

## ORIGINAL PAPER

## Faculty Perceptions of Educator Dispositions: What dispositions do middle level teachers need, and does teacher prep teach them?

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**Abstract:** The current shortage of qualified classroom teachers coincides with a pervasive emphasis on the concept of teacher as technician. Teaching is dominated by centralized top-down instructional decision-making, with a primary aim of teacher accountability. The very human elements required for effective teaching are being increasingly diminished within schools. This runs counter to middle level education's emphasis on relationships and connecting learning to young adolescent students' characteristics and lived experiences. The human aspects of teaching can be evidenced, evaluated, and cultivated through a focus on teacher dispositions. This article asks if educator preparation faculty share a definition of teacher dispositions and value them as a key element of successful teaching and learning. It also examines if faculty hold a common belief that these essential human elements can be taught to teacher candidates and how this may intentionally happen.

**Keywords:** dispositions, teacher preparation, human elements of teaching

### Introduction

State Legislators increasingly question the need for professionally prepared educators. A shortage of teachers has led many states to rush to fill the gap with individuals who have little to no professional knowledge base or training related to teaching and learning. Estimates indicate that at least 406,964 positions were either unfilled or filled by teachers not fully certified for their assignments. This represents nearly one in eight of all teaching positions nationally (Tan et al., 2024). Middle level education is one of the top critical shortage areas (Lunsmann et al., 2021). Finding well-prepared teachers is compounded by the need for teachers who are prepared and committed to meeting the unique needs of young adolescents. At the same time, professional middle level licensure only exists in a limited number of states (AMLE, 2025). Another challenge to securing qualified middle level teachers is that 60% of teacher candidates have a deficit-oriented perception of young adolescent

learners, viewing their characteristics as negative and problematic. (Lunsmann et al., 2021). Successful middle level teacher candidates need to not only exhibit proficiency in the fields of assessment, curriculum, and instruction, but must also have the necessary dispositions to teach and reach young adolescent learners. They need to be positively disposed to creating democratic classroom environments where young adolescents are valued and respected and where all are welcomed, included and affirmed (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). The Association of Middle Level Education indicates the need for dispositions that are deeply connected to a commitment to young adolescents that enable teachers to become student advocates, role models, supporters of diversity, collaborators, and lifelong learners (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Dispositional development is an important aspect of preparing candidates to work with middle level students (Lunsmann et al., 2021).

The shortage of qualified classroom teachers is coupled with a pervasive emphasis

on the concept of teacher as a technician (Villavicencio et al, 2024). Increasingly, teachers are under immense pressure to perform a de-professionalized role (Aronson et al., 2021). Teaching is dominated by centralized, top-down instructional decision-making, with a primary aim of teacher accountability. This technical positioning implies that teaching can be mastered by on-the-job learning. Teacher success is determined by standardized teacher evaluation frameworks that are tied to student achievement test scores. (Aronson et al., 2021; De Saxe et al., 2020; Gerdeman et al., 2017). The very human elements required for effective teaching are being increasingly diminished within schools. However, successful teachers are humans who do not merely enact technical steps and are not easily replaced by online learning modules or artificial intelligence. Middle level education emphasizes that teachers are successful at teaching and reaching all students through developing relationships and connecting learning to students' characteristics and lived experiences. The de-professionalization of teaching creates a heavy burden placed on teachers at a time when retaining teachers is vital (Aronson et al., 2021; De Saxe et al., 2020; Gerdeman et al., 2017), and teachers indicate that human connections with students and acting in their best interests are foundational to their desire to be a teacher (See et al., 2022). Maintaining and developing this humanness may be central to teaching as a profession and the success of young adolescent learners. These human aspects of teaching can be evidenced, evaluated, and cultivated through a focus on teacher dispositions.

Dispositions provide the human framework and relationship structures that resist the concept of teaching as a technical endeavor and support teachers to reach students as individuals, enabling them to become successful learners. Public school classroom teachers have been struggling with challenges related to de-professionalization, including an overemphasis on test scores and a controlled and limited

curriculum. Pacing guides and scripted approaches are employed to ensure standardization of teaching content and practices. Professors in teacher preparation have long lamented the challenges and issues faced by classroom teachers over the last decade. Increasingly, the de-professionalization and control of teacher educators is becoming dominant in the teacher preparation field as well (Milner, 2013, 2023). A lack of focus and concern for the development of beginning teachers' dispositions echoes deprofessionalization. (Aronson et al., 2021; De Saxe et al., 2020). To refute a reductionist definition of the teacher as a technician, middle level teacher educators need to research, develop a better understanding of, and contemplate how to teach the human element of teacher dispositions.

