Assessing the Disposition of Teacher Education Candidates

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The Need for Standards

The movement toward establishing standards and utilizing performance assessment in teacher education programs has experienced a meteoric rise in the last decade. One of the major impacts of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), as well as of the work in many states and learned societies, has been to create an extensive awareness that good teacher education is grounded in a framework of defined standards and appropriate assessments, in both academic and clinical settings. Standards in teacher education reflect the consensus of expected outcomes for new teachers, while assessments serve a range of roles, from enabling "higher-stakes" licensure decisions to providing "lower-stakes" evaluations of individual student performances in particular courses or field experiences.

Standards and performance assessments are at their best when they provide a venue for examining best practice and for creating a dialogue for improvement. The movement to inculcate performance assessment in the overall assessment...
system has fostered considerable attention and discussion, especially in light of the complexity of providing performance-based evidence about teaching practice. Nevertheless, a capable array of standards, coupled with active and appropriate assessments, are now considered essential to a quality teacher education program.

Standards in Colorado

In 1994 the state of Colorado implemented a new educator licensing act that defined five standards essential for all teachers: knowledge of content and learning, assessment, the democratic ideal, diversity, and communication. For each of these standards, three domains of competence were established: the knowledge, the performance, and the disposition expected of the school professional. By thus defining the expected characteristics of quality teaching, the new educator licensing act paved the way for teacher education in Colorado to become more prescriptive and more accountable.

It is generally more straightforward to establish indicators of knowledge and performance for new teachers than it is to determine the disposition of a teaching candidate. The disposition of a professional educator, albeit extraordinarily important, is more abstract and, consequently, is oftentimes considered in a more capricious or subjective fashion. We know the appropriate disposition for an educator when we see it or otherwise experience it. We especially recognize instances when appropriate disposition is lacking. But . . . do we really? The focus of this presentation is to provide information on the efforts undertaken at Colorado State University to establish a performance-based assessment process for examining and ensuring the professional disposition of candidates in teacher education.
The Colorado State University Program

The teacher education program at Colorado State University is one of seventeen professional preparation programs in the state. It is an NCATE-accredited program with over 500 professional education candidates enrolled each semester and with over 220 student teachers placed annually. There are approximately 30 faculty involved and 16 different teaching endorsement areas offered. The program is held accountable for, and the state accreditation status of this program is dependent on, candidates' successful attainment of knowledge, performance, and professional disposition for each of the five mandated standards. However, is it indeed possible to hold a program accountable for assessing the disposition of candidates? According to Eugene J. Campbell, Assistant Commissioner, Colorado Department of Education (1998),

Both the statute and State Board Rules confirm that institutions of higher education approved to offer educator preparation programs must comply with criteria set by the State Board of Education. Since "dispositions" are a part of those standards, the institution has an obligation to utilize these criteria in assessing teacher education candidates.

What Is Disposition?

Given this obligation, the first step to establish a process for assessing candidates' disposition was to define the term and the criteria by which a candidate's disposition would be evaluated. Disposition is defined as the "natural mental and emotional outlook or mood; it is a characteristic attitude. Disposition represents the prevailing personal beliefs as shown in behavior and in relationships with others" (Webster's, 1996). Character is about the core values of honesty, respect, responsibility, and more—values that are
essential to citizenship and democracy. As Bob Chase, President of the National Education Association, stated (1997):

Think of the most influential teachers in your own lives. Did those teachers make such an impact because they were a walking *Encyclopedia Britannica*? No. I dare say that, in most cases, your most-valued teachers were those who taught—and modeled—the high standards of character and morality.

Giving life to this definition were the empirical perceptions of what characterizes inappropriate disposition. The Colorado State University faculty in teacher education had on occasion documented their impressions of the impact of character and disposition on a candidate’s performance. Relevant comments received from faculty included "I don't feel this student values a career in teaching, but I'm not sure how to approach my concern with him" and "This student has great difficulty internalizing responsibility for actions and is defensive when feedback is received." Another series of comments included "The student is a loner, lacks collegiality, and lacks passion to work with children" and "Although this candidate has an exemplary academic record in most content courses, the individual has expressed considerable negativity towards a minority group." On one occasion an instructor went so far as to report:

My perception is harsh. Dennis has been given every opportunity to perform, made promises he couldn't/didn't keep, and generally kept digging his hole deeper. I do not believe that Dennis is the type of person who should be teaching. I may be wrong, but I would not want him teaching my kids. If you look at his academic record, you will also see that he does not have the burning desire to learn. He just does not have it. I have never given up on a student before. I have spent many hours with Dennis and
talking to other instructors about Dennis. All agree that Dennis just does not have what it takes to be a good teacher. (Spring, 1998)

