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## Dispositions

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# Knowledge, understanding, and the disposition to seek both

by Lilian G. Katz

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at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign) and is Co-Director of the Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting (CEEP) at the University of Illinois. Dr. Katz served as Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education for 33 years and as Past President of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and is Editor of the first on-line peer reviewed trilingual early childhood journal, *Early Childhood Research & Practice*.

During the last two decades federal and state educational agencies have put forward national and state standards for academic achievement for all of our children at all levels of education. Invariably, the main purposes of such standards are stated in terms of what all children “should know and be able to do.” Thus far no reference to goals such as the dispositions to use the knowledge, and to be willing to do what they are expected to become able to do, have been seen. In other words, these national and state documents omit reference to the importance of young children “wanting to know” and becoming “eager to do” — or in any other sense, strengthening and supporting positive dispositions to go on learning and to use what is learned. Furthermore, performance standards that emphasize the acquisition of *knowledge* tend to omit reference to the importance of *understanding* the knowledge, or reference to the disposition to seek understanding.

For children growing up to become responsible participants in a democracy, the disposition to seek understanding of the complex issues and decisions for which we all share responsibility should be a major goal of education at every level. At the preschool level this goal means supporting young children’s natural nosiness about things and events around them worth understanding. The disposition to seek understanding is one of several important inborn dispositions that early childhood educators should strive to support and strengthen, by providing a wide range of opportunities for young children to explore and investigate important aspects of their environments and experiences.

Similarly, the important goal that all of our children become able to read — specifically: being able to do it — should be extended to include the importance of teaching them in such a way that the *disposition to become habitual readers* — careful and thoughtful ones — is also fostered, and is not damaged by premature and boring instructional strategies.

I have referred here to only two examples of dispositions: 1) the disposition to seek understanding, and 2) the disposition to read (i.e., to be a reader). As I have already suggested, the first one is most likely inborn in all of our little ones, though probably it may be stronger in some than in others. To build the disposition to seek knowledge and understanding implies that our curriculum strategies and teaching methods must ensure that young children have frequent opportunities:

- to explore their environment
- to observe significant activities, objects, and events and to investigate them in depth
- to look for evidence with which to answer their own questions about these real phenomena
- to challenge as well as appreciate each other’s explanations of daily events
- to ask the adults and older children in their daily environments to help deepen their understanding of what goes on around them and within them.

The term ‘understanding’ is introduced here to alert us to the issue that acquiring knowledge, in and of itself, is not a sufficient goal. Deepening understanding related to that knowledge seems to be equally important to the acquisition of facts, information, and knowledge. I think it also helps to keep in mind that all of us *know* many things that we do not necessarily *understand*, or *understand fully*. For example, I know only too well that airplanes can fly. But I am frequently disturbed by the fact that I do not really understand how that is possible. How can objects so large and so heavy with wings that don’t even flap, stay up in the air? And I know that my cell phone works (at least most of the time!) but I certainly don’t yet understand how it does so. Whether such understandings are important is another discussion. But to have the life-long disposition to try to understand the complex issues that we are responsible for — that we must vote for — or against — is surely one

important criterion by which to judge what should be a major goal of education for all of us.

In the early years many young children are offered experiences that help them to *know* that some things can float and some cannot, that magnets stick to some things but not other things. But we can reassure them that their fuller and deeper *understanding* of the observed phenomenon will come as they get older and learn many other related things. Though I do sometimes wonder about how well we grown-ups really *understand* magnetism. By the way, how much does it matter? How could we decide the answer to that question?

### Implications for teaching

What does matter is that the way we introduce knowledge to our youngsters does not in any way undermine the disposition to strive for deeper understanding of what may at first seem like magic. Let's resist the temptation to introduce young children to topics such as mysteries or magic. On the contrary, we should be exposing children to important phenomena around them so that we ourselves are models of the disposition to wonder about the causes of things and to model or exhibit the disposition to pursue and eventually achieve understanding.

While knowledge can be learned from instruction and from explanations, from illustrations and lessons, dispositions cannot. As already suggested, some of the most important dispositions are most likely inborn in all of us: the disposition to learn (not always what we want children to learn!), the disposition to be nosey, to explore, to pry and to investigate, and so forth, are part of our human nature (and can be seen in kittens and puppies and other young mammals as well). But many dispositions are learned from being around people who exhibit them and are visible models of them.

As parents and teachers of young children, we can be observable models of curiosity, of striving to unravel a puzzling event, of wondering why a particular plant in the garden the children are cultivating does not seem to be doing well. In such cases, when the teacher gathers the young gardeners the next day and says to them something like, "Remember yesterday we noticed that one of the potato plants didn't seem to be growing? Well, I looked it up (or I called the local nursery or a neighbor who is a gardener) to find out

what might have happened and what we can do . . .". In cases such as these, in the real and natural course of events, the children can observe an adult exhibit the disposition to pursue an interest and strive for deeper knowledge and understanding.

