

Introduction

For a long time I have been interested in the word “disposition.” I am particularly interested in two closely linked ways of thinking about the meaning of disposition as it relates to young children and learning. First, a child’s disposition indicates his or her individual approach, temperament, and range of interests. Disposition in this case may be thought of as learning style, or as the particular set of strengths with which each child approaches the world. For example, some children are by nature reflective, others outgoing, and still others a combination of contemplative and sociable. Yet all are involved in the active process of making sense of their daily experiences. A second, equally important aspect of disposition is the child’s disposition *to* communicate, explore, and learn. Early childhood author and educator Lilian Katz (1987, 153) writes about this meaning of disposition in the following way. “*Dispositions*, usually omitted from lists of educational goals, are broadly defined as relatively enduring habits of mind, or characteristic ways of responding to experience across types of situations, for example, curiosity, generosity, . . . and so on.” She adds, “One of the important dispositions of concern to educators of young children is their *interest*, or their capacity, to lose themselves in an outside activity or concern. Interest refers to the ability to become deeply enough absorbed in something to pursue it over time and with sufficient commitment to accept its routine as well as its novel aspects” (158).

This book will take into account young children’s individual dispositions while focusing on specific ways that early childhood teacher-caregivers can use their knowledge of each child in their classrooms to foster the disposition to learn. Child development experts and early childhood educators have long endorsed the well-established principle that social and emotional factors are inseparably connected to cognitive growth. New Zealand educator Marie Clay puts it this way:

A child starting school does so with mixed feelings and some misgivings. Security, self-confidence, acceptance, and a sense of belonging are a foundation for attitudes that encourage participation in effective learning experiences. Happy, relaxed, stimulating relationships between children and between child and teacher promote growth of personality which in turn advances achievement. (Clay 1991, 40)

Neither Katz nor Clay is advocating for an absence of teacher input. They echo Lev Vygotsky’s belief in a zone of proximal development for which effective teachers are alert, watching for signs of the child’s interest, as they support and respond to a need for assistance or the introduction of new material (Crain 2005, 239–40). Thus, early childhood teacher-caregivers can be confident that when children are responded to and valued for who they are and how they think, both developmentally and as unique persons, their self-esteem and natural curiosity will flourish and become springboards to skill development and genuine inquiry.

Part 1 of this book, “Perspectives on Learning,” sets a framework that is both theoretical and accessible. Directors of early childhood programs may use each chapter in part 1 as a staff development tool, one that enriches teacher-caregivers’ own knowledge and empowers them in their conversations with parents. Chapter 1 begins with a basic description of the developing brain, confirming that all healthy children enter the world ready to learn. By exploring recent advances in brain research and investigating the process of synapse development, we see that learning is not a process of “cramming in,” but rather one that involves the child absorbing and eventually pruning information derived from experiences. Thus, scientific findings that show the importance of children learning in the context of significant relationships—in environments that promote

their self-esteem and their disposition to inquire and discover—validate established theories that influence early childhood education practice such as the developmental-interaction approach. A description of the developmental-interaction approach, conceptualized and refined at the Bank Street College of Education, demonstrates how nurturing all aspects of young children’s growth—social, emotional, and intellectual—fosters positive outcomes through interactions with others and with materials that characterize effective learning environments.

Chapter 2 reflects on changing families, societal issues, and cultural differences through the identification of some major challenges faced by early childhood teacher-caregivers and directors today. These challenges are often overlapping, as they include the many variations in family makeup, economic status, and cultural background that comprise our richly diverse society. Understanding the context of children’s lives is a complex yet essential task for educators of all children.

Chapter 3 examines Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences theory, illustrating how a renowned developmental/neuropsychologist has framed an understanding of intelligence that makes visible the often-ignored manifestations of intellectual power in appreciation of children’s individual expressions of intelligence. Examples of persons who have demonstrated their specific expressions of intelligence are placed side by side with examples of children whose behaviors may alert teachers to individual dispositions and strengths.

