



Dispositions for Good Teaching

Gary R. Howard

www.ghequityinstitute.com

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DISPOSITIONS FOR GOOD TEACHING

The central focus of my work over the past 30 years has been to struggle with two overarching and related questions. First, what are the qualities of personhood that the adults in our nation's classrooms must embody to be worthy of teaching our richly diverse students? And second, how do we best prepare ourselves and our colleagues for this work? In this article I reflect on the first of these questions¹, and do so in light of the fact that any discussion of "teacher dispositions," either in pre-service or in-service contexts, is best engaged from the perspective of the students who populate our nation's public schools. These children and young adults reflect a multi-faceted and increasingly broad spectrum of racial, cultural, linguistic, economic, religious, and sexual identities. The adults in these spaces determine, in large measure, both the tone and the outcome of schooling. On the one hand, we have teachers who are highly effective in working in diversity-enhanced schools, and on the other, we have those who are utterly unprepared and even destructive in their teaching. Having benefited from the former, an urban African American low-income student, upon receiving an academic award and scholarship at her high school graduation, acknowledged the work of her principal and teachers by saying, "You made us think we were smarter than we thought we were." And having suffered from the latter, a Jamaican immigrant student said in a town meeting I facilitated for a school district outside New York City, "Some of our teachers steal our hope."

Between these two extremes lies a highly diverse range of teacher attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. It is essential that we talk about who we are as educators, precisely because our personhood, as well as our professional practice, is intimately connected to the quality of our students' experience. In highly diverse educational settings, the salient issue for us as professionals is one of cultural competence: Do I have the capacity and flexibility to be with my students in an authentic and effective way? From my observation and analysis throughout the country, there are four dispositions that characterize good teachers in pluralistic schools.

A DISPOSITION FOR DIFFERENCE

I often tell a story about a white male teacher in an urban high school who said to me after one of my speeches, "I have no Black students in any of my classes." I was curious how that could be true given that over half the students in his school were Black.

When I inquired about this, he said, "I don't see race, so all my kids are the same to me." I replied, "You may not want to acknowledge the reality of race in your classroom, but I can guarantee you that all of your Black students know you're white." I then shared my belief that race does not have to get in the way of our teaching, but when it is denied, it probably is in the way.

[1] For a discussion of the second question, see my article in the March 2007 issue of *Educational Leadership*, "As Diversity Grows, So Must We."

Since 90% of our nation's teachers are white, the business of achieving greater equity and excellence in public education is in large part of a process of transforming the beliefs and behaviors of white educators. The three stages of White Identity Orientation that I have identified in my writing (Howard, 2006), provide one conceptual framework for discussing teacher dispositions. Whites in the **Fundamentalist** stage, like the teacher mentioned above, are predisposed to avoid, deny, or rationalize racial differences, thus distancing themselves from any need for self-examination regarding the meaning or impact of their own racial being. Whites in the **Integrationist** orientation are somewhat more open. They acknowledge that differences are real and even worthy of celebration, but often tend to approach their teaching from a missionary mentality of "serving the less fortunate." Like their Fundamentalist colleagues, they resist any serious interrogation of privilege, power, or their own potential complicity in the dynamics underlying racial inequities in school outcomes. Whites in the **Transformationist** stage, on the other hand, actively seek to bring difference into their lives, precisely because this engagement challenges them to grow both personally and professionally. They are sophisticated in their analysis of racism and vigorous in their efforts to undo the legacy of white privilege in their classrooms and schools. At the same time, they are not apologetic about their whiteness and can engage with students of color in authentic, strong, and effective ways.

The point is, our disposition toward difference makes a difference in the lives of our students. It is not *whether* I am white, but rather my *disposition toward* issues of race and whiteness that really matters. For example, Transformationist white teachers in the many schools I have observed issue fewer discipline referrals to students of color, not because they are afraid to discipline (that is an Integrationist behavior), but because they have the personal capacity and professional skills to prevent and diffuse most cross-race confrontations. And this is not just an issue for white educators. Similarly complex dynamics are at play for a religiously conservative Black heterosexual male teacher in his interactions with gay and lesbian white students. Or for a middle class Latina teacher in her work with a wealthy Muslim immigrant male student. A teacher who is culturally competent and comfortable in his/her own skin, and who can negotiate effectively across these multiple dimensions of difference, is simply a better educator.

