Attending to Ethical and Moral Dispositions in Teacher Education

Richard D. Osguthorpe
Boise State University

As the call for this special issue suggests, there is an "intertwining and 'considerable diversity' of dispositions, moral philosophy, character development, academic integrity, ethical professional conduct, [and] professional identity" in teacher education theory and research. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of ethical and moral language in the curriculum of teacher education classrooms (Campbell, 2003; Sockett & LePage, 2002), and a lack of attention given to the ethical and moral dimensions of teacher education practice (Willemse, Lunenberg, & Korthagen, 2005). In schools, this problem is exacerbated by the promotion of "aggressive individualism" (Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2010), which results in an ethical and moral vacuum in teacher education (Sanger & Osguthorpe, in press). Thus, in terms of actual practice, there is scant attention to the ethical and moral work of teaching in most teacher education programs (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011).

When teacher education programs do attend to the ethical and moral work of teaching, the scope of this attention is relatively narrow. Instead of addressing a broad conception of the moral work of teaching, including character education and moral development theory and practice, teacher education programs often focus solely on the assessment of dispositions

Richard D. Osguthorpe is an associate professor and chair in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Foundations in the College of Education at Boise State University, Boise, Idaho. His e-mail address is richardosguthorpe@boisestate.edu

in teacher candidates. This narrow focus is not surprising, given the emphasis placed on dispositions in accreditation standards (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008) and performance assessment systems as well as the lack of room in the teacher education curriculum for moral education and ethical matters (Schwartz, 2008).

Based on this focus on dispositions in teacher education, there are some strong theoretical and practical approaches presented in recent scholarship (Dottin, 2009; Murrell, Diez, Feiman-Nemser, & Schussler, 2010; Sockett, 2012). However, these accounts are the exception in teacher education programs, and the rule is that the field is in need of continued theory development (Feiman-Nemser & Schussler, 2010). Further, based on there being a wide range of often-conflicting approaches to developing and assessing dispositions (Borko, Liston, & Whitcomb, 2007; Damon, 2007; Diez, 2007; Misco & Shiveley, 2010; Murray, 2007), operationalization of the construct of dispositions is needed (Masunaga & Lewis, 2011). In short, despite the inclusion of dispositions in accreditation standards and performance assessment systems, the field of teacher education does not have a consistent approach to developing and assessing dispositions.

The purpose of this article is to identify some of the issues related to ethical and moral dispositions in teacher education programs. My intent is to provide a starting point for gaining a professional consensus on a set of guidelines for attending to dispositions in teacher education. There are multiple guidelines for attending to dispositions (Diez, 2007; Misco & Shiveley, 2010; Schussler, Stooksberry, & Bercaw, 2010; see also Splitter, 2010, for conceptual analysis with prescription), but there is little consensus. By pushing for professional consensus, I am not suggesting the need for a single prescriptive approach or definition. In fact, I think that there is room for a variety of approaches that have very different theoretical foundations. This article simply takes a step back and presents some general guidelines (and corresponding pitfalls) for those of us who are trying to develop an approach to dispositions in our teacher education programs.

These guidelines are derived from analysis of various approaches to dispositions, as described in the teacher education literature and observed in practice: (a) defining dispositions with moral coherence; (b) defining dispositions with moral dimensions and noble ends; (c) assessing dispositions with development; (d) assessing dispositions with indiscreteness; (e) developing dispositions with indiscreetness; and (f) developing dispositions with self-assessment. In conclusion, I emphasize the importance of attending to dispositions in teacher education as part of the ethical and moral work of teaching.

