Teaching Dispositions as Feedback Loops Leading to Cultural Proficiency

Eunice M. Merideth

(Department of Teaching and Learning, Drake University School of Education, Des Moines, IA 50311, USA)

Abstract: This paper will discuss the methodology and results of how defining, cultivating, and documenting teacher dispositions at three levels in a teacher education program can lead to measureable success in establishing cultural proficiency. The four distinct stages of feedback loops: evidence, relevance, consequence, and action form a strong framework for defining, valuing, and adapting dispositional behaviors for teaching candidates — major elements of cultural proficiency. When this type of looping occurs three times throughout a program, it provides assessment points within the program and from the field, as well as opportunities for self-reflection for teacher candidates. Data offered in this paper affirms the success of supporting dispositions with feedback loops and a focused curriculum that emphasizing cultural proficiency. These loops then change data points scattered across the program into a sustainable system that triangulates data from faculty members, students, and mentor teachers, providing a pathway for candidates to demonstrate personal efficacy and responsive professional practice.

Key words: teacher disposition, cultural proficiency, feedback loops

1. Introduction

The challenge of educating a diverse population is not education's only problem or even a new one: the United States has always had an immigrant population that added characteristics of difference to the dominant culture. However, the level and variety of these characteristics of differences have never been more compelling.

While public school classrooms are becoming more diverse, the teachers in those classrooms reflect a relatively homogeneous population. According to Cruz & Patterson (2005), 87% of elementary and secondary schoolteachers were Caucasian, female, and from the middle class. This statistic has not gotten better; Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, reported in February, 2011 that "nearly 35% of our students in this country are Black or Hispanic, but less than 2% of our nation's teachers are Black or Hispanic men". When projected forward, Eggen and Kauchak (2007) estimate that, given the current rate of immigration, by the year 2020 two thirds of American school population will be African American, Asian, Hispanic, or Native American. In addition to this racial diversity, teachers also need to understand and be sensitive to characteristics of difference for special needs students, low SES students, LGBT students, and different religions, genders, and ethnicities. Combined with the national and state calls for teachers to be accountable and effective while being empathetic and caring of all students, the need to take teaching dispositions as seriously as the knowledge and skills to deal with diversity in classrooms is clear.

Osguthorpe (2008) asserts that teacher dispositions are integral to good teaching, but that these dispositions must connect "to the activities of teaching and learning, moving them away from a narrow focus on moral

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Eunice M. Merideth, Ph.D., Levitt Distinguished Professor and Associate Dean; research areas: technology in education, effective assessment, active learning. E-mail: eunice.merideth@drake.edu.

development" (p. 288). Our program at a private Midwest university agrees with this stance and, consequently defines dispositions as measureable behaviors that illustrate and guide the major ethical mandate of teaching: the commitment and the will to facilitate the learning of each student. To accomplish this lofty goal, we believe professional teaching dispositions can be learned and nurtured through academic and social experiences as well as reflective opportunities about practice. Benninga et al. (2008) affirm this perspective when they assert, "The moral nature of teaching cannot be neatly folded into an articulation of the knowledge and skills essential for teaching, but neither can they be articulated separately from the requirements of effective teaching practice" (p. 4). This means, however, that dispositions have to be addressed in multiple ways and at multiple levels in a looping manner: through academic work, the manner in which teacher candidates interact with colleagues and students in the field, and reflective practice about content knowledge, pedagogical skill, and professional relationships.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the methodology and results of how defining, cultivating, and documenting teacher dispositions at three levels in a teacher education program through data-driven feedback loops can lead to measureable success in establishing cultural proficiency while at the same time supporting assessment of those dispositions within accreditation mandates.

2. Feedback Loops as a Medium for Change

A feedback loop is essentially a control system that allows for feedback and adjustment according to the desired output. In human terms, Thomas Goetz (2011), states that the basic premise is simple: "Provide people with information about their actions in real time (or something close to it), then give them an opportunity to change those actions, pushing them toward better behaviors" (p. 130). Goetz identifies four stages of a feedback loop: *evidence, relevance, consequence,* and *action*. The *evidence stage* involves data that is gathered on both a formal and informal basis and entered into an information system. The *relevance stage* converts the raw data into a usable format, one that has meaning for the individual. The *consequence stage* results in recommendations for future behaviors. Finally, the *action stage* includes decision-making for action or implementation. The more often the feedback loop is run, the more often that small actions approach large changes. Because we defined dispositions in terms of measurable behaviors, we were able to intentionally support and assess those actions that approach cultural proficiency; that is, the ability to interact effectively with people who differ from oneself.

