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# HOW AND WHY TEACHER DISPOSITIONS MATTER IN MIDDLE-GRADES REFORM

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## ABSTRACT

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Middle schools are in a constant state of continuous improvement, with several goals targeted for attention. The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform provides a four-dimensional rubric to guide continuous improvement, one of which is social equity. The purpose of this study was to explore middle grade teachers' dispositions, or values and beliefs, that inform every day practices that inform their behaviors have opportunities to positively influence middle adolescence. Eight transformational dispositions were explained in relation to teachers to demonstrate authentic behaviors informed by dispositions, as school populations are changing. If middle school teachers desire to exhibit behaviors in classrooms that help build relationships and social equity of students, then an examination of dispositions that inform behaviors is crucial.

*The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform and Schools to Watch Focus: Social Equity, Organizational Structures & Processes*

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The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform Schools described social equity in their self-study and rating rubric of high-performing middle schools as a domain that encompasses ten general criteria, all of which are related to values and beliefs (dispositions) that teachers hold in the way they practice in their schools. The social equity domain is described as "High performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students." Transformational dispositions are ideal qualities of teachers who seek to be fair, to build positive relationships with all students, especially the marginalized students who are becoming a bigger population in schools which are experiencing demographic shifts.

For example, one of the ten criteria of the social equity domain is: "To the fullest extent possible, all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, participate in heterogeneous classes with high academic and behavioral expectations." One of the eight transformational dispositions is holding values and beliefs about high expectations for all students. Another one of the ten criteria states that active engagement of families is critical to student success. One of the eight dispositions is related to the values teachers hold related to student and family engagement.

Education has always been a human enterprise, where teachers and students come together to engage in teaching and learning. Middle grades reform involves getting better in learning exchanges that take place in school, where teachers are "sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of ear-

ly adolescence" (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, website, <https://www.middlegradesforum.org/schools-to-watch>). At the 2011 Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) Annual Conference, former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan described the A, B, C's of middle grades reform as "attendance, behavior, and classroom success," all of which are impacted by teacher sensitivity to student needs and relationships that sustain education as a human enterprise.

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform also promotes social equity, calling for highly effective middle schools to be "socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports." Classroom success is not just academic success on state tests, rather it involves having classrooms filled with adolescents who are inspired to learn, take risks, share ideas, and work collaboratively with their peers. They have options and choices in expectations of their high engagement.

These types of classrooms are led by teachers who have knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to middle school success. While much is known about knowledge and skills of teaching, dispositions remain somewhat elusive when discussing teacher effectiveness. Reavis (2008) defined dispositions as a person's beliefs and values, which can be influenced by personality, organizational commitment, self-perception, and self-efficacy. Similarly, The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2008) defined dispositions as the "professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities" (pp. 89-90).

Even though there is some consensus on the definition of

dispositions, the problem is that there is little known about which dispositions and how teacher dispositions impact middle school classroom success. Williams, Kirst, Haertel, et.al. (2010) and Balfanz & Byrnes (2006) helped middle school educators learn more about strategies that work to increase middle school attendance, improve behavior, and improve middle school student achievement. However, more attention to teacher dispositions may help realize the full potential of middle grades reform.

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper was to explore middle grade teachers' dispositions, or values and beliefs, that inform every day practices and behaviors related to social equity. The author sought to explore how and why teacher dispositions matter in middle grades reform, especially in schools where demographics are shifting. Dispositions, as cited earlier, relate to one's values and beliefs that inform behaviors.

While behaviors are explicit and observable, the underlying beliefs and values that constitute dispositions are not readily discernible. However, adolescents recognize authenticity of teacher behaviors, which are guided by dispositions. Middle schoolers have positive responses to authentic teacher behaviors and negative responses to inauthentic behaviors. In a recent study of authentic and inauthentic teacher behavior, Johnson & LaBelle (2017) found that authentic teachers were described as approachable, passionate, attentive, capable, and knowledgeable, all behaviors that promote social engagement and access to the educator. On the other hand, inauthentic teachers were described as unapproachable, lacking passion, inattentive, incapable, and disrespectful. In other words, students know whether a teacher is faking it or making it based on the authenticity of observable behaviors that are grounded in authentic dispositions. To achieve social equity in schools, there has never been a more critical time for teachers to demonstrate authentic behaviors informed by dispositions, as school populations are changing. If middle school teachers desire to exhibit behaviors in classrooms that help build relationships, then an examination of dispositions that inform behaviors is crucial. Teachers are experiencing shifting demographics in schools, as more schools are minority-majority populated. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/>), the trend in student demographics is that schools will have more students living in poverty, more students who need English-language learning instruction, and more students whose life experiences differ from their teachers. In building relationships, teachers need to demonstrate authentic behaviors grounded in authentic values and beliefs about teaching and learning.

Haberman (2012) conducted much research on teacher perseverance and high turnover of beginning teachers, particularly

in schools serving diverse students in poverty. His research led to the identification of a teacher disposition framework, designed particularly for educators who serve students at risk and in poverty. Teacher dispositions can be assessed in ten dimensions: persistence; organization and planning; values towards student learning; theory to practice; connection with at-risk students; approach to all students; survival in bureaucracy; explanation of student success; explanation of teacher success; and fallibility (Haberman, 2005).

