

## CONNECTING THE DOTS: EXPLORING DISPOSITIONS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to explore the dispositions that pre-service teachers require in order to be effective practitioners. Pre-service teachers study a curriculum that equips them with the content, as well as the pedagogical, psychological and philosophical knowledge, that are foundational to their tasks as both professional and subject specialists. However, in order to be responsive to the human quality of teaching, pre-service teachers also require certain dispositions that enable them to build and develop learners. There is thus a need to understand the dispositions that pre-service teachers require in order to be effective practitioners. This study is underpinned by Dewey's constructivist developmental learning theory and also Bandura's social learning theory. The critical question we endeavoured to answer in this study was: What teaching dispositions do pre-service teachers require to be effective practitioners? In order to answer the research question, five journal articles were selected using the following criteria: focus on defining teaching dispositions and listing and explaining teaching dispositions. The study adopted a qualitative approach positioned in the interpretivist paradigm. Inductive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the findings from the five selected journal articles. The findings revealed that pre-service teachers require self-related, learner-related and profession-related dispositions to be effective practitioners. Thus, based on the study's results, we recommend that teacher preparation programmes deliberately include dispositional qualities in their curriculum.*

**Keywords:** teaching dispositions; pre-service teachers; South African teacher curriculum; teacher knowledge; teacher preparation programmes

### Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the dispositions that pre-service teachers require to be effective practitioners. There is no doubt that much of the research into teacher education focuses on the qualities that make an effective teacher. The majority of the research and also teacher

preparation programmes describe teacher effectiveness in terms of knowledge (content, teaching, learning and curriculum) and skills (planning, assessment, classroom management etc.) that pre-service teachers require to enable them to perform in the classroom (Freeman 2007; Cargill, Notar, Riley, Taylor & Thornburg 2009). However,

there appears to be just a tentative understanding of the moral and social dispositions that pre-service teachers require to be effective practitioners (Villegas 2007). In other words, the "education faculty [is] not only are responsible for pre-service students mastery of knowledge and skills but also if they are the 'right sort' of person to be a teacher" (Cargill et al. 2009:2). Thus, if they do not explicitly include dispositions in their curricula it may be that most education faculties are not be meeting the equipping the teachers with the necessary dispositions for teaching

Nevertheless, several education programmes have shifted their focus from teaching knowledge, attitudes and skills to teaching knowledge, skills and dispositions (Villegas 2007)., Freeman (2007) highlights that, as early as 1967, Arnstine had realised that focusing on skills and knowledge was inadequate in describing an effective teacher. However, his work was not well received by his peers. According to Pottiger (2009), it was only in the early 1990s that teacher programmes in the United States paid attention to teacher attitude in determining teacher effectiveness. According to Freeman (2007), it was the work of Katz (1993) that led to the realisation that attitude was not the same as dispositions. At this point, instead of focusing on attitude, research and teacher preparation programmes motivated the importance of teacher dispositions. In the United States, the inclusion of dispositions as an accreditation requirement by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (2006) signalled a serious focus on the social and moral dimension of teaching. Based mainly on studies from the United States, Turkmen (2009:2)

acknowledges that there is currently a shift from an emphasis on content and pedagogical knowledge to what he calls "inter-intra-personal knowledge" for teachers. This shift has resulted from an understanding that teaching is a profession that is underpinned by the transfer of values, ethics and morals and that, without an understanding of these qualities, teacher education institutions are producing ineffective practitioners. Notwithstanding the common agreement that teacher dispositions are critical for pre-service teachers, their deliberate inclusion in teacher preparation programmes has been relatively slow. Cummins and Asempapa (2013) caution that teacher dispositions should be understood and implemented as contextual rather than universal. If this previous premise holds true, then there is need to explore the dispositions that a South African pre-service teacher requires to be effective.

Very few studies have been carried out on understanding teaching dispositions within the South African context although Hoadley and Ensor's (2009) exploratory study highlights the relationship between the teacher's social class, dispositions and pedagogic practice. They found that both social class and teacher dispositions have an influence on pedagogic practice. Flanagan's (1993) emphasis was on thinking as a teaching disposition. She drew from Vygotskian psychology and argued that teachers require critical thinking to enable them to guide their learners to liberated learning. Similar to Flanagan (1993), Kloppers and Grosser (2014) also focus on thinking as a critical disposition for pre-service Mathematics teachers. They found in their study that the critical thinking disposition required by teachers is made

up of three dimensions, namely, judiciousness, open-mindedness and inquisitiveness. From the analysis of the South African studies on dispositions as cited above, it is clear that there is an anecdotal understanding of teacher dispositions in pre-service teacher preparation programmes in South Africa. Thus, this study explores the existing literature on the teaching dispositions that pre-service teachers require to be effective. Specifically, in this study, we argue for the intentional inclusion of teacher disposition in pre-service teacher preparation programmes.

