



Another Piece of the Language Learning Puzzle

Why Teacher Dispositions Are a Crucial Aspect of Student Success

BY MAURA KATE HALLAM

What makes a great educator? Subject matter knowledge? Pedagogical skills? These are two critical elements certainly. But there is another element that is also an important piece in a teacher's makeup: disposition.

Also referred to as “attitudes,” “values,” or “perceptions,” the focus on teacher dispositions has waxed and waned over the last decade. State and federal programs and legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, have often forced schools to emphasize only knowledge and pedagogical skills that produce the short-term results that can be measured on standardized tests.

But there are in fact research-based methods of assessing professional dispositions, and many teacher educators and educational researchers believe that dispositions are critical to student success in both the short and the long term.

“Dispositions are a lot more important than many people realize,” says Mark Wasicsko, director of the National Network for the Study of Educator Dispositions (NNSSED).

“Teacher attitude has a great effect on students, and student success,” says Audrey Heining-Boynton, ACTFL past president and professor of Foreign Language Education and English as a Second Language at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. “It’s an incredibly important component.”

Defining Dispositions

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), a national organization that confers professional accreditation to schools, colleges, and departments of education to help to establish high quality teacher, specialist, and administrator preparation, defines teacher dispositions as follows:

Professional Dispositions. *Professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities. These positive behaviors support student learning and development. NCATE expects institutions to assess professional dispositions based on observable behaviors in educational settings. The two professional dispositions that NCATE expects institutions to assess are fairness and the belief that all students can learn. Based on their mission and conceptual framework, professional education units can identify, define, and operationalize additional professional dispositions.*

Attention on professional dispositions increased in the early part of this decade, thanks in part to NCATE, which officially incorporated professional dispositions into their accreditation standards.

“Professional dispositions’ are integral to our standards,” says Jane Leibbrand, vice president of communications for NCATE. “You can see from the definition above that NCATE clarifies what professional dispositions it expects schools of education to assess their candidates on: fairness, and the belief that all students can learn.”

Measuring Greatness

It is easy to assert that a teacher’s disposition is an important element in student success—and some may say that this is simply com-

mon sense. But how does one measure an attitude or a value? Aside from anecdotal evidence—which may be viewed by some as information that is too “soft” to serve as real research—is this something that can really be quantified?

“It actually isn’t that soft,” says Wasicsko. “There’s research going back more than 50 years that show there are dispositions that have a positive effect on student success.”

NNSSED bases its study of dispositions on the work of Arthur W. Combs, a humanistic psychologist and past president of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).

“Over the course of 40 years, Arthur W. Combs and others investigated the dispositions (Combs called them ‘perceptions’) of effective helping professionals,” states Wasicsko on the NNSSED website. “These researchers pioneered the use of high-inference research tools for making accurate assessments of dispositions. Numerous studies support the view that effective educators have dispositions about themselves, students, and the task of teaching that can distinguish them from ineffective educators.”

According to Wasicsko, effective teacher dispositions can be organized into four measurable “domains”:

- **The most effective teachers perceive themselves as effective.** “These teachers are self-confident and optimistic,” says Wasicsko. “They can identify with a broad and diverse range of people.”
- **They believe that all students can learn.**
- **They have a broad frame of reference and see a larger purpose for what they do.** “Yes, their job is to teach a foreign language, or whatever subject they teach,” says Wasicsko. “But it is also to teach a disposition for learning.”
- **They look at the people element.** “We are all emotional learners,” says Wasicsko. “What really good teachers know is that it is all about people. You can get magnificent learning to happen when you know that.”

NNSSED’s model is not the only model in use for the study of dispositions, of course.

“There are hundreds of colleges and universities using similar models,” says Wasicsko. “But I have not found any of the research that cannot be fit into the four domains.”

Turning Research into Tools

Researching teacher dispositions is, of course, only the first step. To make the research meaningful, colleges and universities need to be able to apply that research to help education students assess how they measure up to these disposition standards. NNSSED makes pre-assessment materials available on its site.

“The materials were developed and tested as part of a Careers in Education course designed to assist college students to make decisions regarding education careers,” states Wasicsko. “They consist of four assignments including a human relations incident in which students describe how they have worked in a teaching or helping situa-



Want to Learn More? Check out These Sites:

ACTFL/NCATE Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers

www.actfl.org (Click on the "Professional Development" link)

Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC)

www.ccsso.org/Projects/interstate_new_teacher_assessment_and_support_consortium/780.cfm

National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)

www.ncate.org

National Network for the Study of Educator Dispositions (NNSED)

www.educatordispositions.org

Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA)

streamer.lacoe.edu/TESA

tion, a reflection on the student's favorite teacher, self-instructional training on the perceptual rubrics complemented with class discussions on the dispositions of effective educators, and an in-depth self-reflection that integrates the other assignments and asks students to self-assess their fit for an education career."