Because this paper focuses on teacher dispositions and middle school reform, especially as it relates to teachers who seek to build social equity and display an authentic sensitivity to adolescents, the author chose to explore a set of dispositions related to transformational school leadership. Working with a team of researchers, the author of this paper validated a set of dispositions grounded in leading school transformation. To explore how dispositions matter in middle school teaching, the author adapted the set of dispositions found in the The School Leaders Disposition Inventory (SLDI) (Melton, Tysinger, Mallory & Green, 2011) to explain how dispositions may undergird authentic middle school behaviors and practices and lead to equitable practices.

### TEACHER DISPOSITIONS IN TRANSFORMATIONAL SCHOOLS

Wasicsko (2002) believed that teacher perceptions, or dispositions, guide their behavior, which in turn generates specific behaviors from others. If dispositions are the foundation of teacher behaviors in classrooms, it is critical to examine one's beliefs and values that inform, predict, and guide behaviors and decisions that teachers demonstrate daily in classrooms. The eight dispositions identified in the SLDI are closely aligned to a transformational approach to working in schools. Bennis (2006) summed up dispositions that inform behaviors and effective practices in transformational organizations in the following propositions:

- A transcending concern with individual dignity, worth, and growth;
- Active participation by all involved;
- Reexamination and resolution of the conflict between individual needs and organizational goals, through effective interpersonal relationships between superiors and subordinates;
- A concept of influence that relies not on coercion, compromise, evasion or avoidance, pseudosupport, or bargaining, but on openness, confrontation, and "working through" differences;
- A belief that human growth is self-generated and furthered by an environment of trust, feedback, and authentic human relationships (p.xvi).

Using these propositions, Melton, Tysinger, Mallory & Green (2011) operationalized dispositions as belief-value state-



ments that are associated with behaviors that lead to the creation of a supportive teaching and learning environment.

These eight belief-value statements, or dispositions, can be examined in terms of teachers who desire to work in high-performing middle schools sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of adolescence. Teachers can self-assess and have discussions about these eight dispositions related to teacher practices and behaviors. If the goal is to have classrooms filled with adolescents who are inspired to learn, take risks, share ideas, and work collaboratively with their peers, then it follows that teachers who work in such classrooms would embody the following dispositions:

1. Teachers involved in transforming their school are disposed to taking risks and confronting conflict for what is ethical, both for the common good and the individual.
2. Teachers involved in transforming their school are disposed to relentless expectations for student growth and instructional leadership from those internal and external to the organization.
3. Teachers involved in transforming their school are disposed to openness and honesty, which is also referred to as transparency. This openness and honesty is an outward expression compatible with building mutual trust and respect with colleagues, students, and families of students.
4. Teachers involved in transforming their school are disposed to active engagement of all members of the school community through democracy-centered practice. This democracy-centeredness follows from the belief that others will not only accept, but will seek responsibility and have the capacity to exercise a high degree of imagination, ingenuity, and creativity in solving problems.
5. Teachers involved in transforming their school are disposed to praise rewards to recognize growth, not just performance outcomes.
6. Teachers involved in transforming their school are disposed to value individual dignity and worth and believe that people are inherently good and are therefore worthy of trust and respect.
7. Teachers involved in transforming their school are disposed to enjoy work and derive satisfaction and fulfill their higher order needs through work.
8. Teachers involved in transforming their school are disposed to believe that students and colleagues are resourceful and receptive to responsibility.

### TEACHER BEHAVIORS INFLUENCED BY DISPOSITIONS

These eight disposition statements can be used many ways to enhance social equity and also learning exchanges that occur in middle schools every day. They can be used in inter-

viewing prospective new teachers to predict how they may engage with students, families, and colleagues from a social equity mindset. They may be used to relate to best practices in classrooms, especially as they guide behaviors of teachers.

### AN APPRECIATION FOR RISK-TAKING

In consideration of the first disposition, if teachers value and believe that risk taking is beneficial, then they create classrooms where students are not afraid of failure. They will encourage perseverance not allow students to shut down upon a first attempt. With a growth mindset, they will help students learn that making mistakes and taking risks will not result in ridicule or penalties. If teachers are willing to confront conflict for what is ethical, they will stand up for all students regardless of the student's background. Teachers who value risk taking use the "yes" response, even when there is uncertainty in how it will turn out.

### VALUE OF HIGH EXPECTATIONS

The second disposition relates to the value of high expectations. Teachers who are disposed to believe in the premise that all students can learn hold high expectations for learning and hold high expectations of others who help build capacity for learning. They will not allow others to abdicate their role in helping the school build capacity for learning. Parent communication, for example, is expected, and the relentless nature of the teacher to engage others to support learning becomes contagious. The power of "yet" kicks in, as sometimes it is "not yet" that students, colleagues, school, families, and community have lived up to the high expectations needed for student success. Hunter (1985) once said while it is true that you can lead a horse to water and maybe the horse will not drink it, an effective teacher will salt the horse's oats. In other words, a relentless teacher will find a way to motivate students to learn. A teacher should never underestimate the power of his or her influence.

