

## **Dispositions in Action: Do Dispositions Make a Difference in Practice?**

**By Holly Thornton**

### **Dispositions and Teacher Quality**

The discourse on teacher quality has centered on issues of teacher knowledge and teacher skill, yet a third element that is central to all professional standards is teacher dispositions. While National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), as well as content area organizations mention dispositions, they have not been a focus of the discourse on teacher quality. Knowledge, skills and dispositions are embraced within these standards as essential elements of teacher preparation and teacher quality, yet dispositions remain a neglected part of teacher education. According to Collinson (1999) they are nearly non-existent. Wenzlaff (1998) states that teacher education must be concerned with more than teaching methods, classroom management, lesson design and assessment. In fact, in order for teachers to be more than mere

“cogs” in a technical process they must possess the dispositions necessary to teach and reach students.

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The No Child Left Behind Act (2000) and the movement of many state legislatures to fully certify individual teachers with non-teaching degrees, content majors, or those who can pass a test of content knowledge has pulled the national discourse away from the fact that teachers must possess not only

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subject matter, but also curricular and pedagogical knowledge of best practices (Shulman, 1986). A reductionist definition of “teaching as content coverage” is far too narrow. But so too may be a focus on “teaching as pedagogical skill,” which can lead to a technical “how to” version of knowledge that perpetuates the belief that competence through professional knowledge and skills is sufficient for producing teacher excellence, (Collinson, 1999).

### **Dispositions in the Field of Teacher Education**

The literature on dispositions is grounded in the fields of philosophy and psychology. Goleman’s (1995) model of emotional intelligence and Perkins’s (1993) connections between neurological, experiential and reflective intelligence acknowledge the impact of dispositions on people’s thinking and judgments. Also there is a proliferation of terms associated with dispositions, such as tendencies, values, habits of mind, attitudes, and behaviors, which makes it difficult to establish the usefulness of dispositions as a concept and to build on one another’s research (Ritchhart, 2001). Katz (1993) defines dispositions as patterns of behaviors that are exhibited frequently and intentionally in the absence of coercion, representing a habit of mind. Building on Dewey’s (1922,1933) work, which addresses the cultivation of habits of mind necessary to effective teaching, Ritchhart (2001) views dispositions as a collection of cognitive tendencies that capture one’s patterns of thinking. Ritchhart’s definition is grounded in a dispositional view of intelligence and is premised on the concept that “intelligent performance is more than an exercise of ability. ...dispositions concern not only what one can do, one’s abilities, but also what one is disposed to do. Thus dispositions address the often-noticed gap between our abilities and our actions.” (Ritchhart, 2001, p.3)

Although there is no consensus about a definition of teacher dispositions, there are several models in use regarding how dispositions are being addressed. Most prevalent in terms of assessing dispositions are the standards of professional organizations such as NCATE, NBPTS, INTASC. For example, NCATE (2000) defines dispositions as “values and commitments” that define teacher performance. Approaches to assessing teacher dispositions often loosely equate to values, beliefs, attitudes, characteristics, professional behaviors and qualities, ethics, and perceptions. Because accreditation requires an emphasis on assessing educator dispositions, several models have emerged.

### **Standards Language**

One concept of dispositions that is dominant in the field is directly related to teacher candidates’ behaviors in the school setting. Such models tend to be a collection of checklists, rating scales, and rubrics, which are correlated with the language of state and national standards, such as INTASC’s for beginning teachers. However, the language of these standards, the descriptors provided, and the criteria

for assessing these dispositions look more like pedagogical practices or teaching behaviors than dispositions. Many restate pedagogical competencies and expectations with the words “value” “believe” or “committed to” in front of them. This model for assessing dispositions becomes another list of teaching behaviors that are difficult to distinguish from actual dispositions.