### **What are dispositions, exactly?**

Over time, multiple definitions and perspectives associated with teacher dispositions have made it difficult to establish the usefulness of dispositions and to build a common research base (Ritchhart, 2001). Dispositions have been grounded in the construct of "habits of mind," dating back to Dewey (1933), who defined dispositions as indicating a belief that is internal and unintentional that determines teacher actions. Dispositions have been described as animating, motivating, and directing teachers' abilities. They are present in patterns of frequently exhibited behavior that is intentional on the part of the teacher and situated within a particular context and particular time (Freeman, 2007; Katz & Rath, 1985; Ritchart, 2001).

The lack of a clear, universally accepted definition of what dispositions are continues to make the ability to assess dispositions questionable. It has led to questioning the usefulness of assessing them (Choi et al., 2016). A representation of this lack of shared understanding and measure of dispositions was demonstrated when NCATE (2007) removed

the definition of dispositions from its glossary, indicating that the definition was “To be determined” (p. 45). More recently, the intensity with which faculty seek to build a collective understanding of dispositions seems to be waning, as does its prevalence in research and standards development. A lack of shared understanding of dispositions makes them challenging to document and evaluate, let alone teach in educator preparation programs. Concerns have been expressed about the violation of students’ rights and privacy. Court cases have focused on colleges of education “using” dispositions to remove teacher candidates from preparation programs or forcing them to sign contracts that push the college’s belief systems onto students, thus violating their rights (Wilkerson, 2006; Leo, 2005). A still unresolved question within the literature on educator dispositions has been whether dispositions relate more to observable behaviors, or evidence the less tangible aspects of teaching like attitudes, beliefs, values, and morals (Hess, 2006) or align with the intellectual and cultural aspects of teaching (Stooksbury et al., 2009). Consequently, Osguthorpe (2013) states that faculty

...cobble together a list of traits, values, beliefs, and attitudes that is derived from discussions of several faculty members who are sitting around a table, trying to achieve consensus on what is important, without any discussion of philosophical underpinnings --- be they habits of mind, virtues, abilities ..... it is easy to recognize the value of theory and philosophical grounding when it comes to knowledge and skills, but too many of us rely on our intuitions and practical experience alone when it comes to dispositions (19).

The question of how educator dispositions affect student learning and understanding has not been clearly addressed within the literature. To

address this, nearly 30 years of research have gone into studying the impact of dispositions on student learning and the development of the framework for *Dispositions in Action* (DIA). The DIA framework emerged from the observation of classroom teachers and resulting, iterative validation studies completed with groups of exemplary teachers. *Dispositions in Action* (Thornton, 2006a) may be thought of as the link between educators’ perceptions of teacher roles and relationships with learners and learning. Dispositions ultimately determine the decisions teachers make and the actions they take. The framework has led to an observational rubric indicating a range from responsive to technical dispositions. The disposition to be responsive is a thinking-based orientation that considers the needs and actions of the learner, developmental characteristics, their cultural background and experiences, levels of understanding, student questions and misconceptions, and the learning context and community. In contrast, teachers who are technically inclined view their role as teachers as that of a technician, knowing how to successfully employ prescriptive teaching skills, with limited deeper decision making and reflection, leading to little variation from situation to situation and student to student.

The lack of a clear, agreed-upon definition of what we mean by dispositions and this lack of focus on the impact on student learning has often reduced dispositions to easily recognizable descriptions of professional behaviors such as promptness and appropriate dress on simple checklists, or verbatim statements of standards language for accountability and accreditation (Thornton, 2018). Such an approach does not capture the complexity of dispositions nor their promise in teaching and reaching young adolescents to think, understand, and lead the world of the future. Nor does it bode well for the future of teaching as a human endeavor.

