

## DIS POSITION PAPER

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At a recent meeting of the California Child Development Administrators Association a group of program directors from southern California reviewed and discussed several sample formats that are being considered in the development of early care and education teacher competencies. There was general agreement among us that the format and the examples of the “knowledge” and “skills” necessary for being a competent teacher of young children are appropriate. Most of us agreed that there should be some differentiation between the levels of competency and didn’t argue about exactly what terms should be used to name those levels (e.g. low, medium, and high vs. beginner, intermediate, advanced). The category of the sample formats that generated the most discussion was that of “disposition”. We all agreed that this is a key characteristic, if not the most important characteristic, that we want to know about teacher candidates when we are considering whether to hire them to work in our programs. While I’m not sure that the abundance of examples included in volume one of the *California Preschool Learning Foundations* was absolutely necessary, when it comes to defining and evaluating teacher competencies in the area of “disposition”, I would like to see lots of examples. Using the four domains in volume one of the Foundations let me present some examples of advanced level dispositions that I’d like to see in prospective teachers (if not all staff).

### **SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

- **Admits mistakes, doesn’t make excuses, and doesn’t blame others**  
This is the hardest competency area for me so why shouldn’t it be the first competency area that I evaluate in teacher candidates. And let me tell you, in my four years directing a public school district child development program I’ve made plenty of mistakes. And the biggest mistake I can make is not to admit when I’m wrong. Yes, I’ve had to apologize to parents, to teachers, to clerical staff, to specialists, to the Superintendent, and most importantly, to children. A candidate who can admit errors that they’ve made and can explain what and how they learned from their mistakes tells me a lot about that person and how they will work with children, parents, and staff.
- **Shows genuine emotion**  
The field of early care and education should not be confused with *A League of Their Own*. While “there’s no crying in baseball” we should expect, and there should be, crying in our programs. And while the crying will most often be coming from children, there are times that I expect to see staff being emotional as well. And no, it’s not realistic to think that the only emotions that our teachers should display are joy and happiness. I also like to see teachers who are able to express sadness and even a bit of anger, as long as they don’t “vent” at children or other staff in the process. Just as we accept the whole child, it is important for us to accept and value the whole teacher, including the full range of their emotions.

## LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

- **Has a passion for language development**

If a prospective teacher doesn't love language and the unique nuances of language development that we see in each child then they need to find another career. This passion for language development should include appreciation for the grasping, groping, and searching that children do in learning to speak a first and/or second language. While it is important for us to admit our own mistakes, when it comes to children it is essential that we understand that their "play" with language, including making unintentional, as well as, intentional errors is essential to how they learn. I'm looking for a teacher who finds joy in words and stories, who genuinely listens to children especially when they are rambling on about something that happened to them, or their brother, or their dog. Show me a teacher who, herself, loves playing with words, making up silly rhymes, singing off key, and dancing crazily to children's songs and I'll show you my next teacher to be hired.

- **Enthusiastically reads stories to children**

And here, don't confuse enthusiasm with raw, uncontained emotion. What I mean is that the teacher is able to match his reading of the story with the tone and mood of the book, while at the same time being sensitive to the individual child and/or group of children that he is reading to. However, there are times when I want to see unbridled excitement from a teacher when they are reading a book. And that just might be a great way to evaluate a teacher candidate; ask them to bring in and read a portion of their favorite children's book during a job interview. If I had to do this, it would be *Horton Hatches the Egg* by Dr. Seuss. I love Horton's values, his caring, his commitment, the importance of keeping one's word, and ultimately the poetic justice at the end of the story. Oh sure, I could look for, "Does the teacher ask open-ended questions at story time?" That's not the competency level I'm looking for here. I'm interested in their disposition towards books and story telling.

