

# “Dispositions” Isn’t A Dirty Word

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Early childhood teachers guide young children’s learning in ways that support their development. Traditionally, foremost in teachers’ minds is what knowledge and skills children should acquire. Today, however, many teachers are becoming aware of the pivotal role of dispositions in the education of children. Te Whāriki, our New Zealand Early Childhood curriculum says that “the combined knowledge, skills and attitudes formed a child’s working theory, which then is seen to help the child develop dispositions that encourages learning to occur.” (Ministry of Education, 1996). Knowledge, skills **and** the disposition to use them are inextricably connected.

Teachers need to be working with parents to identify what it is that you both value and want to promote within your setting. What do we want the culture of our place to be? What is it that we value here? Hope I’m right in saying that currently most early childhood settings ask the parents of new children starting, “What are your aspirations for your child? What is it that you want for them while they are with us?” With parents’ focus often being on their child ‘being school ready,’ how do we as teachers broaden their view so that they think ‘what do we want children to be like as an adults?’ We need them to realise that this means thinking about **all** children, not just their child - **all** children in our community. Ron Ritchhart says that when he asks parents this they tend to come up with a huge list of dispositions, not skills and knowledge. It’s about early childhood laying the foundations of education. Dispositions are the residuals of education, what’s still there over one year on, two years on, not the results of check lists or tests.

Rosemary Hipkins writes in her article *Thinking About Key Competencies in the Light of the Intention to Foster Lifelong Learning*

“It is no longer enough to train our future workers to be obedient, punctual and loyal. They will also need to know how to be more self-reliant, critical, and creative in their thinking and be willing to use their initiative. They will need to recognise their personal limitations and be willing to keep on learning.” (Hipkins, 2005, as cited in Snape, 2007)

We have in early childhood moved from planning themes and checklists, to an emphasis on the learning partnerships between teachers, whānau, tamariki, places and things. A sociocultural approach...Te Whāriki.

## ***So why learning dispositions?***

Margaret Carr (Claxton and Carr, 2002) states that

“The fundamental purpose of education for the 21st Century it is argued, is not so much the transmission of particular bodies of knowledge, skill and understanding as facilitating the development of the capacity and the confidence to engage in lifelong learning.”

Guy Claxton goes on to say that “Central to this enterprise, is the development of positive learning dispositions, such as resilience, playfulness and reciprocity.” (Carr and Claxton, 2004)

Many teachers are working with a dispositional framework to analyse and describe the learning they see. Some of this noticing and recognising is documented in Learning Stories as ‘What learning do I think happened here?’ Teachers are foregrounding dispositional learning by describing learning as being able to *try something new, being playful, persisting, using trial and error, making mistakes, choosing hard work, keeping going when things get tough, being brave and curious*. These kinds of dispositions to learn will support learning for a lifetime, no matter the subject, interest, or level of challenge because they cross traditional curriculum boundaries and act as motivator. This results in learners putting effort and practice into the learning goals they set themselves. Learning dispositions describe what it means to be a learner in the 21st century. They make instant and direct connections to the Strands of Te Whāriki.

## ***So how do we define dispositions?***

Lilian Katz defines dispositions as “relatively enduring habits of mind or characteristic ways of responding to experience across types of situations.” (Katz, 1993). Many writers describe learning dispositions as a combination of learning inclinations, sensitivities to occasion, skills, participation repertoires and “Patterns of learning” - patterns of behaviour, thinking and interaction. Dispositional language describes the ‘Child as Learner’ and supports their own thinking about themselves as “I am someone who... tries new things..., keeps going when it is hard... knows when to stop and ask..., learns from making mistakes”. (Ministry of Education, 2012)

## ***So how do we grow them and how do they link to learning?***

Effective early childhood teachers recognize their roles in strengthening desirable dispositions in children. They know their actions and attitudes send implicit messages. When teachers display curiosity and creativity and value the same dispositions in children, these are likely to flourish in the setting. Good teachers acknowledge and appreciate children's efforts. They provide specific feedback, such as "You used a lot of colors," instead of making general statements, such as "Good job." and they also refrain from using extrinsic rewards like prizes or food. In addition, the teacher who establishes a culture that values cooperation instead of competition, creates the conditions that support and encourage children to get along as they play and work together. So the kind of feedback that we give children can have a huge impact on the development of their disposition to learn.

In his book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman explains that children's ability to learn depends greatly on how much the important adults in their lives have given them these seven key ingredients (adapted from *Heart Start: The Emotional Foundations of School Readiness* by the National Center for Clinical Infant Programs) (Goleman, 1995).