Part 2, “Perspectives on Practice,” begins with chapter 4, which describes my 1993 visit to the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, and the effects of that visit. This was an inspirational experience that led me to think about learning environments in a new way. Bringing these experiences back to my own program resulted in aspects of change and the appreciation of change as an ongoing ingredient of vibrant early childhood practice. The various sections of this chapter address

- room arrangement
- dramatic-play areas
- classroom libraries
- range and accessibility of art materials

- open-ended materials, both classic and collections of found materials for construction
- materials that appeal to the senses, for example, cooking, sand and water play, playing musical instruments
- embedded literacy and numeracy activities that become part of daily choices

The concept of emergent curriculum, embracing the Reggio Emilia approach and Lilian Katz's project approach, focuses on the development of young children's skills and knowledge alongside their dispositions and emotions. As taught in the Art of Teaching program at Sarah Lawrence College, emerging projects are viewed as entry points through which all children can find ways to make meaning.

Observation skills are essential for all of us who work with young children. Chapter 5 outlines a descriptive review process, developed by Patricia Carini at the Prospect Center in Vermont. The Descriptive Review of a Child is both a specific and a reflective approach to observation. It is accessible and immensely useful for both directors of early childhood programs and teacher-caregivers. This powerful tool also helps parents understand that the school really knows their child as a person. It serves as a vehicle for parents and others on the school staff to contribute to a rounded, informed view of each child as an individual.

Chapter 6, "Developing Positive Communication," begins with a discussion of finding your own voice as an effective teacher as you assess the roles of trust, tone, and structure in providing for the needs of every child in your class. This chapter looks at

- group interactions
- ways in which children's ages and temperaments affect communication
- the often overlooked importance of nonverbal communication
- the possibilities for and benefits of multi-age grouping (three to five years)

Essential aspects of communication between teacher-caregivers and families are explored in the context of a full-day program, from morning drop-off to evening pickup, including techniques for dealing with separation and the more relaxed, transitional, late-day needs of children and staff.

Chapter 7 highlights the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) summary of early learning standards, while addressing the often-overlooked fact that children hold standards for themselves. Authentic assessments emphasize the value of observation, longitudinal records, and collecting children's work over time. These dynamic assessment tools help parents experience their children's progress. Keeping individual differences in mind, this chapter's review of curriculum contains a focus on early literacy, beginning with the importance of pretend play in developing symbolic processes. This chapter

- describes the progression from pictures to words
- identifies opportunities for phonological awareness
- acknowledges the illogical nature of English spelling
- explains the value of experimenting with inventive spelling as an important step toward the conventional
- puts handwriting in perspective

Literacy is described within the context of the classroom community, including interactive, "solo," and group times. The teacher's role emerges as that of coach and leader as she reads to and with children, writes down their very own words that can be read back, and engages them in songs, rhymes, and word analysis as their skills progress.

In conclusion, chapter 8 endorses the warm interactions and frequent communications that help teacher-caregivers encourage parents to appreciate and build on their children's unique strengths. Parents today are anxious about their children's progress, so adequate conference time is needed to set a positive tone and create an open dialogue. Conference time can be used to interpret progress as encompassing the interlocking avenues of

developmental growth described in chapter 1. This final chapter also includes tactics for

- maintaining structure within a specified conference time limit
- explaining the school's philosophy and assessment strategies
- demonstrating individual strengths and growth by presenting sequential examples of a child's work

Chapter 8 also includes suggestions on how to react to challenges from parents who question the value of imaginative play, a developmental approach to literacy, and the place of technology in early childhood classrooms. Suggestions for parents emphasize the value of building strong vocabularies and thinking skills for second-language learners by conversing in their home language(s), and the importance of parents' reading aloud, telling stories, and sharing rhymes in interactive rather than instructional ways. Additional suggestions include helping parents recognize their child's reading behaviors, finding opportunities to write down the child's words, and keeping appropriate reading and writing materials available. Without overwhelming already stressed parents, teacher-caregivers can assure families that normal home routines and opportunities for unstructured play are still essential elements for developing a child's social, emotional, and intellectual growth.