The theoretical approach adopted to exploring the dispositions for pre-service teachers is located in Dewey's (1922) constructivist-development perspective and in Bandura's social learning perspective. By embracing these theoretical approaches, we sought to explore pre-service teachers' dispositions as a function of their personal philosophies, cognition beliefs and values. We used both Dewey's and Bandura's conceptual worldviews based on their appreciation that teaching is a social, negotiated, culturally responsive and idiosyncratic profession. Thus, we used this theoretical background to approach this study which aimed to understand the personal and nurtured teaching dispositions that pre-service teachers require to be effective classroom practitioners.

### 1.1 Structure of the paper

The paper is organised into five sections. The theoretical orientation that underpinned the study is discussed in the first section. This is followed by comparative definitions of the term disposition and a discussion on the operational definition used in the study.

The next section explores the research methods used in the study. The dispositions that pre-service teachers require and that emerged from a review of prominent studies in the field are then highlighted and interpreted within the context of the study. Finally, the implications of the article for the pre-service teacher curriculum in South Africa are discussed.

## 2. Theoretical orientation

Based on our understanding of teacher dispositions as practical, experiential, cognitive and idiosyncratic, we decided to use Dewey's (1922) constructivist-development perspectives and Bandura's social learning theories as the theoretical perspective underpinning the study. The constructivist-developmental perspective not only explains meaning as a social and developmental construct, but also allows for understanding the role of the environment in shaping an individual's dispositions (Oja & Reiman 2007). Thus, according to this perspective, human beings act out of habit and reasoning which are informed by their practical and experiential nuances (Dewey 1922). From a constructivist developmental perspective we understand teacher dispositions to refer to both the behaviour that influence teachers to act in a certain way and the context in which the action takes place (Schussler, Bercaw & Stooksberry 2008).

As a social learning philosopher, through his theory of social learning, Bandura rejected the premise that human behaviour may be explained in terms of the behaviourist tradition. Specifically, Bandura (1986), like Dewey (1922), recognises that behaviour is a function of both personal

and environmental factors. In addition, Bandura (1986) maintains that behaviour is regulated by cognitive processes rather than by imitation. In the context of this study, we understand this to mean that, although pre-service teachers may imitate their mentor lecturers, the way in which they process the new knowledge is influenced by their personal dispositions and context. Furthermore, by means of self-efficacy, Bandura (1986) explains that an individual possesses personal ability to perform tasks in order to reach goals. The continuous re-affirmation of one's worth and ability are critical aspects of teaching as teachers require this disposition to be able to deal with contextual and professional challenges.

By embracing Dewey's constructivist-developmental perspectives and Bandura's social learning theory we sought to comprehend dispositions as resulting from the pre-service teacher's idiosyncratic and cognitive appreciation of their professional, moral and ethical duties.

### **3.1 Perspectives in teacher disposition research**

The function of teacher education programmes is to equip pre-service teachers with the knowledge, skills and dispositions they require to be effective teachers (Cummins & Asempapa 2013). There is a burgeoning literature that has identified and assessed the knowledges and skills that teachers require to be effective (Schussler 2006). According to Cummins and Asempapa (2013:99), "while skills and knowledge in the field of education are fairly easy to define, cultivate, and assess, dispositions have always been difficult to define". Teacher dispositions are usually thought to be innate in pre-service teachers who

choose teaching as a profession (Hollard 1996). This assumption may have led to teacher education programmes failing to nurture the dispositional quality of teaching.

There is no question among teacher education researchers that there are critical dispositions that teachers, as professionals, require to be effective (Cargill et al. 2009; Villegas 2007). Nevertheless, the philosophical underpinnings and definitions of teacher dispositions are fiercely debated in education literature. Philosophically, there are two views that exist in teacher disposition research. The first view, which is based on the work of Hollard (1996), indicates that dispositions are inherent in the teacher's personality. This implies that there are some people who are born with the dispositions that incline them to become teachers. According to Hollard (1996), individuals who are caring, reflective, helpful, responsible, dependable, creative, imaginative and team oriented are predisposed to teaching.

