and political ideology, it becomes out of bounds.

4. It is reasonable to assess personal characteristics that are essential to the job of teaching, including character virtues such as honesty, responsibility, and diligence. Assessments of such should be based on definitive behavioral evidence of the presence or lack of the virtue in question. For example, if the candidate has demonstrated a predilection toward dishonesty by plagiarizing his or her own assignments and lying about it, this would be a legitimate part of the candidate’s assessment record.

5. It is not acceptable to assess personal characteristics that have only a speculative relationship with teaching ability. For example, some candidates are temperamentally shy, whereas others are gregarious; as such, a case can likely be made for the advantages of one or the other in classrooms or
tutorials with students. But as far as I know, there is no evidence to support such claims and, therefore, no valid reason to discriminate against candidates on this basis. Where personal characteristics are concerned, only those that affect job performance and ethical comportment in a direct and unequivocal way should be considered, and objective evidence of the characteristics in question must be used.

CONCLUSION

Any assessment process brings one group of people into judgment over another. The asymmetry of power created by such an arrangement inevitably opens the door to many possible abuses. Among other results, it can lead to a certain browbeating over matters that those in charge find so personally compelling that they cannot imagine any other decent human being thinking differently. This does not imply tyrannical intentions on the part of the browbeaters: Often, people who feel a passionate certainty about the rightness of their beliefs feel strongly convicted that others should hold the same beliefs.2 Because this is a common human tendency, fairness in assessment procedures requires built-in controls to prevent abuses of power. One such essential control involves the rigorous and unambiguous definitions of assessment standards by criteria drawn from science and other systematic areas of scholarship. This is a fundamental principle—moral as well as practical—that must underlie any assessment of teaching candidates.

NOTES

1. See Bogen’s article (2007) in Harvard Education Letter, in which the author reports that the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2001) removed the reference to social justice in June 2006, although as of this writing (2007), the document was still available online as the link offered under “Standards for Professional Development Schools.”

2. History, however, has not been kind to this sort of dogmatism: Often, the most passionately held beliefs in one generation are wholly discredited by the next (see, e.g., Koestler, 1963).

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