INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTICLE

Being a Learner: Five Learning Dispositions for Early Childhood

Dr Margaret Carr

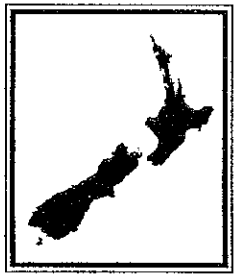
Margaret Carr and her colleagues have worked in New Zealand to develop assessment of children's experiences in relation to the Early Childhood Curriculum framework in New Zealand which is known as Te Whariki. She and her colleagues have described five learning dispositions which they see as outcomes for the Early Childhood Curriculum. The early learning dispositions resonate with five parallel strands which are in the Te Whariki Early Childhood Curriculum.

Although children learn as individuals, Margaret Carr and her colleagues suggest that children are also very much part of a learning community. It is very important for adults working with young children, therefore, to pay great attention to the relationship that develops between the young child's learning and the environment in which they learn. She calls these learning environments "dispositional milieux". She would like to think that schools and early childhood settings of all kinds were good dispositional milieux in which children spend time.

The five strands which she identifies are:

- **Courage** to find something of interest here
- **Trust** that this is a safe enough place to be involved and to focus one's attention
- **Perseverance** to persist when things get difficult
- **Confidence** to express a point of view or a feeling
- **Responsibility** for justice and fairness and for disposition to take on another point of view

She helps us to define what dispositions are and gives some practical examples so that we can see them in action. This is an important project, not just for children in New Zealand, but for those of us in the UK who are concerned that outcomes of the Early Childhood Curriculum should go deeper than subject content, such as knowing particular content in mathematics (number) or particular pieces of literature and writing. Courage, trust, confidence, responsibility and perseverance are important and should never be neglected as we educate our young children.



ARTICLE

Being a Learner: Five Learning Dispositions for Early Childhood

Dr Margaret Carr

This paper describes five learning dispositions as outcomes for early childhood curriculum. These learning dispositions parallel the five strands of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum. The author argues that learning dispositions are not just characteristics of an individual learner; they are part of the 'learning culture' (Bruner, 1996 p.87) that we provide, and are deeply embedded in the relationship between the learner and the learning environment.

In 1996 a new curriculum for early childhood in New Zealand was published (Ministry of Education, 1996a), known to all of us by its shorter name as Te Whāriki, a Maori word meaning a woven mat. This curriculum has weaving as a central metaphor (Carr and May, 1994): each centre and programme weaves its own curriculum from a framework of principles, strands, goals, and learning outcomes. The new curriculum had been trialled in centres since its 1993 draft, and has now provided the framework for curriculum requirements in the Ministry of Education's Desirable Objectives and Practices (Ministry of Education, 1996b). These requirements are now mandatory for funding. The story of the development of this curriculum, and discussions about its underlying philosophy, have been told elsewhere (Carr and May, 1993; 1994; 1996; Cullen, 1996). Here I briefly outline its structure and go on to describe five learning dispositions that parallel the five strands of learning in *Te Whāriki*.

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum

The structure of the Te Whariki curriculum is contained in four Principles and five Strands. Four guiding principles set up the framework for the curriculum: empowerment (whakamana), holistic development (kotahitanga), family and community (whānau tangata), and relationships (nga hononga). The English version of these principles is as follows: the early childhood curriculum empowers the child to learn and grow; the early childhood curriculum reflects the holistic way children learn and grow; the wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum; children learn through responsive relationships with people places and things.

The five strands (originally aims) are as follows:

- well-being *(mana atua)*
- belonging *(mana whenua)*
- contribution *(mana tangata)*
- communication *(mana reo)*
- exploration *(mana aotūroa)*

Each strand has three or four goals attached to it: eighteen goals in all. Each goal has a list of 'learning outcomes' that provide a definition for the goal.

Outcomes as learning dispositions

Te Whāriki replaces the traditional PIES (physical, intellectual, emotional, and social skills) curriculum with a BWECC (belonging, well-being, exploration, communication, contribution) curriculum, one that is empowering, holistic transactional and ecological. At the same time as the strands are divided into goals and outcomes, the children's learning outcomes are summarised as 'dispositions', 'habits of mind' or 'patterns of learning'. The curriculum document adds that 'Dispositions provide a framework for developing working theories and expertise' (Ministry of Education, 1996a p.45).

