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## Instilling Biblical Dispositions in Faith-Based Teacher Education Programs

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## Instilling Biblical Dispositions in Faith-Based Teacher Education Programs

### Abstract

Education faculty understand the importance of emphasizing and assessing teacher candidates' professional dispositions. While all educator preparation providers examine dispositions, should faculty in our community of Christian colleges and universities include a stronger emphasis on Biblically-based dispositions? This essay explores the beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and values Christian educators should embrace, including dispositions teachers should display in a public or private-school setting. Christians are called to conform to the image of Christ (Romans 8:28) and, therefore, they should exemplify the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:22) and the Greatest Commandment (Matthew 22). In addition, the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5), a service mindset (Galatians 5:13), an ethic of care (1 John 3), and a spirit of gratitude (Philippians 2:14) should be evident in a believer's life. Finally, the essay examines potential assessment practices and practical ways to emphasize Biblically-based dispositions.

### Keywords

Professional Dispositions, Biblical Mandates, Educator Preparation Programs

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### Abstract

Education faculty understand the importance of emphasizing and assessing teacher candidates' professional dispositions. While all educator preparation providers examine dispositions, should faculty in our community of Christian colleges and universities include a stronger emphasis on Biblically-based dispositions? This essay explores the beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and values Christian educators should embrace, including dispositions teachers should display in a public or private-school setting. Christians are called to conform to the image of Christ (Romans 8:28) and, therefore, they should exemplify the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:22) and the Greatest Commandment (Matthew 22). In addition, the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5), a service mindset (Galatians 5:13), an ethic of care (1 John 3), and a spirit of gratitude (Philippians 2:14) should be evident in a believer's life. Finally, the essay examines potential assessment practices and practical ways to emphasize Biblically-based dispositions.

### Introduction

The most effective teachers will not only be pedagogically skilled and knowledgeable about their content area, but they must also exhibit key characteristics and behaviors. Consider the following two vignettes to reflect upon the importance of developing professional dispositions in teacher education programs. In the first scenario, a student teacher rejects ideas suggested by her cooperating teacher and often suggests that she knows how to best respond to various classroom situations. Fast forward to the next year and, as a first-year teacher, she purports to have all the solutions

while discussing specific concerns during team meetings. As a result, she is ostracized, as her colleagues grow weary of her "know it all" attitude. She simply does not yet have the knowledge and experience to fully address problems the team has been facing for months. In the second vignette, a teacher candidate does not work well with his classmates on course projects. He is not open to ideas presented by others and his peers grow frustrated with him because he is not team-oriented or dependable. After obtaining employment at a middle school a couple of years later, these types of behaviors continue. He is unable to develop collegial relationships with other educators, and he never fully collaborates as they strive together to accomplish the goals established by the team.

To be effective in the classroom, teachers must possess professional dispositions counter to the ones described in the vignettes above. Beliefs, attitudes, values, and personal characteristics are emphasized in educator preparation programs, and studies support the notion that teacher candidates must develop positive dispositions to fully succeed in their careers (Osguthorpe, 2013; Zhang et al., 2022). The importance of fostering professional behaviors comes without question. Accrediting bodies such as AAQEP and CAEP require programs to identify, develop, and assess dispositions, and faculty continually examine ways to foster dispositional awareness and growth (AAQEP, 2020; CAEP, 2022). However, education faculty at faith-based institutions are not only

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called to evaluate the dispositions that are described by state and national accreditors, but they are also called to integrate dispositions linked to scripture (Hughes, 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to examine Biblical principles, values, and ethics that faith-based educator preparation providers should consider as they strive to cultivate candidates' dispositional development.

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Since colleges and universities have differing philosophical beliefs, it is perhaps imprudent to derive a single definition of "professional dispositions." Nevertheless, research provides descriptions that enable us to conceptually understand its meaning and, consequently, incorporate into teacher education literature. Bair (2017) described dispositions as internal attributes that motivate, one's tendencies to act, and the choices one makes. Zhang et al. (2022) defined teacher dispositions as "a cognitive or affective habit of mind that enhances a teacher's character or competence to perform teaching-related tasks in a professional and effective manner" (p. 4). For the purposes of this article, professional dispositions are defined as the behaviors and attitudes teachers demonstrate, the commitments they make, the values they embrace, and the expressions of one's personality, temperament, character, and personal attributes (Cummins & Asepapa, 2013).

Schussler (2006) summarized the value of dispositions by stating that "one's dispositions can

be compatible to a building's foundation. Although the foundation is not easily discernible, it is fundamental to the type of structure that can be built" (p. 259). Therefore, educator preparation programs continue to evaluate dispositions to help ensure their pre-service teacher candidates successfully enter the field. Education faculty foster professional behaviors and identify specific characteristics, attributes, and values they wish to develop in their candidates (Strom et al., 2019). If teacher educators are to make decisions regarding a pre-service educator's candidacy, then they must validly and reliably assess and document patterns of behavior and dispositions (Choi et al., 2016). An effective dispositional instrument and assessment plan will benefit teacher candidates, and programs must establish clear expectations with understandable terms in program documents.