The second view, which is based on the work of researchers such as Combs (1999), focuses on dispositions as resulting from the imitation of behaviours to which an individual is exposed over time. Researchers who support this view believe that, contextually, dispositions are an indication that they may be "fostered, refined, and weakened by an individual's interactions with others around them" (Cummins & Asempapa 2013:100). According to the work of Davis and Stewart (2005), teaching dispositions that could be fostered in teacher preparation include empathy, dependability, creativity, professionalism and responsibility.

Since this study was exploratory in nature we embraced both views to aid our understanding of the teacher dispositions that could be included in teacher preparation programmes in South Africa. Thus, we believed that some individuals come into the teaching profession already endowed with the dispositions they require to be effective teachers while, on the other hand, some teachers require modelling and mentorship in the teacher preparation programmes in order to acquire the dispositional traits required for teaching.

### **3.2 Charting the murky waters – defining teacher disposition**

There are numerous definitions of the term “teacher disposition” in the literature. In international literature, the definition provided by NCATE is usually used in defining teacher dispositions. According to NCATE (2006:6), teacher dispositions are “professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and nonverbal behaviours as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities. These positive behaviours support student learning and development”. This definition indicates that dispositions are demonstrated in the behaviours and actions that teachers voluntarily perform in the execution of their duties. Similarly, Usher (2002) states that dispositions “are certain more stable characteristics and recurring perceptions of self, students, the job and its purposes, people and the world-in-general which are operative in a teacher’s perceptual world and render much of the effect of their efforts”. Thus, the definitions cited above specify that teaching dispositions are manifested in behaviour. Ritchhart

(2002:21) maintains that dispositions are “acquired patterns of behaviour; under one’s control and will; overarching sets of behaviour, rather than specific actions; dynamic and idiosyncratic, rather than prescribed; coupled with ability; they motivate, activate, and direct ability and contextualized rather than generic”. However, Faull (2009) cautions that dispositions do not cause behaviour although they may be observed in the teacher’s consistency in their behaviour in the classroom.

Having enunciated the different perspectives and definitions of teaching dispositions, it is clear that they are personal, emotional, attitudinal and value laden and are seen in the behaviour of the teachers when they interact with others. In the context of this study, dispositions refers to pre-service teachers’ cognitive characteristics and personal qualities that influence the way in which they behave and interact with others. Such behaviours are without coercion and the pre-service teachers perform them as habit of the mind (Dewey 1922; Davis & Stewart 2005). The pre-service teachers dispositions “motivate, activate and direct” their actions and behaviours (Ritchhart 2002: 31). In line with Katz (1993), we also understood the pre-service teacher’s dispositions to be value, moral and ethically laden. We maintain that pre-service teachers who possess the dispositions suitable for teaching are able to commit to a standard that communicates respect for the school and community nuances that influence learning.

## **4 Methodology**

The aim of this study was to explore, based on existing literature, the

dispositions which should be included in pre-service teacher preparation programmes in South Africa. The following research question was posed, namely, What teaching dispositions do pre-service teachers require to be effective practitioners? Given the aim of the study and the research question, the study used a qualitative approach positioned in the interpretivist paradigm. The selection of the research approach and the interpretivist paradigm was based on our aim to understand the findings of previous studies on teacher dispositions.

#### 4.1 Data collection

In order to answer the research question, five journal articles that were published in English in peer-reviewed journals, which adhere to a high standard of article writing and reporting, were reviewed. Google and Google scholar were used as search engines. The key words used in the search included disposition, teaching dispositions, teaching knowledge; teaching dispositions in South Africa and teacher dispositions.

#### 4.2 Data analysis

The articles were chosen using the following criteria: focusing on defining teaching dispositions; listing and explaining teaching dispositions and published in the previous 10 years (2005–2015). Usher's (2002) article was reviewed despite the fact that it did not meet the selection criteria. However, his article was included as his work usually constitutes the theoretical base used by most of the researchers who classify and categorise teaching dispositions. The analysis focused on the following articles:

- i. Davis, S. and Stewart, P., 2005. Developing dispositions of preservice teachers through membership in professional organization. *Journal of Authentic Learning* 2 (1)37–46.
- ii. Faull, A., 2009. Highly effective teachers. *TEACH Journal of Christian Education* 3(2), 32–39.
- iii. Howard, G, R. 2007. Dispositions for good teaching. *Journal of Educational Controversy* (2)2: 16–29.
- iv. Norris, D., 2008. Teachers' Dispositions: Supporting Democracy or Forcing Indoctrination. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation* 3(3): 1–9.
- v. Usher, D. 2002. *Arthur Combs' five dimensions of helper belief reformulated as five dispositions of teacher effectiveness*. Paper presented at the First Annual Symposium on Educator Dispositions: Effective Teacher – Effective Person, Richmond, KY.
- vi.