In the normal course of life in a preschool or kindergarten class there are many real events and predicaments that could provoke the teacher to follow-up in this way: genuinely modeling the disposition to seek deeper understanding and knowledge of events around them. I recall observing a kindergarten teacher in northern California some time ago who greeted a child on her arrival by saying to her: "Remember yesterday you asked how many different kinds of bridges there are? I found this book in my local library that has pictures of lots of different kinds of bridges . . .". The teacher's behavior was real and genuine, and easily a model of the disposition to follow-up queries and support an interest.

It could also happen that when children are working on a particular project — investigating something around them in depth, for example the local supermarket — the teacher might be asked a question by one of the children that she can be reasonably sure another child across the room would know more about. In such a case she could say, in a genuine and serious way, "I think Greg knows more about this than I do. His mom works at the supermarket. Ask him what he thinks might be the answer to your question." In such situations the teacher models the disposition to seek help from others likely to know more about the topic.

In terms of building and strengthening the important disposition to be a (life-long) reader, teachers and parents can respond in such predicaments by urging the children to look at the books in the book corner — the books they have collected on the relevant topic. Frequent experience of the usefulness of reading can help build a strong disposition to use reading and to deeply grasp its value in the early years — from their own experience as well as from the adult models around them. The availability of genuine observable models of important dispositions is much more likely to be effective than lecturing and preaching about the importance of books and of liking them. Early opportunities to seek knowledge and understanding and to observe adults' acting out those dispositions in genuine ways can help build important life-long dispositions in our children.

## Beginnings Workshop

Let's resist the temptation to introduce young children to topics such as mysteries or magic.



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## Cultivating a reflective disposition for tools: teaching and learning

by Wendy Cividanes and Debbie Lebo

*"Reflection is turning a topic over in various aspects and in various lights so that nothing significant about it shall be overlooked — almost as one might turn a stone over to see what its hidden side is like or what is covered by it."*

John Dewey, *How We Think* (1910)

A century ago, progressive educator John Dewey wrote about the importance of reflection in the teaching and learning process. For Dewey, reflection offered a way for teachers to reorganize their thinking, look at all sides of a situation, and avoid the impulse to do the same old things in the same old ways. Katz (1993) proposed that this kind of reflection can become a 'habit of mind' — a disposition — for teachers. In our current age of standards and standardization, we believe it is time to slow down and revisit these ideas and the foundations that underlie a reflective disposition for teaching and learning. In our work as teacher educators, we feel the pressure and consequences of a 'drive-through' professional development culture; teachers express concern that reflective, deeply child-centered teaching has been replaced with prescribed, 'teacher-proof' curriculums and communication tools, check-box assessments, and 'quick fix' teaching strategies. We have a sense of urgency to invest in something very different for our field.

### The importance of a reflective disposition

For us, a reflective disposition represents engagement in the complexity of teaching and learning. Because each child and each teaching situation is unique, effective teachers must continuously reflect on their responses to everything that happens. No one set of strategies or techniques can work for all teachers, with all children, or in all circumstances. Instead, teaching requires a mindset, or disposition, for constant, sensitive, skillful, and *reflective* decision making. Teachers, then, need and deserve time, tools, and forums that

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cultivate a reflective disposition in their own professional learning.

### Reflecting on teaching and learning

We believe that professional learning experiences should actively engage teachers in reflective practices that bring theory to life and real life to theory. Consider this photograph and observation of 3-year-old Ryan.



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS

When the teacher said the sky was getting dark and it looked like rain, Ryan looked up from the puzzle he was working on and frowned. He strongly said, "I don't want it to get dark. I don't want it to rain."

His teacher heard him and responded, "But rain will make the flowers grow." Ryan stayed firm on his position: "I don't want the flowers to grow. I don't want the grass to grow." Then the rain started. The teacher said, "It's raining now." Ryan ran to the closest window which was well above his eye level. He stepped on some nearby blocks, trying to get up closer to the window ledge. He slipped a bit, and stepped back down. He spotted a nearby chair, slid it right over, and climbed up. Now he could see the falling rain. A teacher saw him and asked him to get down from the chair. He did, but stayed close, sitting on a nearby chair. When he noticed me watching him, he said, "I want it to stop raining." He told me to look out the window for him, asking "Did it stop yet?" I looked and told him there were just a few drops coming down now. He crinkled and squinted his eyes thoughtfully and said softly, "I want to hold that rain."

As you think about Ryan's experience, reflect on the following questions:

- What captures your attention in this story?
- What details do you notice in his words and actions?
- What ideas could Ryan be exploring? What could he be trying to accomplish?
- How do the physical space and materials support or limit his exploration?
- What other perspectives should we consider here?
- What values, philosophy, or desired outcomes would you want to influence your response to Ryan?

These are the kinds of questions we use to help teachers think through the complexity of their work. Teachers reflect on classroom observations after they have occurred, make meaning of these observations, and consider opportunities and possibilities for action. As teachers become skilled in this kind of reflection, they improve their ability to make effective decisions on the spot as classroom events unfold each day. This disciplined process cultivates a reflective disposition for teaching and learning.