Within our conceptual framework based upon *Professional Relationships*, we have adopted the following three dispositional foci to advance and assess the commitment and will of our pre-service teachers to facilitate classroom learning for each student:

(1) A **Learning Leader** who models honesty, integrity, professional ethics, and empowers each student to succeed.

(2) A **Student Advocate** who provides a positive, safe, and secure learning environment, as well as values and sustains positive and professional relationships with students.

(3) A **Reflective Practitioner** who engages in continuous self-assessment of professional strengths, by actively seeking feedback from supervisors, mentor teachers, and peers to improve.

3. Methodology

With the three foci for program dispositions defined in the spring of 2008, the program faculty members spent a two-day summer workshop operationalizing those dispositions into behaviors that could be measured at

three different levels — *Beginning*, *Developing*, and *Proficient* — resulting in the outline below. At all levels and in all three foci, principals of cultural proficiency are stressed and built upon retaining and expanding previous behaviors.

In the *Beginning Level*, students are expected to simply demonstrate an awareness of the importance of dispositions and ask them to comply with basic standards. At the *Developing Level*, students are expected to continue compliance with the beginning standards in a looping manner as well move to the developing level. Moreover, at the *Development Level*, students are asked to think of themselves as professional and demonstrate standards to that end. As students reach the *Proficient Level*, they again loop back to the *Beginning* and *Developing Levels*; however, they are also expected to implement curriculum while demonstrating attitudes and dispositions that can make them successful educators. When *Proficient*, students are expected to set professional goals, develop a philosophy that supports learning of all students, demonstrate flexibility, and communicate high expectation to students. For example, as a novice *Learning Leader*, a beginning student is expected to act respectfully. At the developing level, that student is expected to act respectfully and develop lesson plans that accommodate different ways of learning. At the proficient level of a *Learning Leader*, the student is expected to act respectfully, develop lesson plans that accommodate different ways of learning, and communicate high expectations to all students. Advanced goals are also defined for teacher candidates as they transition to PK-12 practicing teachers.

Table 1   Criteria and Assessment Points for Teaching Dispositions

Disposition 1	Criteria and Assessment Points: Learning Leader

A learning leader who models honesty, integrity, professional ethics, and empowers each student to succeed.	**Beginning:** (Foundations Course: Student Self-Assessment; Admission to the Teacher Education Program: Faculty; Practicum Evaluations: Mentor Teachers)
	    a. Completes assignments, tasks and requirements on time
	    b. Arrives in class and to appointments on time
	    c. Uses references and resources ethically
	    d. Acts respectfully
	Developing: (Methods Courses: Student Self-Assessment; Admission to Student Teaching: Faculty; Methods Practicum Evaluations: Mentor Teachers)
	    a. Demonstrates an open mind and willingness to try new things
	    b. Develops lesson plans that accommodate different ways of learning
	    c. Plans learning activities and assessment to support academic, social, emotional, and physical growth of students
	    d. Takes initiative to work with students and collaborate with educators
	Proficient: (Student Teaching Exit Survey: Student Self-Assessment; Final Evaluation for Student Teaching: University Supervisors; Final Evaluation for Student Teaching: Mentor Teachers)
	    a. Sets professional goals
	    b. Demonstrates confidence and self-direction in pursuing solutions to problems or questions
	    c. Communicates high expectations to all students
	Advanced: (Goals for Practicing Teachers)
	    a. Uses the needs and interests of students to approach curricular and strategic decisions
	    b. Extends learning beyond classroom walls