A DISPOSITION FOR DIALOGUE

Dialogue is the process whereby differences become meaningful. It is through dialogue that we create the opportunity to discover how we are similar or different from others, and to build bridges of communication and understanding. I have observed over my many years of conducting professional development workshops that the one thing teachers most often mention as the highlight of these experiences is "the opportunity for open and honest conversation with my colleagues."

Teacher-to-teacher dialogue is the essence of professional learning communities and a key component of effective school improvement efforts. Professional dialogue is powerful precisely because it provides a reality check across our different perceptions, perspectives, and practices. Such exchange opens the possibility of growth. Unfortunately, I encounter too many educators who are predisposed *not* to engage in this kind of reflective professional

conversation. For example, as I was inviting the faculty in a large urban high school to begin a dialogue on differences, a white male teacher proudly announced, "I have good relationships with all of my students, and so I have no more need for personal transformation." Many of his colleagues were aghast at this comment, especially given the existence of a huge gap in math achievement for students of color in their school. Lacking a disposition for dialogue or personal growth, this teacher was a detriment to his students' success and a hindrance to his faculty's school improvement efforts.

Teacher-to-student dialogue is equally important. In the dialogic process of teaching, wherein there is a healthy and authentic flow of conversation between teachers and students, everyone has an opportunity to learn, including the teacher. Visiting recently in a high school special education classroom, populated by "behaviorally disturbed" Black and Hispanic male students and one white male teacher, I was able to observe the power of authentic dialogue. As part of his unit on the Constitution, the teacher was discussing the intricacies of *habeas corpus*, a topic with which the students could meaningfully engage, given their personal familiarity with the juvenile justice system. At one point the teacher made an inaccurate statement about the interpretation of a legal procedure, and one of the Hispanic students turned away from the computer on which he had been searching for a used car (I had been wondering if the teacher was going to confront him about this) and interrupted the teacher: "Excuse me, sir, but that's not how it works in our state," and went on to explain the correct legalities. Rather than becoming defensive or chastising the student for apparently not paying attention earlier, the teacher merely remarked, "Thank you for that. You're exactly right; my mistake."

This exchange illustrates several elements of good teaching, but I was particularly impressed by the power of the teacher's humility, honesty, and professionalism in engaging only those elements of student behavior that would serve to continue the dialogue, rather than extinguish it. The entire classroom atmosphere was infused with a palpable sense of respect for the students' knowledge and for their lived experience. Working in the presence of students for whom school culture was not, for the most part, a safe or successful place, this teacher navigated the dialogue across differences in such a way that everyone in the room could find safe harbor, including himself.

This disposition for meaningful dialogue has profound implications not only for our classrooms, but also for our world. I was inspired recently to learn about a group of former Israeli and Palestinian fighters who have come together under the banner of "Combatants for Peace" (www.combatantsforpeace.org). Each of the members of this group has committed acts of violence in the name of their conflicting truths, in some cases having injured or killed members of each other's families. In what must be incredibly painful conversations, they confess their actions to one another and reinforce their common commitment to give up the way of past hatred and violence. Having met initially in secret, they have now come into the public arena to declare that dialogue rather than death is the only way to true and lasting peace in their part of the world.

In another example of dialogue across difference, a Jewish rabbi, a Christian minister, and a Muslim imam, all U.S. citizens from the Seattle area, have been meeting since 9/11 for

"vigorous discussion," and have traveled together to the Middle East in search of healing responses there as well as at home. Says Jamal Rahman, the Muslim member of this delegation, "Interfaith [dialogue] is not about conversion, it's about completion. I'm becoming a more complete Muslim, a more complete human being" (van Gelder, 2007, p. 13).

This human capacity to engage the conversation rather than wage war across our differences is a skill we want our children to acquire, and that we teachers must embody. This disposition for dialogue is an essential feature of what it means to be an educated person. Imagine how our post-9/11 world would be different today if those in power in our country had acquired this capacity from their teachers.