One researcher analyzed the professional dispositions teacher education programs emphasized and assessed (Wiesman, 2017). Data were gathered from 20 private and 17 public colleges and universities in a Northeastern state in the United States. Data included dispositional frameworks, program handbooks, checklists, student teaching handbooks, and evaluation instruments. Six overarching themes emerged from the synthesis of program documents, including professionalism, collegiality, professional growth, character and personality, twenty-first century skills, and respect for human diversity (see Figure 1).

While the figure includes distinct lists, many of the dispositions are interrelated. For instance, when promoting diverse viewpoints, educators must be able to communicate skillfully. Sometimes teachers must be patient collaborating with others, and to be well-prepared often means they have to reflect upon practice. Hence, dispositions for teaching are the behavioral and personal attributes necessary to maximize the teaching and learning experience (Strom et al., 2019).

<b>Professionalism</b>	<b>Respect for Human Diversity</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regular attendance and punctual</li> <li>• Professional appearance</li> <li>• Maintains confidentiality</li> <li>• Accepts responsibility for actions</li> <li>• Responsible and reliable</li> <li>• Maintains professional boundaries</li> <li>• Adheres to policies</li> <li>• Well prepared</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Considers diverse viewpoints</li> <li>• Promotes diversity</li> <li>• Respectful of others</li> <li>• Concern and compassion for others</li> <li>• Belief that all students can learn</li> <li>• Treats others fairly and equitably</li> </ul>
<b>Professional Growth</b>	<b>Collegiality</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflects upon practice</li> <li>• Seeks and accepts constructive feedback</li> <li>• Seeks out growth opportunities</li> <li>• High expectations for self</li> <li>• Sets and evaluates goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Willing and able to collaborate</li> <li>• Communicates with clarity</li> <li>• Actively engages</li> <li>• Allows for participation of all</li> </ul>
<b>Character and Personality</b>	<b>21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caring</li> <li>• Positive attitude</li> <li>• Patient</li> <li>• Flexible</li> <li>• Enthusiastic and passionate</li> <li>• Honesty and academic integrity</li> <li>• Stress management</li> <li>• Confident and positive self-image</li> <li>• Curious</li> <li>• Humble</li> <li>• Ethical and moral character</li> <li>• Persistent and gritty</li> <li>• Strong work ethic</li> <li>• Emotional maturity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical thinker</li> <li>• Problem solver</li> <li>• Creative</li> <li>• Leadership skills</li> <li>• Organizational skills</li> <li>• Resourceful</li> </ul>

**Figure 1:** *Professional Disposition Framework*

### **Biblically-Based Dispositions**

Now consider a third story concerning an educator whose perspective aligns with the values and beliefs at a Christian college or university. At a public high school outside of Chicago, a social studies teacher who was also a committed Christian, entered the school’s library learning center to complete a couple of routine tasks. In

preparation for one of his classes, he interacted with the librarian and a couple of aides, finished his tasks, and then headed back to his office. After his departure, the librarian and aides commented about how he is always so kind, compassionate, welcoming, encouraging, and full of joy. He possessed and demonstrated personal and professional dispositions aligning with Biblically-based ideals.

Christians are called to be set apart and conform to the image of Jesus Christ. Indeed, scripture offers much guidance with regard to the beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and values Christ-followers should embrace, including personal characteristics Christian educators should display in a public or private school setting. Readers of Galatians are called to live in accord with the Holy Spirit and live with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Verses in Proverbs also direct us to adopt a strong work ethic, carefully choose our words, and avoid speaking out of anger or with haste. Colossians 3:8 specifically instructs us to rid ourselves of anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language. Furthermore, Paul challenges God's chosen people to be humble, compassionate, and grateful.

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*Christ-followers working in the field of education should also embrace the words of Isaiah and strive to seek justice and defend the weak (Isaiah 1:17). Teachers have an obligation to advocate for every student, regardless of background, personal characteristics, gender, race, ethnicity, class, or capabilities. Therefore, pre-service candidates must learn how to encourage and mentor students and create supportive environments so all can maximize their potential.*

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Christian teachers, especially those working in a public school system, are in a unique position to spread Christ's love to children. They have opportunities to minister to and care for their students on a regular basis. They are called to apply Christian values from the parable of the Good Samaritan and the Golden Rule

(Shotsberger, 2017), and they should demonstrate an ethic of care by helping students in need (1 John 3:17-18).