### Why do dispositions matter?

The literature reveals that significant issues and concerns related to a candidate's success are almost always dispositional (Osguthorpe, 2013). Issues that arise during field experiences are often related to the moral and ethical aspects of teaching practices or a candidate's way of being with students in a classroom setting. Terms such as responsibility, commitment, care, kindness, open-mindedness, and other less tangible concepts are often used to describe dispositional concerns when candidates are struggling within field experiences. (Osguthorpe, 2013; Anderson & Brydges, 2011). Research indicates that teachers' attitudes, values, and beliefs about students, teaching, and themselves have a significant impact on student learning (Taylor & Wasicsko, 2000). Teacher dispositions directly impact the depth of student understanding and correlate with candidate success on licensure assessment measures such as the edTPA (Thornton, 2006, 2018). Intentional development of dispositions, provided by mentors who understand the particular needs of young adolescents, may extend candidates' abilities to more effectively reach and teach middle level learners (Wei et al., 2009).

This positive impact on student learning, coupled with the importance of recognizing and maintaining teaching as a human endeavor, suggests that teacher preparation faculty should be concerned with understanding, evaluating, and teaching effective teacher dispositions. Teacher preparation should focus on triggering and enhancing the dispositions necessary to effective teaching (Riveros et al, 2012). Research reveals that building knowledge and honing skills related to effective dispositions causes candidates to leave a teacher preparation program with changes in their dispositions (Diez, 2006). Thus, a focus on developing an understanding of dispositions and intentionally teaching dispositions that cultivate candidate effectiveness and deepen students' learning should be central to research and professional

development initiatives in colleges of education.

### What do teacher preparation faculty think about dispositions?

A study was conducted to examine how education professors define dispositions, their presence within teacher preparation, and their teaching methods, addressing some of the aforementioned concerns.

The research questions were as follows:

- How do teacher preparation faculty define teacher dispositions? Is there a shared understanding?
- What do teacher preparation faculty consider important related to teacher dispositions?
- Do teacher preparation faculty believe dispositions are taught? How?

A survey examining teacher educators' definitions of teacher dispositions, their importance, faculty concerns related to the use of dispositions in the field of education, and how faculty teach dispositions was conducted. The survey questions were grounded in the literature about how teacher dispositions have been defined, evaluated, and addressed within education. The survey included themes found within the literature, such as morals and ethics, patterns of professional behavior, patterns of thinking, personality traits, the variety of tools and approaches to assessing dispositions, the relationship between dispositions and teaching behaviors, teaching dispositions in teacher preparation, and identified concerns about dispositions.

These themes within the literature led to the development of a psychometric survey that was electronically distributed (via email) to all faculty members of the identified college of education faculty at a North Carolina university. A list of email addresses for each full-time faculty member and student teacher supervisor was requested from each of the college of

education's departments. The response rate was 33% across all departments combined. A Likert scale was employed to measure the attitudes, opinions, and perceptions of the teacher preparation faculty regarding their understanding of educator dispositions. The survey allowed participants to express their level of agreement or disagreement towards multiple statements representing constructs found in the literature base about educator dispositions, quantifying their responses in terms of level of agreement. Respondents were to indicate their level of agreement with each question response statement. The percentage of the surveyed faculty that agreed with each statement (combined 3 and 4 level scores) was analyzed and determined (see Appendix).

Interestingly, all responses for each question indicated significant percentages of faculty in agreement with the statement, with 65.2% agreement being the lowest score on any response item, and 23 of the 31 possible responses scoring agreement percentages of 80 % or higher. This can be correlated with the literature base, indicating that the definition and use of the construct of teacher dispositions is vast, varied, and largely inconsistent.

Analysis of the surveys indicated that the two most frequently supported definitions of dispositions went beyond a surface level. Faculty viewed dispositions as being essential to effective teaching, determining teacher instructional decision-making and student/teacher relationships. Dispositions were also reported as representative of morality and deeply rooted perceptions of self and others. A stark contrast can be drawn between these top two responses and the next highest level of agreement. This response focused on more surface definitions of behavior (*Professional behavior such as promptness, willingness to receive criticism, work ethic, reliability/follow through, and use of appropriate language*). The least supported definition was centered on self-perception.