A DISPOSITION FOR DISILLUSIONMENT

Authentic dialogue across differences is powerful precisely because it allows us to see beyond the barriers of our own culturally conditioned realities. Whatever mind-spaces we may have been socialized into, as teachers we are called to transcend our particular truths and perspectives and come to a place of greater breadth and cultural competence. We do this because our work requires it. As teachers we must be flexible, genuine, and effective in our relationships with students, having the capacity for empathy and respect for their multiple lived realities. Of course, we want to share our world with them, but first we must be able to respectfully enter theirs and insure that our world is one in which they will feel welcomed.

At a time of violent collision across our differences as a nation, Abraham Lincoln said in an address to Congress in 1862, "We must disenthral ourselves" because "the dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present." With these words, Lincoln called himself and other leaders to a profound reckoning with our own illusions, challenging his fellow citizens to break through old images and hostilities, to claim a higher path to community. Likewise for us as teachers, we are called to dis-illusion ourselves from our own race-, class-, gender-, and religion-based assumptions about what is good, true, worthy, and right. This is a positive form of disillusionment, not one of despair or disappointment, but one of strength and reckoning. In Parker Palmer's terms, we are challenged to see truth as "an eternal conversation" across differences (2004, p. 127), rather than as a set of fixed and final conclusions. This kind of proactive disillusionment moves us from a smaller reality to a larger one, from a circumscribed world to a more open, complex, diverse, and ever-changing environment – precisely the kind of environments we find in our schools.

My wife uses a cultural immersion assignment as a way of inviting her pre-service teacher undergraduates into an experience with disillusionment. Students design for themselves an opportunity to enter a cultural context different from their own, a context that places them in the minority. One young white woman chose to attend an African American church in the Central Area of Seattle. She went alone, and from her perspective was "the only white face in the congregation." The traditional time came for guests to introduce themselves, but as her turn approached the student became distraught. She had never been in a Black cultural context; she had never had the experience of being the only one like her. In her

anxiety she lost her capacity to speak and walked out of the church before the minister came to her.

One would hope that our teacher candidates might come to us with more cultural competence than this young woman exhibited, but we know that she is more the rule than the exception. In the end, the meltdown experience was positive for her. Debriefing her cultural immersion project with my wife and her fellow students, she came face-to-face with her own limitations, and in a preliminary way began the process of disillusionment from her racial and cultural naïveté. After this lesson in awareness and humility, her subsequent work on issues of cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching was much more reality-based. Fortunately, she was able to initiate her disposition for disillusionment in the rarified environment of the university classroom, rather than requiring that her eventual students would pay that price for her, which is too often the case.

Disillusionment is not a single event or even a stage we go through; it is a life-long process intimately tied to our dispositions for difference and for dialogue. In my own experience, from over forty years of conversations and friendships with people of color, and now with a family of multiracial children and grandchildren, I have become increasingly disillusioned from my former assumptions about race, privilege, and whiteness. Likewise, through my forty-year marriage to a woman and in dialogue and friendship with female friends and colleagues, I have grown continually more disillusioned from my former paradigms around maleness, gender, and sexism. Similarly, through my conversations with the gay and lesbian friends that my children brought home in high school, and now through my own network of friends and colleagues in the gay community, I have become disillusioned from my narrow images of relationship, sexuality, marriage, and intimacy. In addition, through my immersion in many spiritual contexts in cultures around the world, I have become deeply disillusioned from the single-dimensional truth and narrow assumptions that I held as an 18-year-old Christian fundamentalist. Echoing the sentiments expressed by Jamal Rahman in the above discussion of interfaith dialogue, I feel that the ongoing erosion of my dogmatic Christian belief structures has only brought me closer to the true meaning of Jesus' teachings. Happily, none of these personal transformations has reached an end point, and I look forward to a lifetime of continuing disenthralment.

Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) has a wonderful way of talking about the kind of people we can become through exercising our dispositions for difference, dialogue, and disillusionment. He describes the qualities of personhood that lead to "cosmopolitanism." The cosmopolitan is a person who maintains and treasures his/her own particular cultural identity, but is not limited by it. The cosmopolitan seeks out differences, is energized by the exchange of realities, and is always open to learn more, to see the world through different eyes. The cosmopolitan expects and even welcomes disagreement, yet values community over conflict, and mutuality over dominance. These are certainly the capacities we want our students to embody as they mature toward adulthood, so we as teachers are called to become cosmopolitans ourselves. With this in mind, we can welcome our various and ongoing disillusionment, knowing that behind each veil of illusion lies a greater truth and a better way of teaching.