Other organizations and programs, such as the Los Angeles County Office of Education's (LACOE) Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA) program, focus on teachers who are already working in the profession.

The TESA program, according to LACOE's website, "is a research-based, in-service training program for teachers, grades K-12. The program identifies research showing that teacher interactions with students perceived as 'low achievers' are less supportive and less motivating than those practiced with 'high achievers.' Teachers are

Cathy Musci, French and Spanish teacher at Kernersville Middle School in North Carolina, was just voted Teacher of the Year at her school.

trained in an interaction model that results in their practicing the supportive and motivating techniques with all students in an undiscriminating manner."

"I was trained in TESA about seven years ago, and we use TESA as training for our mentors," says Sherwin Little, a Latin teacher with the Indian Hill School District in suburban Cincinnati, OH. "The research-based strategies remind us of the things which make good teachers. I appreciated that TESA addressed the affective side of teaching, which is often easy for young teachers to forget about as they worry about content. Experienced teachers always need reminders about what makes a positive climate."

The Foreign Language Connection

Once upon a time, learning a foreign language was frequently looked on as something only a "certain kind" of student should take on.

But the last few decades have seen a shift away from this outlook. As foreign language learning became more universally standards-based; as we began to realize, as a nation, the importance of having a foreign language-trained population; and as philosophies about learning and education evolved across disciplines, foreign language classrooms on all educational levels grew less exclusive and more inclusive of all learners.

Consequently, today's foreign language instructors are coming into classrooms which are a veritable melting pot of students, bringing a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and cognitive experiences with them.

"That sea of faces in front of them is not going to mirror their own experience," says ACTFL member Marjorie Hall Haley, associate professor of Education in the Center for Language and Culture in the Graduate School of Education at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA, "They are going to be educating today's learners differently than the way they were educated."



Professor Marjorie Hall Haley helps train the next generation of educators in her "Methods of Teaching Foreign/World Languages in K-12 Schools" class.

This evolution in outlook and classroom composition means that teacher dispositions are more important than ever for student success in foreign language learning.

"Teachers have to be critically aware of the sameness, as well as the differences, of the students in front of them," says Haley.

"In a foreign language class it is vital that students feel comfortable and able to try new things," says Leslie Baldwin, foreign language program specialist at Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools in North Carolina. "Their affective filter has to be lowered so that they are willing to participate, even if they might make mistakes. The teacher's attitude contributes a great deal to the overall environment of the classroom, and can help to lower or raise affective filters."

"A teacher's attitude is very important for student success," says Francemise S. Kingsberry, a student in University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill's Master's in School Administration program. "It is a difficult and sometimes intimidating task to learn a new language so having a teacher who is excited about teaching really is infectious. This is something Audrey Heining-Boynton embodied. Her enthusiasm about Spanish made her class very exciting."

"This isn't something that is just special for our field," says Heining-Boynton, "This is true of any subject students find intimidating or scary. Certainly there's a population of students who do find foreign languages challenging. We must understand, acknowledge, and appreciate that. If we don't then what we are doing is turning off the student."

"With the right support and structures, as well as well-selected methods and activities, students can succeed at a high level," says Little. "This is especially true for foreign language learning. Because learning a foreign language requires a lot of interaction, and many times students make errors, the students need to feel that their teacher cares about them as a person and believes they can learn. Students know which teachers care and which ones don't. A student with moderate ability can be inspired to improve by a motivating teacher."

Being the "Favorite" Teacher

Everyone has a favorite teacher—someone who had a greater impact on our lives than the simple imparting of information or disseminating facts and figures. Where did that impact come from? What made



National Board Certified Spanish FLES teacher Carlos Perera reads to his second grade students at Seawell Elementary School in Chapel Hill, NC.

those teachers different? Chances are, it was their dispositions.

Part of Wasicsko's work includes a nationwide survey collecting memories about survey respondents' favorite teachers. The project has collected 5,000 such stories and the process of analyzing the information is now underway.

"We've analyzed about 2,500," he says. "And what's happening is about 75% of the time when they think of their favorite teacher what they first think of is a disposition: 'They cared about me, they believed in me.'"

The teacher's pedagogical skills—making the learning experience fun and meaningful—this survey is finding, usually are a secondary factor; and the teacher's knowledge, third.

Teacher dispositions, ultimately, are about the teacher's ability to bring out a student's best, no matter what that "best" may mean on an individual basis. This may all seem obvious. But what may not be as obvious are the long-term effects that teacher attitude can have on students long after they leave a classroom.

"Those we call our 'favorite' teachers," says Wasicsko, "are those teachers who can produce more than a year's worth of change with a year's worth of effort."

"It's about creating lifelong learners," says Heining-Boynton. "We want to access, inside every student, that which makes them a learner. Student attitudes toward foreign language learning are inextricably intertwined with everything we do in the classroom. Not every learner ends up in the same place. But it is our goal to make them feel successful."

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