Dispositions are more than attitudes, and they can be seen to include skills. One way to make the static concept of skill (an ability that one has) more dynamic (an ability that one uses) is to look at strategy and disposition.

Skills plus intention equals strategy

Nisbet and Shucksmith (1986) suggest that a learning strategy is a series of skills used with a particular purpose in mind.

> **Strategies are different from skills in that a strategy has a purpose, it is a sequence of activities and it is more readily modiled to suit the context.** (Nisbet and Shucksmith, 1986 p.vii)

Nisbet and Shucksmith describe strategies like planning ahead, monitoring one's progress to identify sources of difficulty, asking questions. For the infant, learning strategies include investigating, prodding, floundering, imitating, bridging (fitting together already possessed expectancies), practising, and playing (Claxton, 1984).

Learning strategies for three- and four-year-olds have been described by Cullen (1988;1991). Cullen researched the continuity of learning from early childhood to school, as she observed children using the same strategies in play in their kindergarten and then in reading lessons at school:

- **task persistence**
- **use of (experimenting with) resources**
- **use of peer as a resource, use of adult as a resource**
- **seeing self as a resource for others**
- **directing self**
- **and directing others**

She described these as 'metacognitive abilities', or 'repeated patterns of behaviour and language which indicate an active, strategic approach to learning' (Cullen, 1991; pp.45-46). Cullen linked these strategies to being ready for school and concluded:

> **preschools have a valuable function of assisting children to acquire a range of independent strategies which will help them to become competent learners** (Cullen, 1988, p.1).

She also noted that in the different context of the primary school classroom such abilities or strategies may not be demonstrated if, for instance, there is little opportunity to use a creative approach to choosing resources appropriate to the task in hand, or for the child to see herself as a resource for others.

Strategy plus motivation equals disposition

Nisbet and Shucksmith (1986) anticipate the later literature on dispositions when they suggest that there may be a hierarchy of learning strategies. At the higher level are strategies in which attitudinal and motivational factors play an important role. They call these 'style' or 'approach to learning'. Later writers (e.g. Resnick and Klopfer 1989; Katz, 1993; Perkins, Jay and Tishman, 1993) have called these higher level strategies 'dispositions'. Resnick and Klopfer, and Perkins et al., are writing about 'thinking' dispositions. However, the wider notion of *learning disposition* provides a useful way of looking at the longer-term outcomes of quality early childhood programmes. When Katz (1988) answered the question 'what should young children be doing?' she listed four categories of learning: knowledge skills dispositions and feelings. She defines dispositions as follows (p.30):

> **Dispositions are a very different type of learning from skills and knowledge. They can be thought of as habits of mind, tendencies to respond to situations in certain ways. Curiosity is a disposition. It's not a skill, and it's not a piece of knowledge. It's a tendency to respond to your experience in a certain way.**
> **Friendliness is a disposition. Unfriendliness is a disposition. Creativity is perhaps a set of dispositions. Being bossy or a bully are dispositions. Not all dispositions are desirable. Think about the difference between having reading skills and having the disposition to be a reader, or having writing skills in contrast to having the disposition to be a writer.**

A short definition of a learning disposition is as follows:

> **a habit of mind that disposes the learner to interpret, edit, and respond to experiences in characteristic ways**

What dispositions for early childhood?

A number of schools in the United States have set out a list of guiding dispositions or 'habits of mind'. A multi-cultural public school in Harlem (Meier, 1995 p.l57) lists five habits of mind on every classroom wall, and uses them to organise curriculum.
They are the basis for their standards for judging portfolios on graduation: **evidence** (what's your evidence?), **viewpoints** (what viewpoint are we hearing?), **connections** (how are things connected together?), **voice** (can we imagine alternatives?), and **conventions** (who cares?).
In his popular book on emotional intelligence, Goleman (1996 pp 193-194) provides a list of what he describes as the seven key ingredients for the 'capacity to know how to learn' (they are all related to emotional intelligence).