Defining Dispositions with Moral Coherence

The many discussions that I have had in regard to dispositions typically revert back to the question, "What is a disposition?" There are many helpful definitions in the literature, including those that present a robust framework for developing dispositions grounded in an understanding of how teachers develop advanced abilities (Diez, 2007), put forward an Aristotelian conception of dispositions as virtues (Sockett, 2012), and position dispositions as Deweyan habits of mind (Dottin, 2009). Because conceptions of dispositions in the literature arise from different philosophical perspectives, any effort to argue for one of these definitions over the other seems misplaced. Instead, it seems more prudent to focus our program-level discussions on conceptual coherence and to make sure that we identify the moral philosophical perspective that undergirds our conception of dispositions and then employ the concept in a logical and consistent manner with that perspective. As Benninga et al. (2008) argue:

> There are a variety of ethical perspectives from which a unit may derive the set of dispositions it selects in accordance with its conceptual framework and mission . . . There is no question that a multiplicity of uses and meanings of the term *dispositions* exists in the professional literature and wider public discourse . . . As a community of teacher educators, we must not lose sight of the larger aim for which the construct of *dispositions* was created in the first place—to develop the moral and ethical dimensions of the profession of teaching. (p. 3)

The key here is to define dispositions in such a way that logically and consistently connects to the moral perspective that undergirds the definition and reminds us of the perspective's larger aim for dispositions. The alternative is to 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, or some other logically coherent and sound concept. 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.

Defining Dispositions with Moral Dimensions and Noble Ends

The quickest and simplest way to avoid controversy in attending to dispositions in any teacher education program is to eschew the moral, i.e., to deliberately strip away the concept of any moral dimension. In

such cases, teacher education programs identify a technical approach to dispositions that focuses on, for example, oral and written communication, class attendance, listening ability, and peer collaboration. The move away from anything moral is typically grounded in the assumption that it is impossible to agree on anything related to ethics and morality; thus, consensus is sought in assessments that do not require any judgment of moral value (Wilkerson, 2006).

The potential pitfall here is attending to dispositions in a way that reduces teaching to a merely technical enterprise, limiting the scope and purview only to that which is effective and ensures successful practice, without recognizing those dimensions that make it responsible and good (Oser, Dick, & Patry, 1992). As Fenstermacher and Richardson (2005) indicated, quality teaching is both morally good *and* successful:

> Quality teaching, it appears, is about more than whether something is taught. It is also about how it is taught. Not only must the content be appropriate, proper, and aimed at some worthy purpose, the methods employed have to be morally defensible and grounded in shared conceptions of reasonableness . . . Good teaching is teaching that comports with morally defensible and rationally sound principles of instructional practice. Successful teaching is teaching that yields the intended learning. (p. 189)

This conception of quality includes the need for teaching to be both morally good and successful, which, in turn, suggests the need for teachers to possess the moral dispositions that inform morally defensible teaching. Thus, eschewing the moral not only leaves a vacuous conception of dispositions; it also misplaces priority on the technical aspects of teaching that render it effective.

It also would seem possible to place too much emphasis on the moral, particularly on ends related to moral education. When I ask teacher candidates why they need to be of good moral disposition, the most common response is that they need to be good examples to their students, modeling virtue so that it will rub off on their students. With further probing, they also state that teachers of bad moral disposition might be effective teachers but that they worry about the effect that such teachers might have on the moral development of children in their charge (See Zenkert, 2012, for additional teacher candidate beliefs about dispositions).

Placing such narrow emphasis on the moral education ends of dispositions also seems to be misguided. A better response to these questions, and a concomitant end for attending to dispositions, would be that we want teachers of good disposition because we want them to have the virtues, habits of mind, and/or professional judgment that constitute

effective and responsible teaching and to realize all of the noble ends of education.

Assessing Dispositions with Development

It is perplexing that many teacher education programs assess teacher candidates on something (dispositions) that such programs might not seek to actually teach or develop. Conversations about dispositions among teacher education faculty too often turn to relatively petty discussions of identifying ways to remove teacher candidates from the program for reasons related to their past or current unprofessional behavior. In doing so, teacher educators adopt what I have called a "moral dispositions police" approach, an "approach that merely seeks to identify teacher candidates of deficient disposition and poor moral character for the purpose of removing them from the program" (Osguthorpe, 2008, p. 297). The result of such an approach is often an assessment rubric that assists teacher educators in dismissing teacher candidates that they deem undesirable.