Responses related to what was viewed as evidence of dispositions revealed that faculty believe teacher dispositions do animate teaching and can be examined through observation of teaching behaviors. They were also viewed as impacting the nature and results of student learning. There was less agreement with evidence, including self-reporting, behavior checklists, and evidence of student beliefs. The restating and use of standard language as evidence had the least positive responses.

Despite the lack of a shared and articulated definition of teacher dispositions, the respondents in this survey valued dispositions, viewing them as crucial to the human aspects of teaching and how this may ultimately impact students as learners. However, most of the faculty respondents stated that dispositions cannot be taught. The second most frequent response indicated that faculty believed that dispositions can be modeled for teacher candidates. Overall, the faculty reported that the college of education did not have a direct focus on intentionally teaching candidates the desired dispositions.

Respondents indicated their concerns related to the construct of teacher dispositions and its place within teacher preparation. The most frequently expressed concern was that educator dispositions could lead to a focus on issues that may be controversial, such as morality and ethics. This was followed by concerns that there is no consistent or agreed-upon definition within the profession. Responses also indicated concern about reductionist approaches to teacher dispositions. The least frequently indicated concern focused on the dispositions' ambiguous nature and messiness.

## Discussion

Teaching is increasingly questioned as a profession that requires rigorous and intentional preparation that uses research-based instructional decision making. Filling large

numbers of vacancies with unprepared or underprepared lay people is justified by the thinking that teaching is a matter of “doing”. This definition views teaching as merely implementing increasingly prescriptive and technical acts, void of the need for human relationships and responsive decision-making. The value added and importance of what the teacher brings to the classroom, beyond technical prowess, is neglected within the profession and teacher preparation programs. The underlying human filter that determines the actions teachers take in the classroom and their impact on student learning may be best represented by the construct of educator dispositions. Within this study, a shared understanding of this construct, or even a basic shared definition, remains lacking.

If teacher education professors recognize the value and importance of a teacher’s dispositions in instructional decisions and the nature of student learning. In that case, the emphasis on reductionist approaches to educator dispositions within colleges of education is problematic. Administrative tasks, such as efficiently filling a growing number of unfilled teaching positions or collecting data for teacher preparation accreditation, can ignore or complicate this problem. Considering dispositions as largely intangible or innate, or even intractable, contributes to neglecting explicit teaching and cultivation of educator dispositions within candidate preparation. This, coupled with the potential for controversy surrounding such an ill-defined goal, has led to surface-level approaches to dispositions and missing the opportunity for this aspect of teaching to be considered consequential to student learning. The lack of an intentional and research-grounded approach to educator dispositions further misses the increasingly necessary representation of teaching as a complex and human endeavor. This act cannot be replaced by scripted novices or artificial intelligence.

The belief that educator competence is defined by professional knowledge and skills, and that alone is sufficient for producing teacher excellence, has existed for some time (Collinson, 1999). Legislatures have focused on content coverage over pedagogy and strict oversight of curriculum to reduce teaching to a consistent, “non-controversial”, scripted, and paced procedural act. The current culture of increased managerialism, accountability, routine planning, assessment, and reporting procedures has changed not only the way education is delivered but has also profoundly affected teacher identity (Gray, 2007). This has become a reality in both the P-12 and university classroom. Professors in colleges of education are no longer immune to this de-professionalization (Franklin-Torrez & Haniford, 2018). This may be illustrated by dispositional assessments within teacher preparation that continue to reflect reductionism, superficiality, disconnectedness, and a culture of compliance (Diez, 2006, 2007).

A focus on student-centered dispositions and the importance of relationships and student ownership is foundational to middle level education. These values run counter to the current standardization and technicalization of teaching. Embracing, defining, and owning the construct of educator dispositions, as aligned with middle level teacher preparation, may be a means for middle level educators to continue to teach against the grain in the best interests of young adolescent learners and future middle school teachers. If the disruption of defining teaching as a technical act does not come from those who prepare professionals to enter the field, how can we expect teachers in the field to take on this daunting challenge (Milner, 2023)? Understanding and developing effective dispositions within middle level teacher preparation may be a place to push back. According to Wenzel and Roberts (2025):

“Providing middle level students with teachers who have dispositions most well suited to the specific needs of

young adolescents is what students deserve.... dispositions of new and experienced teachers need to be cultivated or strengthened to meet the changing demands of middle school curriculum and learners.”