They are a mixture of abilities, wishes, capacities, and senses; they look like dispositions:

- **confidence:** includes a sense that he or she is more likely than not to succeed and that adults will be helpful,
- **curiosity:** includes the sense that finding out about things is positive and pleasurable
- **intentionality:** the wish and capacity to have an impact, and to act upon that with persistence
- **self-control:** the ability to modulate and control one's own actions in age-appropriate ways, and a sense of inner control
- **relatedness:** the ability to engage with others based on the sense of being understood by and understanding other's 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
- **cooperativeness:** the ability to balance one's own needs with those of others in group activity.

Learning dispositions for early childhood have not been defined in any detail but Katz (1993) provides an important guideline: the 'disposition to go on learning' is the most important:

> **...the most important disposition to be listed in educational goals is the disposition to go on learning. Any educational approach that undermines that disposition is miseducation** (Katz, 1993 p.20)

Katz' comprehensive review of the concept of disposition in education concludes (pp.19-20):

> **Much research is needed to determine which dispositions merit attention, and whether dispositions of a general or specific focus should be addressed by educational goals. If the desirable dispositions listed among the goals are very specific, the list is likely to become unmanageably long...However if dispositional goals are too general, they become too difficult to observe and therefore to assess. Ideally, educational goals should include dispositions that strike an optimal balance between generality and specificity.**

The *Te Whariki* curriculum suggests that a list of dispositions will be to do with belonging, well-being, exploration, communication, and contribution. A New Zealand research project on assessment that followed on from the early childhood curriculum project (Carr, 1998) has trialled a list of five learning dispositions that connects with these strands, emphasising Katz' guiding principle that the disposition to 'go on learning' is central, and taking as an umbrella notion that children should be empowered to view themselves as competent and confident learners. The list has emerged from a combination of: research elsewhere; the early childhood,;education, and human rights literature; the New Zealand curriculum framework; and the research project.

- **courage** to find something of interest here,
- **trust** that this is a safe enough place to be involved and to focus one's attention,
- **perseverance** to persist when things get difficult,
- **confidence** to express a point of view or a feeling, and
- **responsibility** for justice and fairness and the disposition to take on another point of view.

In each case the disposition includes observable behaviour: taking an interest, being involved, persisting when things are difficult, expressing ideas and feelings, and taking responsibility. This dispositional framework makes a number of assumptions about learning, three of which are:

A **learning is about children engaging with challenge, uncertainty, and change.** Our children will be growing up within an economy and society characterised by technological and social change (Rogers, 1969; Postman, 1992) and uncertainty (Claxton, 1990). In the United States, Dweck's research has highlighted the early emergence of dispositions to engage
(or not) with difficulty and challenge (Smiley and Dweck, 1994).

B **learning is about the combination of affective, social, and cognitive domains in specific cultural and social contexts.** It is sited in transactions between the learner and the learning environment (Woodhead, 1988). The literature on responsive and contingent relationships in quality early childhood environments (e.g. Howes, Phillips and Whitebook, 1992; Smith, 1996a; Smith, 1996b; McGurk, Caplan, Hennessy and Moss, 1993) has emphasised this aspect of learning.

C learning is about learning for all: curriculum includes critical and emancipatory concerns for social justice, equity and inclusion (e.g. Siraj-Blatchford, 1994; Davies, 1989; McNaughton, 1997; Polakow, 1992).

The five dispositions explored in the research project are elaborated as follows:

(i) courage: to find something of interest here.

Some children are simply 'doing time' at the early childhood centre. For them, the interesting and desirable things in life are happening at home. This is particularly true at times of transition from home to centre, from a familiar environment to a new one. But even for old hands, children often choose old and familiar goals and topics, and avoid the new ones. Courage releases a key disposition for learning: curiosity.

Example:

Danny had been attending the early childhood centre for some time. The topic of greatest interest to him was 'being a friend', and to a certain extent this was combined with 'being a boy'. The topic, and its definition, came from elsewhere, and he and the other boys were working hard to keep it going. However, Danny is also particularly interested in drawing, and he gradually becomes interested in the possibilities of screen printing as a medium to represent his favourite subject: small animals (ants, bugs and rabbits).

(ii) trust: that this is a safe enough place to be involved and to focus ones attention.

The level of involvement of the children is one way of measuring a quality early childhood environment (cf. the EEL Project in the United Kingdom: Pascal, Bertram and Ramsden, 1997), and the ability to control ones attention or focus emerged as an important feature of learning in early childhood as long ago as Sylva's Oxford study of simple and complex play (Sylva, 1980). Another, related, disposition that can follow from involvement over a sustained period and knowing a topic well is playfulness: the capacity to play around with materials and ideas in new and creative ways.