Disposition 2	**Criteria and Assessment Points: Student Advocate**

A student advocate who provides a positive, safe, secure learning environment, as well as values and sustains positive and professional relationships with students and colleagues.	**Beginning:** (Foundations Course: Student Self-Assessment; Admission to the Teacher Education Program: Faculty; Practicum Evaluations: Mentor Teachers)
	    a. Uses professional language appropriate in discussions and writing
	    b. Maintains a positive attitude toward students, peers, educational stakeholders
	Developing: (Methods Courses: Student Self-Assessment; Admission to Student Teaching: Faculty; Methods Practicum Evaluations: Mentor Teachers)
	    a. Maintains professional boundaries with students and educational stakeholders
	    b. Facilitates a learning environment to support the safety, dignity, and equity of students
	Proficient: (Student Teaching Exit Survey: Student Self-Assessment; Final Evaluation for Student

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	Teaching: University Supervisors; Final Evaluation for Student Teaching: Mentor Teachers)
	    a. Develops a teaching philosophy that respects all learners
	    b. Demonstrates pedagogical flexibility by adapting, adjusting and modifying practices to meet the needs of students
	Advanced: (Practicing Teacher Goals)
	    a. Accepts professional responsibility for student learning outcomes
	    b. Advocates on the part of students and/or educational stakeholders (IEP meetings, parent-teacher conferences, etc.

Disposition 3	**Criteria and Assessment Points: Reflective Practitioner**

A reflective practitioner who engages in continuous self-assessment of professional strengths, by actively seeking feedback from supervisors, mentor teachers, and peers to improve teaching.	**Beginning:** (Foundations Course: Student Self-Assessment; Admission to the Teacher Education Program: Faculty; Practicum Evaluations: Mentor Teachers)
	    a. Follows established policies and procedures
	    b. Expresses a positive view of self
	Developing: (Methods Courses: Student Self-Assessment; Admission to Student Teaching: Faculty; Methods Practicum Evaluations: Mentor Teachers)
	    a. Expresses a commitment to teaching and learning
	    b. Participates in thoughtful, reflective conversations with students, peers and educators
	    c. Incorporates feedback into products and performance
	Proficient: (Student Teaching Exit Survey: Student Self-Assessment; Final Evaluation for Student Teaching: University Supervisors; Final Evaluation for Student Teaching: Mentor Teachers)
	    a. Sets and achieves professional goals
	    b. Articulates high expectations for professional performance
	    c. Incorporates feedback from supervisors, mentor teachers, and peers into revisions of products or performances
	Advanced: (Practicing Teacher Goals)
	    a. Engages in self-assessment as part of ongoing professional growth
	    b. Involves and works with others in planning, problem solving, and learning.

The feedback loops within this program were set up to coincide with the levels of dispositional behaviors that were assessed at three "gates" within the program: entrance into the Teacher Education Program, entrance to student teaching, and finally, certification.

The emphasis on cultural proficiency within the dispositions measured has been supported throughout the program by the curricular mapping of twelve characteristics of difference or labels that may affect students' success: English language learning, race, talented and gifted, at-risk, ethnicity, LGBT, gender, sex, socio-economic status, religion, immigrant status, and disabilities as identified by the IDEA act. These characteristics are mapped across the curriculum and designated as either *Strongly Addressed* (experiences that are multidimensional and may be identified by active learning, frequency, assessment measures, intensity, simulation, debriefing activities, or student reflections) or *Addressed* (experiences that create awareness of characteristics of difference by one or more of the following instructional strategies: lecture, classroom discussion, activity through class participation or authentic assessment). Consequently, dispositional behaviors as well as knowledge and skill to handle cultural proficiency is not segregated into one class or treated as expectations that magically appear, but are integrated into both university and practicum work.

The lack of a broad consensus in the field of education about defining teaching dispositions has led to models of assessment based on standards, professional behaviors, moral obligations, or self-reflection. Whatever approach a program adopts for assessing dispositions, there exists a delicate balance between philosophical ideals espoused and behavior in the field. Ritchart (2001) explains, "Unlike desire, dispositions are accompanied by behavior and thus assume the requisite ability to carry out that behavior" (p. 145). To provide as much feedback as possible for candidates and establish the balance between the ideal and the real, we elected to spread the assessment of dispositions among faculty members, practicum PK-12 teachers in the field, and students themselves. The

implementation of these measures began with students in fall of 2008, using an electronic form to rate their behaviors at the appropriate level. Students used the form to assess their performance of dispositional behaviors and to use that feedback to establish a goal in each of the three focus areas for the next semester. PK-12 practicum teachers were then added with electronic forms, and finally faculty members transitioned from written reference forms to electronic that allowed the collection and aggregation of data at each level. Although students are identified by name and program by faculty members and PK-12 practicum teachers, students' self-reflections are anonymous to encourage honest self-reflection. Other areas of the program have been added as the system to handle the data has been built.