### ***Professional Behaviors***

Another model of dispositions is built around teacher professional characteristics or behaviors such as attendance, work ethic, preparation, punctuality, sense of humor, and appropriate dress. These types of assessments are often grounded in the wisdom of practice and have face validity. They are often developed by groups of principals and teachers coming to consensus, or teacher education faculty who share a common list of concerns and expectations for how candidates should behave. Although important, these characteristics are minimal expectations of behavior and fall short of capturing true dispositions. They are clear cut, simple to document, easy to agree upon, but do not capture the complexity, importance, and potential value of dispositions to teacher preparation.

### ***Self-Reflections***

Another model for defining and assessing dispositions uses reflective self-assessments, often serving as pre- and post measures of candidate dispositions. This approach attempts to address the complexities and psychological nature of dispositions. One example is the National Network for Educator Dispositions, also known as the Eastern Kentucky model, which is grounded in the work of Arthur Combs’ (1969) Florida Studies of self-perceptions of effective helping professions. Combs utilizes an approach in which candidates respond in writing to a written human relations incident. Candidates may also respond to classroom observations. This approach reveals teacher candidates’ perceptions of themselves in relation to others and the greater world and provides insight into dispositions. This process can be used for pre-admission, ongoing and post evaluation of dispositions. Similarly, reflective journaling and essays about one’s beliefs as an educator are often employed to document changes in candidate dispositions during a teacher’s preparation program. Such approaches may provide insight about dispositions and how these may change over time throughout a program. However, these models are dependent upon candidates’ self-reporting and ability to express their meta-cognitive understanding in writing, but they are not necessarily focused on how dispositions are actually manifested in the candidates’ actions in the classroom.

### ***Ethics and Equity***

A large body of literature related to dispositions centers on the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching. Much of this work focuses on fostering positive dispositions toward diversity (Major & Brock, 2003) and addresses the issue of teacher candidates

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entering teacher preparation programs with beliefs and dispositions that work against the success of students from diverse backgrounds (Shutz et al., 1996). This field of research addresses worldviews and the mismatch between teachers' and students' backgrounds, experiences, languages and the resulting attitudes of teachers. Such mismatches often lead teachers to see children of diverse backgrounds as children with deficits as learners (Zeichner, 1996). Dispositions within this body of literature are closely intertwined with attitudes, values and beliefs about issues of equity.

### ***Dispositions in Action***

In contrast to the above models, Ritchhart (2001) focuses on the active nature of dispositions.

Thinking dispositions represent characteristics that animate, motivate, and direct abilities toward good and productive thinking and are recognized in the patterns of one's frequently exhibited, voluntary behavior. . . . Unlike desire, dispositions are accompanied by behavior and thus assume the requisite ability to carry out that behavior. (p. 5)

Building on Ritchhart's definition, the study described in this paper conceptualizes "dispositions in action" that move beyond reflection, self-assessment and perceptions to examine how dispositions are manifested within the classroom and how they impact pedagogy and ultimately the learning process. The construct of "dispositions in action" is concerned with patterns of thinking and how one is disposed to act. It moves beyond personality traits and minimal behavior expectations. Within this construct, patterns of thought about issues of morals, ethics and diversity reveal dispositions toward thinking *and* how they manifest themselves through the actions teachers subsequently take in the classroom. With a focus on the connection between dispositions and action this definition of dispositions was linked to teaching practices and grounded in the findings of the study reported next.

### **Discovering Dispositions In Action**

Studies have indicated the significant relationship between teacher quality and student learning (Byrne, 1983; Darling-Hammond, 1999). Teacher quality makes a difference. Is this difference solely attributed to content knowledge? Pedagogical expertise? Or is there another form of knowledge that teachers bring to the enterprise of teaching that is a requisite of quality teaching performance, which could be called dispositional intelligence?

Delving deeper into how and why teacher dispositions matter was the focus of a study about teachers who created a model school and participated in an action research study of its development and implementation over a period of three years. This study occurred within a best-case scenario, where the typical constraints of schooling would not prohibit teachers and students from reaping the full benefits of a high-quality experience.

