



# Learning to learn:

Positive dispositions as a 'learning curriculum'



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Dispositions for learning have been discussed in the early years' context for some time but have recently been considered with more significance. It has been acknowledged that positive dispositions are essential to children being confident and capable learners. It is also important that educators attend to practices and environments that create the right conditions to enable the development of positive dispositions.

Educators have often found it a challenge to have a clear understanding of the concept of dispositions, most commonly because of the lack of a single clear definition. This makes both learning and then applying effective teaching practices that develop positive dispositions more challenging.

Though the concept of a disposition comes originally from developmental psychology<sup>1</sup> it now appears more frequently in relation to children's learning and has links to thinking and theories of school readiness, a topic of much public and professional debate in relation to education.

The Macquarie dictionary defines disposition as a natural or acquired tendency, inclination, or habit in a person or thing. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) specifically refers to positive dispositions, recognising their significance as a learning outcome<sup>2</sup>. In doing so it demonstrates the importance of their development and a shift away from an emphasis solely on more recognised areas such as knowledge and skills<sup>3</sup>. It is a very different type of learning and includes tendencies to respond to situations in certain ways<sup>4</sup>. By intentionally 'placing dispositions in the list of educational goals (educators) are likely to pay more deliberate attention to ways in which desirable ones can be strengthened.'<sup>5</sup>

The EYLF uses Carr's (2001) description of dispositions as

“enduring habits of mind and actions, and tendencies to respond in characteristic ways to situations, for example, maintaining an optimistic outlook, being willing to persevere, approaching new experiences with confidence”<sup>2</sup>.

There has been a great deal of discussion regarding how the development of dispositions and an individual's inbuilt characteristics and personality relate. Many people believe that children have natural ways of doing things and of being, perhaps as part of their biological make-up.

It is important for educators to acknowledge that children have the capacity to develop positive dispositions, though not all children possess or apply these 'habits of the mind'<sup>6</sup> as part of their normal manner of play and learning. The idea of developing dispositions is suggested as becoming 'more or less disposed' to respond in a particular way rather than acquiring them.<sup>7</sup>

“Learning dispositions can be construed as default responses in the presence of uncertain learning opportunities and circumstances.”<sup>7</sup> (emphasis in original)

Arthur Costa (2000) describes habits of mind as 'the characteristics of what intelligent people do when they are confronted with problems' where the solution is not seen immediately and lead to productive behaviours<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Carr, M. (2001) *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Dispositions* (London, Paul Chapman).

<sup>2</sup> DEEWR, (2009) *Belonging, Being and Becoming*, Early Years Learning Framework.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur, L. et al (2012) 5th Edition, *Programming & Planning in Early Childhood Settings*, Cengage Learning, Melb. Victoria.

<sup>4</sup> Katz, L. cited in Carr, M (2001) *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Dispositions* (London, Paul Chapman).

<sup>5</sup> Katz, L. (1993), *Dispositions: Definitions and Implications for Early Childhood Practices*, Perspectives from ERIC/ECCE: a monograph series (Urbana, IL, ERIC Clearinghouse on ECCE).

<sup>6</sup> Costa, A. (2000), Describing the Habits of mind, in: A.L. Costa & B. Kallick (Eds) *Habits of mind: discovering and exploring*, Assoc. For Supervision and Curriculum Development.

<sup>7</sup> Claxton, G & Carr, M. (2004) *A Framework for Teaching Learning: the dynamics of disposition* University of Bristol UK.



“In this way children are able to approach a situation or circumstances in an intelligent manner, applying positive learning dispositions...”

“When we teach for the Habits of Mind, we are interested...in how students behave when they don’t know the answer. Habits of Mind are performed in response to questions and problems.”<sup>7</sup>

Dispositions have also been described as an ‘accumulation of motivation, situation and skill’<sup>8</sup>. In this way children are able to approach a situation or circumstances in an intelligent manner, applying positive learning dispositions that have progressively developed over time in a supportive environment to the point where they appear to happen naturally.