Each article's findings were recorded. These findings were then grouped together forming categories in terms of their similarities. Each group was then named according to the prevailing theme in the category. Table 1 provides a summary of each paper in terms of the names of the researchers, the purpose of the study and the study findings.

**Table1: Summary of analysed papers**

<b>Researcher(s)</b>	<b>Purpose of the study</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Usher (2002)	This conference paper focuses on describing teaching dispositions as anchored in Arthur Combs' five dimensions of a helper.	Positive view of others Empathy Positive view of self Authenticity Meaningful purpose and vision
Davis and Stewart (2005)	This study describes the effects of the membership of and service in professional organisations on pre-service teachers' dispositions in the United States.	The study found that pre-service teachers require the following dispositional traits:  Creativity Empathy Responsibility Professionalism Dependability
Howard (2007)	This study describes the personhood that make effective teachers in diverse classroom.	The findings of the Howard study include:  Difference Dialogue Disillusionment Democracy
Cargill et al. (2009)	This study identifies and assesses the dispositions embedded in the curriculum for Jacksonville State University in the United States.	The study found out that pre-teachers require the following dispositions to be effective:  Determination Courage Respect for students Patience

Faull (2009)	This study explores the dispositional characteristics of effective teachers in Wales.	Teachers' dispositional characteristics include:  Authentic (caring, open, emphatic and reflective).  Communicative (engagement, knowledgeable, listener and humour).  Creative (risk taking, originality, curiosity and problem solving).  Committed (purposeful, organised, motivated and resilient).  Passionate (enthusiastic, positive, excitable and energetic).
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The findings from the five selected articles were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. In other words, the information from the articles was used to structure the analysis but without imposing a theory (Creswell 2013).

### **Findings**

Based on the analysis of the articles, the researchers proposed that teaching dispositions fall into the following three classes, namely, self-oriented, learner-oriented and profession-related. Each of the classes of teaching dispositions, as identified from the articles reviewed, are discussed in detail below.

#### **4.3 Self-related teaching dispositions**

It emerged from the analysis of the articles that researchers such as Faull

(2009), Davis and Stewart (2005) and Usher (2002) highlight self-related dispositions. For example, a number of researchers acknowledge the inclusion of individual beliefs and values as constructs of the teaching disposition (Faull 2009; Davis & Stewart 2005; Usher 2002). The fact that values and beliefs are idiosyncratic suggests that there are teaching dispositions that are self-oriented. In other words, some individuals are born with the innate qualities which are required in teachers (Hollard 1996). It was clear from the literature that self-related teaching dispositions contain three sub-themes, namely positive view of self (Usher 2002); authentic (includes the sub-themes of reflective, emphatic and open) (Faull 2009; Davis & Stewart



2005; Usher 2002) and caring (includes categories such as encouraging, approachable, sensitive and compassionate) (Faull 2009; Davis & Stewart 2005; Usher 2002).

According to Usher (2002), the most important innate quality for teaching is a positive view of self. This suggests that teachers need to possess a good sense of self-worth which guides their actions when they interact with others. Faull (2009) maintains that teachers who have a positive outlook on others tend to be authentic. An authentic teacher is caring, reflective, emphatic and open. As a caring being the teacher is compassionate, sensitive and approachable and provides constant encouragement to the learners (Faull 2009). Such teachers are emphatic toward their learners' physical and cognitive abilities and seek to integrate these abilities into meaningful learning experiences (Davis & Stewart 2005; Usher 2002). In addition, according to Faull (2009) and Usher (2002), authentic teachers are reflective as they continuously checking on the quality of teaching taking place in the classroom. Reflective teachers are open to criticism and use such feedback to improve the quality of their work (Faull 2009; Usher 2002).

#### **4.4 Learner-related teaching dispositions**

Learner-related dispositions encompass all behaviours that motivate learners to learn effectively. Cargill et al. (2009:4) state that "dispositions affect student learning, student motivation, and student development" This means that the dispositions of the teachers determine the quality of the learning that takes place in any classroom. It emerged from the literature that two sub-themes fall under learner related

dispositions, namely, communicative and committed. Communicative teachers create dialogue in class, engage with their learners and are both attentive and humorous (Faull 2009; Howard 2007; Davis & Stewart (2005). On the other hand, committed teachers are patient, determined, purpose driven and organised (Faull 2009; Cargill et al. 2009; Usher 2002).