### VALUE OF TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY

The third disposition relates to the vulnerability of transparency. A key question every teacher asks of himself or herself is: to what extent am I open and honest about the quality of my teaching? Another question is: how purposeful am I about building mutual trust and respect with colleagues, students, and families of students? Teachers establish trust with students by planning and teaching with confidence and speaking with clarity about expectations. Trust is the foundation for collaboration among colleagues. As a principal once stated, "Teachers in this school don't sign in because they sign up. Signing up means someone in the school always knows where you are and in most cases why you are there."

### VALUE OF STUDENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

The fourth disposition expects that the teacher places great value on student engagement, as well as family engagement.

With this belief and value, teachers plan and implement lessons with activities. They do not seek to have a compliant classroom where students wait to be told what to do. Rather, they seek to have an engaged classroom in which students make sense of their work to do, have choices about the work they do, and then do it! They teach students how to form teams and norm their team work. They provide wait time and think time to expect everyone to engage. They do not let students off the hook easily, by first seeking to understand what positions students hold and continually questioning and probing to know why students hold that position. They make sure students understand the “why” of their work and provide clear meaning of the value of the work.

### VALUE OF PRAISE

The fifth disposition describes teacher values and beliefs toward the use of rewards and acknowledgement of efforts and accomplishments. The school’s reward procedures and policies seek to show value of diversity and service. While the research is fairly consistent that extrinsic rewards do not lead to intrinsic motivation of students, the research is very clear that praise works. Authentic feedback works. Yes, praise of effort, especially when students see the link between repeated efforts and accomplishments, works. Clear praise works. With little money and deep reflection on all students’ performances, teachers who praise and acknowledge effort provide motivation for learning. Service learning is also valued and praised in an authentic way.

### VALUE OF INDIVIDUAL DIGNITY

The sixth disposition may be the foundational value in transforming a school to be its most effective place for learning exchanges. Students know when teachers value each student’s individual dignity and worth. If a teacher believes that people are inherently good and are therefore capable of trust and respect, students sense the teacher’s belief in his or learning capacity. Proactive interventions that keep students engaged and respectful of one another are often used. Hunter (1985) used to say the worst thing a teacher can do is to cause a student to lose his or her dignity. Once that line has been crossed, a teacher has little chance to repair the relationship, and, worse yet, other students who witnessed the teacher causing a student to lose dignity may also mistrust the teacher, resulting in the lost potential for a strong teacher-student relationship.

Because maintaining dignity is so critical in an age of shifting demographics in schools, it is a good idea to examine the values of a middle school transformational teacher in more detail, going back to a seminal study in the late 1990’s. Mender and Curwin (1999) developed a framework, discipline with dignity, which identified five basic principles, or beliefs, for teachers to guide their reactions and behaviors to discipline issues in classrooms. Those principles are: we are responsible

for teaching all students; we view difficult behaviors as opportunities to educate for change; the more we motivate, the less we discipline; discipline is just another form of instruction. These beliefs were grounded in the noble overarching belief that the goal of discipline should be to prevent inappropriate behaviors.

### VALUE OF JOY IN WORK

The seventh disposition relates to the beliefs and values one has toward his or her work. The teacher who has a strong work ethic may be successful, but the teacher who believes his or her work brings joy to life will experience more success. When a teacher places value in being the difference a student needs, the teacher is motivated to remain in the profession. If a teacher places value in the hard work of solving problems in practice, he or she has the resolve to carry on, in spite of low pay and public criticism of the profession.

### VALUE OF AN ASSET VIEW TOWARDS MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

The eighth disposition calls for teachers to have an asset view towards students and colleagues. Recognizing individual differences, the teacher sees others for what they can do and what resources they bring to the table, rather than what they cannot do. Gerstein (2016), an educational blogger, explains the deficit view of marginalized students by stating that many educators with a deficit view approach teaching and students as: “lacking in some way; defective; deficient; needing to be fixed; not as good as . . .; needing to develop skills valued by mainstream society.” The inverse is an asset view, or strength-based view, which involves seeing students from marginalized populations as: “having unique strengths, passions, and interests; being competent and capable in settings that are important to the learners; having their own personal powers; having much to offer to other learners and their school communities; sources for educating others about their communities and cultures; thriving in a climate of differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning; even though they are not marching to the beat of traditional school design, it doesn’t mean they are out of step.”

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of education is to support children in developing the skills, knowledge, and their own dispositions that will lead them to be responsible, contributing members of their communities on a global stage. Teachers who serve as role models in classrooms may be guided by their transformational dispositions, which do not waver, but rather contribute to one’s self-confidence and self-efficacy. Teacher practices grounded in these eight dispositions inform the teacher’s best practice, as well as the teacher’s next practice, due to the guiding nature of underlying values and beliefs.



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