Example:

Once Danny had been 'captured' by the new medium, screen printing, he was increasingly able to resist the call of friends to take him away: he could both engage with art, and then play with friends, and he could combine the two: talking to others while he worked in the art area. Linda, four, was particularly

(i) courage

(ii) trust

concerned about and distracted by 'being good'. She often asked other children who behaved adventurously whether they were 'allowed' to do that, and usually she avoided challenge and the risk of failure. When another child mixed dye into the glue Linda told her "You're not allowed doing that. I'm telling telling on you soon". However, one morning she remained focused and involved amongst a busy group of children for 43 minutes using paper scissors cellotape and stapler to make a paper chain.

(iii) perseverance: to persist when things get difficult.

Dweck's research (in Smiley and Dweck, 1994) found that before the age of five years children were developing dispositions (she calls them 'orientations') towards performance goals or towards learning goals. When children were oriented towards performance, they tended to avoid difficulty or uncertainty, in case they were shown up to be not able, or not good. When children were oriented towards learning, they were prepared to risk getting it wrong. The researchers linked these orientations to entity and incremental beliefs about ability or goodness: children who chose to avoid difficulty believed that their intelligence or ability (or goodness) was a fixed commodity. However, these beliefs may change when the topic of interest changes (Carr, 1997a, 1997b). I have found that children's topics or goals to do with gender (being a girl, being a boy) and age (being nearly five and therefore, in New Zealand, being nearly at school) and goodness (being good) favoured entity beliefs. Friendship (being a friend) and technologist (being a screen printer) topics favoured incremental beliefs.

Example:

Nell was particularly interested in friendship, and when Laura and Emily excluded her by whispering 'behind her back' she was annoyed, but persevered: she used two strategies (a) telling a good story that linked with a story that Laura has told, and (b), the old favourite, offering a birthday party.

When Laura tells a story about her Dad, Nell responds with a story about her Dad, how he went on the trampoline and broke a spring. Laura says she would like to jump on a trampoline, and Nell seizes her chance:

Nell: You can do it if you want 'cos we might invite you to my birthday.
Laura: Pardon.
Nell: Does your Mum know where Holtain Downs is?
Laura: No. I don't even think she knows there.
Nell: Well you can't come to my birthday.
Laura: Well why couldn't we ask your Mum?
Nell: We can.
(17/2TTB8.20-9.02) (translation of identifying code: date, Table Tape Side B, and minutes into the tape)

(iii) perseverance

Jason (nearly five) was learning to write his name, and informed the observer "I can do the squiggly S's now". In a collaborative episode with one of the teachers he worked hard to write his friend's name.

(iv) confidence: to express a point of view or a feeling

To express a point of view has been included in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 12 states:

