

Charting the Dispositional Knowledge of Beginning Teachers in Special Education

Pamela LePage, Shelley Nielsen, & Emilene J. Fearn

Abstract: *When graduate students enter special education programs, they arrive with dispositional knowledge that can assist or hinder them in their professional development. Over the course of two years, the researchers in this study assessed the dispositions of beginning teachers in a special education program at a west coast state university. The researchers gathered data using qualitative methods, which included analyzing vision statements, survey questions, and interviews. The results of this study describe how students entered the program with a variety of perceptions and attitudes and how course work and clinical experiences in these programs affected students' attitudes, as instructors began building on students' prior experience and knowledge.*

In recent years, research about education reform has included a great deal of discussion about the importance of teachers developing certain dispositions during teacher preparation. Most of the articles and books that present a philosophical orientation and emphasize the development of habits of mind are focused on general education (e.g., Fullan, 1993; Greene, 1995; Hammerness, 2006; Hansen, 1995; Hansen, 2001; Sockett, 1993). For the papers that are focused on dispositional knowledge in special education, many emphasize efficacy (e.g., Soto & Goetz, 1998), collaboration (e.g., Bradley & Monda-Amaya, 2005), the need to be family-centered (e.g., Murray & Mandell, 2005), or attitudes toward inclusion (e.g., McLeskey, Waldron, So, Swanson, & Loveland, 2001). According to the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), dispositions are the values and commitments and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students,

families, colleagues, and communities. Dispositions can affect student-learning, motivation, and development, as well as the educator's own professional growth. At the turn of the century, NCATE proposed an emphasis on dispositions. In a recent American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) publication on dispositions, Sockett (2006) makes the argument that if institutions are looking to make the NCATE descriptions of dispositions less opaque, they must face up to the characterization and teaching of dispositions as a form of philosophical inquiry. Although the concept of development of dispositions in general education seems to be grounded in a political and social context, issues of integration, access, collaboration, and disability, which are not always a priority in general education, are brought to the forefront in special education.

The goal of this study was to explore the dispositional knowledge special education certification candidates bring with them when they enter a special education program in order to better understand and enhance the teacher education process. Teacher candidates enter

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Pamela LaPage, San Francisco State University, Department of Special Education, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA, 94132. E-mail: plepage@sfsu.edu

special education programs with personal philosophies about the purposes of education and a vision about how those purposes can be realized. At the time they begin their studies, their visions are often unarticulated and incomplete. By asking students to clarify and articulate their beliefs, teacher educators will be able to better guide them in their development as teachers.

Graduate students in three introductory classes on professional, legal, and ethical practices in special education, who were beginning a special education certification program, and who were graduate students from one advanced class preparing to graduate participated in this study. All 146 students from the four classes participated by describing in writing why they chose to enter the field of special education. Students were also asked to describe their visions of teaching in written assignments for those courses. Fifty-nine out of the 113 new students and 15 out of the 33 advanced students also participated by submitting their vision statements for analysis. In addition, a small number of the new students (i.e., 10) who provided vision statements for analysis were also interviewed individually.

Literature Review

The Importance of Studying Dispositions

Most teacher educators agree that all types of knowledge gained in teacher education programs are important. Professional content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and specialized knowledge (e.g., Braille), are all important. Dispositions, however, have always baffled college faculty in many ways. Everyone thinks dispositions are important, but can they be taught? And if yes, how? People who do not believe that teacher education programs should focus on dispositions may emphasize the admission process and suggest that only students who demonstrate good character should be accepted into various programs. In this paper, we argued that dispositions are important, not only because they affect a teacher's attitude toward a child, and therefore a teacher's response to a child, but also because they affect a teacher's own ability to learn. It is further suggested, that these dispositions can be taught, and almost

immediately when entering a teacher education program, students' attitudes and beliefs are affected.

Research has shown that dispositions are important for teacher quality. Teacher quality is hard to measure, but given the importance, researchers have strived to better understand what makes a good teacher. With a nationally representative sample of 475, Carlson, Lee, Schroll, and Pei (2004) used surveys to measure teacher effectiveness. They found that an important factor in teacher quality in special education was self-efficacy. In their report, they claimed that the general education teachers, who secure the greatest gains in student achievement, also exhibited certain beliefs about students and their learning process.

In a different type of study, where 180 teachers were asked to respond to a case scenario, Abernathy (2002) concluded that for children who find school difficult, a teacher's commitment to each student's academic and social development is essential for ensuring educational success.

Research on Teachers' Attitudes Towards Students with Special Needs

Perhaps the most common research on dispositional knowledge in special education focuses on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. For special educators, this usually means they are examining the teacher's ability to make a difference with students in inclusive settings. In general education, they are usually measuring teachers' attitudes toward inclusive practices generally. (Abernathy, 2002; deBettencourt, 1999; Praisner, 2003; Shippen, Crites, & Houchins, 2005; Stempien & Loeb, 2002).

Research on attitudes toward special needs students is often targeted at general educators. For example, deBettencourt (1999) conducted a study looking at general education teachers' attitudes toward mainstreaming. The author surveyed 71 teachers from three middle schools, and although 54% of the teachers believed that mainstreaming was important, over 60% did not support the concept of mainstreaming or felt a strong commitment to the concept.