Of course, teacher education programs certainly need to have clear expectations of professionalism and ethics, but attention to dispositions should not stop at a list of professional expectations or code of ethics. It must go beyond such expectations and bear directly on programmatic goals, conceptual frameworks, and quality teaching, as Diez (2007) suggests:

> While I believe it is important to have clear statements of professional expectations that can be used as criteria in making judgments about dismissing candidates whose behavior is harmful to others or inappropriate for professional practice, it seems to me that our concern with dispositions must be broader and deeper. I propose, in fact, that attending to the development of candidate dispositions can build a teacher's ability to work as part of a professional community to support learning for all students—reducing the achievement gap—thus addressing the key issue facing twenty-first century educators. (p. 394)

In this sense, the assessment and development of dispositions go hand in hand. Instead of simply policing the program, teacher educators can identify desirable dispositions in teacher candidates and seek to develop them through structured course assignments and clinical field experiences.

Assessing Dispositions with Indiscreteness

It is interesting that many teacher education programs assess knowledge of content and methodological skill together, even on the same

assessment form, while creating a different assessment form and different context for assessing dispositions. There are numerous exceptions to this practice, but it is not uncommon for teacher education programs to assess dispositions discretely, in isolation from knowledge and skill, a practice that runs counter to the original purpose of dispositions:

> The triadic articulation of "knowledge, skills and dispositions" was never intended as an invitation to treat the topics discretely [INTASC as cited in Benninga et al., 2008]. The purpose for including *dispositions* in the triad was to draw attention to the moral and ethical nature of teaching as essential attributes of professional teaching. (Benninga et al., 2008, p. 3)

Attending to dispositions discretely also might create a false separation between knowledge, skills, and dispositions, as I have asserted previously:

> Too often, teacher preparation programs focus primarily on the knowledge, skills, and perhaps, even the dispositions of teacher candidates without attending to the moral manner with which a teacher candidate adeptly delivers that content. To teach in moral ways is to connect content knowledge and methodological skill with its moral manner of conveyance—be it the way teachers interact with students, interpret tests, deliver instruction, talk with parents, and so on. In this sense, dispositions are not an entity in and of themselves that are somehow assessed in their own right. Instead, they become visible via the practice of teaching as a modifier to method—displayed in a teacher's manner. (Osguthorpe, 2008, p. 297)

Thus, dispositions, such as respect, fairness, and compassion, can be assessed in relation to the manner in which a teacher candidate interacts with students *respectfully*, grades tests *fairly*, and talks with parents *compassionately*, instead of trying to assess them as personal traits in isolation.

Similarly, when dispositions are treated discretely, teacher educators run the risk of not only creating a false separation from knowledge and skill but also divorcing dispositions from actual teaching practice. To understand this additional problem, it is helpful to consider two possibilities that I have entertained:

> (a) Teacher candidates who display virtuous attributes and traits both in and outside the classroom might still be *unable* to translate them into practice and teach in virtuous ways (in fact, it is not difficult to imagine an honest, responsible, caring person who fails miserably at the task of teaching), and (b) teacher candidates might be able to teach or perform morally in the classroom without displaying virtuous behaviors, ideas, and beliefs outside the K-12 classroom (or, perhaps, even within the teacher education classroom) (Osguthorpe, 2008, p. 297).

In other words, selecting teacher candidates for teacher education program admission based on the positive display of ethical and moral dispositions does not guarantee that their instructional practice will be informed by those dispositions. Additionally, denying teacher education program admission to teacher candidates based on a negative report (past or current) of ethical and moral dispositions is not necessarily sufficient grounds to eliminate a candidate for consideration. The former might fail at the task of teaching, while the latter might be both effective and responsible *in the classroom, in practice*. Of course, advocating an approach to assessing and developing dispositions that relies solely on the observation of teaching practice also would be folly. Attention to dispositions needs to be interwoven throughout a program, at every stage, including pre-clinical field experience, but completely divorcing dispositions from practice is a potentially giant pitfall.

Developing Dispositions with Indiscreetness

The next, and related, guideline is that of developing dispositions with indiscreetness. In my experience in teacher education, when we treat dispositions with discreteness, in isolation, we also often tend to treat them with discreetness by giving overly careful and circumspect feedback to teacher candidates in an effort to avoid giving offense.