Learner-oriented teachers are communicative. Teachers who communicate encourage in-class dialogue with their learners (Howard 2007). Such dialogue is aimed at providing the learner with the opportunity to engage with subject specific knowledge and interact with others. Faull (2009) recognises that communicative teachers do not only engage but they are also humorous. Humour results in learners participating and engaging meaningfully in the classroom. Bekelja Wanzer, Bainbridge Frymier, Wojtaszczyk and Smith (2006) state that humorous teachers maintain a rapport with the learners which has a positive influence on learning. Furthermore Davis and Stewart (2005) note that communicative teachers are attentive to others and use appropriate language and interpersonal skills in order to maintain their relationships with learners.

In the main, teachers who possess learner-oriented disposition are committed. According to Cargill et al. (2009), committed teachers are patient, determined and courageous in the execution of their duties. In other words, committed teachers are determined and invest in the growth of the learners. Faull (2009) further indicates that committed teachers are not only determined but they believe in their learners' successes. Such teachers have

a clear purpose; are organised and are able to motivate their learners to reach academic and personal goals (Usher 2002).

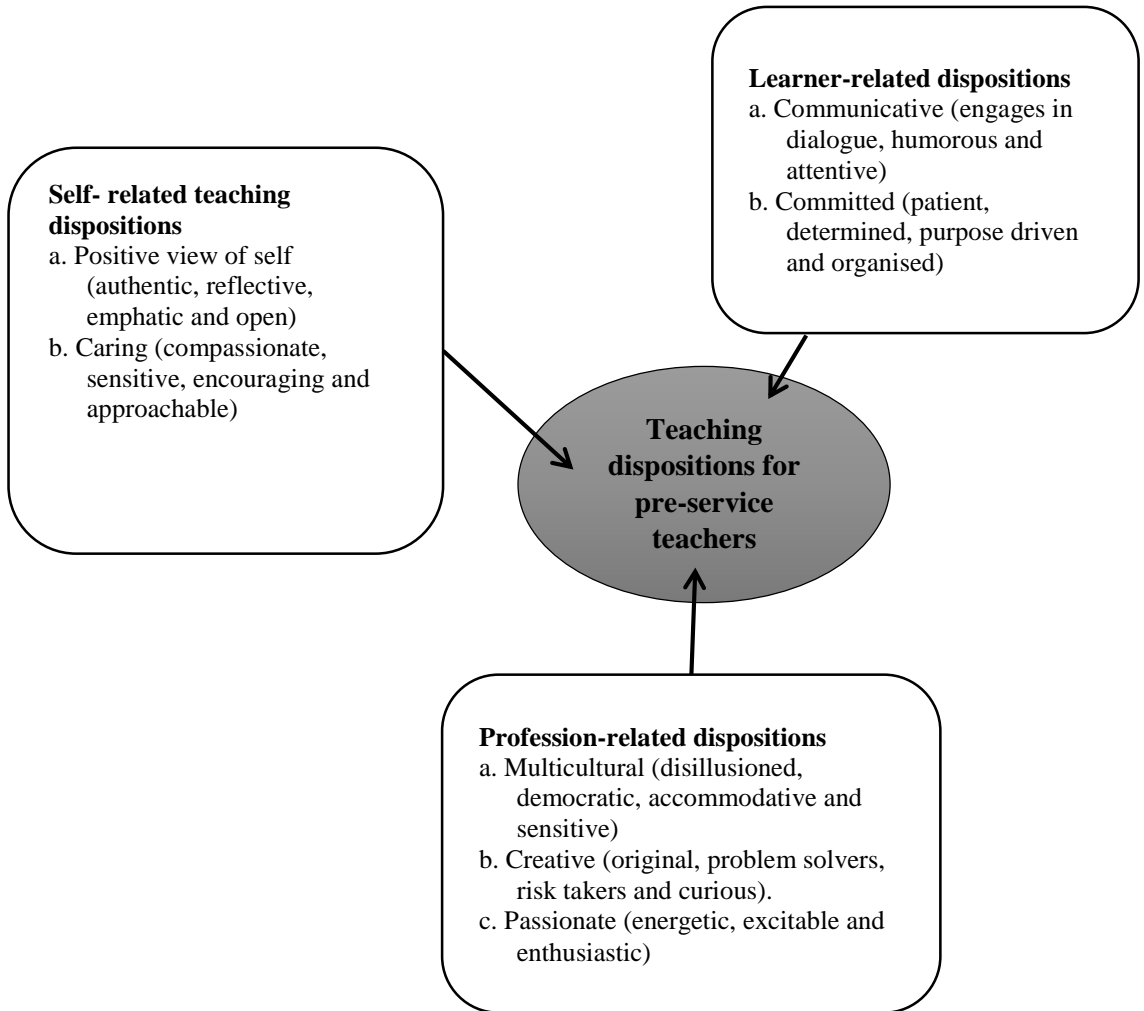
#### 4.5 Profession-related teaching dispositions