**Participants: Urban, At-Risk Students and High-Quality Teachers**

Sixteen urban middle-level teachers and 120 middle-grades students were involved in a three-year study (one year of planning and two years of implementation of a summer academy for middle-level at-risk students). Nine pre-service teachers acted as participant observers each year during the implementation phase for a total of 18 observers. A three-person research team gathered and analyzed data during the implementation phases of the study. Prior to implementation the lead member of the research team worked with the teachers during a one-year planning period. The 60-70 students involved in each year of the summer academy were representative of the students whom the teachers taught in their home schools. In fact, 90 % of the students came from those school sites. The academy was first opened to at-risk students who needed summer school credit to pass to the next grade. Approximately one third of the students fell into that category. The remainder of students received average and above grades in their home schools, yet all scored consistently below grade level with grade equivalent scores on standardized tests ranging from second to fourth-grade level. However, their teachers viewed these students as at risk in a different way: at risk of not reaching their potential and being passed through the system because they came to school regularly and did what they were told. Approximately 96% of the students were African American and came from three schools in low-income areas, with 72%, 81%, and 96% of students receiving free and reduced lunch.

All 16 teacher participants in this study were designated as high-quality by their building principals; also all were part of a Professional Development School collaborative with a Georgia state university and had worked together in professional development seminars and as master teacher mentors over a period of three years prior to their involvement in the study. They were selected for the master teacher role using a peer selection observation and interview process adapted from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. In addition, they all possessed master's degrees or education specialist degrees and were all active in professional organizations. All had engaged in two summer professional development and planning sessions related to curriculum development and authentic assessment, which they had determined would be the focus of their summer work.

**Context: Best Case Scenario**

The teachers chose to become involved in developing a summer academy for urban middle schoolers. Without the typical constraints of schooling, the teachers developed, shared and implemented a common curriculum, common pedagogy and teaching strategies, and a common assessment approach and process. They shared the same students on the same teaching teams and a shared a common vision of education. The teachers were the impetus for the design of this summer, middle-level, urban academy, and designed the school based on the tenets of the National Middle School Association's *This We Believe* (1992). They further crafted the following belief statements about teaching and learning:

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Learning is a collaborative act.

Learning should be based on students' needs as young adolescents.

Learning is an authentic experience.

Learning should be supported by the structure of school, not impeded by it.

They created their own learning outcomes that focused on: (a) decision making, (b) conflict resolution, (c) problem solving, (d) communication, (e) collaboration, and (f) self-development. They designed learning strategies based in a constructivist orientation toward pedagogy, working on teaching teams to build in the state-required curriculum, through backward mapping. They utilized James Beane's (1993) concept of student-driven curriculum to ground the curriculum in their adolescent students' interests, questions and needs. Students investigated the concept of conflict in order to address their questions and concerns about the conflict within their lives and their community through research and problem solving. They employed outcomes-oriented assessments grounded in student performances of meaningful learning (Wiggins, 1998). In summary, all of the teachers jointly developed and shared the same vision of teaching and learning, the same curriculum, the same pedagogical approaches and the assessment processes.

### **Research Questions**

Within a "best-case scenario" where constraints are removed so that high-quality teachers are empowered to employ best practices, what can we learn about teacher dispositions? Given a common curriculum, assessments, teaching strategies and teaching teams, would differences in the learning experiences of the middle school students occur? Were any differences attributable to teacher dispositions? In what ways can these dispositions be identified and evidenced? Do specific dispositions align with learning experiences identified as more positive by participants and observers?

### **Data Collection**

Multiple interviews of the academy teachers, the participant observers, and academy students were conducted and analyzed at the end of each summer session for two years. These interviews were conducted following multiple classroom observations. Both small-group interviews (three to five participants) and individual interviews of all teachers and participant observers (who were pre-service teachers) were conducted. In addition to this, a random sample of 18 individual students was selected for interviews (six students from each of the three teaching teams) each year. The interview questions were purposefully designed to be open-ended and serve as an interview guide to allow for emergent themes and grounded theory to be generated from the multiple participants in the academy. The guiding questions asked of the participants were:

How does your experience in the summer academy compare to your experience in your home school?  
What makes a difference? How?  
What matters the most?