Evaluating Disposition

In accordance with the Colorado mandate for assessing the disposition of professional education candidates, coupled with faculty members' beliefs that some candidates may not always possess dispositions deemed appropriate to professional education, efforts were undertaken to institute a system for assessing and monitoring the disposition of teacher candidates. Through the involvement of major stakeholders (e.g., professional candidates, faculty, school professionals, and alumni), it was clear from the outset that efforts aimed at implementing this system needed to be directed in two areas: (a) creating a feedback instrument that addressed the major criteria of appropriate disposition for each standard, while also providing opportunities for narrative commentary and suggestions for action or remediation, and (b) creating a clear, defensible, and fair protocol for handling assessment feedback received on candidates. As Linda Darling-Hammond (1998) noted, "Schools of education ought to be able to show how they're preparing students to develop particular abilities in a way that is credible and defensible."

Development of an Assessment Instrument

The underlying assumptions in the creation of the feedback instrument were:

1. The form would be available to university faculty and advisors, field-experience supervisors, and other cooperating professional educators who wished to share relevant information on the professional progress and
disposition of teacher education candidates at Colorado State University.

2. The form would be used in both on-campus academic settings and field-based clinical settings.

3. The form would be used not only to raise concerns or issues about a preservice candidate but also to identify exemplary performances of candidates who should be recognized for their superior achievements.

4. The information collected through this assessment would be handled with the highest standards of professional confidentiality, individual protection, and due process.

5. This assessment of disposition, although necessitating a more subjective interpretation, should be written as objectively as possible, thereby reducing its adverse impact.

After an extensive search in the literature and through some exhausting stakeholder dialogues, decisions were made to develop an instrument that would assess disposition in terms of both personal and contextual characteristics. Some of the professional characteristics that were to be measured were adapted from earlier work by Sudzina and Knowles (1993). Personal characteristics were defined as those pertaining to social habits (e.g., self-initiative, punctuality, reliability, and dependability), interactions with others (e.g., collegiality, oral expression, critical thinking skills, tact, judgment, and valuing diversity), attention to academic duties and responsibilities (e.g., attendance, academic performance), and familiarity with the expectations that exist for all teachers (e.g., attitude towards learners, role models, caring, trustworthiness, fairness, and citizenship). Contextual characteristics were defined as adjustment to school culture, commitment to the profession, desire to improve one's own teaching performance, and professional conduct.
For each of these characteristics a rubric was created that proposed a range of behaviors that could be observed. Finally, the instrument was designed to encourage narrative input on (a) perceived barriers to the candidate's professional progress, (b) attributes that may help enhance the candidate's professional progress, and (c) recommended actions to address the pertinent issues raised. The instrument is to be signed by both the educator completing the form and the professional candidate, to indicate their knowledge of and/or participation in the completion of the instrument. Prior to the form's adoption, the appropriate university legal counsel screened it and reviewed selected formal court findings regarding actions taken against candidates for dispositional issues. A review of relevant court cases LeKutis v. Osteopathic Medicine, (1994); Hahn v. Lucas, (1994); and Banks v. Dominican College, (1994) revealed that the court system tended to favor institutions of higher education where evaluation of personal and contextual characteristics of their students was concerned.

**Developing a Process to Utilize the Instrument**

Efforts were also undertaken to create an appropriate strategy for handling the feedback that would protect the individual rights of the professional candidates. As stated in the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, "... no state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens. ..." Linda Darling-Hammond (1998) reflected a related concern pertaining to assessment processes by stating:

I think we have to be very, very concerned about developing methods of assessment and methods of scoring assessments that hold up as valid and reliable, as not arbitrary, capricious, or idiosyncratic.
Ultimately a process was developed to accommodate the range of issues or concerns that might be raised. For example, in most cases, upon receipt of a completed form, the administrator in the Educator Licensing Office would provide the candidate with written notification of the form's receipt and, if appropriate, would suggest options for the student to consider. The candidate would also receive a copy of the completed form. In cases where concerns were raised about the candidate's actions/disposition in a field placement, the administrator would have the option of immediately withdrawing the preservice candidate from the placement.

If the candidate did not resolve the problem(s) for which concern was expressed, or if a second completed form was received on the candidate, a formal meeting would be convened with the affected persons (e.g., the student, the educator who raised the concern, an advocate for the student, the student's advisor, the school's coordinator of field experiences, and the director of the Educator Licensing Program). In these instances, a remediation plan would be developed and implemented. If the candidate subsequently showed insufficient improvement or received additional completed forms, the administrator would have the option of deselecting the candidate from the teacher education program.

Assumptions that were adopted in the development of this process included:

1. At each juncture in the process, the candidate would be permitted to bring an advocate (e.g., friend, faculty member, relative) who would have the opportunity to provide information or commentary. At each formal meeting, the candidate's advisor would also be asked to participate.
2. Minutes of each meeting would be kept and copies provided to each participant.