Noddings (2002) discussed how teachers can apply the ethic of care to education. She argues that it is an educator's moral obligation to develop caring relationships with students and to routinely engage in care-giving actions. Freytag and Shotsberger (2020) extend Noddings' work by presenting a Christian perspective of care theory. They point to Matthew 22:34-40 and to the Greatest Commandment of all, which is to love your neighbor as yourself. In one essay included in Freytag and Shotsberger's (2020) publication, Anderson (2020) stated that, by definition, teaching is caring. It is a role that is seen as self-giving, which includes characteristics such as compassion, authenticity, love, presence, relationship, hospitality, and service. Indeed, developing supportive and nurturing relationships is an essential component of effective teaching.

Christ-followers working in the field of education should also embrace the words of Isaiah and strive to seek justice and defend the weak (Isaiah 1:17). Teachers have an obligation to advocate for every student, regardless of background, personal characteristics, gender, race, ethnicity, class, or capabilities. Therefore, pre-service candidates must learn how to encourage and mentor students and create supportive environments so all can maximize their potential. As demonstrated by the social studies teacher in the third story, Christian educators should be the salt of the world (Matthew 5:13-16) and live such good lives that students and others may see their good deeds (1 Peter 2:12). Figure 2 includes a synthesis of Biblically-based dispositions highlighted by Christian educator M. C. Hughes (2020), as well as some of the Biblical mandates expressed throughout scripture. The list presents dispositions faculty should consider developing in faith-based pre-service education programs.

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**Christian Values, Beliefs, and Attitudes**

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Justice</li> <li>• Greatest Commandment</li> <li>• Golden Rule</li> <li>• Slow to anger</li> <li>• Compassionate</li> <li>• Ethic of care</li> <li>• Defend the weak</li> <li>• Keeping the Sabbath</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fruits of the Spirit</li> <li>• Strong work ethic</li> <li>• Careful with our words</li> <li>• Humility</li> <li>• Spirit of gratitude</li> <li>• Serve the needy</li> <li>• Value diversity</li> <li>• Service</li> </ul> |
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**Figure 1:** *Biblically-Based Dispositions*

**The Role of Teacher Preparation Programs in Faith-Based Academies**

A discussion on this topic begs the question, should education faculty at faith-based institutions include a stronger emphasis on the dispositions included in Figure 2? In addition, should they assess student growth in these areas? Should they create an evaluation tool to determine if completers serve the needy, possess a spirit of gratitude, demonstrate an ethic of care, and adopt other similar dispositions? With an analysis of Figures 1 and 2, one will notice that overlap exists to a small degree. Sometimes colleges and universities underscore the importance of Biblical mandates and strive to develop caring, ethical, and joyful teacher candidates who adopt a strong work ethic and have a respect for social justice issues.

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*Christian teacher education programs can convey high expectations linked to Biblical dispositions. This can be done by creating a dispositional framework that fully aligns with mission statements and Biblical mandates.*

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A review of program literature at seven Christian institutions across the country reveal that faculty occasionally assess Biblically-based dispositions (Wiesman, 2017). An analysis of documents in faith-based educator preparation providers was completed by myself, and the list below includes indicators that were included in formal evaluation documents.

- Does the teacher candidate demonstrate a positive attitude through his or her words and actions?
- Is the teacher candidate aware of/respectful of individual differences?
- Does the teacher candidate demonstrate trustworthiness, integrity, and ethical behavior at all times?
- Does the teacher candidate actively seek knowledge of students' backgrounds, cultures, skills, language proficiency, interests, and special needs from a variety of sources, and attain this knowledge for individual students?
- Does the teacher candidate foster classroom interactions that are highly respectful?

The list is quite limited and, therefore, should programs in the community of Christian colleges and universities include more explicit language regarding other Biblically-based dispositions? For example, should faculty include more specific language regarding the ethic of care? Should they examine if teacher candidates are demonstrating care by putting the needs of others before their

own or if they are actively seeking out service opportunities (Freytag, 2017; Shotsberger, 2017)? These are questions faculty should ponder since some of the characteristics included in Figure 2 are often conspicuously absent from program literature. Characteristics such as humility, patience, kindness, and gratitude often are not emphasized. Perhaps educators from faith-based institutions should focus on an additional set of values, beliefs, and attitudes as compared to what secular academies emphasize.

### Valuing and Assessing Biblically-Based Dispositions

Some personal and professional dispositions are easier to assess than others. Faculty can document if students dress professionally or consistently arrive on time. They can ask candidates to provide evidence of personal reflection on a lesson plan. They can examine unit plans to see if student teachers present content in a way that promotes diversity and considers varying viewpoints. Teacher educators can observe a classroom setting and determine if practicum students treated P-12 students fairly and equitably. In fact, researchers have found that dispositions can be reliably evaluated if candidates are exposed at entry to the desired dispositions, have opportunities to self-assess and reflect, and when the dispositions are clearly defined and discussed throughout the candidates' program (Choi et al., 2016; Seay, 2021).