***Analysis: Emergent Themes, Grounded Theory, and Discourses Analysis***

A three-person research team, two acting as observers and interviewers and one as coordinator/debriefer, collected and analyzed all interview data and cycled findings back to the participants for member checks. The research team also engaged in multiple classroom observations of teaching and learning. During these observations the research team recorded field notes to capture what transpired in the classroom. They took notes about dialogue within the classroom to record student and teacher interactions and behaviors. After debriefing sessions following each observation period, the research team coded the data for emergent themes. Interview data were also coded according to emergent themes.

Differences that emerged among the cadre of teachers during early stages of analysis fell into three overarching themes: *relationships, support, expectations*. Subsequent data that were coded according to these themes were further aligned with classroom functions where they most frequently occurred. For example, relationship dialogue focused on classroom management functions, support dialogue with curriculum and instruction, and expectation dialogue with assessment and evaluation of learning.

Student and pre-service teachers observers' identification of teachers who were more and less effective in helping students learn were compared to classroom observations. The teachers in each category were consistently identified within both the interviews and the observations.

***Discourse Analysis of Classroom Interactions***

After identifying initial themes, trends, and patterns about how classroom functions related to emergent themes about relationships, support and expectations, the researchers undertook the second phase of data analysis. During this post hoc analysis, we used discourse analysis to delve deeper into the underlying meaning of the three emergent themes and developed a coding schema to represent the intents and purpose of the classroom dialogue. Discourse analysis may be thought of as examining "the conversations—of ordinary lives, settings, and occasions for the ways in which order, meaning, and structure are assembled and achieved from within them, and in real time." (Macbeth, 2003). It can be a means to make explicit the implicit dispositions and related beliefs that educators hold. According to Fairclough, (1989,p.2) "Ideology is pervasive in language" and discourse analysis is an analytic means to examine vernacular expressions and spoken words that represent underlying autonomous structures. The discourse analysis in this study focused on the interactions between students and teachers

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represented in the dialogue that occurred in the classroom. By examining the interactional detail of how regular classroom lessons were assembled by teachers and students alike, we gained insight into their construction (Macbeth, 2003) and the dispositions upon which they are built.

## **Findings**

### ***Student Interviews***

When 18 randomly-selected students in the academy were asked how this experience compared to their experiences in their home schools, their responses initially focused on the charges that the cohort of teachers made. They talked about the focus being on learning and not about tests, and about understanding things the students were really interested in learning about. They stated that the teachers all helped to guide the students through the learning process, answering their questions, helping them to do quality work and to “figure things out together.” They experienced that the teachers in the academy cared more about them as individuals than teachers in their home schools and said that teachers were more “real” and students “could talk to them.”

As the interviews progressed, each student participant began to identify teachers within the academy who acted “almost the same” as teachers did in their home schools compared to those who “taught them better.” Each student had the opportunity to work with two different teams of teachers, and within these teams they worked with two to four different teachers. They stated that they learned more from the teachers who were “teaching differently” and that these teachers helped them to understand more through their questioning, acceptance of their questions, and the focus of classroom dialogue. These teachers who “acted different” “helped them more, talked to them more, let them work together, trusted them to make decisions,” and “expected them to be smart.” They “weren’t always watching you and telling you what to do.” The students felt like they learned more from these teachers and did “better for them.” Interesting to us, these teachers who were different, or as the students said “better,” were teaching the same lessons, using the same methods, the same curriculum, same assessments and were even on the same teaching teams.