4. Results

Three years of data have resulted in strong feedback loops for teacher candidates in the program, but also for the program itself. In the tables below, results for individual items have been averaged within their categories in order to report a profile across years and levels.

Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the simultaneous implementation of the cultural proficiency curriculum and feedback loops through the assessment of related dispositional behaviors listed within the tables at the *Beginning Level*. Scores for these basic behaviors have remained fairly steady in these areas over three years, but it is interesting that PK-12 practicum teachers with limited exposure to teacher candidates actually rank them higher than they rank themselves.

Table 2   Profile Data — Level 1 Dispositions for Cultural Proficiency: Students' Self-Reflections in Foundations Courses (Aggregated Mean Data in a Likert Scale of 1–4)

Criteria for Dispositions	F2008 n = 57	S2009 n = 65	F2009 n = 74	S2010 n = 72	F2010 n = 65	S2011 n = 49
Using references and resources ethically	3.54	3.73	3.58	3.65	3.66	3.67
Acting respectfully toward others	3.81	3.88	3.61	3.71	3.74	3.84
Maintaining a positive attitude toward students, peers, educators and caregivers	3.65	3.63	3.72	3.43	3.58	3.76
Expressing a positive view of self	3.60	3.0	3.46	3.36	3.40	3.39

Table 3   Profile Data – Level 1 Dispositions for Cultural Proficiency: Practicum Teachers Assessments in Foundations and Human Development Courses (Aggregated Mean Data in a Likert Scale of 1–4)

Criteria for Dispositions	F2008 n = 95	S2009 n = 100	F2009 n = 121	S2010 n = 107	F2010 n = 108	S2011 n = 119
Using references and resources ethically	3.92	3.89	3.90	3.90	3.94	3.86
Acting respectfully toward others	3.95	3.90	3.90	3.87	3.92	3.88
Maintaining a positive attitude toward students, peers, educators and caregivers	3.90	3.90	3.91	3.86	3.91	3.85
Expressing a positive view of self	3.91	3.90	3.84	3.79	3.89	3.85

Table 4   Faculty Assessment after the First Four Courses in the Program and at the Entrance to the Teacher Education Program

Criteria for Dispositions	2010–11 n = 236
Using references and resources ethically	1.95/2.0
Acting respectfully toward others	1.95/2.0
Maintaining a positive attitude toward students, peers, educators and caregivers	2.0/2.0
Expressing a positive view of self	1.95/2.0

One of the real advantages of this type of data collection is that when any of these scores do dip, program adjustments can be quickly made. For example, when students indicated a lower "view of self" in S2009, Vygotsky's theory of self-talk was included in the Foundations class the following semester to help students understand that what they say to themselves matters just as what they say to others matter.

In the fall of 2010, faculty members' assessments of students ready to enter the Teacher Education Program (typically after 2 to 2 ½ years) moved from hand-written references to an electronic form with only three levels: Proficient (2), Needs Improvement (1), and Unacceptable (0). The scores above must be read within this context. Data from faculty earlier than fall 2010 was qualitative as well as subjective and very difficulty to analyze from a programmatic point of view. By creating and using an electronic form, faculty members are able to see student readiness for 236 students within one year as a aggregate figure, but still have individual ratings and improvement plans for students at this first gate in teacher education. Students who have been assessed for the 2010–2011 academic year, have been part of the cultural proficiency curriculum and feedback loop since their entrance into university study.