From my perspective, teacher educators are comfortable commenting on the ineffectiveness of teacher candidates' methods of instruction and the inadequacy of their content knowledge. For example, most teacher educators presumably would be comfortable providing the following constructive criticism after observing a drill-and-kill episode of teaching: "You relied quite heavily on direct instruction, and you might consider using questions and activities that draw on higher order thinking skills." Likewise, few teacher educators would be uncomfortable calling out a teacher candidate for a gap in subject matter knowledge: "From my observation, it appears that you need to brush up on your understanding of the subjunctive verb tense."

From my perspective, the prospect of delivering meaningful feedback related to dispositions is often much more daunting for teacher educators. For example, many teacher educators presumably would be uncomfortable providing the following criticism: "In my estimation, it appears that you are closed-minded, uncommitted, and irresponsible. You are not open to new ideas in class; you only seem to want to teach so that you can have summers off; and you rarely show up to class on time." This example is exaggerated, of course, but when it comes to providing constructive criticism related to dispositions, it is difficult to avoid a sense

of personal attack. It is easy for teacher candidates to take offense, and the fallback for teacher educators, if they give any feedback at all, is to provide overly circumspect, discreet feedback to teacher candidates that often papers over the root problem.

Effective assessment of dispositions must be done transparently, openly, and directly (with indiscreetness), in the same way that method and skill are assessed, and in conjunction with method and skill as well as practice (with indiscreteness). It should be natural and commonplace in teacher education programs to have conversations with teacher candidates about moral dispositions and to comment on practices that might not be informed by those ideals: "I am concerned with your relatedness and compassion. You appear to have difficulty connecting with your students in regard to the new content of your unit plan, and you seemingly have lost any sense of care and empathy for them, choosing instead to show them that you are the boss and attempting to directly control their behavior in class." These types of conversations will always be difficult, but it is easier for teacher educators to give meaningful feedback in regard to dispositions that does not require character or personality evaluations if they are directly and transparently assessed as part of method and content and connected to teaching practice.

Developing Dispositions with Self-Assessment

A final guideline for attending to dispositions in teacher education is to develop dispositions by engaging teacher candidates in self-assessment and reflection on personal beliefs. Feiman-Nemser and Schussler (2010) called for increased attention to a theory of disposition development due to what they perceive as a glaring theoretical hole in most approaches to dispositions in teacher education. In the absence of such a theory, an appropriate starting point is the self-assessment of dispositions and reflection on the way that dispositional beliefs inform instructional practice (Sockett, 2011; Splitter, 2010). It is well documented that teacher candidates come to programs of teacher education with beliefs derived from their apprenticeship of practice and that those beliefs, especially deeply held beliefs, inform their development as teachers (Richardson, 1996; Richardson & Placier, 2001).

Moreover, there is arguably no set of apprenticeship beliefs that are more deeply held than those related to moral dispositions (and how those dispositions might be connected to future practice). As a colleague and I have contended earlier, "We believe that the process of teacher education and development [related to the moral work of teaching] is one that ignores, at its peril, what teachers and student teachers bring

to it" (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2009, p. 31). Thus, it would seem an appropriate first step to examine these prior beliefs and engage teacher candidates in self-assessment of those beliefs as part of any meaningful theory and approach to developing dispositions. The development of dispositions appears to require active participation on the part of the teacher candidate, including some form of self-assessment and reflection at regular intervals throughout a teacher education program.

Conclusion

In my role as university faculty liaison to a local high school, I have occasion to interact with mentor teachers who are experiencing seemingly intractable problems with student teachers in our teacher education program. The mentor teachers' concerns often bubble up in the form of a classroom management issue or a student teacher's (in)capability to effectively execute a lesson plan, but I have found that the underlying problems are rarely, if ever, solely related to the content knowledge or methodological skill of the student teacher. Instead, when a mentor teacher has a problem with a student teacher, the core issue is almost always dispositional in nature and related to the moral and ethical manner in which the student teacher carries out the practice of teaching. In other words, the mentor teacher's worries might initially be voiced as a concern about instructional method, but they often are more closely connected to a concern about a student teacher's way of being and moral disposition—the student teacher's level of responsibility, commitment, open-mindedness, care, kindness, politeness, or some other conception of dispositions.

