



# Fwd:

## Arresting Insights in Education

### Subject:

## Personality Test: The dispositional dispute in teacher preparation today, and what to do about it

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History has shown us time and again the power of a word to shape human thought and action. Consider how many legions have mobilized around the word *freedom*—a single word

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that millions have fought and died for. No doubt those who live in free societies today owe a debt to the inspiration and fire afforded by this one stirring word.

Of course, a word can be used in multiple ways, with wisdom or foolishness, with sincerity or guile, even to indicate the opposite of its original meaning. It is possible, for example, to imagine manipulative leaders telling their subjugated masses that “*Freedom is Slavery*.” Indeed, in his novel *1984*, the great British social critic George Orwell did imagine exactly such a thing. From the pages of Orwell’s grim dystopian saga our lexicon gained a new word—“*Orwellian*”—to indicate attempts at mind control through

various forms of snooping and manipulation, including “double-speak” and other kinds of semantic distortion.

### A Buzzword Roils the Education Field

In an effort to upgrade and “professionalize” the ancient craft of teaching, educators have begun doing what all respected professions try to do sooner or later: define standards for assessing whether or not aspiring candidates are capable of performing the work well enough to be certified for practice. In 2000, the largest established agency that accredits teacher education programs (the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, or NCATE), announced a revised set of standards for evaluating candidates’ performances. Central to the focus of these NCATE standards are the “knowledge, skills, and dispositions” of teaching candidates.

There is not much doubt as to the meanings of the words “knowledge” and “skills.” These terms have had long and broad use in education and in the learning sciences; moreover, they have been thoroughly examined in cognitive

and behavioral research. (Of course, it may well be that NCATE could do a better job with these concepts too, but that's beyond the scope of this paper.) The term "dispositions" has not been used as frequently in any of these fields. Perhaps sensing that the word requires some further definition, NCATE's website glossary provides the following:

**Dispositions.** The values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors towards students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator's own professional growth. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice. For example, they might include a belief that all students can learn, a vision of high and challenging standards, or a commitment to a safe and supportive learning environment.

It is clear from this definition that NCATE intended the term "dispositions" to signify "beliefs and attitudes" that reflect a *particular stance* towards moral issues large and small, from "caring" on an interpersonal level to "social justice" on a broader societal scale. The standards imply that a successful candidate must demonstrate the right kind of beliefs and attitudes with regard to such matters. It also follows from the construction "Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes..." that the candidate not only must *have* such beliefs and attitudes but must be *guided* by them. Thus the same definition uses the word "disposition" for dual purposes, to indicate the right kinds of moral beliefs and attitudes as well as to indicate the tendency of being guided by them. This double meaning gives the definition both a very long reach and a certain looseness.

Predictably where far-reaching and loosely defined matters of moral belief, attitude, and behaviors were concerned, it did not take long for contention over NCATE's disposition standard

to arise. A *New York Sun* story in May 2005 reported that "Disposition Emerges as Issue at Brooklyn College." According to the *Sun* story, students in the Brooklyn College School of Education have complained that the College uses the disposition standard to foist upon them ideological beliefs that they disagree with. In one class, according to one student's complaint, the instructor insisted that English must be considered the language of oppressors. In the course materials, the instructor linked this claim to the theme of "social justice," one of NCATE's examples of a dispositional standard. The student objected not only that the course material was illegitimate, but also that students were discouraged from expressing their own opinions on the matter. Another instructor, in response to this student's complaint, retorted that the very act of making the complaint could be considered a violation of the College's dispositional standard, since it represented "aggressive and bullying behavior towards his professor."

But in reaction, another professor in the College, incensed by what appeared to be, yes, an *Orwellian* use of the disposition language, told the newspaper: "All these buzz words don't mean anything until you look and see how they're being implemented.... Dispositions is an empty vessel that could be filled with any agenda you want." For the College, the whole incident has devolved into a host of accusations, charges, investigations, and other conflictual events far removed from the pursuit of excellence in the craft of teaching. The looseness of the NCATE definition has far-reaching implications indeed.