### ***Participant Observer Interviews***

Similar perceptions were reported from the participant observer (pre-service teachers) group interviews. They also articulated the improvements and benefits they saw related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the academy as compared to their fieldwork observations in multiple urban middle schools during the regular school year. But after explaining the differences they had observed, they too began to identify that not all teachers were enacting these transformed processes in the same way. They reported that some teachers were actually more effective in getting students “to talk, to think, to investigate and to understand and be motivated



to engage in quality work and performance”, while others who “just went through the motions” and “did not seem to elicit the same depth of thought” and “enthusiasm for learning” with students. They indicated the same teachers falling into categories of more or less effective as did the students.

### **Teacher Interviews**

The teachers’ interview responses did not indicate the same differentiation among teachers. The teachers in each case tended to articulate the core beliefs and learning outcomes originally established by the group when designing the academy. However, when probed as to whether they thought there were differences in the way that teachers enacted the agreed-upon curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and shared vision of the academy, three-fourths of the teachers felt this was the case. When asked why they thought this occurred or how they thought this was happening, most stated that they were just “different people” even though they had so much in common and “had brought so much together to the table.” While not attributed to personality differences, the differences were attributed to “a lack of commitment.” Some teachers were described as doing what was agreed upon, but somehow just “going through the motions.” The teachers who did not report differences among teachers and who were most satisfied with the continuity of the instruction were those who were identified as less effective in the student and pre-service teacher interviews.

### **Observations**

Discourse analysis of classroom interactions was used to gain insight into the teachers’ tendencies toward thinking, or their dispositions, which were identified as influencing the teachers’ action in the classroom, thus representing “dispositions in action.” In the secondary examination of the observational data, the quotes were analyzed and compared to the three emergent thematic categories (relationships, support and expectations) to search for various intents, purposes and implicit assumptions of the language and intonations within the teacher/student dialogue. Within each dialogic theme, the analysis revealed a continuum ranging from a *responsive* to a *technical* orientation toward interacting with students. As discourse reveals underlying structures, this continuum may be thought of as representing a range of dispositions that indicate the patterns of thinking these teachers were bringing to the enterprise of teaching. Descriptions of these dispositional orientations grounded in the observations and multiple interviews follow.

Responsive dispositions represent a way of thinking about teaching and learning that embraces the notion of teacher as decision-maker. It is a thinking-based orientation that is responsive in many dimensions: responsive to the needs and actions of the learner, their developmental characteristics, their cultural background and experiences, their levels of understanding; responsive to student questions, student work samples, the learning context and the expectations of the profession and society as a whole. The technical orientation is reflective of the notion

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of teacher as technician focusing on how to successfully employ the skills of teaching. There is little variation from situation to situation and student to student.

### **Defining Dispositions in Action**

As a result of this study differences among the practices of teachers in the study that may be attributable to teacher dispositions were identified. Through the analysis of teacher/student interactions via discourse analysis and triangulation of data with interviews of multiple participants and independent observers, these dispositions were revealed and labeled. Further, specific dispositions, such as those identified as responsive, were aligned with learning experiences identified as more positive by participants and observers. From this study the following definition of dispositions in action was constructed. *Dispositions are habits of mind including both cognitive and affective attributes that filter one's knowledge, skills, and beliefs and impact the action one takes in classroom or professional setting. They are manifested within relationships as meaning-making occurs with others and they are evidenced through interactions in the form of discourse.*

Each disposition and its alignment with classroom functions as evidenced within classroom dialogue and practice can be found in Table 1.

To further distinguish between the technical and responsive dispositions, the following vignettes were constructed from the interview and observation data to show how dispositions were manifested in practice in this study in order to illuminate the concept of dispositions in action.