Margaret Carr describes the eagerness of learners as ‘being ready, willing and able to participate in various ways’<sup>1</sup> as outlined below –

- **Being ready** – seeing themselves as a participating learner
- **Being willing** – recognising that this place is (or is not) a place for learning
- **Being able** – having the abilities and funds of knowledge that will contribute to being ready and willing

The educator then assists children with whatever the next step might be and scaffolds their involvement until they are able to gradually withdraw as the child becomes more capable on their own. Carr then identifies particular domains of learning within which children can be ready, willing and able –

- Taking an interest
- Being involved
- Persisting with difficulty or uncertainty
- Communicating with others
- Taking responsibility

An educator can consider each of these domains; for example, if a child is ready to be involved or willing to persist, to assist them to decide their own role in the future. That is, how the educator intends to support learning when engaging with children.

In later work Carr and Claxton considered how dispositions grow or progress in their development and ‘what we do that strengthens or weakens them.’<sup>7</sup> They suggest it is the strength of the tendencies to engage more or less frequently, appropriately or skilfully that changes over time ‘and which teachers influence, knowingly or not ‘through the setting they create.’<sup>7</sup> They describe progress as change in three dimensions of this strength:

- **Robustness** – the tendency to respond in a learning – positive way even when conditions are not supportive, such as a toddler no longer needing to reassure themselves their mother is in sight to continue to be involved in an activity
- **Breadth** – concerns the development of perception – realising the habits that have stood you in good stead in one domain are also applicable and useful in another – the application to completing a jigsaw puzzle being applied to creating a story.
- **Richness** – persisting, questioning or collaborating can develop in flexibility and sophistication and may become more subtle and relate to what support is available. Persistence might move from not giving up to later involving emotional maintenance or getting assistance.

*Adapted from ‘A Framework for Teaching Learning: the dynamics of disposition’*

<sup>1</sup> Carr, M. (2001) *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Dispositions* (London, Paul Chapman).

<sup>6</sup> Costa, A. (2000), Describing the Habits of mind, in: A.L. Costa & B. Kallick (Eds) *Habits of mind: discovering and exploring*, Assoc. For Supervision and Curriculum Development.

<sup>7</sup> Claxton, G & Carr, M. (2004) *A Framework for Teaching Learning: the dynamics of disposition* University of Bristol UK.

<sup>8</sup> Carr, M. (2001) Cited in Arthur, L. et al (2012) 5th Edition, *Programming & Planning in Early Childhood Settings*, Cengage Learning, Melb. Victoria.

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Carr also outlines that a child may act differently in different situations because dispositions may become attached to activities and places<sup>1</sup>. They may display confidence in conversations with an educator but not so in considering entering a play situation with peers. The context and relationships are important aspects in both developing and applying dispositions across a range of situations and circumstances as they relate to a child's social identity and feelings of belonging.<sup>9</sup> Children need to feel secure about themselves and the people around them.<sup>2</sup>

Feeling secure is an important condition that needs to be present to enable children to participate freely, to engage and become involved<sup>2</sup>. Conditions are a set of circumstances that always exist and can be relied upon to provide a foundation for these important contributors to positive learning dispositions. Educators create the conditions within the setting and it is important to have a clear idea of the learning outcomes that are trying to be achieved. The EYLF gives educators confidence in this regard.

More recently there has been consideration of settings as 'learning communities' that have favourable conditions that support more sustained thinking and involvement by children. A learning community is a setting

“in which useful resources (are) available, interesting projects invite children's engagement, expectations encourage children to sustain their interests over long periods, and adults and children model and assist each other, sharing the initiation and leadership of learning episodes.”<sup>7</sup>

It is in these environments that children learn how to learn, developing and applying positive dispositions in different measures, at different times and in different circumstances. They will not always be confident or successful and rely on

trusted educators to support and encourage them when required. Knowledgeable and skillful educators are integral to the environment creating the right conditions to enable children to progressively become more capable learners.

