



# Dispositional Awareness and the Christian Teacher

By Michelle C. Hughes

Navigating today's educational landscape remains a complex challenge for Christian educators. Each school year, teachers face increased pressure to equip K-12 students with twenty-first-century skills for college and career readiness. Teachers must stay current in their disciplines, meet student needs, and support school constituents. Historically, teachers have been expected to develop and deliver quality content-specific instruction and skills. Today's teachers must be equipped with content-specific pedagogy and be able to demonstrate the "harder to measure" skills or dispositions connected to the heart of teaching.

I am privileged to serve as a professor in a teacher preparation program. My experience and research in training teachers reveals that when dispositions are fostered and developed in new professionals, dispositional awareness grows. Furthermore, when developing teachers are given opportunities to foster, demonstrate, and practice specific dispositions, they develop an even greater desire to cultivate dispositional awareness, ultimately carrying dispositions and practice into their first classroom positions.

Since teaching is often described as a moral craft combining habits of mind, heart, and practice, dispositions appear to play an important role in teacher development; dispositions ground teachers in their professional

work (Murrell et al. 2010). Dispositions are traditionally defined as the beliefs and commitments that influence professional behaviors toward students, colleagues, and families. They make an impact on student learning, motivation, and development (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education 2001). Dispositional awareness is "the conscious perception or self-awareness to name, define, and understand professional teaching dispositions" (Hughes 2014, 5); increasing a teacher's self-awareness can lead to the desire to understand and practice dispositions (50). This awareness can essentially transfer directly to students in the classroom. Yet how can Christian teachers tackle their work with a solid foundation rooted in both pedagogy and dispositional awareness?

Recent examination of one small teacher preparation program provided a window into the dispositional development of teachers in training. Although there are a multitude of professional dispositions for teachers, the faculty in this program of study committed to focus on three dispositions: *lifelong learner*, *reflective spirit*, and *compassionate professional*. Faculty defined and linked the dispositions to Scripture and sought to demonstrate the dispositions with two cohorts of developing teachers. Personal interviews with faculty, personal interviews with program graduates teaching in K-12 classrooms,

and archived course artifacts such as reflections, essays, and course syllabi were collected and analyzed to gain an understanding about dispositional development specific to the program.

Data analysis revealed a blending of four explicit and implicit program expressions that heightened dispositional awareness in program graduates: an early and sustained focus on dispositions, embedded assignments, professor modeling, and multiple practice contexts. The blended approach suggested that program graduates carried dispositional awareness from the teacher preparation program into their first teaching positions. “Teachers need to find some appropriate blend of confidence and humility and recognize that dispositions are important over the journey” (Hughes 2014, 64). This finding aligns with current research that suggests the process of becoming a professional requires dispositions such as courage and integrity (Sherman 2013). Hence, the challenges and joys associated with teaching require commitments to—and awareness of—professional values and beliefs that inform teachers’ daily decisions related to instruction, students, colleagues, and parents.

Of particular significance, the research affirmed an important link between Christian faith and the three professional dispositions highlighted throughout the preparation program (Hughes 2014, 63). Personal interviews with program graduates teaching in the field revealed that because dispositions were linked to the pre-service program’s faith-based mission, new teachers recognized that their Christian faith reinforced a depth of understanding unique to the three dispositions. This point was reinforced in a personal interview with a new teacher: “It is because of your love of God, you are then wanting to love ... kids through God’s eyes” (63).

This case study of one teacher preparation program suggested that when teacher mentors and supervisors provided multiple contexts and opportunities for new teachers to consider and practice specific dispositions, dispositional awareness was elevated. Building on this finding, how do Christian teachers in K–12 classrooms apply and increase their own dispositional awareness?

I recommend three practical strategies to foster dispositions in developing teachers:

### **1. First, commit to identify and focus on specific dispositions significant to a school community.**

Examine the school’s mission and motto as a springboard to discover the themes and dispositions that your school community values. “Why do you get up every morning

and care for people and care for kids? And care for colleagues?” (Hughes 2014, 40). Choose to explore no more than three dispositions in a single school year to sustain focus and see results. Highlight and promote the dispositions. For instance, a school may choose to focus on the disposition of patience. Faculty can discuss a common definition for patience, examine related Scripture, brainstorm, and even link patience to strategies and contexts where teachers can demonstrate the disposition within the school community. “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12, NIV).

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### **2. A second recommended strategy is to model dispositions for teachers and the school community.**

Significant contributors to a teacher’s dispositional awareness are educational leaders such as mentors, administrators, and school boards. Modeling by school leaders serves as a meaningful piece of the puzzle for dispositional development. Modeling can occur in a variety of contexts: the classroom, professional conferences, faculty meetings, and informally in lunchroom conversations. When interviewed, one program graduate noted, “They (the three dispositions) transfer to who I am as a teacher now because they just became something that I did in the program or I was surrounded by people who were doing them. It’s like a child who sees their parents doing something and starts doing it” (Hughes 2014, 42–43). How colleagues listen to one another, engage, and even disagree professionally with another, links back to dispositional awareness. School leaders can proactively model how teachers navigate and respond to conflict gracefully.

Intentional discussion around dispositions and practice through role-play are additional strategies school leaders can employ to increase dispositional awareness. “Instruct the wise and they will be wiser still; teach the righteous and they will add to their learning” (Proverbs 9:9).

### 3. A third recommendation to foster dispositional growth is to provide time and space for teachers to examine and reflect on dispositions.

Teachers need time and space for reflection to consider how they can cultivate dispositions in their practice.

Providing time is essential for teachers to discuss, read, write, and foster dispositions in the school community. Reading books related to dispositions and beliefs, as a faculty or in small groups, is one way to promote professional dialogue around dispositions. Titles such as *Compassion, A Reflection on the Christian Life* (McNeill, Morrison, and Nouwen 1982) or *Teaching Well: Insights for Educators in Christian Schools* (Goodlet and Collier 2014) can foster and keep dispositions in the forefront of teachers’ minds and hearts. “The Christian mind embraces exploration of such issues of meaning and the belief and values that are integral to such matters as they occur across all subjects” (Holland 2014, 73). When Christian teachers investigate their own values and beliefs, K–12 students may be encouraged to reflect and do the same. “I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw” (Proverbs 24:32).

Placing emphasis on dispositions in a school community can add depth and purpose to a school’s ethos. When teachers are reminded of their calling to the profession, their faith and long-term career trajectory may grow. Teachers can cultivate professional and personal growth using these three recommended strategies: (1) identify and commit to focus on dispositions, (2) model dispositions in the school community, and (3) provide time and space for teachers to examine and reflect on dispositions. When teachers are given space to nurture and practice dispositions such as compassion, curiosity, or patience, they are more likely to carry the dispositions into their classrooms and daily interactions with students. For

Christian teachers, dispositional awareness demonstrated in classroom contexts may provide significant benefits; linking the important work of teaching to dispositional awareness may produce the sweetest, most fruitful rewards in the classroom that honor our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law” (Galatians 5:22–23).

### References

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