- **Confidence** - a sense of control and mastery of one's body, behavior, and world;
- the child's sense that he is more likely than not to succeed at what he undertakes and that adults will be helpful.

- **Curiosity** - the sense that finding out about things is positive and leads to pleasure.

- **Intentionality** - the wish and capacity to have an impact and to act upon that with persistence. This is related to a sense of competence, of being effective.

- **Self-control** - the ability to modulate and control one's own actions in age-appropriate ways; a sense of inner control.

- **Relatedness** - the ability to engage with others based on the sense of being understood by and understanding others.

- **Capacity to communicate** - the wish and ability to verbally exchange ideas, feelings, and concepts with others. This is related to a sense of trust in others and pleasure in engaging with others, including adults.

- **Cooperativeness** - the ability to balance one's own needs with those of others in group activity.

### ***So how do we get parents onboard?***

Ron Richhard talks about how parents often worry that when you focus on dispositions that something is being left out or that there is an imbalance. We need to share with them that we are not leaving anything behind when we focus on dispositions, we are in fact lifting the bar! We need to find ways for parents to understand that dispositions can't be directly taught, they are learnt over time. Children grow into the intellectual life around them,

so they need to ask themselves "what life are we surrounding children with?"

Richhard (personal communication, 2013) says, "Parents want to hear from the teacher about their child and we should want to talk with them also, enlisting them as allies." We need to feel confident about what it is that we want to share. He feels that there needs to be a structure to these meetings and it is imperative that we link what we are doing in our setting to a research base. It is important as it gives parents a sense of where these ideas came from, it gives them a chance to have some link back to resources and it gives us credibility as professionals as we link back to some key ideas - we are not just making things up as we go along; there is a body of research in education that we can draw on.

We need to provide parents with a rationale for change. Why is it different from when they were children? Why do we need to be looking at things differently? We need to help connect parents to some familiar experiences so that they can see that what we are doing is not just 'education talk'.

We also need to unpack what core practices the setting is going to be involved in. Videos will often help to demystify what these look like. Helping parents become familiar with these practices will allow them to recognise why you are doing what you are doing. Let parents know that we are researchers and learners too. We are learning from best practice, and are sharing this knowledge with them.

Finally provide specific things that parents can do. Parents just don't want to know about what is happening in your setting they also want to be helpful, they want some very specific things that they as parents can do.

## **Talking with parents...**

- \* Links to research base
- \* Provide a reason for the change from the status quo
- \* Connect to familiar experiences or contexts
- \* Unpack core practices with rich examples
- \* Provide specific things that parents can do & actions they can take home

In the setting I worked in we set ourselves a challenge to create presentations, highlighting the value of dispositional learning to share with our parents as well as our primary and secondary colleagues. This was a huge step outside our comfort zone, and a very BIG step in the direction in being able to articulate clearly what we were learning.

You can see from some of the feedback we received that it was a worthwhile experience.

*"I was amazed how much EC is aware of secondary curriculum - but not the other way around...I want to work with students at secondary with ways to drive their own learning. Taking ownership of the process." (Secondary)*

*"The kindy 'learners' are 21st Century 'learners' - using technology, self-motivated, willing to explore and experiment...We need to be aware of the ownership students must have of their own learning in order to be successful and life long learners." (Secondary)*

*"It has added to our discussions around ways to organise learning to personalise learning and take the linearity out." (Primary)*

*"The dispositional learning was very thought-provoking and informative." (Primary)*

*"We're exploring ways to strengthen the community's understanding of learning." (Primary)*

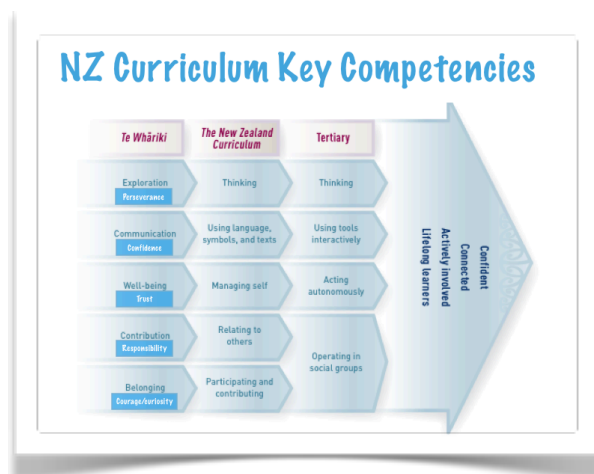
*"Learning knowledge not necessarily fact or skill, I think that it's about doing and creating." (Parent)*

*"Self esteem I never thought how kindy played a role in that...I guess I just assumed that that was our job, that we could teach him that." (Parent)*