We believe that teachers should be given ample time and support to reflect on observations like this one of Ryan and the rain. When teachers are given a structure for this type of reflection, including a protocol of guiding questions, we find that a rich discussion emerges. Dialogue often centers on our shared curiosity about Ryan's perspective; we pay attention to his competent problem-solving skills and his unique way of getting answers to his questions. Teachers are interested in meeting up with Ryan's mind and supporting his exploration. With this structure in place, teachers generate a rich range of possible responses and opportunities to further both Ryan's learning, *and their own*.

Contrast this with the typical reaction teachers might have to Ryan in a less reflective environment. Without adequate time, support, and structure, teachers tend to focus on 'quick-fix' techniques to address Ryan's behavior rather than thinking in a deeper, more meaningful way about the countless possibilities for teaching and learning that exist in this one moment with Ryan.

### **A forum for reflection: Communities of practice**

We have found that 'communities of practice' offer a useful forum for helping teachers reflect on their work. Communities of practice are groups of individuals with a shared interest in their work who interact regularly with a mutual commitment to deepen their knowledge and skills (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). They can come in a variety of sizes and forms, from very

small to very large, and from very informal to very structured, and can include members from different organizations or from the same organization (Wenger, 1998). Although the model may vary in form and structure, some elements are always present. Members commit to spending regular, consistent time with each other, listening deeply, and sharing their unique perspectives. Group discussion centers on a topic of interest to all members specifically related to their work with children and families. Communities of practice benefit from members' educational, experiential, cultural, and individual diversity. Dialogue in a community of practice is facilitated by one or more 'critical friends' who are essential in offering encouragement and challenge to keep the group focused.

Teacher leaders, administrators, and teacher educators who understand and value the community of practice model can use it to help teachers cultivate a reflective disposition for teaching and learning. The model can be used successfully in a variety of ways:

- Teachers can create communities of practice within or between classrooms and programs.
- Administrators can offer professional development structures that bring educators together around focused areas of interest and sustain learning relationships over time.
- In professional development courses, instructors should recognize that time and relationships are necessary for deep reflection. Small group dialogue can be carefully structured to engage students in the course content and its application to their work.
- On a larger scale, the community of practice model even offers a way of rethinking professional development conferences. In our work with Margie Carter and Deb Curtis, we help facilitate multiple-day Reflective Institutes where participants form small communities of practice and engage in structured dialogue with a focus over time.

### **A tool for reflection: The Thinking Lens**

Reflective dialogue may not necessarily arise spontaneously in every community of practice (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003). Members may need support in centering their discussion and remaining focused on the topic at hand. This may be particularly true for early childhood teachers whose voices, skills, and knowledge have too often been overlooked in our field. Consequently, many teachers have had little practice participating in a deeply reflective exchange of ideas. Use of a protocol can help communities of practice overcome this obstacle.

When we cultivate a reflective disposition about teaching and learning, we center ourselves in our work, our passion, and our purpose in teaching and learning with young children.

Reflection is central to our beliefs and values and well worth the investment.

In our work with teachers, we use “The Thinking Lens” protocol, originally developed by Margie Carter, Deb Curtis, and Ann Pelo (Carter & Curtis, 2009). You can see this protocol reflected in the questions that follow the observation of Ryan. As teachers use and become familiar with the headings and sample questions of *The Thinking Lens*, they ‘train their brains’ to reflect on all angles of a topic and think through the complexity of their work. They become more disciplined in reflective dialogue and therefore more efficient in the use of time in their community of practice.

In our experience, early childhood professionals from a variety of backgrounds eagerly rise to the challenge when offered this kind of disciplined tool for reflection — often with powerful and transformational results. New teacher Jane Carstea wrote about her experience using a protocol for reflection in a preservice course:

“I feel like *The Thinking Lens* has helped me to ‘wake up.’ The theoretical is meeting the practical now. I get it! I now reflect on my values, things that I knew were inside of me, but I didn’t focus on. Now, they are right in front of me and I understand that I will never be

done. Lifelong learning is reframing, reflecting, making meaning, and then changing.”

## A responsibility and a right

For us, cultivating a reflective disposition for teaching and learning has taken on new meaning in this time of increasing early childhood standards and accountability. We believe the movement to meet quality standards by ‘teacher-proofing’ the curriculum must be countered with a strong investment in teachers’ abilities to be reflective, thoughtful decision makers. And while a reflective disposition can be looked at as a *responsibility* for early childhood teachers, it should also be looked at as a *right* of early childhood teachers. Teachers have the right to the time, support, structures, and tools that cultivate their ability to reflect on the ways that new standards can be integrated into their existing teaching practice. Reflective teaching and learning is not easy work; it takes an investment of time, resources, discipline, focus, and relationships. In our view, however, reflection is central to our beliefs and values and well worth the investment. When we cultivate a reflective disposition about teaching and learning, we center ourselves in our work, our passion, and our purpose in teaching and learning with young children.

### The Thinking Lens Protocol

The Thinking Lens (Carter & Curtis, 2009) offers six areas of considerations to cycle through, with some sample questions in each area. As this becomes second nature to teachers, they begin to uncover additional questions that might need asking.