In a study that surveyed 408 elementary principals, Praisner (2003) found that only about 1 in 5 principals had a positive attitude toward inclusion, while most were uncertain. The author

found that positive experiences with students with disabilities and exposure to special education concepts were associated with a more positive attitude toward inclusion. Shippen, Crites, and Houchins (2005) also determined that after one special education course, preservice teachers were also more positive toward inclusion.

Hastings and Oakford (2003) used their measure on attitudes toward inclusion to survey 93 teachers. They found that those teachers were more negative about the impact of including children with emotional and behavioral problems on other children and teachers. Another study also compared the satisfactions and dissatisfactions of teachers of emotionally and behaviorally impaired students in special education (Stempien & Loeb, 2002). This study included 116 teachers working within a 30-mile radius of Detroit. In this study, 60 participants were general education teachers, 36 were special education teachers, and 20 taught both special and general education. The special education teachers were the most dissatisfied due to stress and frustration, especially among the less experienced teachers. The authors theorized that the special education teachers began their careers with high expectations that they could overcome difficulties and cope with insoluble realities. Instead, most of the teachers felt a sense of not measuring up to their own goals.

In their conclusions, Stempien and Loeb (2002) suggested that these teachers should learn a cognitive approach to modify destructive thoughts associated with problematic situations. Teachers should learn by listening, observing, and establishing relationships with experienced teachers. They needed collaborative communities that supported creativity and challenged traditional teaching routines and philosophies.

Using Vision Statements to Bring Beliefs to Consciousness

It is important for teacher educators in special education, as well as general education, to have students consider their visions of teaching, because doing so leads to students' examining teacher knowledge at a metacognitive level. According to Hammerness (2006), vision represents how teachers think about and understand their teaching, and it provides insight into teachers' motivations, commit-

ments, professional decisions, struggles, affirmations, and doubts. The concept of vision can be a tool to help teachers (a) bring beliefs into consciousness, (b) question and alter beliefs, (c) identify steps to promising practices, and (d) identify environments in which they can thrive (Hammerness; Wubbels, 1992). Therefore, analyzing vision statements seemed a useful way to ascertain information about the dispositions of students entering the program.

For a number of years, researchers have explored the need for special educators to develop a personal/professional philosophy and vision. As part of his work in the early eighties, Davis (1983) researched questions about vision tailored to the special educator. He asked teachers to consider (a) who they were as individuals, (b) what their personal and professional strengths and weaknesses were, (c) what irritated them most about their roles and how could they resolve those irritations, (d) to what extent they had control over their professional lives, (e) why they entered the field of special education in the first place, (f) what their initial expectations were and how their expectations had changed, and (g) what their primary responsibilities as teachers were and who or what was preventing them from meeting those responsibilities. Based on his research, Davis suggested that a special educator's vision includes being an advocate for students and parents, being informed on the ever-changing law, understanding the different areas of assessment, and being able to communicate interpersonally with all individuals who are involved with children with special needs. In the results section, we will explore how special educators described their visions and what dispositional knowledge they possessed when they entered special education certification programs as graduate students.

Methods

Purpose

In this study, the main goal was to understand graduate entry level special education students' dispositional knowledge (e.g., their perceptions, experiences, attitudes, and beliefs about special education) in order to enhance the educational process by guiding instructors' teaching practices. This study was

conducted at a west coast urban state university to explore teachers' dispositions at the point of their entering a special education program and to explore how teachers' dispositions evolve by also examining the dispositions of advanced graduate students in special education.

Participants

Most of the participants in this study were in their first semester in a special education preliminary certification (i.e., CA level I credential) program. Most students were between the ages of 25–45. Fifty-nine students from three first semester classes over the course of two years provided vision statements for analysis. Twenty-four participants were in an introductory course in Fall 2003, 13 students were in an introductory course in Spring 2004, and 22 students were enrolled in an introductory course in Fall 2005. The Fall 2005 course was specifically designed for a *dual credential program*, which provides students who plan to work in inclusive elementary settings with certification credentials in both elementary and special education. These 22 beginning dual credential students were in a four-semester full time program that required a student teaching experience in each semester. The dual credential students were not allowed to be employed while they were in the program. Students in the dual credential program were working to get both a preliminary elementary and special education credential. The program was designed to take both programs simultaneously so the students would get through both programs faster and they could earn a master's degree faster if desired. The dual program provides students with more job options and flexibility when they leave the program, and prepares them for work in inclusive elementary classrooms. This program is not replacing the traditional special education program, it simply gives students more options.

The other 37 beginning students were in the traditional special education program, and most students were part-time students. Although only one semester of student teaching was required, these students had other classroom experiences throughout their program, and the majority of them obtained teaching jobs by the time they graduated. In the traditional special education program, the

teachers were instructing students whose ages spanned from early childhood to high school and across disability types (although the majority were high incidence disabilities).

Vision statements were also collected from 15 students who were enrolled in a high incidence student teaching seminar course (i.e., the last course before graduation) in the Spring of 2003. We wanted to collect data from these advanced students that might provide us comparative information about the change process.

In addition to collecting vision statements, all of the 146 students in the same four special education (i.e., SPED) courses were asked to answer a question about why they chose special education as a career. Of those students, 113 were enrolled in introductory courses and 33 were enrolled in an advanced course to clear their certification (i.e., CA level II credential) after having earned their preliminary certification (i.e., CA level I credential).

Finally, 10 special education students, from the original 59 who provided vision statements, were interviewed for approximately an hour in order to provide more in-depth statements about their attitudes and perceptions upon entering the program.