Teachers who are professionally oriented are curious about others especially those who influence their work. Carroll (2007) states that professional teachers are aware that their job takes precedence over their own beliefs and preferences to the benefit of the learners. Three sub-themes fall under the theme of profession-related teaching dispositions, namely, multicultural, creative and passionate. A multiculturally disposed teacher is democratic, sensitive and accommodative (Howard 2007; Cargill et al. 2009). Professional teachers are creative as they are curious, original, problem solving and risk takers (Faull 2009; Davis & Stewart 2005). A passionate disposition is also important for effective teachers as such teachers are energetic, excitable and enthusiastic (Faull 2009; Usher 2002).

Effective teachers are also multiculturally responsive. Howard (2007) uses the term disillusionment to refer to the disposition of culturally curious teachers. Disillusioned teachers are willing to question their own cultural practices in an effort to understand their learners' worldviews. This implies that effective teachers preside over a democratic classroom. Democratic teachers are sensitive to learner diversity in the classroom and actively seek material that accommodates all, despite differences. The South African Constitution (1996) explicitly states the need for the classroom to be a place for critical and

democratic citizenship. This makes a case for learning environments that foster critical multicultural awareness and consciousness. Howard (2007) maintains that there is need for teachers to recognise that their learners should be "educated in diverse, multicultural environments". Learners who are groomed in democratic classrooms will be well prepared to participate meaningfully in South African society. Creativity is also an important aspect of professional dispositions. Faull (2009), Davis and Stewart (2005) and Usher (2002) describe creative teachers as curious, problem solvers, original and risk takers. The characteristics listed are above are typical of teachers who experiment with different learning styles in order to improve the quality of their teaching. Faull (2009) is of the opinion that creative teachers are not afraid to take risks in order to solve localised challenges for the benefit of the learners.

One of the most important characteristics of teaching dispositions is passion. Faull (2009) describes passionate teachers as energetic, positive, enthusiastic and excited about their work. In addition, Howard (2007) maintains that passionate teachers possess an intellectual zest which influences their approach to teaching. Figure 1 provides a *tour d'horizon* of themes that emerged from the reviewed literature.



**Figure 1: Teaching dispositions (from the 5 articles reviewed)**

## 5 Conclusion and recommendations

It emerged from the review of relevant literature that teaching dispositions are deemed to be "rooted in experience, knowledge, personal beliefs, and values, but they are culturally constituted and shaped by interactions with others in social contexts, just as other dimensions of learning to teach are" (Carroll 2007:5). This suggests that there is a need to understanding teacher

effectiveness beyond skills and knowledge. It is clear that teaching dispositions are an important source of the teacher's intellectual development. If they not guided to either developing or fostering teaching dispositions, preservice teachers risk not being able to acquire both the skills and knowledges they require to be effective classroom practitioners (Carroll 2007).

By explicitly including teacher dispositions in their curricula, teacher preparation institutions will be able to categorise the dispositional requirements for effective teaching. Such categorisation is important in understanding and tracking the student teachers' dispositions before, during and after training. It is essential to acknowledge that teaching dispositions are continuously being constructed in context. In other words, dispositions and their development result from experience. Such experience may be gained in teacher preparation programmes when student teachers are engaged in simulated classroom activities. Such experiences will activate student teachers to regulate, reflect on and construct the positive dispositions that are critical for effective learning. Thus, we recognise that pre-service teachers need to be scaffolded into building positive teaching dispositions and that the teacher preparation programmes are ideally positioned to do that.

The discussion above highlights the need for a collaborative dialogue between teacher preparation institutions and practising teachers in the classroom. Such a collaboration could initiate a discourse on positive teacher dispositions and the way in which such dispositions could be embedded in the teacher preparation curriculum. The symbiotic relationship between the academic and the practice is key in forging dispositions that are both theoretical and practical in the South African context. Such a discourse could, in turn, provide an in-depth understanding of how to embed dispositions in teacher preparation curriculum.

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