#### Know yourself

- What captures my attention as the children engage, explore, and interact?
- What delights me as I watch and listen?

#### Find the details that touch your heart and mind

- What do I notice in the children’s faces and actions?
- Where do I see examples of children’s strengths and competencies?

#### Seek the child’s perspective

- What is the child drawn to and excited about?
- What might the child be trying to accomplish?

#### Examine the physical and social/emotional environment

- How is the organization and use of the physical space and materials impacting this situation?
- How could we strengthen relationships here?

#### Consider multiple perspectives

- What questions might we ask to get the perspective of the child’s family?
- Who else or what other perspectives should we consider?

#### Consider opportunities and possibilities for next steps

- What values, philosophy, and desired outcomes do I want to influence my response?
- What other materials and activities could be offered to build on this experience?

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## The power of classroom dispositions

by Sandra Duncan and Deb Lawrence

When teachers describe children in their classrooms, they often mention both positive and negative dispositions such as inquisitive, impatient, curious, friendly, intolerant, and resourceful. Early childhood experts believe that the acquisitions of dispositions are just as important as skill development to children's academic success (Hyson, 2008; Katz & Chard, 2000). While there is much talk and research on children's dispositions, little attention has been focused on the classroom's disposition and its influence on the development of positive dispositions in young children. Yet, according to Bertram and Pascal (2002), in addition to some dispositions being inborn, many are environmentally sensitive. This means that the classroom environment has a powerful influence — both positive and negative — on children's abilities to acquire important dispositions required for life-long learning.

As early childhood educators, our goal is not to get children ready or prepare them for kindergarten. The goal and purpose of early childhood education is to provide children with the appropriate experiences and environments to help them develop thinking dispositions that encourage life-long learning. Although there are many dispositions that can be woven and laced into the environment, the dispositions of wonder, curiosity, and discovery are pivotal to integrate into the classroom.

### The disposition of wonder

Children are born with a sense of wonder (Wilson, 1997). In order to maintain it, research has shown the importance of continuous experiences with the natural world (Ann Arbor Foundation & Dimensions Educational Research Foundation, 2007; Cobb, 1977; White, 2004). Since continuous exposure to nature leads to a sense of wonder that promotes life-long learning, it is important for children to have opportunities for experiencing nature not only outside, but inside the classroom. An environment that encourages the disposition

of wonder is filled with natural and living elements such as plants, rocks, herbs, seashells, twigs, small animals, fresh flowers, and fish (Deviney, et al., 2010).

In a classroom that promotes the disposition of wonder, nature items are easily and readily accessible to encourage tactile, auditory, and olfactory exploration and investigation. Perhaps it is the element of the sound of a breeze blowing across a wind chime or the gentle water sounds coming from the table waterfall. Or, the disposition of wonder is inspired with an array of nature's textures that engages children's interests and senses. Children's sense of wonder can be captured by a prism hanging from a sunny window that is magically reflecting beautifully colored rainbows on the classroom floor. Regardless, nature is a source of beauty . . . and beauty instills the disposition of wonder (Greenman, 2005; Wilson, 2010).

### The disposition of curiosity

When teachers create environments that support curiosity, these conditions are supported in children's dispositions. Children are given the attitudes and inclinations that support curiosity — such as freedom and time to explore, ask questions, and activate knowledge through investigations and observations — their sense of curiosity flourishes and is less likely to become dormant (Covington, 1998).

It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure the environment is a powerful provocateur of curiosity. Perhaps children are curious about:

- Where does the sun go at night?
- Do plants have feelings?
- Why do leaves turn colors in the autumn?
- Do the fish in the bowl sleep at night?

Providing elements and resources in the environment that help children find answers to their own questions

With over 40 years of experience in the early care and education field, Sandra Duncan has extensive experience in publishing curricula and teacher resources, working with young children, training early childhood professionals, and teaching at the university level. Currently, she is a Dissertation Chair for doctoral students and a Professor of Early Childhood. Sandra is a co-author of two recently published books, *Inspiring Spaces for Young Children* and *Rating Observation Scale for Inspiring Environments (ROSIE)*.



Deb Lawrence is a doctoral candidate with more than 30 years in the field of early childhood education. Over the 30+ years, Deb has been a teacher of young children, a director of child care programs, a multi-site manager, and a director of quality improvement initiatives. In the last few years, Deb has taken her expertise into higher education and is adjunct faculty in the graduate school of education for two universities in the Philadelphia area.





## Beginnings Workshop

The goal and purpose of early childhood education is to provide children with the appropriate experiences and environments to help children develop thinking dispositions that encourage life-long learning.



— without the teacher providing the answers — is important. In order to foster the disposition of curiosity, the environment must be able to respond to children's thought inclinations:

- Are the classroom's interests centers rigid and unmovable or does your environment support children's curiosity by being flexible in arrangement?
- Do you have the flexibility to expand or reduce the learning areas based on children's interests and ongoing projects?
- Does the environment listen to the children's ponderings and questionings?
- Can the environment react in ways that help children investigate their curiosities, reflect, conclude, and apply new information in a relevant way?