### A Short Course in Some Theory and Terminology of Contemporary Behavioral Science

When dealing with concepts such as knowledge, skills, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and even that current buzzword and so-called empty vessel "dispositions," we do not need to rely

on our intuitions alone. For well over a century, there has been deep and systematic study of such things, including a thoughtful array of efforts to define them in precise and consistent manners. Such study has occurred in fields of behavioral science such as psychology, sociology, cognitive and linguistic studies, and neuroscience. It is not that these relatively young scientific fields are without blind spots or disputes (nor, by the way, are older fields

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such as medicine, as anyone with a complex illness soon discovers). But it is the case that analytic work done in these fields tends to be intelligent, careful, and evidence-based. Professional educators who wish to employ behavioral concepts for their own work would do well to apprise themselves of what the behavioral sciences have to say about these concepts—how such concepts may be defined and interpreted, and how they may be sensibly put to use in professional applications.

The concept “dispositions” in the behavioral sciences has a particular meaning that, as far as I know, has never been contested. For the present purposes, I shall use as my source the four-volume compendium of theory and research in human development called *The Handbook of Child Psychology*. The seventy lengthy chapters in the *Handbook* cover every psychological process known to the field at this time. For disclosure’s sake, I must admit to being editor of the last two editions of this

compendium (1998 and 2006)—it’s my familiarity with its contents that entices me to refer to it here. Nonetheless, I can say without exaggeration that the *Handbook* is widely seen as the definitive and authoritative source for what’s presently known in the field.

“Dispositions” comes up in just two of the *Handbook*’s chapters, and each time the word is used in exactly the same way. Both chapters deal with *personality development*. Personality is the big enchilada of psychology, in the sense that it incorporates everything else. All of our ideas, abilities, habits, motives, virtues, vices, attitudes, traits, and *dispositions* are integrated at any one time into a unique personality that defines the special self which each of us has developed over time. The role that dispositions plays in this all-encompassing pattern is deeply entrenched and long-lasting, beginning early in life and influencing the direction of the other components of personality.

For example, one of the two *Handbook* authors, personality theorist Avshalom Caspi, writes of “dispositional traits” that “show significant continuity across development” and that have long-term consequences for the shape of the life course. One of Caspi’s examples is a boy who since infancy was prone to temper tantrums. The boy’s ill-tempereness (his dispositional trait) may stay with him for years and along the way may determine much of his experience and future direction in life. Caspi writes: “His ill temper may provoke school authorities to expel him...or may cause him to experience school so negatively that he quits. Leaving school may limit his future opportunities, channeling him to frustrating, low-level jobs...He is likely to explode when frustrations arise on the job or when conflicts arise in his marriage. This can lead to an erratic work life and unstable marriage.” This of course is not the only possible outcome of ill-tempereness, and (blessedly) most people have plenty of positive dispositional traits

that benefit the course of their development. But Caspi's analysis does indicate how fundamental and life-determining personality dispositions can be.

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In a similar vein, the other *Handbook* author who uses the term (Urie Bronfenbrenner, one of the field's most distinguished theorists) writes of "dispositional characteristics"—a phrase that is virtually synonymous with Caspi's "dispositional traits." Bronfenbrenner identifies two types of dispositional characteristics, those which are "developmentally generative" and those which are "developmentally disruptive." Among the former are curiosity, sociability, and "the readiness to defer immediate gratification to pursue long-term goals." Among the latter are "impulsiveness, explosiveness, distractibility...(and) ready resort to aggression and violence."

In the scientific sense, therefore, a disposition is a "trait" (or "characteristic") that is embedded in temperament and "disposes" a person towards certain choices and experiences that can shape the person's future. It is a deep-seated component of personality, with roots going back to the origins of our temperaments and tentacles that bear major import for who we are and who we shall become.

### A Closer Look at NCATE's Overreaching Disposition Standard

NCATE's operational definition of "dispositions" spills far beyond the precise semantic boundaries established in the behavioral sciences. As I have noted above, NCATE uses the term to indicate *moral beliefs and attitudes*—a particular set of which it deems appropriate for teachers—as well as a *behavioral tendency*

to be "guided" by such attitudes. Thus the NCATE definition, and the standard based upon it, focuses *both* on candidates' values and their value-driven conduct. The scientific definition, in contrast, restricts itself to a particular psychological process, albeit one with enormous and long-lasting consequences for personality development.