#### **Assessment as Expectations: Evidence of a Technical Disposition**

*Jarrad and Dante finish up the last of the presentation. Their project is clearly missing some of the criteria of the rubric, a rubric which had been passed out to them to guide the assignment's completion, but had not since been discussed with students as to meaning. All of the elements are found in their presentation. They have the data sources, the questions, the findings, the connections to their community in the past and now, but it is not clear that the group understood all of the terms they used, or grounded their findings in any type of framework.*

*Connections are not clearly made between the data and the community, and they did not share the mathematical processes of statistical analysis that lead them to arrive at their conclusions. Some misconceptions are clear from their conclusions and use of the data. They had gone through the rubric, like a checklist, said what they needed to say, and were now done.*

*They stand before the class, who sits quietly watching and listening (or not) awaiting the teacher's response. The teacher, who had been recording points on the rubric as the students presented, looks up and speaks. "Good work! Any questions?" Some students ask what part did they like the best, and did they get to talk to the judge when they went downtown to the courthouse to do some of their research. Dante says,*

Table 1

<i>Responsive Dispositions</i>	<i>Classroom Function</i>	<i>Technical Dispositions</i>
<p>The disposition to be <i>Critical</i> in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: probing, focused on quality, centered on criteria, concerned with deep understanding.</p> <p>The disposition to be <i>Challenging</i> in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: centered on high expectations, student competence and success for all students.</p>	<i>Assessment</i>	<p>The disposition to be <i>Assuming</i> in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: centered on completion of tasks, focused on correctness, concerned with grades.</p> <p>The disposition to be <i>Accepting</i> in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: indicative of low expectations, focused on effort and compliance.</p>
<p>The disposition to be <i>Facilitative</i> in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: guiding, inquiry oriented, concerned with application and connections to students' lives, and real world examples, in search of multiple answers and the exchange of ideas.</p> <p>The disposition to be <i>Creative</i> in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: about multiple ways of framing learning, examples, and paths to understanding diverse learners, responsive to students' questions, comments.</p>	<i>Instruction</i>	<p>The disposition to be <i>Directing</i> in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: about directing actions of students, coverage of facts, telling information and giving answers.</p> <p>The disposition to be <i>Repetitive</i> in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: lacking in variety in explaining, exemplifying or representing learning, repetitive, the same way for all students.</p>
<p>The disposition to be <i>Empowering</i> in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: concerned with student input related to classroom instructional decisions, centered on fairness and equity.</p> <p>The disposition to be in <i>Connected</i> one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: centered on developmental needs, exhibits "withitness" problem solving, conflict resolution and responsiveness to students as individuals.</p>	<i>Management</i>	<p>The disposition to be <i>Controlling</i> in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: concerned with managing student behaviors and actions including movement, talking, and other forms of interaction.</p> <p>The disposition to be <i>Disconnected</i> in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: often limited, general in nature, generic, often remaining the same from class to class and situation to situation.</p>

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*“Yeah, the judges was pretty cool. But you don’t want to mess with him.” The teacher responds, “I bet . . .” and then looks around, smiles and says, “Next group?” Now everyone write down three new facts you learned in your journal to turn in for a grade at the end of the day. And the presentation process continues.*

#### **Assessment as Expectations: Evidence of a Responsive Disposition**

*Chantal and Robert take the lead in sharing the data analysis of their research. They respond to the teacher’s and other students’ questions about why they made certain choices in their work, how they came to results and conclusions, and share the processes they went through as they made design decisions and the challenges they had to address and revisions they had to make. After helping to design the rubric with the teacher, and using it as a reference during multiple conferences with the teacher and peers while working on their project and presentation, the students feel comfortable with it and use it to help them make sense of their work.*

*As Robert reveals the statistical analysis of the data on crime in the nation, as compared to their city, the teacher interjects, “Why do you think those differences exist?” which leads to discussions within the group and with the other members of the class.*

*“I noticed that you decided that more black males are convicted of crimes because of prejudice ... are there other factors that could contribute to that statistic as well? How did you incorporate these? As a follow up, why don’t you look into the poverty and literacy issues you just shared and tie them back into your project .and then I can take another look at it?”*