Tables 5 and 6 also reflect the implementation of the cultural proficiency curriculum and feedback loops; however, the students at this level were at the junior-senior level when the implementation began. Although once again the PK-12 practicum teachers rated the students very high across items and years, the students' self-reflection illustrate the desired growth within teacher candidates over time. Students in the fall of 2008 ranked themselves 2.71 on a "positive view of self" and 3.02 in "acting respectfully toward others." Within a semester of feedback loops, the scores rose swiftly and have remained in the same range since that time as students were given clear objectives and understood that their behaviors both in class and in practicum were to be assessed against those objectives.

Table 5   Trend Data – Level 2 Dispositions for Cultural Proficiency: Students' Self-Reflections in Methods Courses
(Aggregated Mean Data in a Likert Scale of 1–4)

Criteria for Dispositions	F2008 n = 43	S2009 n = 43	F2009 n = 36	S2010 n = 24	F2010 n = 35	S2011 n = 25
Using references and resources ethically	3.02	3.83	3.86	3.96	3.69	3.92
Acting respectfully toward others	3.02	3.97	3.89	4.0	3.83	3.75
Maintaining a positive attitude toward students, peers, educators and caregivers	3.02	3.83	3.81	3.67	3.54	3.88
Expressing a positive view of self	2.77	3.87	3.75	3.54	3.51	3.67
Demonstrating an open mind and willingness to try new things	3.44	3.70	3.75	3.71	3.63	3.46
Planning learning activities and assessments to support academic, social, emotional, and physical growth of each student	3.49	3.30	3.72	3.71	3.54	3.48
Facilitating a learning environment to support the safety, dignity, and equity of each student	3.93	4.0	3.94	3.88	3.60	3.96
Incorporates feedback into products and performance	3.67	3.57	3.81	3.63	3.69	3.83

Table 7 outlines the responses of students as they are exiting the program. The Likert Scale at this level was expanded to 5 so that students would have a greater range to rate their behavior. Students are asked to fill out a exit survey as part of their last seminar before graduation and certification. It is a time for them to reflect back on their own performance, but also to lend their voices to the improvement of their programs. This particular feedback loop was implemented in the spring of 2009, so students in the earlier years on this table did not have the same foundation with feedback loops and a cultural proficiency curriculum as those starting in spring 2010. Although most of the areas indicate a steady growth, the improvement of scores in "expressing a positive view of

self", "planning learning activities and assessment to support academic, social, emotional, and physical growth of each student", and " communicates high expectations for students" points to increased success for students and program.

Student teaching PK-12 mentors and supervisors have had a long history of careful assessment throughout the program, but the last assessment by PK-12 mentors or supervisors have been more focused on knowledge and skills of INTASNC standards than teacher dispositions. This next year, they will begin assessing dispositions based on the outline of dispositional behaviors as outlined previously.

Table 6   Trend Data – Level 2 Dispositions for Cultural Proficiency: Practicum Teachers Assessments in Methods Courses (Aggregated Mean Data in a Likert Scale of 1–4)

Criteria for Dispositions	F2008 n = 31	S2009 n = 62	F2009 n = 72	S2010 n = 81	F2010 n = 101	S2011 n = 93
Acting respectfully toward others	3.90	3.94	3.90	3.91	3.99	3.94
Maintaining a positive attitude toward students, peers, educators and caregivers	3.97	3.92	3.94	3.90	3.95	3.95
Expressing a positive view of self	3.90	3.84	3.88	3.82	3.89	3.93
Demonstrating an open mind and willingness to try new things	3.87	3.80	3.93	3.85	3.90	3.83
Planning learning activities and assessments to support academic, social, emotional, and physical growth of each student	3.69	3.75	3.71	3.65	3.72	3.71
Facilitating a learning environment to support the safety, dignity, and equity of each student	3.90	3.89	3.9	3.85	3.92	3.91
Incorporates feedback into products and performance	3.86	3.87	3.77	3.77	3.82	3.83

Table 7   Trend Data – Level 3 Dispositions for Cultural Proficiency: Students' Self-Assessment at the End of Student Teaching (Aggregated Mean Data in a Likert Scale of 1–5)