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## Appendix

### 1. How do you define teacher dispositions?

- Values that influence moral dimensions of teaching, such as issues of ethics and equity, **93.7%**
- Habits of mind necessary to effective teaching are seen in patterns of behaviors exhibited frequently and intentionally in the classroom, **91.5 %**
- Filters that define how teachers make decisions about approaches to student relationships, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, **89.6%**
- Professional behavior such as promptness, willingness to receive criticism, work ethic, reliability/follow through, and use of appropriate language, **85.6%**
- Collection of cognitive dispositions that capture one's tendency to engage in certain patterns of thinking, **82.9%**
- Personality traits such as sense of humor, flexibility, collegiality, enthusiasm, and confidence, **79.8%**
- Teachers' perceptions of themselves in relation to others and the greater world, **71.8%**

### 2. How are dispositions best evidenced?

- Dispositions animate, motivate, and direct abilities and are observed in the patterns of one's frequently exhibited behavior, **93.5%**
- Dispositions are evidenced through grounded observation processes that evidence how teachers are responsive or technical in how they enact teaching and learning that directly impacts learners' experiences and success, **89.2%**
- Dispositions are evidenced through the identification of teacher beliefs that work against the educational success of students from diverse backgrounds, such as mismatches between teachers' and students' worldviews, backgrounds, experiences, and languages, **79.6%**
- Dispositions are professional behaviors that can be observed with a rating scale or checklist, **75.2%**
- Dispositions are evidenced in self-reporting such as pre- and post-test scores before and after preservice courses or field experiences, responses to written student cases, guided self-reflection, or journaling, **70.3%**
- Dispositions are evidenced through the documentation of CAEP and other SPA standards that define dispositions as "values and commitments" using standards-based checklists, rating scales, or rubrics, **65.2%**

### 3. Importance/Impact of dispositions

- Dispositions represent the human element of teaching and teacher preparation, **95.2%**
- Teachers are not mere cogs whose technical expertise is the main determinant of student success, **93.8%**
- Characteristics of teachers evolve from their dispositions and are the impetus for successful teaching and learning, **93.4%**
- Dispositions determine how teachers are responsive to the diverse needs of all students, **89%**
- Most novice and even veteran teachers' struggles with success in the classroom are due to dispositional concern, **88.5%**
- Beyond standards accountability tools, dispositions are implicitly, yet intentionally, taught, and an important part of learning how to teach, **88.3%**

- Dispositions are the intangible aspects of teaching that directly impact students' success, beyond planning, procedures, or methods, **84.2%**
- Dispositions separate average teachers from great ones, **79.5%**

#### **4. How are dispositions taught?**

- They cannot be taught as one's dispositions do not change, **97.6%**
- Through modeling of desired dispositions by professors, master teachers, colleagues, and others, **94.4%**
- Through intentional identification and understanding of one's dispositions and their impact on all learners/learning, **88.8%**
- Through intervention and developing action plans to develop desired teacher/candidates' dispositions, **88.7%**
- Through building a common understanding of research and language about educator dispositions among candidates and professionals, beyond standards language and documentation systems that are often not grounded in dispositional theory and research, **82.6%**

#### **5. What are your concerns about dispositions?**

- They are potentially problematic in addressing/intervening with candidates and may open up potentially problematic dialogue about beliefs, morals, and equity, **92.3%**
- They are not well understood by teachers and teacher educators, as the research on dispositions is typically not a focus in the professional field, **90.6%**
- The current focus tends to be more on accountability than substance, **85.9%**
- They are reduced to direct or loosely correlated dispositions language from state and national standards that often restate pedagogical standards of practice with the words "value," "believe," or "committed to" in front of them, **84%**
- They are by nature ambiguous, and necessarily messy and less concrete than many technical educational processes and elements, **77.1%**

Dr. Holly Thornton (thorntonhj@appstate.edu) is a professor of middle grades at Appalachian State University whose research centers on teacher quality, with a specific focus on effective teacher dispositions. She has also authored a book related to this research entitled *The it factor: What makes a teacher great?*

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