Dispositions — from Attitude to Action

At the Second Annual Provost’s Induction Symposium for new teachers, held at Florida A&M University Development School (FAMU DRS) May 29-30, 2009 under the sponsorship of Teachers for a New Era and the FAMU College of Education, one major topic was dispositions.

Discussions of teacher training usually focus on the knowledge a teacher must possess and the skills that teacher must master. Teaching is discussed in terms of content, teaching methods, classroom management, lesson plans, and assessment. With the proper knowledge and skills, many seem to think, anyone can become a teacher who can “deliver content” and “produce knowledge.”

The Induction Seminar focused on the third and most neglected term in teacher education — dispositions. Dispositions matter not only because they are essential to teacher excellence, but because accreditation requires them to be assessed.

“Dispositions” have been defined in a variety of ways. To some, dispositions can be recorded with a checklist of desirable behaviors: The teacher arrives on time, completes paperwork, prepares lesson plans, etc. Others have pointed out that this approach makes it more of a measure of teaching practices than of dispositions.

To some, dispositions are the values, commitments, beliefs.

Mary Diez on Teacher Dispositions

The Induction Seminar opened with a dynamic, interactive presentation by Dr. Mary Diez, Ph.D., of Alverno College, on teacher dispositions and their role in building professional communities. Teachers are often described as having “knowledge, skills, and dispositions.” There is wide agreement about the meaning of “knowledge” and “skills,” but the concept of “dispositions” has many meanings.

Diez led participants to reflect on different views on student learning, on different ways of understanding dispositions, and on the value of developing a professional community of teachers, rather than only selecting qualified people and inserting them into the system.

Four Beliefs About Teacher Education

Diez (pronounced "deets") first asked us to reflect on four beliefs about teacher education:

1. All kids can learn, and the teacher’s job is to put students into the right tracks so, each students learn to the limit of their inborn abilities.

2. All kids can learn if they take advantage of the opportunity. It is the teacher's job to provide opportunities and invite students to take advantage of them.

3. All kids can learn, but their growth is limited by a combination of innate ability and limited effort. Our job is to encourage students to learn as much as possible, but they are limited by factors we cannot control.

4. All kids can and must learn at relatively high levels of achievement. The teacher's job is to create an environment that results in the high performance.

Modeling good instruction, Diez assigned each belief to a different group and had the groups ask: What do teachers at this school believe? Want? Know?

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Reginald Weaver—Opening Session

"People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered. Love them anyway." -- Mother Teresa

As you might expect from a man experienced in giving presentations to educators, Reginald Weaver wove together several themes into a presentation around the topic: "You cannot do with kids in 2009 what you did with kids in 1969."

Weaver told of how he left classroom teaching in 1981 for other duties, and, when he returned in 1989, he found students to be very different. What had worked before was not working now. Earlier, he could tell students to do their work or stop misbehaving and receive a "Yes, Sir, Mr. Weaver."

But in 1989, he found many students sullen, unresponsive, disrespectful, rebellious. When Weaver told the 1989 student, "Stop that fighting, boy," instead of getting a respectful, "Yes, Mr. Weaver, I'm sorry," he heard a defiant, "You can't make me!"

When he directed students in 1989 to "do your homework," he got this disengaged reply, "It won't do no good." What he found in 1989 were students many parents could not handle and had sent to school hoping the teachers would be able to do something with them. Times had changed.

If you do good, people may accuse you of selfish motives. Do good anyway. " -- Mother Teresa

(Reginald Weaver)

Although Weaver did not use the terminology explicitly, his presentation can be understood as a characterization of the "dispositions" teachers must possess in order to be successful.

A lot of kids come to school unprepared and with the wrong attitude, "but we have to help them learn to do something they wouldn't otherwise be able to do." You don't accomplish this by only following the rules, Weaver said, and you don't do it by enforcing rules that aren't doing what they were meant to do.

Adaptability, flexibility, responsiveness, caring—these are dispositions required in teachers that go beyond content knowledge, pedagogical practices, and classroom management.

The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. " -- Mother Teresa

A teacher of disadvantaged students is always working in two worlds -- the world inside the school and the world outside. The school says, "Don't fight!" But Mama might have taught that boy, "If somebody hits you, you hit back." There is an endless negotiation between the needs of the school and the needs of the kids who attend it.

But, Weaver insisted, "young people will do almost anything you ask them to do if you ask them to do it right."

Teachers have to be models for these kids. When they see us adapting to change and to unpredictable situations, they learn how to adapt. When they see us treating others with tact and respect, they learn to use tact and respect.

Where do teachers learn tact and respect? They don't learn them like skills; they live them, they treat them as foundations upon which to build their teaching. Teachers act on these deep values every day.

Honesty and transparency make you vulnerable. Be honest and transparent anyway. " -- Mother Teresa

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Weaver counseled new teachers to get to know their students, and to let students know them, before they try to teach them. "You can't start teaching a new class till you know the kids and get the kids to know you."

He warned new teachers of what society would expect of them: "The expectation of policy makers is that you do the job well—regardless of whether you have the resources." And you will often not have the resources: "People want you to do miracles when you do not have the resources."

Teachers will become interwoven into the lives of students: "You have to be advocates for these kids." For many of these students, their chances in life depend on the actions of a small number of caring teachers: "We have to make a difference for these kids." And you have to keep trying until something works: "You have to figure out how to teach the way those students learn."

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway. " -- Mother Teresa

An impassioned advocate for educational equality during his two terms as president of the NEA, Weaver issued a plea and a demand that schools in poor areas with disadvantaged students need the same good teachers and quality resources as the schools in rich areas.

