

# Determining Dispositions to Teach: A Hiring Strategy

**T**ell me how you used your sense of humor to teach an important lesson.” During interviews, I use questions such as this to increase the likelihood of hiring high-quality teachers who, in addition to possessing significant knowledge and experience, have dispositions—attitudes, values, and beliefs—that are essential to enhancing learning, teaching, and school culture. Here is a research-based strategy that can be incorporated into a 20-minute interview to provide insight into an applicant’s dispositions.

To get a glimpse into a candidate’s dispositions, I might ask the applicant to describe his or her *perfect day*. One applicant sent to me, after receiving high marks from the search committee, responded, “I would sleep until noon and then lie in bed the rest of the day watching TV and eating snack foods.” This answer triggered further inquiry into the applicant’s energy and motivational levels, priorities regarding learning new things, and about the ability to engage in meaningful interactions with others. By the end of the interview, I was certain that this teacher was not a good fit for our program and he was not offered the position.

So, how can we make reliable and valid determinations about a teacher’s dispositions in the short span of an interview? Fortunately, research, with roots in perceptual psychology of the late Arthur W. Combs (1981, 1988, 1991), shows that effective teachers possess discernable dispositions (Combs called them “perceptions”) about themselves, toward students, and regarding teaching. Further, these qualities can be observed and measured during an interview through the systematic use of carefully crafted questions from which inferences about dispositions can be made (Wasicko 1977). By listening carefully to the answers, valuable insights can be garnered into applicants’ self-perceptions, how they see students, and what they believe about the nature of learning and teaching. Follow-

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ing are some of my favorite interview questions that can be used to detect these qualities.

### *How would your students describe you?*

To answer this question well, applicants will have to have some idea about what students think of them and will disclose their strengths and weaknesses without having to be asked that question directly.

Research and experience tell us that effective teachers have positive, yet realistic, self-perceptions and demonstrate an inherent ability to identify with people of diverse abilities, learning styles, and backgrounds. Positive dispositions about self are exhibited through a “can do” attitude and openness to examining diverse perspectives.

*Describe a situation in which students you taught learned a significant lesson.* This is a good question because it is so open-ended. The interviewee can take it anywhere and it gets to the root of his or

her educational philosophy and to core dispositions about students and teaching. When using this question, there are at least two things to look for. First, look for evidence that the applicant understands the difference between “teaching” and “student learning.” If the crux of the answer is not on what the students learned, that person might have a difficult time identifying with some students, colleagues, or administrators. Second, the best teachers maintain high expectations for students and believe they are worthy of significant time, thought, and effort.

Research indicates that effective teachers think students are able, worthy, and valuable, and believe that all students are capable of learning. Conversely, the worst instructors have low expectations of students, find it difficult to work with some students, and offer many excuses for why they fail.

*What kinds of problems do people bring to you?* Answers to this question can indicate if others have confidence in the person and provide insight into his or her teaching or helping style. A good follow-up question is to ask what advice was given and what, if anything, happened afterwards. This question is especially good for understanding the teacher’s dispositions regarding teaching, learning, and solving problems.

*If your life works out the best you can imagine, what will you be doing in five years?* This question is a good for two reasons. First, it tells if a person is forward-looking, if he or she can think beyond the immediate, and about the person’s aspirations. Answers such as, “I will have won the lottery and be living on my private island” or more subtle variations of “I will be in a position that better suits my needs and interests” don’t bode well for being a good fit. Second, it is a way to look for talent. Some of the best lead teachers, department heads, and future administrators have been discovered by listening to people’s aspirations. When applicants indicate that they hope to have greater responsibility or a meaningful impact on the profession, that is a good sign.

*How do you balance work and play in your life?* This is probably my favorite question. Research about teachers who maintain positive mental health (and who are fun to work with) indicates that they have found ways to balance work and play. They realize that being a teacher is more than a job but less than a life. This is usually the best question for getting people to engage and open up. Look for answers that indicate the person knows how to have responsible fun. Your ultimate goal is to hire talented people with good mental health and who are fun to be around!

To systematically and effectively infer a candidate's dispositions, there are several guidelines that must be kept in mind:

- None of the questions has an absolute right or wrong answer. The best insights are obtained by reflectively listening to the applicants' answers and then inferring their attitudes.

- Treat the answers as you would any other self-reported information, knowing that applicants will always attempt to

present themselves in the best possible light.

- Most candidates rehearse for an interview. Learning about peoples' dispositions requires getting beyond the rehearsed remarks and engaged in conversation on topics that interest them.

- Start the interview with usual questions—"Why are you a good fit for this position at this time?" or "What is it about this position that interests you?"—before moving to questions such as the ones above.

Always offer applicants an opportunity to ask questions. The type and quality of their questions provide significant insight into what the candidates see as important and into their motivation for applying to teach at your school.

"When was the last time you left school whistling and what happened to make that day so special?"

It would be great to be able to answer, "Today I significantly enhanced the educational future of our students. I

hired new teachers, all of whom have the dispositions to teach effectively and successfully!" ■

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