This definitional contrast is far more than a mere academic distinction, as evidenced by the Brooklyn College example. The effect of the NCATE approach is that it opens virtually all of a candidate's thoughts and acts to scrutiny as part of the assessment process. It legitimizes an examination of the candidate's moral attitudes and beliefs (little wonder that students complain about ideological thought-control); but that is only a start. The NCATE standard brings under the examiner's purview a key element of the candidate's very *personality*, the candidate's behavioral predilections associated with (or "guided by," in NCATE's phrase) the candidate's attitudes and beliefs. As the scientific study of personality has shown, such behavioral predilections are right at the heart of the developmental processes that determine

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who we are and who we shall be. In shining the examiner's spotlight on this entire cluster of values, beliefs, and personality characteristics, NCATE has deemed that, for teachers, all that is personal must belong to the profession. Aspiring teachers will be held accountable for whatever ideas the profession decides are

appropriate for teachers to believe and act upon.

It is impossible to know whether those who designed the NCATE standards consciously presumed to take on such power over what, in non-scientific terms, might be considered the very souls of those who wish to enter the teaching field. The problem may well be simply the result of a sloppy definition cobbled together without careful scholarship rather than a dictatorial effort at mind and behavior control. But the effect is much the same: those who have been granted the authority to assess teaching candidates have been given unbounded power over what candidates may think and do, what they may believe and value, and those who are subject to this authority (the candidates) must guard their every expression of moral belief and commitment. This is far from an ideal way to launch a career dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, learning, thinking, and truth.

### Towards a More Principled Approach

Assessment in the service of professional accreditation must be based upon clearly defined principles rather than the fuzzy intuitions of whoever happens to be in charge of the process at any one time. Otherwise the assessment process can easily be used to eliminate those who don't pass certain political litmus tests and to indoctrinate those who are afraid of being eliminated. The only protection against the risks of such manipulation is to set limits on the standards of assessment that are used to evaluate teaching candidates. Principles for doing so include:

1) It is acceptable to assess skills, knowledge, and understandings that are imparted in training and derive from the established knowledge base of education. For example, an aspiring math teacher needs to know math and have the skill to communicate it to novices, all of which

can be learned and tested. Such knowledge and skill may be examined.

2) It is *not* acceptable to assess particular attitudes and beliefs related to social/political ideologies. For example, a candidate's belief systems regarding economic redistribution, the politics of multi-culturalism, the implications of

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religious faith and its expression, whom we should vote for in the next election, or even whether all our national wildernesses should be turned into golf courses, are none of an assessor's business. General beliefs directly related to the candidate's capacity and motivation to teach *are* appropriate to examine: for example, Teach for America quite reasonably questions its candidates about whether or not they truly believe that all children can learn. But when such questioning wanders into the realm of social/political ideology, it is out of bounds.

3) It is acceptable to assess personal characteristics that are essential to the job of teaching, including character virtues such as honesty, responsibility, and diligence. Assessments of such should be based on definitive behavioral evidence of the presence or lack of the virtue in question. For example, if the candidate has demonstrated a predilection towards dishonesty by plagiarizing his or her own assignments and lying about it, this would be a legitimate part of the candidate's assessment record.

4) It is *not* acceptable to assess personal characteristics that have only a speculative relationship with teaching ability. For example, some candidates are temperamentally shy while others are gregarious, and likely a case could be made for the advantages of one or the other in classrooms or tutorials with students. But (as far as I know) there is no evidence to support such claims, and therefore there is no valid reason to discriminate among candidates on this basis. Where personal characteristics are concerned, only those that affect job performance and ethical comportment in a direct and unequivocal way should be considered, and objective evidence of the characteristics in question must be used.

Any assessment process brings one group of people into judgment over another. The

asymmetry of power created by such an arrangement opens the door to many possible abuses. Among other things, it can lead to a certain browbeating over matters that those in charge find personally compelling. Some of this may be inevitable, and it does not imply tyrannical intentions on the part of the browbeaters: many who have passionate certainty about the rightness of their own beliefs want others to hold the same beliefs as well. Since this is a common human tendency, fairness in assessment requires built-in controls to prevent such abuses of power—controls such as rigorous and unambiguous definitions of assessment standards by criteria drawn from science and other systematic areas of scholarship. This is the most fundamental principle that should underlie a principled approach to the assessment of teaching candidates.

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