Carr and Claxton also identify four different types of learning environments created by educators in relation to whether they encourage children to 'learn how to learn' and the approach and actions of educators as part of them. They outline these as -

- **Prohibiting** – one in which it is impossible or dangerous to express a particular kind of learning response
- **Affording** – one which provides opportunities for the development of a range of learning attributes
- **Inviting** – one that not only affords opportunities but highlights them as valued activity
- **Potentiating** – one that not only invites the expression of certain dispositions, but actively stretch and develop them and shares responsibility and power amongst educators and learners.

They also address aspects of the teacher's role differentiating between when they may -

- **Explain** – make clear the learning curriculum drawing attention to the development of learning as valued goal
- **Orchestrate** – organise the resources and experiences in a way that creates an inviting and potentiating environment for all the children
- **Commentate** – on processes and products as they are happening, scaffolding children's learning path and providing feedback
- **Model** – the responses of an effective learner, often spontaneously

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<sup>2</sup> DEEWR, (2009) *Belonging, Being and Becoming*, Early Years Learning Framework.

<sup>7</sup> Claxton, G & Carr, M. (2004) *A Framework for Teaching Learning: the dynamics of disposition* University of Bristol UK.

<sup>9</sup> Goodenow, C. Cited in Carr, M. (2001) *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Dispositions* (London, Paul Chapman).



“The educator’s role is clearly important in the search for understanding of dispositions in children’s learning.”

The educator’s role is clearly important in the search for understanding of dispositions in children’s learning. Though the environment is identified as the other important ingredient, the environment is the product of the decisions educators make within the resources available to them. There may be some limitations in this regard, but there is more scope in regard to the approach and actions of educators. If educators are to create positive habits of mind then practices need to be deliberate and intentional.

Lillian Katz outlined seven reasons for including dispositions as educational goals though –

“The most important reason is that the acquisition of knowledge and skills alone does not guarantee they will be used and applied.”<sup>5</sup>

There is sound reason for including dispositions as an outcome in the Early Years Learning Framework and as part of its definition of wellbeing. It challenges educators to consider a ‘learning curriculum’ in addition to knowledge and skills and to be thoughtful about whether teaching practices will develop positive dispositions or inhibit them. It provokes educators to question whether children’s learning environments grow ‘dispositions such as curiosity, persistence and creativity that enable children to participate in and gain from learning’<sup>2</sup>.

## FURTHER READING

Costa, A. (2000), Describing the Habits of mind, in: A.L. Costa & B, Kallick (Eds) *Habits of mind: discovering and exploring*, Assoc. For Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Katz, L. (1993), *Dispositions: Definitions and Implications for Early Childhood Practices, Perspectives from ERIC/ECCE: a monograph series* (Urbana, IL, ERIC Clearinghouse on ECCE).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Are you able to identify when children are unsure, hesitant or don’t know what to do? Are you confident in how to respond to develop a more positive approach by them? How confident are you in responding and supporting children to develop a more positive approach?
- What dispositions can you identify in your children? How might they be strengthened or transferred to another context? Are there others that could be developed?
- What practices might need to change to help and guide children to develop positive dispositions?
- Can you identify other positive dispositions that you think are important in addition to those in the EYLF?
- Are you using your observations and thoughts regarding dispositions in your planning and documentation?
- How might your environment better develop positive dispositions?
- How might you communicate the value of positive dispositions and children ‘learning how to learn’ with parents? Will this help you with the notion of preparing children for the transition to the school learning environment?

<sup>2</sup> DEEWR, (2009) *Belonging, Being and Becoming*, Early Years Learning Framework.

<sup>5</sup> Katz, L. (1993), *Dispositions: Definitions and Implications for Early Childhood Practices, Perspectives from ERIC/ECCE: a monograph series* (Urbana, IL, ERIC Clearinghouse on ECCE).