## ENGLISH-LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

- **Demonstrates that ENGLISH is not the ONLY language**

That means, at minimum, tries to learn to speak a few words in each of the different languages of the children, parents, or staff in your program. Certainly, learning to say *hello* shouldn't be too difficult. How about *please, thank you* and *you're welcome*? Those should all go a long way towards building relationships between a teacher and the children and parents in her program. And while learning a few key words is valuable, a more sincere effort or ability to actually speak a language other than one's primary language is something that should be valued when considering a teacher candidate. Translation: I desire candidates who speak a second language, even if they don't speak it perfectly and as long as they are "competent" in the other dispositions described in this paper. What's important is being able to make connections and communicate with others. My own experience will make this abundantly clear. Many years ago I spoke at a Los Angeles public school meeting and advocated for a new program for the children. While I can't remember all of the

details, I do remember that there were parents, school administrators, and district administrators in attendance. Spanish was the first language for most of the parents in attendance, and the school had translation equipment available so that parents could understand what I was saying. When I spoke passionately in English, advocating for this program that I thought was important for the children, the parents sat quietly listening. However, when I tried my best to make the same point, this time speaking in my broken, present-tense only, Spanish, the parents erupted into applause and hollers of support. I had been able to make that connection, even with my imperfectly spoken Spanish.

- **Understands that there is a strong connection between language and bias**  
Language is how we come to understand the world and the people around us. Growing up, at least when I was growing up, conversations with friends and with family often contained subtle, though powerful, biased comments about people of races, cultures, religions, and abilities different from my own. Sometimes these came in the form of “innocent” jokes and at other times, I was exposed to raw hate-filled and prejudiced remarks. I must accept that it will never be possible to unlearn some of the biases that came with such charged language. And so to this day, I must be vigilant to recognize and confront my own visceral, and at times biased, responses when I hear people speaking a language other than English. American, white, Christian, speakers of English are not the standard. Indeed, we often display our worldly ignorance by being unable to speak a language other than English. We must admit that all staff, whether teachers, custodians, specialists, or superintendents bring our views to the jobs we do. It may be more difficult to ascertain the disposition of prospective teachers in this area, but it is crucial that we somehow get a sense of their “world view” before hiring them.

## **MATHEMATICS**

- **Is open to experimentation and takes risks**  
Briefly, I hope to interview and hire candidates that are able to “think outside the box.” Of course, we’re all implementing a “research-based curriculum,” but I want to see a person who takes the curriculum to the limit, who uses the curriculum as a starting point, who infuses the curriculum with their own creativity, their own excitement. We talk about not wanting every child’s “cut-out pumpkin” to look exactly the same, with all of the round eyes and triangle noses glued in the exact same place. Similarly, I don’t want every teacher implementing the curriculum in exactly the same way. And while scripted curriculums practically require this, even theme-based or other widely used developmentally appropriate curriculums may lead teachers to habitual instructional practices and lessons. Perhaps during the interview process we should ask, “What is one of the wildest projects or classroom environments that you’ve ever planned?” Or, “Tell us about a lesson or project that went in a totally different direction than you expected – what did you learn from this?”

- **Believes that children and parents have a lot to teach us**

If young children learn primarily through play, then we, as early care and education professionals, need to let them play. And while they're playing, we need to observe, be sensitive to, and respond to the lesson-rich opportunities that children are giving to us. As is often said when working with infants and toddlers: the children ARE the curriculum. I look for teachers who can take their cues from the children. Hopefully, they can develop close and trusting relationships with both the children and the parents so that their programs truly reflect the interests of those we serve. Candidates must not be set in their ways or think that they know THE way to teach all children. In my first year as a teacher in a New York City preschool on Roosevelt Island, I learned a valuable lesson that I will never forget. I remember in my college training and in one of the classrooms where I worked as an assistant teacher being introduced to using a "water table" filled with rice instead of water. The children scooped, poured, measured, and touched the rice. I must admit, I too enjoyed running my fingers through the rice with the children as they played. That is until one morning when a parent approached me and pointed out that in the country where she came from this would be a sacrilege, that there was enough rice in the table to feed children and families for days. This changed my own disposition forever regarding food in the classroom whether it be rice or beans in a tub, elbow macaroni glued on paper, or Cheerios made into a necklace. In many areas of the world, food is precious and not to be played with. We and the staff we hire should all be open and eager to learn from the children and families in our programs.