A DISPOSITION FOR DEMOCRACY

Good teachers know we are preparing our students for something much more interesting, valuable, and profound than standardized tests. Participatory citizenship in a pluralistic nation and world requires a complex skill-set that looks very much like the three dispositions we have discussed so far. The strength of character to engage effectively across differences, the power of critical thinking to sustain meaningful dialogue, and the self-reflective capacity to be disillusioned from our narrow certainties; these are the life-blood of democratic citizenship. Good teaching and good democracy flow from the same heart-space of passion for both the *Pluribus* and the *Unum* of our shared humanity.

Also embedded in both teaching and democracy is a passion for justice. Good teachers work their hearts out simply to give their students a fair chance of success in life, particularly for those students whose families and ancestors have been marginalized by the realities of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and the many complex dynamics of social dominance that underlie school inequities. I define social dominance as "systems of privilege and preference, reinforced by the consolidation of power, and favoring the advantaged few over the marginalized many." In contrast, the social justice we are seeking to achieve in our schools is characterized by "systems of equity and inclusion, reinforced by shared power, and favoring the good of the many over the greed of the few.

In this context, school reform can be understood as a movement from social dominance to social justice, as a process of undoing those educational systems that have favored only the few and replacing them with institutional practices that will more effectively serve the many. This is the original meaning and visionary intent of Marian Wright Edelman's passionate plea to "leave no child behind." It is both a vision for democracy and a vision for social justice.

When we acknowledge who is caught in the achievement gap – the same racial, cultural, and economic groups that have been marginalized by the larger dynamics of dominance in our society – it becomes clear that "education for all" and "justice for all" are synonymous goals. The work of transforming public education in the service of equity, inclusion, and excellence for all of our children, is social justice work. It cannot be successfully carried out without the transformation of all other social, political, and economic systems. For example, with the exceedingly high correlation between poverty and school failure, it is clear that ending or significantly reducing poverty would be one of the most efficient and effective ways to eliminate achievement gaps. It is tragically ironic, however, that the same administration that has championed the virtues of NCLB mandates has also put into place economic policies that have exacerbated poverty and increased the gap between the rich and the poor.

This is how social dominance works: Those who have the power to hold educators accountable for raising test scores, also have the power to insure that they themselves remain unaccountable for alleviating the very inequities that render those test scores so resistant to change. Challenging this dynamic of dominance is the work of social justice, which is perhaps the reason some politicians and academics have worked so hard to

decouple the education conversation from the justice conversation. Surely, the legitimate and productive question is not whether we can say "social justice" in educational settings, but rather how we might transform those and other social settings to actually achieve it.

TEACHING FOR A NEW HUMANITY

Speaking recently about issues of social dominance and social justice with a class in the MIT program at Seattle University, I was intrigued by a question raised by one of the students: "Isn't all of your talk about social justice really running counter to human nature? Aren't we predisposed as a species to seek power over others?" This was an insightful query, and I acknowledged the truth of her response. In large measure, our history has been a story of revolving dominances, with one group establishing hegemony over others only to be later replaced by the emergence of a more powerful group.

Having said this, I suggested to the class that we are perhaps moving into a new time in our evolution as human beings. On a shrinking planet with national and cultural boundaries being erased by both economics and immigration, each of us and our students are becoming more intimately touched by increasing degrees and dimensions of difference in our daily lives. For the sake of our common survival, we can no longer trust our future to the dynamics of laissez-faire social Darwinism, wherein single-dimensional truths continue to compete for power and control. Instead, we need to nurture in ourselves and our students a new kind of social imperative, wherein the survival of the fittest is still in play, but our understanding of "fitness" gradually evolves toward those qualities of personhood that favor community over control and dialogue over dominance.

Having said this, it remains true that all American citizens have a constitutionally guaranteed First Amendment right to remain imprisoned in their own conditioned narrowness and cultural isolation. This luxury of ignorance, however, is not available to us as teachers. Ours is a higher calling, and for the sake of our students and the future of their world, we are required to grow toward a more adaptive set of human qualities, which would include the dispositions for difference, dialogue, disillusionment, and democracy. These are the capacities that will make it possible for us to thrive together as a species. These are the personal and professional dispositions that render us worthy to teach.

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