Data Collection

Data were collected in three ways (a) through analysis of student products, (b) through a survey question about why students chose to be special education teachers, and (c) through student interviews. When appropriate, the information from one data source was used to supplement information provided from another.

As a requirement for the introductory course, entering students were asked to write a 3 to 5 page vision statement sometime during the students' first semester in the program. The more experienced students from the student teaching seminar were also required to include philosophy or vision statements in their portfolios. Most of the advanced students had prepared these statements before they entered their student teaching seminar.

In addition, 146 students from three introductory special education courses and one advanced course were asked to briefly (i.e., in three to four sentences) answer the

question, "Why did you choose special education as a career?" Students were asked to answer this question during the first class of the semester.

The researcher also interviewed entering 10 students (i.e., 9 women and 1 man) as a follow-up to the vision statements. The interviews were open ended and lasted about one hour. These students were interviewed after the end of their first semester in the program. In this study, the focus was mainly on understanding how special education teachers defined and then described their beliefs as they entered the graduate program.

Data Analysis

The challenge of qualitative data analysis is to make sense of large amounts of data, to identify significant patterns, and to construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal (Patton, 1990). Student documents and interviews were analyzed with an inductive cross-case analysis. Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories emerged out of the data rather than imposing predetermined categorization prior to data collection and analysis. A cross-case analysis means that the information was grouped together according to answers from different people, themes, perspectives, or issues. A content analysis then was conducted which included the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data. In the final step, the data were interpreted. Interpretation, by definition, goes beyond description. Interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, making inferences, building linkages, attaching meanings, imposing order, and dealing with rival explanations.

Rigor

Within the positivist paradigm, a study's rigor is judged through measures of reliability and validity. In the mid-eighties, Lincoln and Guba (1985) offered four alternative terms which were more applicable in determining the rigor of a study conducted within an interpretive paradigm including, credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. Credibility refers to the researcher's ability to

conduct the study in a manner ensuring that the participant is accurately identified and described. In other words, credibility refers to the believability or the confidence of the study. For this study, the vision statements were cross-checked with information provided in the interviews and with the question about why students were in the program.

It is important to determine whether another researcher can confirm the findings. In this study, the two researchers analyzed the vision statements separately by coding each sentence of each vision statement. Then the second researcher would replicate the same process with the same text. This provided the researchers with a way to determine whether both researchers found the same themes within the same vision statement text and interview data. Consistent themes were found by both researchers during this process.

Dependability accounts for changing conditions in the phenomenon chosen for study as well as changes in the design created by an increasingly refined understanding of the setting. It was not necessary to make changes during this investigation. Finally, transferability refers to the applicability of the findings to other settings, contexts, and groups. Triangulation of methods through the use of multiple cases, multiple authors, multiple sources of data, and multiple theories strengthen the transferability of the results of this study.

Results

Dealing with Ambiguity

When beginning students were asked to write a vision assignment, they asked the instructor several questions, including (a) how a vision statement differed from a philosophy statement, (b) how they should define vision, (c) what were the goals of the assignment, and (d) how many pages the assignment should be. For this assignment, there were no right or wrong answers and that was explained to the students. The students were free to decide on their own definition of vision. It was clear that the students were unfamiliar with this type of assignment and were frustrated by the ambiguity. To study dispositions, researchers wanted to determine specifically what these pro-

Table 1. Study Participants

	Career Choice Question	Vision Statements	Inter- views
New Students			
Traditional Program			
Fall 2003	45	24	10
Fall 2004	46	13	0
Dual Credential Program	22	22	0
Total New Students	113	59	10
Experienced Students	33	15	0
Total All Students	146	74	10

spective teachers would choose to write about when asked to describe their visions, and the instructor intended for the students to have to struggle intellectually and reflectively with this concept. Therefore, minimal direction was given on the assignment. The new teacher candidates were expected to define the concept for themselves and to make decisions about what they thought was important.

Some of the students who were interviewed were similarly challenged. When asked to define vision, one replied, "I don't know, this is a hard question." Another said, "I wish I had my paper." These responses implied to the interviewer that even after they had completed the assignment, the concept of vision was still not well-defined in their minds. Some applied the definition to life, some to both life and teaching, and others, to just work.

Many students decided that vision was connected to the reasons they were in special education, while others thought it was related

to their philosophy on how children should be treated in our society. Some focused on their own personal experiences. A group of student teachers discussed their work prior to teaching and what they wanted to learn during the program. On the other hand, some participants described their philosophy from a teacher's perspective and outlined what a teacher needed to do to be successful.

The papers of students' just beginning in the program were never well-developed or comprehensive, and many students complained that it was too early in the program for them to "...provide a good essay on [their] philosophy or vision in teaching." Some claimed they had not yet developed a philosophy or vision of education and hoped to do so during the program.

Even at this early stage of the program, the data clearly demonstrated a common vision of inclusion among students entering the traditional special education program participants, a particular orientation toward the purposes of education, and a view of the child. These findings are discussed in the next several sections.

Inclusion as a Common Goal

For a large majority of the special education students in the traditional special education program, as opposed to the dual credential program, their overall vision focused on a common goal. That goal was tied to inclusion. Many of these students considered inclusion a civil rights issue and believed their role as teachers was to help children get what they needed, and were due, by the system, morally and legally. They believed that children with disabilities had the right to be fully

Table 2. Why Did Students Choose Special Education as a Profession?