Recently, I spoke with a mentor teacher at this high school with just such a concern. When I asked the mentor teacher to assess the student teacher's performance to date (apart from the standard form), she hemmed and hawed, not wanting to disparage the student teacher, and then finally suggested that this student teacher was able to effectively teach the students in her class but that she was also confrontational with students and did not respond well to feedback from the mentor teacher, always implying that she already knew what to do. The mentor did not want to derail this student teacher's apprenticeship, but she was worried that the confrontations might escalate and destroy any sense of a caring classroom community, and she was perplexed at how to "mentor" someone who assumedly already knew how to teach. In effect, she was primarily concerned about her student teacher's ability to be caring, kind, and polite to students as well as open-minded to constructive criticism. As is often the case, the mentor teacher was reticent to divulge her true

feelings for fear of causing any problems for the student teacher, but her discomfort had risen to a level that she could no longer ignore.

The nature of the problem herein is common in teacher education and explicated in the previous sections: the possession of subject matter knowledge and methodological skill without accompanying ethical dispositions and moral manner to teach in ways that align with what is good, right, virtuous, and caring. Unfortunately, matters of how to meaningfully attend to ethical and moral dispositions in teacher education are anything but settled. However, the unsettled nature of the field should not discourage teacher educators from developing approaches to dispositions. Rather, it should challenge and encourage them as well as move teacher education toward professional consensus in regard to the definition, assessment, and development of dispositions.

Seeking to develop meaningful approaches and following these guidelines (among others) will provide a first step toward a consensus on quality teacher preparation that opens the door to multiple, even contrasting, approaches from various philosophical perspectives and theoretical orientations, without such approaches being overly prescriptive. That said, approaches to dispositions in teacher education too often fall short of these guidelines, but they need not. It is not difficult to envision teacher education programs that: (a) subscribe to a set of theoretically grounded and ethical dispositions; (b) assess dispositions in conjunction with teacher candidates and in connection to actual teaching practice; and (c) develop dispositions in direct, open, and transparent ways. Further, while following these guidelines is difficult work, the importance of developing a meaningful approach to dispositions is underscored by the fact that many of our most difficult problems in teacher education often stem from dispositional issues with teacher candidates. When teacher candidates experience real problems and difficulties in practice (or in teacher education classrooms, for that matter), the root problem is often found in dispositional factors.

Stated another way, it is rare for teacher candidates to be dismissed from a teacher education program because they rely too heavily on lecturing instead of breaking students into groups for discussion or because they only have a cursory (Praxis-level) understanding of the subject matter. In fact, there are courses in every program that will assist teacher candidates in developing those competencies. On the contrary, teacher candidates are often dismissed or "counseled out" (or later fired as teachers) for a lack of self-awareness, integrity, persistence, care, commitment, relatedness, or civility. However, and ironically, the courses that address these competencies in relation to subject matter and method, and seek to develop them in practice, are few and far between.

Moral and ethical dispositions occupy an important dimension of the moral work of teaching, and they need to command more attention in the teacher education curriculum and conversation. To command more attention, teacher educators need to widen the scope of the moral and ethical in teacher education despite other demands in the curriculum. The focus in teacher education is on connecting teacher education practice to P-12 student achievement and rightly so. But to attend to content knowledge and methodological skill as our only means of achieving that end, without attention to the moral and ethical dispositions that might inform such practice, dismisses the grand and noble ideals we espouse for education and, perhaps, places teacher education in peril.

References

Benninga, J., Diez, M., Dottin, E., Feiman-Nemser, S., Murrell, P., & Sockett, H. (2008, February). Making professional conduct in education more intelligent: Using knowledge and skills to enhance moral sensibilities (Dispositions). TEAMC concept paper presented at AACTE Annual Meeting, New Orleans, LA.

Borko, H., Liston, D., & Whitcomb, J. A. (2007). Apples and fishes: The debate over dispositions in teacher education (Editorial). *Journal of Teacher Education, 58,* 359-364.