Long an advocate and activist himself, Weaver urged new teachers, "Whether you like it or not, you have to become involved in the political process."

A veteran of many educational battles, Weaver gave new teachers a taste of what the battle can be like. The loyal union member that he is, Weaver warned against divisiveness: "They're going to try to split you from those you work with. We cannot allow that to happen."

People who really want help may attack you if you help them. Help them anyway. " -- Mother Teresa

He warned against silence: "Stand up and speak out. You have to, because the kids can't do it. Many of the parents don't know how. People are going to say you aren't loyal, but that's crap."

He warned about the inevitability of feeling inadequate, of feeling like a failure: "We fall down, but we get back up again. You've got to do the same."

Again, beneath Weaver's colorful, dramatic presentation, you could hear a running commentary on the dispositions teachers need to develop in order to be successful.

In a presentation salted with stories, one anecdote stands for Weaver's message. When asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, one student in Weaver's story said, "My mother says I am impossible. I just want to be possible."

Making that impossible student possible was the essence of Weaver's plea.

Give the world the best you have and you may get hurt. Give the world your best anyway." -- Mother Teresa

What choices do they have? What are the implications of their beliefs, wants, knowledge, and action for their students?

Tensions in Teacher Dispositions

Diez then taught how the concept of "teacher dispositions" exists in a tension between dispositions as fixed (like personality traits), and dispositions that develop, change, and grow (like character or moral development).

Under the fixed view, teachers are chosen from those people who already have certain dispositions and will continue to have them. Diez agreed that people clearly have some fixed traits in their dispositions. "You have to be conscious of who you are, what you have to work with," Diez said. "If you are an introverted person, you have to find time in your day for reflection. If you are action oriented, you have to find out how to make your strength work for you."

Even then, however, teachers must be "Willing to do the kind of bending you have to do to work with a range of students." There is no one set of rules for how to make a teacher.

Considering dispositions as a kind of ongoing development leads to a focus on decision-making and the development of

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Mary Diez, cont’d

Dispositions, cont’d

Although these represent dispositions, attitudes, and qualities that define a teacher’s performance. But, as others point out, the world is full of people with good intentions.

Another approach to dispositions defines them in terms of professional behavior—such as work ethic, attendance, and appropriate dress. Although these represent minimum standards for teachers, they do not do justice to the meaning of dispositions.

Another approach tracks the growth of dispositions throughout a teacher training program, through the use of journals and other self-reflection.

Still another approach considers teaching an activity generated out of a system of morals and ethics. Researchers in this area have investigated teacher worldviews and the match between teachers and students.

The approach taken by Diez and Weaver considers dispositions as the intersection between values and action — where a teacher’s training and personality meet the reality of students’ needs.

It is at this interface that teacher quality takes place — an interface that is constantly changing and challenging. Nothing works the same way twice. Teachers not only apply instruction, they adapt and, indeed, constantly create instruction.

That creative process is the heart of “dispositions.”

Mary Diez, cont’d

Diez encouraged teachers and supervisors to ask themselves how they give feedback that helps develop the ability to self-assess and reflect. For example, instead of only scolding a student, ask "How did you set that up? What happened? How might you have done it differently?"

Separate vs. Holistic Views

Teacher dispositions are sometimes considered as a collection of separate traits -- cognitive knowledge, skills, attitudes, performance measures, administrative requirements. And sometimes teacher dispositions are considered as a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts - as knowledge, skills, and attitudes working together in an ongoing, responsive performance.

Just as dispositions can be thought of as traits separate from a teacher’s development, they can be thought of as intentions separate from performance. Although Diez posed this in the form of a question, she urged us to think of how dispositions, skills, and knowledge combine into and integrated whole.

Compliance vs. Construction of Professional Identity

Many teacher education programs, Diez said, focus on a narrow set of factors -- being on time, meeting deadlines, dressing appropriately, and the like. Other programs take a deeper view and target things like "respect for others, willingness to maintain engagement with learners, willingness to do what it takes to help students learn."

Under one approach, the teacher arrives on time to keep from being marked down. Under the other approach, the new teacher arrives on time out of respect for those she is meeting with.

Teacher education programs must find a balance between training the correct behavior and developing the internal sense of "what it means to be a professional" who can generate, from within, the appropriate behavior.

Teacher education programs need to help new teachers "choose to construct their own professional identities," then provide them with opportunities to create that professional identity, put it into practice, and learn from experienced teachers how they handle themselves as professionals, how those teachers model the belief that all students can and must learn, how those teachers model the skills for scaffolding a wider range of learners.

In this sense, new teachers do not so much learn a role as they engage in a "moral purpose and ethical practice" out of which they make choices and generate actions, and with which they reflect on their activities and improve them. This larger, deeper sense of reflective activity is what Diez encouraged us to recognize as the real meaning of "dispositions."

In pursuit of that larger role, Diez encouraged teacher education programs to focus less on "screening individuals" and more on "building a professional community."

"Are there things we have no control over?" Diez asked. "Of course. But the things we do have control over, we’d better take responsibility for."

In closing, Diez reminded us that teachers need to always keep in mind that students, parents, and teachers all share a larger common practice -- that of being a citizen.

And she asked each school and teacher training program to consider, "How might you strengthen the growth toward becoming a professional community?" Behind that question lay Diez’s theme that the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of individual teachers are shaped and enhanced by their participation in the larger professional community of reflective teachers.