Student Status and Program	Number of participants	Had previous work experience in Sped and liked it/were good at it	Moral reasons: Help kids/ Rewarding/ Social justice	Personal experience with disability	Other reasons (convenience, summer breaks, money)
New Students					
Traditional Program					
Fall 2003					
Fall 2004	45	56%	28%	15%	0
Dual Credential	46	57%	26%	15%	2%
Program—Fall 2005	22	50%	45%	5%	0
Experienced Students					
Traditional Program Fall 2004	33	60%	24%	15%	0

Table 3. Results Indicating Inclusion as a Common Goal

Result	Student Comment
Inclusion as a Common Goal	<p>Presently, my vision of a perfect educational system for children with special needs would be a neighborhood school where children with special needs attend the same classroom with the other children in their neighborhood.</p> <p>My new philosophy is that everybody belongs, and by that I mean that all students have the right to be with their age appropriate peers regardless of their disabilities.</p> <p>My ideal picture of the learning environment would be one where understanding and acceptance of everyone in the classroom is the first priority.</p> <p>I believe in my heart that all humans should have equal rights. I truly believe that this might lead to a system of inclusion.</p> <p>Special education is the marriage of education and social work. It is a civil rights issue, and it is a social justice issue as well.</p> <p>Classroom is a place where diversity is celebrated, not just tolerated.</p>

included into general education. These teachers suggested that while general education teachers seemed to recognize the importance of trying to provide equal access to education for ethnically and linguistically diverse students, for special education students, this was considered "...a possibility for the future." As one person stated in an interview, "Special education is still 50 years behind, functioning under 'separate but equal.'" A few of those comments from their vision statements are listed in Table 3. For example, one student stated "Presently, my vision of a perfect educational system for children with special needs would be a neighborhood school where children with special needs attend the same

classroom with the other children in their neighborhood."

Purposes of Education

The teachers' overall vision of inclusion as a civil rights issue affected their perspectives on the aims of education and their role as teachers. In general education, at least three perspectives on educational purposes have emerged, which can be boiled down to one of three basic assumptions: (a) education prepares people for their social role, (b) education develops people as individuals, and/or (c) education gives people knowledge of their culture (i.e., for a complex critical account of this division, see Egan, 1997).

Table 4. Results Indicating Purposes of Education

Result	Student Comment
Developing the child as an individual	<p>I believe the goal of special education is to empower each student to attain his or her maximum potential.</p> <p>Reaching their potential means everything from being able to perform activities of daily living independently to earning a college degree, to owning a business...etc.</p> <p>I want students to succeed at a personal level and to be encouraged to reach their personal goals.</p>
Educating students to be good citizens	<p>While one of the goals in teaching is to help students gain the academic knowledge they need to acquire basic skills and function in society, the more important objective is to guide them in their growth as human beings.</p> <p>In special education people are rarely focused on content</p> <p>What most people remember from their educational experience is not the subject matter they learned, but the person who taught it to them.</p> <p>Many teachers do not want to teach special education because it is not <i>academic</i> enough to keep them interested in the instruction. While this may be true on some levels, I believe there are more opportunities in the mild/moderate classroom for teaching equally important skills like critical thinking, anger management, social justice, etc.</p> <p>While one of the goals in teaching is to help students gain the academic knowledge they need to acquire basic skills and function in society, the more important objective is to guide them in their growth as human beings.</p> <p>In special education people are rarely focused on content.</p>

Table 5. Results Indicating View of the Child and Roles of the Teacher

Result	Student Comment
View of the child as being <i>different</i>	I have found, as special educators, we are often working with sensitive, even emotionally damaged children, with predominately low self-esteem. Basically, the population that you are dealing with is tough kids, who speak the language of the street, and who generally do not respect institutions such as schools. I think that working with youth with special needs demands a level of patience that is different than what is required when working with other children.
Disability is a disadvantage to overcome	As a special educator, I plan to join my colleagues' existentialist approach to empower my students and teach them that they can overcome their "disability" by focusing on their <i>ability</i> . I believe that individuals can rise above all obstacles. A major problem for people who live with a disability is the ignorance they experience from society at large. People react to fear of difference in many ways including prejudice, discrimination, and hate.
Main goal: Transform the children's views of themselves	As they leave the classroom, I hope that they will become proud of who they are. Each child must be made to feel successful in his accomplishments. What I expect from my students is that they believe in themselves. When a child has seen himself as a failure and then succeeds and begins to see himself as a person who can learn, that experience truly changes that child. I want to create a place in my classroom where SPED students see themselves as people who can learn. I must be prepared to face the challenges in order to enhance the morale of my students.
Teachers' role to empower and advocate	It is my hope that I will not only impart knowledge, but also provide positive support and opportunities for success. Being a special education teacher, I am not only a service provider; I am also an advocate for my students. Special education to me needs to be a service. A service that provides students with what they need to be successful. To me, an ideal special education teacher is not just an effective classroom instructor, but an effective out-of-the classroom advocate. We will prove that children can learn.
The need to teach children <i>how to learn</i>	By helping the children gain the techniques and know how to learn, they will be enabled and empowered to follow their schoolteacher's directions, as well as their parents and their peers.
The need to <i>protect and save</i> the children	Children are unique. I protect them from harm, and ensure that my classroom is safe, healthy, peaceful, and interesting. I know that I am not going to be able to reach all my students. I will not be able to save them all.