## The disposition of discovery

When children learn something new or solve a problem through discovery, they will understand it more completely and retain the information more intensely. The disposition of discovery might include interesting elements that the teacher strategically places in the classroom, allowing children to discover on their own without prompts or guidance. Maybe it is a fascinating piece of driftwood, an exciting scientific experiment, or uniquely textured recyclables. Or, perhaps a child needs a different prop in the home living area.

Teachers, in many instances, may believe they are being helpful by supplying the child with the needed prop. This act, unfortunately, leads to a child's dependence on adults rather than instilling independence and problem-solving abilities that lead to discovery.

When teachers provide the requested props, they are inhibiting a child's ability to discover or find a solution to a dilemma. Rather, the teacher's role is to ask the child to think about what else they could use instead of the requested prop. For example, when children are playing grocery store, the teacher might want to assist by giving them a cash register or play money or allow them to generate other possibilities to continue their play. An environment that does not provide everything

is much better for the discovery disposition than an environment that provides all materials for any scenario. Remember back to your childhood when you were playing for long periods of time. Most likely, no adult provided you with props. Instead, you used your creativity, ingenuity, and problem-solving capacities to make do with what was available. The disposition of discovery is a much more powerful gift for children than to always have a ready supply of materials at hand.

Finally, a teacher who asks questions instead of providing answers is also nurturing the disposition of discovery. When a child asks a question, the teacher often wants to provide the answer. Limit your answers and instead ask children where they might find the answer. The answer could be found in reading books, interviewing adults and children, listening to an audio, watching a visual, or conducting their own research.



Children may question why the goldfish moves its tail. This wondering could lead to a provocation of not only goldfish movement, but the discovery of how and why other animals – or even people – move.

Though there are many more dispositions of the environment, this article has focused on wonder, curiosity, and discovery. Dispositions are not learned through formal instruction but can be encouraged and taught through the children's environments. Creating environments that foster the acquisition of these dispositions is critical to a child's future learning potential. Without the foundational prerequisites of wonder, curiosity, and discovery, children may find it difficult to approach academic subjects or may lose sight of the joy of learning (Perry, Hogan, & Marlin, 2000). Early childhood is the time for all children to practice and master these positive dispositions and the environment plays a powerful role in fostering dispositions that encourage life-long learners.

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## Beginnings Workshop

An environment that does not provide everything is much better for the discovery disposition than an environment that provides all materials for any scenario.

Early childhood is the time for all children to practice and master these positive dispositions and the environment plays a powerful role in fostering dispositions that encourage life-long learners.

## What's Your Classroom Disposition?

Directions: Select A, B, or C for each item listed — A = Strongly Agree; B = Agree; C = Strongly Disagree

- \_\_\_1. The adults in my classroom continually and constantly display and model the positive dispositions of wonder, curiosity, and discovery.
- \_\_\_2. Through the inclusion of a variety of open-ended materials, my classroom environment sends a clear message that children are free to explore, discover, and express ideas and thoughts through the languages of sculpting, painting, and drawing.
- \_\_\_3. There are at least three different types of living items in my classroom environment that are periodically changed or revitalized.
- \_\_\_4. There are at least three natural elements that are accessible to children for exploration, investigation, and manipulation that are frequently refreshed and changed.
- \_\_\_5. Children have frequent opportunities to create and explore using natural materials and recyclables.
- \_\_\_6. There are at least three areas where children's discoveries can be honored through artful display.
- \_\_\_7. The disposition of discovery is supported by furnishings that are flexible, can be used in multiple ways, and have the ability to expand or contract based on children's interests.
- \_\_\_8. Children are given plenty of time to ponder, investigate, and construct with intentionally placed tools that support the dispositions of curiosity and discovery.
- \_\_\_9. Many accessories are multipurpose, such as a scarf that could be used for a baby blanket, tablecloth, multicultural display, or dress-up element.
- \_\_\_10. There are designated discovery places where the natural materials and recyclables can be organized, categorized, and explored by the children.
- \_\_\_11. The disposition of curiosity is fostered by offering children sensorial experiences that engage smelling, hearing, seeing, and touching.
- \_\_\_12. There are systems in place to protect children's creations and projects until they are finished.

### Scoring:

This tool helps assess the level of commitment to the dispositions of wonder, curiosity, and discovery in your classroom. Remember that the commitment to these dispositions is an ongoing process of learning, so there are no correct answers.

If you responded frequently with an 'A', you are well on the way in developing your classroom's disposition competence.

If you responded frequently with a 'B', you may have some work to do in this area.

If you responded frequently with a 'C', you may want to consider implementing some of the ideas mentioned in this article.

Adapted from Tawara D. Goode's *Promoting Cultural & Linguistic Competency: Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Services and Supports in Early Intervention and Early Childhood Settings* (2009) and Deviney et al.'s *Rating Observation Scale for Inspiring Spaces* (Gryphon House, 2010).

