



Teachers' narratives: A source for exploring the influences of teachers' significant life experiences on their dispositions and teaching practices

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers' stories provide key resources for effective teacher education programs.
- Teachers' significant life experiences and dispositions influence teaching practice.
- Supportive learning environments influence teachers' dispositions positively.
- Experiences related to personal attributes influence teachers' dispositions.

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1. Introduction

Teachers are change agents in societies. Class size, administration, and resources are important, but it is teachers who have the most influence on student achievement (Brophy & Good, 1986; Cruickshank, Jenkins, & Metcalf, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2006, 2000; Lasley, Seidentop, & Yinger, 2006; Tellez & Waxman, 2006). With technological and societal demands of the 21st century, effective teacher education is even more critical. Among other things, teachers need to be *disposed* to deal with rapid changes and innovations. Teachers' dispositions are also important for many other aspects of students' learning experiences. Dispositions have been linked to teachers' behaviors and practices (Diez, 2007a; Fang, 1996; Serdyukov & Ferguson, 2011), to their beliefs, knowledge, and characteristics, and have long-lasting impact on instructional practices (Hong, Greene, & Hartzell, 2011).

Given the importance placed on dispositions, it is little wonder

that there has been a call for teacher education programs to foster constructive teaching dispositions. In 1992, the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) and later in 2008, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) emphasized the importance of dispositions in teacher education programs. The Council of the European Union for teacher education included dispositions among its priorities for teacher achievement (Caena, 2011). Teacher education programs “can influence the creation and revision of dispositions” (Nelsen, 2015, p. 6). Therefore, it is important to understand what dispositions are and what contributes to their development.

2. Theoretical framework

Although there are many different ways to define dispositions, in general they are individual's tendencies to act in a particular manner (Borko, Liston, & Whitcomb, 2007, p. 361). To identify and understand these “tendencies to act,” the authors of the current paper favor the Deweyan term “habit” (Dewey, 1922, p. 32). Other researchers have used the term habit to describe dynamic and revisable teaching attitudes and behaviors (Altan et al., 2017; Costa & Kallick, 2014; Dottin & Sockett, 2006; Richhart, 2001; Thornton, 2006).

In the current study, a teacher's *disposition* is considered to be comprised of clusters of mindful and thoughtful habits that can evolve through constructive experiences. To categorize habits, the authors relate to Habits of Mind as outlined by Costa and Kallick (2000) who identified and described the following 16 habits of mind: (i) applying past knowledge to novel situations, (ii) creating, imagining, and innovating, (iii) finding humor, (iv) gathering data through all senses, (v) listening with understanding and empathy,

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(vi) managing impulsivity, (vii) metacognition (thinking about thinking), (viii) persisting, (ix) questioning and problem posing, (x) remaining open to continuous learning, (xi) responding with wonderment and awe, (xii) striving for accuracy, (xiii) taking responsible risks, (xiv) thinking and communicating with clarity and precision, (xv) thinking flexibly, and (xvi) thinking interdependently.

The authors refer to the *Theory of Experience* as described by Dewey (1938) to explain how dispositions are developed. In this theory, life can be viewed as the experiential continuum where every experience leads to change and growth (albeit positive or negative). As the experiences are repeated and enforced, individuals develop habitual ways of thinking to interact with the experiences. Fig. 1 illustrates how these habits are developed and become a disposition (a cluster of habits of minds). The habits of mind in turn can be used to address new and different situations, such as those teachers face in their daily teaching practice.

As noted in the introduction, teacher education programs have been encouraged to focus on dispositions. When teachers' dispositions are viewed as habits of mind, teacher education programs can provide constructive experiences to help develop effective teaching dispositions (Dottin, 2009; Nelsen, 2015). But, which educative activities can contribute to development of effective teaching dispositions? It is beyond this study to study all kinds of habits, dispositions, and experiences. Instead, the authors chose to focus on five teachers who were observed by the lead author to exhibit many of Costa and Kallick's habits of mind. These observations were confirmed through a peer review of the participants. Through qualitative analysis of these teachers' narratives about their significant life experiences, the researchers learned which events the teachers believed contributed to the construction of their habits of mind and are reflected in their teaching practices. The authors discuss how integration of these experiences in teacher education programs may provide opportunities for fostering constructive habits of mind and anticipate further research to explore the feasibility and outcomes.