This simple three-fold distinction can get complicated, since within each category there are differences and disagreements. For example, where the emphasis is on preparing people for a social role, some argue for a specific vocational purpose, while others argue for a general socializing purpose (e.g., citizenship).

Our findings indicated that the teachers in this study were primarily focused on developing the child as an individual. For example, one teacher stated "I believe the goal of special education is to empower each student to attain his or her maximum potential" (see Table 4). A few comments suggested that teachers wanted to educate students to be good citizens;

none of the vision statements identified knowledge acquisition as being their most important goal. A teacher in the study commented "In special education people are rarely focused on content" (see Table 4).

View of the child

Although it is admirable for teachers to care so much for children, to want them to develop as individuals, and to care about whether they are accepted by peers, some of the entering students' comments revealed that the teacher candidates themselves viewed children as being *different* in ways that might support the belief

that students with disabilities might have difficulty functioning in a traditional classroom setting. For example, an entering student commented "I have found, as special educators, we are often working with sensitive, even emotionally damaged children, with predominately low self-esteem" (see Table 5).

Many of the teacher candidates in the traditional special education program viewed disability as a disadvantage that students had to overcome in order to be successful and productive in society. And they also suggested this may be how children with disabilities view themselves; for example, a student stated "As a special educator, I plan to join my colleagues' existentialist approach to empower my students and teach them that they can overcome their *disability* by focusing on their *ability*" (see Table 5). All of the teachers indicated that they believed these students could overcome their challenges. Many times throughout the vision statements and interviews, students stated, "I believe all children can learn."

What are their goals for children?

Given the teacher candidates' views of children and their beliefs about the purposes of education, an important question to ask is "What do teachers expect to accomplish in their classrooms?" What are their main goals? Most of the participants wanted the children to feel good about themselves, supporting the conclusion that teachers believe that children with special needs might not feel good about themselves. Since the candidates were working from the assumption that these children have low esteem and face insurmountable challenges, their main goal was to transform the children's views of themselves. For example, a student in study commented "As they leave the classroom, I hope that they will become proud of who they are" (see Table 5).

Teachers' Role

The teacher candidates' perspectives on the aims of education, their vision of inclusion, their views on children with special needs, and their goals set the tone for their perceptions of their role as special education teachers. Often, they expressed that their role as that of advocate or helper as opposed to teacher. Special education

was viewed as a service, and the teacher's role was to empower students and to advocate. One candidate expressed "It is my hope that I will not only impart knowledge, but also provide positive support and opportunities for success" (see Table 5).

When students did talk about their teaching, they focused on the need to teach children *how to learn* as opposed to teaching specific content (see Table 5). In some cases, the role of the special education teacher as helper was taken to extremes. The teachers saw themselves as the students' protectors. A few suggested they needed to *protect and save* these children. A candidate suggested "Children are unique. I protect them from harm, and ensure that my classroom is safe, healthy, peaceful, and interesting" (see Table 5).

Vision of their Practice: How Will They Accomplish their Goals?

None of the students in the traditional special education program were able to articulate a clear vision of good teaching. Very few even mentioned curriculum or pedagogy. Only a few mentioned classroom management and behavior supports; however, the students did have some opinions about what is important for teachers to know and be able to do. When they explained how teachers might accomplish their goals of enhancing self-confidence and empowering students, consistently they mentioned four basic themes: (a) the importance of relationship; (b) the need for safety; (c) the importance of collaboration, especially with parents; and (d) the need for individualizing instruction.

The importance of relationships

The teachers focused on the development of relationships as a way to empower students and to help them learn. Many suggested that building a relationship with the students was the most important step toward achieving academic success. For example, one teacher commented "I believe that building rapport with students is the most important step in helping them strive towards their goals" (see Table 6).

Safety

Quite a few teachers mentioned the need for children to feel safe. A teacher candidate

Table 6. Results Indicating the Vision of Students' Practice: How will they Accomplish Their Goals?

Result	Student Comment
The importance of relationships	<p>I believe that building rapport with students is the most important step in helping them strive towards their goals.</p> <p>A strong relationship between the teacher and the preschooler is important in developing success in a school environment.</p> <p>What is important is cultivating relationship between student and teacher and making sure the child feels safe.</p> <p>A teacher should have strong relationships with their students to facilitate success in their classroom.</p> <p>I want to make sure that my kids know they can come to me with any problems they may have.</p>
Safety	<p>Children learn best where they are safe.</p> <p>It is important that I provide a classroom environment of safety.</p> <p>I want my students to feel free to speak their mind, no matter what the subject.</p> <p>Cultivating relationship between student and teacher and making sure the child feels safe.</p> <p>I believe in providing a safe environment for learning and exploring the world.</p>
Collaboration	<p>Collaborate, especially with parents.</p> <p>I have reaped tremendous benefits from collaboration.</p> <p>One of the most vital components of inclusion is collaboration with colleagues.</p> <p>Teamwork can be an amazing teaching tool.</p> <p>The parents and family are crucial to a child's success.</p> <p>Working in partnership with each child's parent(s) is essential.</p>
Individualized instruction	<p>I believe that all children learn differently, at different speeds, with different examples and methods.</p> <p>Because each person is an individual, they have different ways of learning.</p> <p>Different students learn in different ways, and it is up to me to be creative and use various strategies to ensure that they understand the concepts I am teaching.</p> <p>I feel it is important to recognize the student as an individual, in order to understand their specific and individualized needs, as well as their potential for accomplishment and success.</p> <p>All children should develop at their own pace.</p> <p>In a classroom of students with diverse learning needs, modes of instruction and assessment must be differentiated.</p>

commented "Children learn best where they are safe" (see Table 6). This is a natural extension of the teachers' desire to protect and empower. It is difficult to protect children in an environment where they do not feel safe.