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# Just wondering: How do we share our own sense of wonder with children? (and if we've lost ours, how do we find it again?)

by Nancy Rosenow

A few months ago my husband and I were on a trip near Great Smoky Mountains National Park. We mostly went for business reasons; but while we were there we wanted to squeeze in a little sightseeing, if only for a few hours. So, we undertook a quick car trip through the park and dutifully stopped at a sign encouraging us to climb a trail to a spectacular view. We knew we didn't have much time, so we set off at a quick pace, eager to reach the destination.

Halfway up we spotted a couple stopped along the side of the trail, staring intently into the wooded area nearby. They looked to be a good generation older than we were (probably in their late 70s), but they were crouching down easily, smiling at each other and pointing. As we passed by, they motioned to us with fingers on lips, and gestured toward a stunningly-colored little snake gliding slowly through the underbrush, tongue darting in and out to 'smell' the air. Just as we slowed down to watch, another couple passed by. They were a good generation younger than we, with a small daughter in tow. We motioned to them just as the older couple had to us. Seeing the snake, the mother quickly pulled out a video camera and began recording. With all the adults crowding around, the little girl tugged on her mother's sleeve and asked, "Can I get closer so I can see, too?"

"Shh," her mother replied. "You can watch the video when we get back to the car."

I was taken aback by her response, and looked on mutely as the young family returned to the trail to continue their hike. I was disappointed with myself that I didn't say anything to the little girl, but the encounter had really caught me off guard. The older couple smiled sadly at us, but no one spoke. Noticing the time, my husband and I hurried off to finish our hike while the older couple stayed behind to do more snake watching.

Reflecting on the scene later, I thought, "I need to write about this. It's a powerful example of why children aren't connecting more deeply with the world around them. If we believe that watching something on a video is as good as seeing it firsthand, it's going to be hard to help children develop a sense of wonder." The funny thing is though, I've only recently realized that there's another side to this story. While I've been feeling self-righteous and somewhat judgmental of the young mother, I've been forgetting that if it hadn't been for the older couple, I never would have noticed the snake or stopped long enough to enjoy a 'wonder-filled' scene. And, even when I stopped, I barely let myself 'be there' or connect in any way with the other people trying to enjoy the experience with me. Ironically, I rushed and hurried through my trip to 'see beauty' so that I could get back to my hotel room to work on a speech I would be giving about helping children appreciate the natural world. "Hmmm," I thought. "Busted!"

It's easy in any profession to bandy about catch phrases until they become somewhat meaningless from over-exposure. I often repeat this Rachel Carson (1965) quote: "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in." It's a wonderful sentiment, and I really believe it, but as my Great Smoky Mountains trip shows, I'm no Rachel Carson. I can get so caught up in the hurry of modern life that my own sense of wonder starts to atrophy.

My trip was a pivotal moment for me. Vaguely troubling thoughts that had been flitting in and out of my brain for years began to work themselves into something resembling an insight. All of a sudden I realized what's been bothering me: I'm worried that we early childhood educators and administrators might be spending too much of our professional lives talking about 'what to do' with children and not enough time talking about

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'who to be' with children. And this is a profession that needs us to be our best selves. The children we work with come to know us on a deep level, whether or not we want to be known in that way. They learn as much from who we are as what we 'teach.' It might be important to stop often to ask, "What will children learn about life from the way I'm living mine?" Whether or not we like it, there's great truth to the old adage that our actions speak louder than our words. We say we believe this, but really, when do we talk honestly about ways to enrich ourselves so that our lives will have something valuable to say to children?

A few years ago I facilitated a workshop for an early childhood staff in a public school. One of the teachers came in, sighed deeply and made her way over to me before the session began. "I'm only here because my principal is making me come," she announced. "I really hate learning new things." That comment has stuck with me, because I can't imagine how she is able to inspire children to love learning if she doesn't enjoy it herself. My guess is that it doesn't work very well.

In her book, *Composing a Life*, Mary Catherine Bateson (1989) says:

"The need to sustain human growth should be a matter of concern for the entire society, even more fundamental than the problem of sustaining productivity. . . . Building and sustaining the settings in which individuals can grow and unfold, not 'kept in their place' but empowered to become all they can be, is not only the task of parents and teachers, but the

basis of management and political leadership — and simple friendship."

I began to think about how an early childhood staff can be "empowered to become all they can be" — not just encouraged to grow as teachers, but, perhaps even more importantly, empowered to grow as human beings. I remembered something that happened during a large early childhood conference in Chicago when I was a fairly new program director. At the end of the conference the art specialist in our program told me that she'd enjoyed attending sessions on the first two days, but on the third day she'd decided to visit the Chicago Art Institute. "I was so inspired there," she said, "and I'm bringing that inspiration back to the children." I'm afraid my response to her was less than inspired. I half-heartedly agreed that her visit might have been a good idea, but I know what I was really thinking was that we paid good money for her to attend the conference and she shouldn't have skipped any days. Today what I'd say is, "Hallelujah!"

What our art specialist was really telling me was that she had found a way to help renew her own sense of wonder. After my un-Rachel Carson moment in the Great Smoky Mountains, I've been thinking a lot about what it truly means to have a sense of wonder. It isn't only about nature, is it? What else can it be about? How can we share our own sense of wonder with children, and if we do, will it make a difference in our interactions with them? What if we've lost our sense of wonder? How do we find it again?