2.1. Researching teachers' lives: significant life experience research

The relationship between life experiences and learning has been researched by a number of educators and psychologists (Dewey, 1938; Jarvis, 1987; Kolb, 1984; Merriam & Clark, 1993; Mezirow, 1990). In the literature, several researchers have investigated the influences of the family environment, especially parents, in nurturing personal dispositions (Becker, 1964; Cabrera & Tamis-

Lemonda, 2013; Egberts, Prinzie, Dekovic, de Haan, & van den Akker, 2015; Goleman, 1995; Lamb, 2010; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Nettle, 2008; Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006; Suzuki, 2005). Parental attitudes and values are considered to be among the most significant influences on children's development (Langelhof, Komdeur, & Oldehinkel, 2016) and childhood is the most malleable period in terms of identity formation (Knafo & Schwartz, 2004). Parents are teachers and role models for the development of children's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Greenfield & Suzuki, 1998).

Although there is extensive research conducted about the influences of the role of family environment on the development of personal dispositions, there have been fewer studies related to the role of teachers' significant life experiences on the development of their teaching dispositions and practice. Goodson and Gill (2014) refer to teachers' significant life experiences and other background factors as "key ingredients" of a person and that those key ingredients shape teaching practices (p. 13). Butt, Townseed and Raymond (1990) suggest narratives focusing on childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and other phases of development can bring forth an understanding of teacher dispositions (p. 7).

3. Study purpose and research questions

This study used narrative inquiry as methodology to investigate the influences of significant life experiences on the dispositions and teaching practices of five female teachers. Significant life experiences are the ones that "personally affect the individual and are subjectively valued by the individual" and the significant experience results in "expansion of skills and abilities, sense of self, or life perspective, or it precipitates a transformation that involve the whole person" (Merriam & Clark, 1993, p. 182).

The narrative texts, which are the outcomes of interaction between the researchers and participants, were analyzed using a conceptual framework developed by the Altan et al., 2017 in order to contemplate the influences of participants' significant life experiences on their dispositions. This framework was created to provide theoretical grounding to Habits of Mind proposed by Costa and Kallick (2000). The authors drew upon intelligent behaviors associated with the habits of mind and used a review of the literature to identify established educational theories that explained the behaviors. Rather than seeking a cause-and-effect relationship between the significant life experiences and participants' dispositions, the researchers used the conceptual framework to contemplate potential relationships between participants' significant life experiences and their dispositions. The research questions that

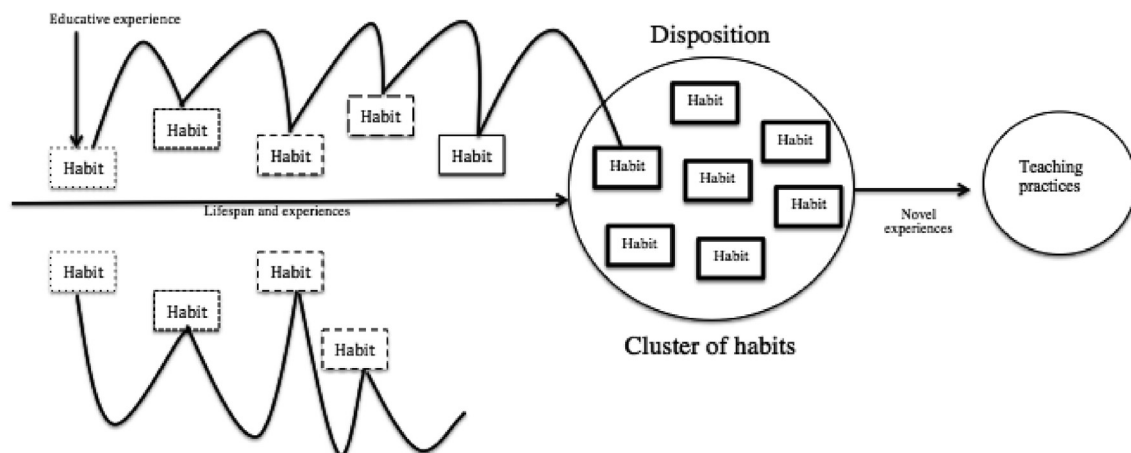


Fig. 1. A conceptual map displaying the connections between a teacher's disposition [comprised of cluster of habits], experiences and teaching practices.

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