Collaboration

The vast majority of teachers recognized the need for collaboration. For example, a teacher mentioned "I have reaped tremendous benefits from collaboration." Comments are included in Table 6.

Individualized instruction

Finally, if students in the traditional special education program did mention instruction, they identified the need for teachers to individualize instruction to meet the needs

of diverse learners. Few gave specific examples, but all emphasized the belief that since children learn and develop at different speeds, they need differentiated instruction to meet those needs. Students expressed that part of the special education teachers' role was to find ways to meet those special needs. For example, one teacher remarked "I believe that all children learn differently, at different speeds, with different examples and methods" (see Table 6).

Why do I want to be a Special Education Teacher?

Table 2 includes responses from students surveyed in four special education classes during the Fall 2003, Spring 2004, and Fall 2005 semesters. The students were asked why they chose to teach in special education. The

Table 7. Reasons for Choosing Special Education as a Career Choice

Reason	Student Comment
Moral motives	<p>A passion for social justice, a fascination with uniqueness of every human being, the drive to give kids support to reach their potential- their dreams;</p> <p>I was tired of seeing LD students incarcerated and witnessing juvenile staff treating children poorly. I felt that I might promote system change through education;</p> <p>I read <i>Savage Inequalities</i> by Jonathon Kozol and was struck by the inequity that exists in education. After working in schools, I feel that special education students tend to experience a great deal more educational and social disadvantage;</p> <p>While teaching general education 5th grade, I found myself drawn to the kids who were struggling, yet frustrated that I didn't know how to help them with conventional remediation. Mostly, it is so rewarding to help kids who have often been lost in the shuffle; and</p> <p>I find it really important to wake up every day with a purpose. Special education is a lot of pressure, but I thrive on the constant challenge and the feeling that I am making an impact.</p>

question was an open-ended essay question. The students wrote a few sentences to describe their reasons for entering a special education program, and these reasons were categorized as (a) previous experience, (b) moral reasons, and (c) personal experience. To provide a comprehensive analysis, the researchers specifically searched for *other* reasons, such as *convenience*, *summer breaks*, or *money*. There were virtually no *other* reasons given for choosing to become a special educator. All of the reasons provided fit neatly into one or more of the three categories listed on Table 2.

The percentage of students in each category remained fairly constant in the special education program, both in the beginning and advanced classes. Approximately 15% of the students in the special education program had personal experiences with disability. Many of these students had a disability themselves or a child with a disability. Some had siblings who struggled in school. Others had parents who worked in special education.

Many candidates had some type of previous experience teaching (e.g., tutoring, aiding) in special education and *liked* it and/or felt they were *good* at it and wanted to continue. Twenty-five percent indicated that they had moral reasons for choosing special education as a career choice and 45% stated they had moral reasons (e.g., to give back to society, was rewarding, etc.). For example, one teacher candidate mentioned "A passion for social justice, a fascination with uniqueness of every human being, the drive to give kids support to reach their potential- their dreams."

Additional moral motives teachers mentioned are displayed in Table 7.

Comparing Predominant Themes of Dual Credential Program Students and Traditional Program Students

After comparing vision statements from students in the dual credential program, all of whom were just beginning the program, with statements from students in the traditional special education program who were also just beginning the program, the researchers identified differences in the predominant themes. First, when talking about the purposes of education, students from the dual credential program tended to emphasize citizenship more than individual achievement. Many emphasized the belief that education should equalize educational opportunity for all students.

Second, the dual credential students focused on teaching rather than advocacy. The researchers theorized that these students may have seen themselves as teachers right away because these students were required to start their student teaching in their first semester. In their vision statements, many of them talked about themselves as teachers and how they would set up classroom environments.

Another difference between the vision statements was that the teachers in the dual credential program were more focused on a community orientation and were more interested in other types of diversity, such as ethnicity and students who were learning English. They expressed more progressive and

more constructivist thoughts in their visions. The students discussed at length wanting to create a safe, comfortable, and rich learning environment for all children, describing the ultimate classroom environment and how it should be structured. They were much more constructivist and progressive in describing their personal teaching styles, and they specifically referred to the need for active engagement. Neither group focused on content.

One last difference was that the students in the traditional special education program were much more focused on inclusion than the students in the dual credential program, even though the dual credential program was developed specifically to train students to work more effectively in inclusive elementary settings. These students were being trained to be inclusion specialists.

As we looked at the course sequences for both programs, neither program had any methods courses being taught in the first semester, which could explain why neither group mentioned content. On the other hand, the program had classes being taught in social justice and second language acquisition. Professors in both programs emphasized inclusion.

Comparing New and Experienced Students

One of the researchers' goals was to begin to understand how teachers' dispositions evolve over time. To obtain such comparative data, we collected vision statements from students about to graduate from the traditional program, as well as from new students from the traditional program.