Criteria for Dispositions	S2009 n =	F2009 n =	S2010 n =	F2010 n =	S2011 n =
Acting respectfully toward others	4.4	4.34	4.39	4.6	4.48
Maintaining a positive attitude toward students, peers, educators and caregivers	4.0	4.53	4.44	4.7	4.69
Expressing a positive view of self	4.0	4.21	4.32	4.6	4.58
Demonstrating an open mind and willingness to try new things	4.2	4.3	4.13	4.5	4.38
Planning learning activities and assessments to support academic, social, emotional, and physical growth of each student	3.7	3.82	3.96	4.2	4.22
Facilitating a learning environment to support the safety, dignity, and equity of each student	4.3	4.26	4.43	4.45	4.45
Incorporates feedback into products and performance	4.2	4.1	4.12	4.5	4.34
Communicates high expectations for students	4.0	4.21	4.37	4.6	4.49
Demonstrates pedagogical flexibility by adapting, adjusting and modifying practices to meet the needs of students	4.3	4.13	4.27	4.5	4.38

5. Summary

Cultural proficiency goes beyond an awareness of cultural differences; it also requires that an individual or organization respond effectively in a variety of environments. A Teacher Education Program can promote cultural proficiency through its practice and its policies. Students in that program, on the other hand, must interact with diverse humans through behaviors, adapting to others rather than expecting others to adapt to themselves. Feedback loops that help teaching candidates' dispositional behaviors to evolve provide the opportunity for those students to step back and reflect in order to move forward. McAlpine (2004) acknowledges the significance of this type of feedback when he states, "All too often, students are provided with an introduction to a topic (informing),

often in class, and left to achieve the learning on their own with minimal structure and frequently no formative feedback" (McAlpine, 2004, p. 128). Yet Moll and Artnot-Hopffer (2005) assert that teachers need "sociocultural competence in working with the diversity of students that characterize contemporary schooling. Few places provide aspiring teachers, or veteran teachers for that matter, with such experiences, as critical as they may seem" (p. 244).

Using intentional feedback loops to nurture dispositions is not meant to place one individual's personal values above another or to make subjective judgments about a teacher candidate's moral character, but rather to recognize that the will to facilitate the learning of each student is as important as the ability to do so.

Feedback loops can also be valuable to programs by identifying areas that need attention. As Wiggins (1989) states, "In the mass of information that students are exposed to, what the modern student needs is the ability to see how questions both produce and point beyond current knowledge." Support for documenting observable behaviors that challenge teacher education candidates to both learn and grow, therefore, must be clear, consistent, reliable, and available from a variety of sources. In addition, the documentation of realistic dispositional behaviors can link data to action through informed decision-making in curricular and pedagogical areas. While the data offered here affirms the success of supporting dispositions with feedback loops and a focused curriculum, it also serves as an encouragement to sustain and keep improving efforts within the program.

6. Implications

However promising an educational innovation or change, it is only theory until it has been implemented and sustained. "Because of all of the emphasis on and excitement about 'newness' in change, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that change is a transitional process that also involves loss" (Merideth, 2007, p. 22). Technologies that are now available to help present, gather, compile, sort, and report data aid the design and process of assessing teaching dispositions. However, these new technologies may bring a sense of loss of the familiar paper form and checklist, while providing anxiety about use and future sustainability.

The implications of using feedback loops in assessing teaching dispositions include the following:

(1) Teaching dispositions must be consistent with a program's conceptual framework and connected to the knowledge and skills of teaching and learning.

(2) Using feedback loops in assessing teaching dispositions must be able to provide credible evidence for individual and programmatic feedback.

(3) Using feedback loops in teaching dispositions should involve systems that build from basic behaviors to complex behaviors expected of a professional educator.

(4) Using feedback loops in teaching dispositions should involve systems that are clearly designed and reliable, with direct data collection and standard management.

Consistent and well-established dispositions that encourage educators to reflect on themselves as learning leaders, student advocates, and reflective practitioners are program objectives that, when built over time, establish a coherent programmatic design. Feedback loops from these self-reflections and responses from educational partners then change raw data points scattered across a program into a sustainable system that triangulates data from faculty members, students, and mentor teachers, providing a both pathway for candidates to demonstrate personal efficacy and responsive professional practice and a pathway for a program to engage in continuous improvement.

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