Christian teacher education programs can convey high expectations linked to Biblical dispositions. This can be done by creating a dispositional framework that fully aligns with mission statements and Biblical mandates. Below includes a variety of strategies education faculty could incorporate to foster dispositional growth; many are included in the research and have been practiced by faculty at faith-based institutions.

- Create awareness and have numerous conversations with pre-service educators about the valued dispositions. Discussions could be more formal during a post-observation debriefing session or informal while chatting after class (Erdvig, 2020).

- Be sure the ideals are embedded in the program's education courses. Faculty might include case studies, class discussions, or stories of their own experiences where they endeavored to demonstrate Christ's love and ethic of care (Shotsberger & Freytag, 2020).
- Create evaluation instruments to measure student dispositions. Assessments should be discussed with candidates at length and should occur at various points throughout a student's undergraduate or graduate experience (Hughes, 2015).
- Ask pre-service teachers to self-evaluate, journal, and reflect upon their behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and values (Erdvig, 2020).
- Integrate faith with learning by incorporating scripture into lessons. God's word makes Jesus known and reveals His character (Erdvig, 2020).
- Partner with churches and mission organizations to create student service projects (Rieger, 2018).
- As classrooms become increasingly culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse, demand the inclusion of race, justice, and equality in curricula (Livingston-Galloway & Robinson-Neal, 2021).

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*Much research in the educational arena has examined the question, "What makes a great teacher?" But at Christian institutions, perhaps faculty need to spend additional time asking, "What makes a great Christian teacher?" Excellent Christian educators are pedagogically skilled and knowledgeable in their content area. But equally as important, they live out Biblically-based personal and professional dispositions. After all, teacher candidates and graduates at faith-based colleges and universities are called to honor Christ by serving the students they teach and by meeting the needs of those in their local school community.*

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Young adulthood is a pivotal time when most candidates enter a pre-service program and develop their worldview; consequently, it is vitally important for Christian leaders to emphasize scriptural dispositions (Erdvig, 2020). Moreover, as faculty teach truths revealed in scripture, pre-service educators will begin to take ownership of the critical values, beliefs, and behaviors (Erdvig). An increased emphasis on Biblically-based dispositions will also produce educators who are better able to spread God's love and serve their community. As teacher education programs nurture growth, both faculty and students can spread God's word and "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Christian institutions often include mission statements such as "serve Jesus Christ and advance His Kingdom through excellence in liberal arts and graduate programs that educate the whole person to build the church and benefit society worldwide" (Wheaton College, Wheaton,

IL). Another mission statement reads, "Taylor's mission is to develop servant-leaders marked with a passion to minister Christ's redemptive love, grace, and truth to a world in need" (Taylor University, Upland, IN). Incorporating scriptural dispositions in teacher education programs certainly supports mission statements such as these. When faculty strive to educate the whole person and develop servant-leaders, completers go out into the world and build the church, benefit society, and minister to communities. Hughes (2015) summarized the importance of integrating Biblically-based dispositions in educator preparation programs by stating that when pre-service educators have opportunities to examine and reflect on dispositions, "they are more likely to carry the dispositions into their classrooms and daily interactions with students" (p. 32). Furthermore, completers are more likely to create a positive classroom culture (Seay, 2021) and improve student learning (Conderman & Walker, 2015) as they go into the local schools and live out a mission statement similar to the ones stated above.

### **Modeling Dispositions Exhibited by Christ**

It would be inappropriate to have a discussion about Biblically-based personal and professional dispositions without thinking of one's own attitudes, actions, and behaviors. To be an effective model, Christian faculty must be reflective and pose many questions. How can educators serve the underrepresented in the community (Galatians 5:13) and incorporate a multicultural curriculum? Are teachers respectful of diverse viewpoints and patient of others, bearing with one another (Ephesians 4:2)? Are they careful with their words (Proverbs 12:18)? Do Christian faculty pray for their students and colleagues (James 5:16)? Do they grumble or are they more likely to express gratitude for all God has provided (Philippians 2:14; Colossians 2:7)? Do colleagues encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11) and forgive others when they have been wronged (Ephesians 4:32)? How do teachers demonstrate love and care for others (1 John 3:11)?

Educators at faith-based institutions should strive to become more like Christ. Yes, Christian teachers will often fall short, but as they exercise the spiritual disciplines and follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit, they will likely grow and better resemble Him. Much research in the educational arena has examined the question, "What makes a great teacher?" But at Christian institutions, perhaps faculty need to spend additional time asking, "What makes a great Christian teacher?" Excellent Christian educators are pedagogically skilled and knowledgeable in their content area. But equally as important, they live out Biblically-based personal and professional dispositions. After all, teacher candidates and graduates at faith-based colleges and universities are called to honor Christ by serving the students they teach and by meeting the needs of those in their local school community.

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