I don't have all the answers to those questions, but

I think they're questions worth asking. I'm starting to believe that having a sense of wonder means paying attention to the things that remind us that life is important, finite, and needs to be savored. I'm guessing that we each connect to a sense of wonder in individual ways. For some of us, listening to certain passages of music might be a channel. For others, reading an especially moving piece of writing might do it. Or, it could be enjoying a warm, ripe tomato straight from



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disservice we are doing our children if the only stories they hear come from electronic media:

“Humans are story-telling animals. Since the beginning of time adults have told children stories . . . to instruct and entertain. As they told the stories, they could see the children’s faces. They could calibrate and adjust the stories to fit the children’s ages, experiences, fears, and hopes. Now the adults who are telling stories do not know the kids who are listening, do not love them and will not be there to comfort them if they are confused or upset by their stories. Another problem is that stories that are told are designed to raise profits, not children. Most of the stories children hear are mass-produced to induce them to want good things instead of good lives.”

Maybe telling children stories about ourselves, about our ‘wow’ moments in life, will not only counteract the anonymity of electronic storytelling, but will help re-ignite our own sense of wonder.

In a book called *Hamlet’s BlackBerry*, William Powers (2010) warns that the “self-created bustle” of life is making our experiences become ever more shallow. He encourages us to unhook from our BlackBerrys long enough to figure out what gives us real joy in life and

then to go do it. For those of us who choose to spend our lives trying to inspire children to lead good lives, this is something we must take seriously. If we want to help children know the world as a wonder-filled place, it might be very important that we first find a way to live in that place ourselves.

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the garden, preparing an especially delicious meal for friends, singing in harmony with others, walking in the rain, volunteering at a shelter for the homeless, climbing to the top of a mountain, or even watching a colorful little snake smell the air (if we let ourselves stop to see it).

Might it be valuable to have discussions with other educators about what inspires us to feel wonder, and how we share that inspiration with children? Do we let children see us as individuals with talents and passions and a love for learning about life? Do we show them the quilts or the woodcarvings we’ve made, rave about the beautiful paintings we saw at an art exhibit, or tell the story of the snake on the trail?

Speaking of stories, perhaps storytelling is another way to help connect with our sense of wonder. Authentic stories about ourselves, told to children, shared with co-workers, can connect us all in a way that celebrates life’s goodness. In her book, *The Shelter of Each Other*, Mary Pipher (1996) has this to say about the great

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## Cultivating dispositions for cultural democracy

by Luz Casio

*If I'm teaching ten children in a preschool classroom, I am impacting their lives; but with a classroom of ten preschool teachers, I am impacting the life of a hundred children.*

I chose to open this article with a thought I had ten years ago about the impact of teaching in the early childhood field, because it speaks to my underlying philosophy and my motivation for shifting my focus from the preschool classroom to working with adults. I wrote it many years ago when asked why I work with children. Teachers often respond, "I love children. I enjoy working with children." However, I work with children because I want to do what I can to impact the quality of their lives and their access to quality education, health care, and integration into society in general. I realized that I could do more by working with teachers. A recent conversation with my 24-year-old son confirmed for me the importance of centering my work in teacher education on cultivating dispositions for cultural democracy.

My son Javier wrote in one of his school papers that he wished I had been more involved in his school when he was younger. This shocked me and provoked a lot of thinking on my part. When Javier was in school, I was a young mom, a Mexican immigrant new to this country, learning English as quickly as I could. From my cultural perspective I thought I was a good parent. I trusted Javier's teacher as the expert. I was very involved in supporting his education behind the scenes by volunteering to do things for his teacher that didn't require proficiency in English. What I now understand is that there was a different set of cultural expectations in Javier's school. However, since these weren't communicated to me directly, I didn't know how I was being viewed or judged at the time by the teacher or by my son. Looking back, I wish the teacher had made more of an effort to get to know me and the values of my culture, and had suggested more ways for me to be involved with the classroom community.

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Many years later, I am now a CDA instructor and coach for early childhood educators. I think a lot about the dispositions I want to nurture in teachers, parents, and children so that each is culturally literate and responsive. From my personal experience, and now professional knowledge, these are the dispositions I want to nurture in teachers who work with diverse families. Here I specifically address working with Latino families because that is what I know best, but I think much of it applies to working with any family.

### Nurturing habits of mind

An important teacher disposition, or as Katz (1993) would say 'habit of mind' is to wonder why, rather than make assumptions or neglect to consider other possible meanings of behaviors. This is so important when working cross-culturally. For instance, I've seen Euro-American teachers view Latina mothers as weak when they don't stand up for themselves. But in our culture we see self-sacrifice as a skill, a commitment to a relationship, not a weakness. I want to help teachers acquire the disposition of seeking to understand and negotiate different cultural values. This involves always examining one's assumptions and committing to learn about other cultural perspectives. The disposition to be self-aware and eager to learn about others will help teachers understand, for example, that relationships and community are all-important in my culture, and that we make many sacrifices to preserve relationships. If you understand that achievements are celebrated by the community, not just the individual, you might structure school celebrations to be more inclusive.