In their early vision statements, students from the traditional program tended to focus on the needs of the individual child. In their later statements, the students pondered building communities of learners. Following are quotes from an advanced student's early vision statement and revised vision statement. For example, an advanced student commented in her early statement "I feel it is important to recognize the student as an individual, in order to understand their specific and individualized needs, as well as their potential for accomplishment and success." In her later statement, she stated "I believe it is important to create a

sense of community within each classroom and the school."

In many cases, the students were thinking more about teaching in their later statements. They started considering specific teaching practices. For example, one teacher mentioned in her early statement:

Many teachers do not want to teach special education because it is not "academic" enough to keep them interested in the instruction. While this may be true on some levels, I believe there are more opportunities in the mild/moderate classroom for teaching equally important skills like critical thinking, anger management, social justice, etc.

Before the student graduated, in the later statement, the teacher commented, "How will I address instruction in my own special education classroom? The first step is to understand the child's needs and modify the curriculum accordingly. The best way to know this is through appropriate and effective assessment."

If the teacher candidates included references to instruction in their early statements, they tended to describe a more traditional style. In the later statement they seemed more open to alternative methods of instruction. For example, in an early statement, a teacher candidate stated "I tend to like to teach math from traditional textbooks, emphasizing the formulas and rules, rather than the current popular approaches where students learn by self-discovery instead of explicit instruction." In the teacher's later statement, the teacher suggested "I believe that quality teaching involves a mixture of techniques ranging from explicit instruction to constructivist approaches where students "discover" knowledge for themselves."

The most notable change in dispositions was that students seemed more sure of themselves as they wrote their early statements and less sure of themselves in the later statements. In the later statements, the students seemed more open to new ideas and were questioning their assumptions.

Finally, for the more experienced students, advocacy became more political. The attitudes presented in their later vision statements seemed angrier and less idealistic. The way the advanced students expressed care for

students was often associated with *fighting the system* in the schools, the state, and nationally.

Discussion

Special education students enter programs with personal philosophies about the purposes of special education and a vision about how those purposes can be realized; however, these initial visions are often incomplete, can be uninformed, and unarticulated. Therefore, students need to understand and articulate their vision so that teacher educators can better guide these students in their development towards becoming effective teachers. Based on the data from this research study, when the students entered the traditional special education program many of them: (a) shared a common vision associated with inclusion and equity; (b) believed the purpose of education was centered on developing the individual; (c) believed that special education is a service, and that their role was to help and advocate for children; (d) viewed a child with disabilities as someone who must overcome challenges; (e) believed that children with disabilities have low self-esteem, making it important for the teachers to transform the students' feelings about themselves; and (f) emphasized relationships, collaboration, individuation of instruction, and safety.

Data comparing new students with experienced students suggests that as they moved through the program, they became (a) less focused on the individual child and more interested in building communities, (b) more focused on specific teaching practices, (c) more open to different approaches to teaching, (d) more likely to question their assumptions, and (e) more politically focused on a need to change the system rather than saving the child in terms of advocacy.

In contrast, students in the dual credential program: (a) believed the purpose of education was centered on citizenship and equalizing opportunity; (b) focused more on teaching, especially on building community and on developing a safe and nurturing environment for children's learning; and (c) spoke very little about how children with disabilities *feel*, unless it was in the context of all children who face challenges, including ethnic minorities, second

language learners, religiously diverse and others.

Varying Dispositions of Incoming Teacher Candidates

Even in this study, it is evident that the respective groups of students came in to their programs with different perceptions and that the different makeup and clinical experiences of the respective classes began to immediately affect students' dispositional knowledge.

First, it was clear that students did not have a clear concept of what vision is, and they were resistant to struggling intellectually, with defining their vision, and then writing about it. Papers were poorly developed, with students claiming they needed time to develop a vision. For the students in the traditional special education program, the data nonetheless delineated a common vision among the participants; this included a particular view of inclusion and the purposes of education and of the child, the aims of education and their roles as teachers.

Since the candidates were working from the assumption that these children have low esteem and face insurmountable challenges, their main goal was to transform the children's views of themselves.

The students in the dual credential program articulated a vision of education that emphasized citizenship and the need for education to equalize opportunity for all students. The students also saw themselves as teachers and talked more about developing a safe learning environment for children.

Why the Difference Between the Dual Credential the Traditional Program

At first glance, it might appear as though the students were just regurgitating on paper what they were hearing in their classes. The authors believe it was more complex than that. It was true that even within the first few weeks of the program, the classes and internships seemed to be having a significant impact on the students' dispositional knowledge. The professors' words were already influencing the students' attitudes and perceptions. The internship in the dual credential program was helping students to understand what it meant to be a teacher.

Beyond that, however, by looking at why the students chose to enter the program, we could distinguish between these two groups from the start. The students from the dual credential program cited many more *moral reasons* and the traditional special education students cited many more *personal experiences* for choosing special education as a career. Perhaps if someone has a child with a disability, grows up with a sibling with a disability, or has a disability himself/herself, he might have a better understanding of why someone would want to be fully integrated and accepted and of how difficult that is to accomplish.

On the other hand, if a student is already in an inclusive setting serving English learners, cultural minorities, children with disabilities, and/or children of poverty, he/she may be more focused on finding ways to make inclusion more effective. The students in training to be inclusion specialists were focused on the challenges of inclusion, and the classroom environment was foremost on their minds. The idea of segregation for children with disabilities as being unfair and pervasive was not part of the dual credential students' incoming dispositional knowledge, so they were not predisposed to be concerned about it. The traditional program students, who will be working often in segregated settings, were more aware of the issue and focused on advocating for inclusion.