Campbell, E. (2003). *The ethical teacher*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

Damon, W. (2007). Dispositions and teacher assessment: The need for a more rigorous definition. *Journal of Teacher Education, 58*(5), 365-369.

Diez, M. E. (2007). Looking back and moving forward: Three tensions in the teacher dispositions discourse. *Journal of Teacher Education, 58*(5), 388-396.

Dottin, E. (2009). *Dispositions as habits of mind: Making professional conduct more intelligent*. New York: University Press of America.

Feiman-Nemser, S., & Schussler, D. L. (2010). Defining, developing, and assessing dispositions: A cross-case analysis. In P. Murrell, M. Diez, S. Feiman-Nemser, & D. L. Schussler (Eds.), *Teaching as a moral practice: Defining, developing, and assessing professional dispositions in teacher education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Fenstermacher, G. D., & Richardson, V. (2005). On making determinations of quality in teaching. *Teachers College Record, 107,* 186-213.

Fenstermacher, G. D., & Richardson, V. (2010). What's wrong with accountability? *Teachers College Record*. Retrieved from http://www.tcrecord.org (ID No. 15996)

Masunaga, H., & Lewis, T. (2011). Self-perceived dispositions that predict challenges during student teaching: A data mining analysis. *Issues in Teacher Education, 20*(1), 35-49.

Misco, T., & Shiveley, J. (2010). Seeing the forest through the trees: Some renewed thinking on dispositions specific to social studies education. *The Social Studies*, *101*(3), 121-126.

Murray, F. B. (2007). Disposition: A superfluous construct in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education, 58*(5), 381-387.

Murrell, P., Diez, M., Feiman-Nemser, S., & Schussler, D. L. (2010). *Teaching as a moral practice: Defining, developing, and assessing professional dispositions in teacher education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. (2008). *Professional standards for the accreditation of teacher preparation institutions*. Washington, DC: Author.

Oser, F., Dick, A., & Patry, J.-L. (1992). *Effective and responsible teaching: The new synthesis*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Osguthorpe, R. D. (2008). On the reasons we want teachers of good disposition and moral character. *Journal of Teacher Education, 59*(4), 288-299.

Richardson, V. (1996). The role of attitudes and beliefs in learning to teach. In J. Sikula (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teacher education* (pp. 102-119). New York: Macmillan.

Richardson, V., & Placier, P. (2001). Teacher change. In V. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (4th ed., pp. 905-947). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

Sanger, M. N., & Osguthorpe, R. D. (2009). A theoretically descriptive analysis of the Child Development Project. *Journal of Moral Education, 38*(1), 17-34.

Sanger, M., & Osguthorpe, R. D. (2011). Teacher education, preservice teacher beliefs, and the moral work of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 27*(3), 569-578.

Sanger, M., & Osguthorpe, R. D. (in press). The moral vacuum in teacher education. *National Society for the Study of Education Yearbook*.

Schussler, D. L, Stooksberry, L. M., & Bercaw, L. A. (2010). Understanding teacher candidate dispositions: Reflecting to build self-awareness. *Journal of Teacher Education, 61*(35), 359-364.

Schwartz, M. J. (2008). Teacher education for moral and character education. In D. Narvaez & L. Nucci (Eds.), *Handbook of moral and character education*. New York: Routledge.

Splitter, L. (2010). Dispositions in education: Nonentities worth talking about. *Educational Theory, 60*(2), 203-230.

Sockett, H. (2012). *Knowledge and virtue in teaching and learning: The primacy of dispositions*. New York: Routledge.

Sockett, H., & LePage, P. (2002). The missing language of the classroom. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 18,* 159-171.

Wilkerson, J. R. (2006). Measuring teacher dispositions: Standards-based or morality-based? *Teachers College Record*. Retrieved from http://www.tcrecord.org (ID No. 12493)

Willemse, M., Lunenberg, M., & Korthagen, F. (2005). Values in education: A challenge for teacher educators. *Teaching & Teacher Education, 21*(2), 205-217.

Zenkert, A. J. (2012, April). Teacher candidates' beliefs about dispositions: Where do we go from here? Paper presented at the annual meeting of American Educational Research Association, Vancouver, BC.