### Recognizing different cognitive styles

The research of several authors supports what many other immigrants intuitively understand and struggle with as we take up the task of becoming Americans

and helping our children succeed in school. Teacher dispositions need to go beyond sensitivity to include the desire to understand and provide for different cognitive styles. Ramirez and Castañeda (1974) remind us why the melting pot won't work, even if it were desirable. For example, consider that Mexican American children are socialized by their families and community to rely on adults for help and guidance. They are encouraged to be inter-dependent, rather than independent. As a result, they develop a different learning or cognitive style than their Anglo-American peers who are encouraged to be independent and think for themselves.

Reading this research, memories came to mind of my years of childhood in Durango, México, where during the primary years of my education I believed totally in my teachers who wanted the best things for me. Here in the U.S., if teachers seek to recognize and understand, rather than judge cultural differences, they can adjust their teaching accordingly. They can support Latino and all immigrant children in gradually becoming bicultural and bicognitive, more independent over time, even as they continue to develop the cultural values of working collaboratively on behalf of their community. Gardner's research (1993) on multiple intelligences could be very useful in informing teachers about different cognitive styles.

### Teaching in a culturally relevant manner

I resonate strongly with Ramirez and Castañeda (1974) when they call for culturally democratic educational environments. To develop a culturally democratic classroom, teachers need to embrace the philosophical approach of culturally relevant teaching presented by Ladson Billings (2004) who notes, "Teachers who practice culturally relevant methods can be identified by the way they see themselves and others." These teachers have the disposition to "see themselves as a part of the community and they see teaching as giving back to the community."

I have seen these dispositions in practice in several dual language programs in Seattle that strive for cultural democracy. At Jose Marti Child Development Center and La Escuelita, the commitment from teachers is to create a climate in the classroom that invites children to be themselves. They promote a home and community connection involving the parents in the education of their children with a curriculum that is relevant because it emerges from the needs of the

specific families served. The messages in these programs are "I believe in you and yes, you can."

I have also seen the opposite happen in programs where teachers lack this disposition to be culturally relevant. They ignore the importance of honoring the children's languages. When I entered these classrooms, I did not feel connected to what was going on. The climate in the classroom did not make any sense. I thought to myself at the time, "Do the children feel the same way that I am feeling?" When the teachers follow pre-planned monthly themes they seem to ignore how little this relates to the children's culture, family or community. With no consideration for children's different cognitive styles, these teachers seem to be trying to fit all the children in the same box.

These observations have led me to ask questions about the kind of professional development that would nurture early childhood education teachers and provide guidance to them in identifying effective strategies for implementing relevant curriculum. For example, what would be the best way to present research and theoretical frameworks for understanding the socio-political constructs impacting diverse communities? I investigated this question by engaging in a cooperative, bicultural effort with an Anglo American college instructor in designing a literacy class using the Soy Bilingüe Adult Dual Language Model. We drew not only from Cronin and Masso (2007) but also the work of Freeman and Freeman (2004) who outline the political influences on bilingual education and its history.

I share common ground with the ideas of Freeman and Freeman (2004) who say, "Teachers working in Spanish-English bilingual and dual language classrooms must not simply teach their students to read and write: they must teach them to think and act to build a better world." I try to help teachers to understand their role in advocating for the best methods to support children to develop bi-culturally and linguistically and use assessment tools that truly measure children's abilities, skills, and strengths.

Another influence on my thinking is the work of Darder (1991) who speaks to the work of Ramírez and Castañeda (1974) on cultural democracy. Darder's writing focuses on the rights of individuals to continue to develop within the context of their primary culture while interacting with a dominant culture. She recog-

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nizes the power exerted by educational institutions and says,

"If educators are to meet the pedagogical needs of bicultural students, it is essential for them to recognize the ideological underpinnings that shape bicultural responses and contradictions and tensions that result from students' efforts to survive in the midst of serious forms of educational oppression."

Darder suggests ways to think about the dispositions and practices essential for Anglo American teachers if they are to foster cultural democracy for children of color in their classrooms. Her strong message is:

"To even begin to comprehend the bicultural experience requires that teachers from the dominant culture invest time and energy into establishing critical dialogues with people of color if they wish to understand their communities better. Even then, these teachers must recognize and respect that their process of learning and knowing is inherently situated outside that cultural context, and is therefore different from the knowledge obtained from living within a particular cultural community."

### My son the teacher

I return now to my son Javier who is now in his second year as an early childhood teacher, because he provides an example of the ideas I have explored in this article. As a bicultural and bilingual educator, Javier draws on his own experience and the support of others in his family and community. He commits himself to being knowledgeable about creating learning environments that are reflective of the cognitive styles of the cultures of the children in his classroom. Reflecting on his own experience as a child, along with his growing professional knowledge, Javier places a priority on developing strong relationships with families and finding comfortable ways for them to be involved in their children's education. He brings pride to our family and community and great hope to the diverse children and families he is responsible for in his work.

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