Implications for Teacher Education and Future Research Need to Recognize and Understand Dispositions in Teacher Preparation

Teacher educators need to know and understand their students' dispositional knowledge in order to guide their students learning, and an important implication of this study is that teacher candidates' dispositions are more variable and more complex than we had previously suspected. This study also suggests that the manner in which a program is structured from the first semester course sequence to when their internships are offered affects knowledge acquisition and development, including the development of dispositional knowledge. Teacher educators are sometimes baffled when students in one class

respond well to our teaching methods and the next class responds less well. We tend to blame the students as being *negative* (e.g., they are a *negative cohort*). But, if we encounter a negative group or we find an incredibly positive group it could mean that for a large segment of that particular group we are either focused on developing the right and or wrong attitudes and dispositions (e.g., ones they are ready to think about) that they need to help them understand teaching at a deeper level at that time. The researchers in this study believe that each group has its own dynamics and needs to be understood as a unique group. The students from the dual credential program responded differently than the students in the traditional program to various teaching strategies based on (a) the dispositions they had coming into the program, (b) the different clinical experiences and course work they experienced once they entered the program, and (c) the mix of the various personalities. Students also need different emphases that align or contrast to their incoming dispositions. For example, if students already possess moral motives, time allocated for discussion on that topic might be better spent elsewhere discussing other controversial and thought-provoking topics. Understanding the dispositions that students come into a program with can help teacher educators understand students who are diverse ethnically, culturally, economically, religiously, gender-wise, and age-wise. Diverse students bring different dispositional knowledge to the classroom when they enter teacher education programs.

How might teacher educators work with students in this study? Teacher educators might want to consider helping students think about their relationship with content knowledge. And, it would be useful for the teacher candidates in this study to have opportunities to examine their views of children with disabilities. According to Jordan, Lindsay, and Stanovich (1997), teachers who successfully supported inclusion interacted with their students, but those interactions were often focused on academics. Successful teachers also exhibited a greater use of techniques to extend the student's thinking compared to those teachers who held contrasting views. Therefore, teacher candidates need an opportunity to explore their beliefs and assumptions, such as

(a) Can teachers care about children, develop relationships, and also focus on content? (b) Should teachers work to *empower students*? (c) What does empowerment mean? (d) When the moral commitment is there, how should they care for these students? (e) What does it mean to care (Noddings, 1992)? (f) Do students with disabilities need sympathy/empathy and/or do they need to be taught?

In teacher preparation programs, students need to develop a set of dispositions or habits of mind about teaching and children. This includes the disposition to reflect and to learn from practice, which Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) called *inquiry as stance*. In the past, a number of important dispositions have been identified in general education. For example, persistence, or the ability to work with children until they succeed has been identified as important (Haberman, 1996). Ladson-Billings (1994) found that believing all children could succeed was important for successful teachers of African-American children, and beyond that, teachers need to take responsibility for children's learning. Watson (2003) suggested that understanding attachment theory is the key for developing successful student-teacher relationships. Haberman (1996) also emphasized the need for teachers to develop strong relationships with children, and Noddings (1992) has argued for the importance of caring.

The special education teacher candidates in this study demonstrated that even in the early stages of preparation, they were well on their way to understanding the importance of persisting with children and developing relationships. Many of the teacher candidates commented that they believed that all children could learn and they already felt responsible for finding ways to make inclusion work. Teacher educators must also use the strengths that students bring to their preparation programs.

As Haberman (1996) pointed out, different settings require different forms of teacher preparation that take into account the role of context, and so it seems does the program, and even the individual classes. Feiman-Nemser (2001) suggested that:

...unless teacher educators engage prospective students in a critical examination of their entering beliefs in light of compelling alternatives and help them develop powerful images of good teaching

and strong professional commitments, these entering beliefs will continue to shape their ideas and practices. (p. 1017)

Whether the teachers in this study are right or wrong in their beliefs and perceptions at the start of their program is not a question to be addressed here. What is important is that many already have developed assumptions about children's strengths, weaknesses, self-esteem, and potential at such an early stage in their preparation. It is important for students to struggle with philosophical questions that help them probe deeper into the complexity of certain dispositions.

Fullan (1993) believed it is important for teachers to face doubts about themselves and what they are doing. He believed teachers should explore moral purpose with greater and greater skill, conceptualizing their roles on a higher plane. He felt that the more one expresses one's beliefs to others, the more one will develop professional relationships.

The data collected in this study suggests that struggling with habits of mind is just as important for special education teachers as it is for general education teachers. The new special educators need the opportunity to struggle with philosophical questions, and this need is often overlooked in special education. Towards this end, programs may want to examine the writings of Foucault (see Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998), Freire and Habermas (see, e.g., Morrow & Torres, 2002). This level of exploration would resonate with some students, who in our interviews stated they wanted more intellectual depth in the special education programs.

Ultimately it is important for special education students to be able to bring their beliefs to consciousness, interrogate, and possibly alter those beliefs, as well as identify steps to promising practices, and select contexts in which they can thrive (Hammerness, 2006; Wubbels, 1992).

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Pamela LePage, Department of Special Education, San Francisco State University; Shelley Nielsen, University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco State University; & Emile J. Fearn, University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco State University.

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