3. The candidate would have access to an appeal process that would utilize a subcommittee of educators to review the issues and outcomes.

Finally, a process of formal and congratulatory notification to the candidate and his/her advisor would be developed to respond to a completed form that identified a candidate's superior achievements in the area of disposition. If additional forms of this nature were received, the candidate would receive a framed certificate and other forms of congratulatory recognition.

**Preliminary Analysis of the Process**

Decisions to remediate or deselect candidates from the teacher education program, using the instrument and operational protocol, have withstood a number of challenges that have arisen through its use. In the four semesters since this process for assessing and monitoring the disposition of professional candidates was first implemented (spring 1997), 32 forms have been submitted on 28 individual students. Figure 1 reflects the distribution of completed forms by semester. It is interesting to note that a disproportionate number of completed forms (18) were received during the first semester in which this assessment process was available. During each of the following semesters, only three to eight forms were received. This leads one to speculate that as faculty became more familiar with the assessment, they became more selective of the circumstances for which they chose to invoke this process.
Over these four semesters, some of the concerns noted on these forms by educators about candidates have included "passive," "frequently absent," "little desire for teaching or improving written work," "writing mechanics are weak," "poor interaction with peers and school students," "struggling with diversity issues," "weak writer," and "seems very depressed overall." During this same period of time, one completed form indicating exemplary performance was received: "The candidate has consistently demonstrated an enthusiastic and caring attitude to all students whom he encounters. His overall demeanor is one of joyful professionalism."

A small number of candidates (12%) who received a completed form received more than one form. Figure 2 reflects the breakdown of the number of forms received by each candidate.
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Figure 2
Analysis of the Number of Completed Forms Received by Candidates

Candidates Receiving Three Forms (4%)

Candidates Receiving Two Forms (8%)

Candidates Receiving One Form (88%)

Note: The percentages were calculated only on the population of students (N=28) who received one or more forms during this four-semester period and not on the total population of students in the teacher education program.

Finally, the following actions, reported in Figure 3, occurred as a result of the assessment of professional disposition.
Figure 3
Action Taken Following the Receipt of Completed Assessment Forms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Taken</th>
<th>Number of Candidates</th>
<th>Percentage of Candidates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The administrator of the teacher education program took no formal action, with the exception of the initial written notification to the student candidate.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A remediation plan was developed and the candidate chose to complete the plan and stay in the program.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A remediation plan was developed and the candidate chose to leave the program.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate was dismissed outright as a result of the assessment process.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate received a series of recognitions and affirmations for positive performances.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The percentages were calculated only on the population of students (N=28) who received one or more forms during this four-semester period and not on the total population of students in the teacher education program.

Although in most cases (84%) there was no formal action taken against a candidate to remedy a concern, we found that when a remediation plan was necessary, a surprising half of the affected candidates (one out of two) was unwilling to fulfill the requirements of the plan and thus withdrew from the program. Only once was it necessary to dismiss a candidate outright as a result of the concerns raised in this assessment process.
The Future of Disposition Assessment

The theme of this NES conference, "Teacher Preparation Assessment: The Hows and Whys of New Standards," is extraordinarily timely in light of the intense scrutiny in which teacher education presently finds itself. The Colorado Department of Education has made it clear that the successful accreditation of teacher education programs in the state will be based on carefully constructed academic and field-based experiences that develop the appropriate knowledge, performance, and disposition of professional education candidates in five defined standards—knowledge of content and learning, assessment, the democratic ideal, diversity, and communication. Mary Diez (1998) confirmed the critical importance of standards in education when she stated:

In fact, that may be the most important role of standards—to lay out a vision of teaching in a public way so that all in the profession can contribute to its critique and refinement. In that sense, the development of standards is directly related to the development of teaching as a profession.

The teacher education program at Colorado State University is committed to the development of competent new teachers and thus has a program fully engaged with the standards and with performance assessments. In recognizing the importance of assessing and ensuring the appropriate professional disposition of candidates, our program has developed a process whereby these characteristics can be examined and ensured. Although this process appears relatively simple, the examination of character is not. We have learned that the process must be defensible, it must be thoughtful, it must be humane, and it must be attentive to the vision and goals of the stakeholders. A candidate's disposition has not, in the past, been formally scrutinized as a part of his or her preparation for teaching. The high level of subjectivity of such assessment is fraught with risks. Yet, as standards are
raised, disposition is indeed one area that must be examined. Our efforts in this regard over four semesters have suggested that only a small number of significant issues surrounding the appropriate disposition of our candidates will ultimately be raised. However, we intend to continue to use this process to provide feedback on candidates and to promote evidence-based decision making in this teacher education program. It is through this process, in part, that good teaching occurs. It is through this type of process that we all learn.

References