*As the group finishes sharing, the teacher asks, “What were the strengths of this group’s presentation?” Students look at their notes from their presentation journal and share this with the group.*

*“What were some things they could change now, or consider next time to make their case even stronger?” Students ask questions and make suggestions based on the rubric criteria. Later, the teacher makes comments to challenge some of the group’s assertions. The teacher guides this discussion and redirects it, bringing the whole class into the mix. “Who agrees with Chantal’s last point . . . thumbs up or down...who thinks Steven’s point was closer to the mark . . .why? What can we learn from both points of view ... is there a common ground?”*

*“What questions do you still have for the group? Make sure to write them down on the feedback sheet you give them. Also remember to record the new facts you learned from them, and the data from their presentation we will need to work on our next focus . . . use the guide questions in your presentation journal.”*

#### **Curriculum and Instruction as Support: Evidence of a Technical Disposition**

*After the class reads an article aloud about Carver High school, the teacher talks about how the media portrays conflict. Literary devices are listed on the board and students copy the definitions down and the teacher tells them, “later we will*

*use these to write a news script for a news cast, so don't lose them. Put them into your yellow notebook and put today's date in the upper right hand corner. Get out the sheet from yesterday that says .... WHO, WHERE, WHEN, WHY and HOW on it. We will use this in the computer lab today." Later they go to the computer lab to look up examples of media coverage of major world conflicts. The teacher gives them a list of the conflicts and the URL for each website. " You need to get the main ideas from each of these stories and web pages because we will be making a newscast later. We only have 20 minutes so make sure you go to all of the websites and get all of the important information: who, where, when why and how." Students go to the computer lab and the teacher reminds them about plagiarism and not to copy things word for word, or it will affect their grades. Students cut and paste information from the websites onto a clipboard. They sit with raised hands, waiting for the teacher to give them more directions or rush ahead with the task to have time to surf the web while the teacher is elsewhere in the room. She periodically reminds them to work more quietly. They work at this for 20 minutes, then return to the classroom.*

**Curriculum and Instruction as Support: Evidence of a Responsive Disposition**

*What did you think of the story about the gangs in Carver High School yesterday? Do you know anyone who goes to Carver? Was the story very realistic to you? Why or why not? What did the writer use to try to get your attention ... what were some of the literary devices we talked about in the magazines yesterday... did you see any in there? Could they have used some others... what was their purpose? Let's take our notes from yesterday's work on the magazines, and these notes from our brainstormed list to the computer lab. We can use them to see if other stories on conflict in our city in the past are portrayed in the same way... and then take a look at some key new stories on conflict from the past. What stories on conflict from our past do you know about? Let's make a list. What are some key words we can try to find other stories? Let's get lists of some stories we find to share for tomorrow's work..."*

*As the students work in the lab, they pull out the guide sheet they generated yesterday in class, to help them get the main ideas from the articles they are researching. They cut and paste examples for their guide sheet, knowing later they will pull the information together into their own concept map, then an outline for their world news story. The teacher circulates around the room, redirecting students, and reminds them to ask their research buddy if they have a question. Students use their key word lists and brainstorming from class to guide their work. The teacher stops to give the class tips. She shares what one student is doing as an example. Students work with their buddies and eagerly share websites and information with their peers and the teacher as they find them. They begin to plug their ideas into the concept map they have started, weaving the content from social studies and history into their focus on journalism and writing. "Let's go back to the workroom, and set goals for tomorrow's class time, and see what questions we still have about the newscast."*

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### **Management as Relationships: Evidence of a Technical Disposition**

*"I need everyone's attention. We have a problem we need to take care of right now. We have a contract that you all came up with and now you have to follow it. It is all about respect and someone is not respecting the learning of others. The college students down the hall can't learn because someone isn't being respectful of others." The teacher goes on to talk about how lucky the students are to have their summer academy on a real college campus and how the dean is going to get very upset if the students from the academy are too loud and that they need to act like adults and follow adult rules if they are going to have the privilege of being on a campus. She calls a community meeting to solve the problem.*