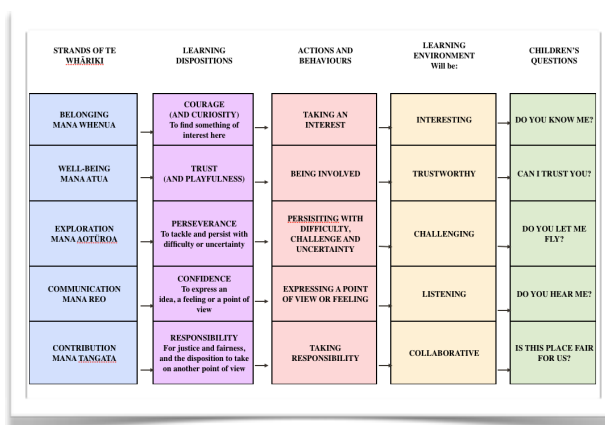
### So where to from here?

Parents enjoy their child being the focus of attention and being engaged in conversations about their child. It is through face-to-face discussions about what learning is occurring and how it can grow that parents' interest can be sparked. If these conversations are to occur then teachers need to be confident in articulating the learning, and this will only happen when they develop their own understanding through Professional Learning opportunities, reading current theory and research, as well as engaging in regular pedagogical discussions around what they have learnt and how to implement what they've learnt into their environment, alongside their colleagues. In our setting we found the most effective way to build our confidence in articulating the learning was chatting briefly with parents when we handed over our Learning Stories, as a way of sparking their interest.

The key competency cross-section alignment diagram may also be a useful prompt when discussing learning with parents. It shows the continuum of, and links between, dispositional learning and the key competencies defined for schools. What we describe as dispositional learning can be seen from the diagram to benefit their child in the school environment. Margaret Carr says "Learning dispositions and key competencies share some very similar features, and we now have a great opportunity to build learning pathways from these frameworks." (Carr, 2006).



Margaret Carr's Learning Disposition diagram is also incredibly helpful, not only as a tool when writing assessment but also when looking at how we operated as teachers. It helps teachers to focus in, to look in-depth at their interactions and the learning environment. If we want children to tackle and persevere with difficulty or uncertainty then we need to look at our interactions with them and how our environments are set up to support the development of this disposition. Do we let them fly with their ideas and do our learning environments offer challenges?



Teachers need to reflect on whether the rosters, routines and rules of their settings impact on opportunities for children to have "enough time to develop and pursue in depth the complex problems that can arise when children go beyond the superficial use of materials into enriched exploration and experimentation." (DeVries, 2002).

In a setting I worked in we had reflected on whether using the timer on the computer to monitor turns was fair? After several discussions we recognised that children were not being supported in going further into 'enriched exploration and experimentation'. With the children we developed a list process instead. Children put their names onto a list; those that were keen, always placed their name up as soon as they arrived, when a child finished his work he moved his name over to the completed list and went to find the child whose turn it was next, or sent a runner to find them! This supported

them in being able to take the time that they needed to finish what they started and alongside this there were opportunities for them to take responsibility as well.

Guy Claxton (1999) says learning is about

“...having the ability to engage intellectually with uncertainty, and to persist in the face of difficulty, when it matters. It is about which learning invitations to accept, and which to decline, based on an astute appraisal of your goals and resources, and not on insecurity and self-doubt. It is about having a varied toolkit of learning approaches and the ability, the courage and the enthusiasm to deploy them effectively.”

Shouldn’t we want to give our children this toolkit too?  
Carol Dweck’s work on Mindset supports the focus on

**“Children need to be taught that learning and education is about stretching their learning muscles. Practice makes the learning muscles stronger.”**

Claxton (2006)

dispositional learning that underpins Te Whāriki and The Key Competencies. This short extract demonstrates one of the many ideas she explores

“In a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment.” (Dweck, 2008).

Her message is that the way our children view their own intelligence largely determines how it will develop. How children see themselves as learners will impact on how they will learn. This means that the kind of language we use with children can have a huge impact on the development of their disposition to learn, and, therefore, it is important to not only incorporate dispositional language into your assessment documentation but into your every day interactions with children as well.

You have an opportunity to change the culture of your place based on what you and your community value. Whether you choose to develop presentations, display planning stories, foreground dispositional learning in your Learning Stories or imbed dispositional language into the culture of your centre the important thing is that you start.

I would like to finish by sharing with you one of my favourite TED talks by Ken Robinson. He shares a poem written by W B Yeats that went...

“Had I the heavens’ embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half light,  
I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.”

Ken says, “Every day, everywhere, children spread their dreams beneath our feet, and we should tread softly.”



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