*"Here you are all responsible for the rules. We can have no snack machine." (the students grumble) "Or we can follow the rules you set." The teacher leads a discussion where the students get a choice of consequences that will happen if they are caught being too loud at the snack machine, setting up a kind of strike system, eventually leading to a loss of privileges. They write this up as a new snack machine contract. They then discuss how the noise level will be monitored and set up a watch system to make sure the new rules are followed. "Now that we have all agreed, these are your rules, and if we can't be responsible citizens of our learning community, we might lose that privilege ... does everyone agree?" Students nod and class begins.*

### **Management as Relationships: Evidence of a Responsive Disposition**

*"Okay, everyone has done a great job of making the contract for learning work here. The students are living up to their end of the bargain, watching out for one another, helping each other learn, helping the teachers learn. We've been working out problems before they have happened except one small problem that is happening before we start in the morning and it is disrupting others' learning."*

*"Uh, oh . . . it's the snack machines"*

*"Yes, so let's have a community meeting and figure this out . . . the college students we share the building with are trying to work and study and we are making too much noise . . . so what do we do?"*

*The students brainstorm some ideas. Some say no snack machine. Others say some of them don't have any food at home in the morning and that's all they get to eat. They say maybe they can take turns bringing in snacks. Another suggests that maybe some people don't have money for that. Someone laughs. The teacher interjects, "If we are all here for each other like the contract you all came up with . . . and no put downs . . . let's not go there...lets work this out...bringing in food for a lot of people is expensive for all of us...so what can we do?"*

*"We could just be quiet in the hall way...then it won't be a problem"*

*The teacher adds, "But did we find another problem now?"*

*The students go on to find a solution to make sure they don't come to school hungry and decide to add hunger to their list of issues about problems in society.*

## Discussion

Throughout this three-year study of creating a model school to meet the needs urban students, critical differences in teachers and teaching emerged, even given the best-case scenario and the common factors of quality teachers, shared vision and the power to create the entire context for learning. The teachers who made a difference with these urban middle schoolers were those who exhibited key dispositions that impacted, even determined, how content knowledge and pedagogical skills came to life within the classroom. When knowledgeable, skilled, veteran practitioners are empowered to make a difference in the lives of students and stark differences still exist within their classrooms, we need to examine why these differences exist. Dispositions may be the key. Further research is needed in the area of how teacher dispositions are enacted in practice—dispositions in action.

The quest to define, assess, and develop effective teacher dispositions is fraught with challenges and ethical dilemmas. There are several benefits to examining the construct of dispositions in action. First it is classroom and practice based. It attempts to answer the question “so what?” when we focus on dispositions. What do they look like in the classroom? How do they affect pedagogy and ultimately student learning? Why do they matter (or do they)? Furthermore, the construct of dispositions in action is grounded in teaching practice. Instead of coming from an *a priori* notion of what makes for the best dispositions, this approach comes from observations of teachers in practice and what transpired in the classroom. Finally, this study suggests that dispositions in action can be evidenced and documented through examining classroom discourse.

Through further examination of dispositions in action, other critical questions arise. Can dispositions be taught, since this orientation assumes that they are not merely personality traits? Dewey (1922) emphasizes the importance of the acquisition and development of dispositions, differentiating them from innate characteristics, traits or temperament. His work suggests that dispositions can be taught and cultivated. If so, dispositions may be a critical aspect of teacher education and worth examining as standards (knowledge, skills and dispositions) suggest as a triad of the core of what high-quality teacher education programs, courses, and instructors should emphasize on a regular basis. If this is the case, the documentation of how we do this and the impact that it has on preparing high-quality teachers, and ultimately positively influencing P-12 student learning, may be an important part of future studies and our professional discourse. Before we can move on to these ever-pressing questions, it is clear from the literature and current practices related to dispositions in the field that we need further research into the understanding of dispositions in action.

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