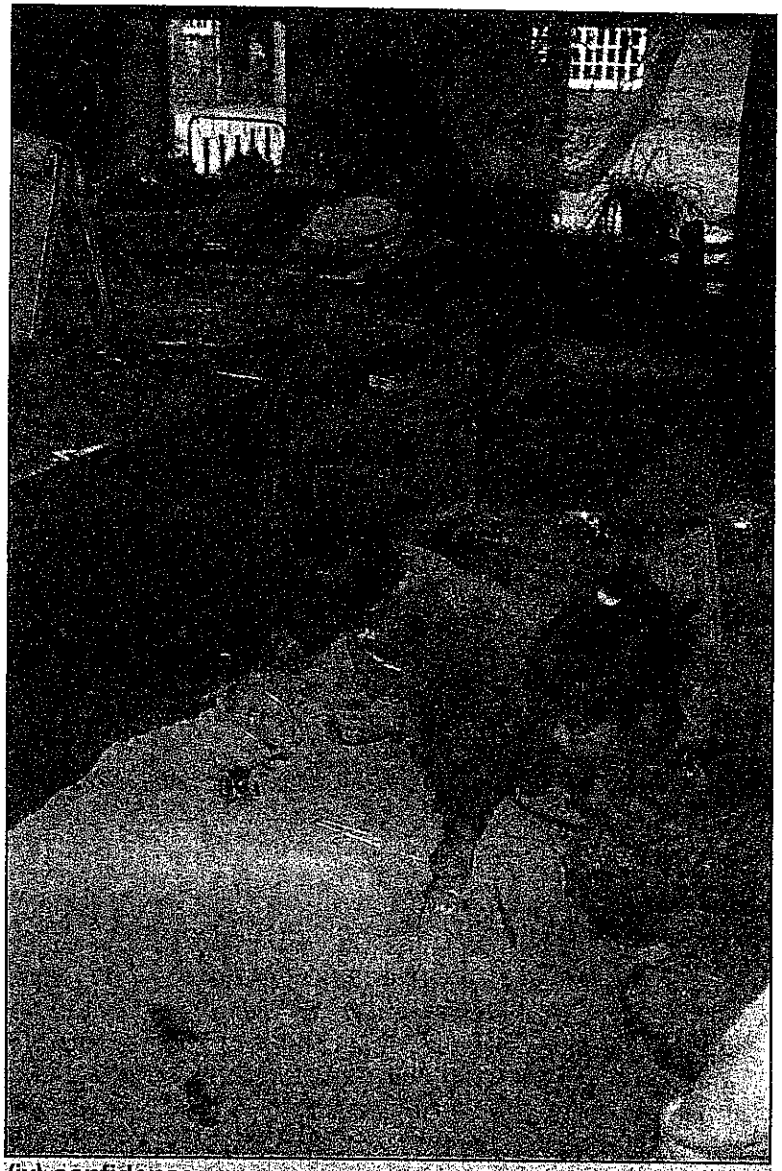
> **State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child.** (O'Reilly, 1997)

Research by Gardner on 'multiple intelligences' (Gardner, 1983) illustrates the range of ways of knowing and expressing. A paper on four 'creative' four-year-olds in one centre in the United States found that each had different special areas of expression: painting and drawing, block building, construction and collage, telling and constructing stories with others in pretend play (Johnson and Hatch, 1990). Often these special voices will only appear at home. After Danny talked about his interest in drawing I asked him "Do you do drawing here much?" He answered "Not much". An investigation of four-year-olds' number knowledge found that those children who were experienced and expert with numbers hardly ever used that expertise while they were at the early childhood centre (Young-Loveridge, Carr and Peters, 1995).
Although this is sometimes because children have other 'fish to fry' (Danny for instance was involved with making friends), opportunities for practising being a learner, tackling difficulty, collaboratively tackling difficulty, and having special abilities valued away from the family setting may be lost.

Example:

In the following example Nick Tony and Rachel were creating a script that is satisfactory to all the players.

Nick: ...some yummy meat balls for the party tonight
Tony: And I'm making some
Rachel: No, you're not playing this game with us.
Tony: Uh?
Nick: 'Cos these are just for us for the party.
Tony: I'm making something as well for the party.
Rachel: No, you're not coming to our party.
Nick: No, he's just making something for us to take, eh?
Tony: And I'm coming as well, eh?



(iv) confidence

Nick: No
Rachel: No
Nick: You're just making something for us to take. And you can. And we can cut a bit in half for you to have for dinner tonight, OK?
Tony: Because I'm.
Nick: Because you won't have any dinner left, will he Rachel?
Rachel: No.
Nick: So we're going to cut him a bit.
Tony: I'm cutting.
Nick: 'K. Now go and put that bit in the fridge. That bit. That bit of pizza. It's a bit of pizza. OK? (1512TTA37.54-38.50)

These three children are telling and acting out a story, imaginatively adapting the script to suit each of the players. They are story-tellers, a domain of expression of special interest to early childhood writers like Vivian Paley (e.g. Paley, 1990).

(v) responsibility for justice and fairness and the disposition to take on another point of view.

When children learn how to do something new, often the pattern of responsibility is an asymmetrical one: one person (often the adult) is the expert with the skill and the ability, and the expert teaches the novice. The expert provides assistance and praise as the novice 'has a go'. The expert anticipates and explains the difficulties that will be encountered. And often the expert will do part of the work, leaving increasingly difficult sections for the novice to do. Learning to tie shoe laces, do up the zip on the jacket, write ones name: all these tasks are learned in this way. However, learning is also about symmetrical experiences, joint attention, where children collaborate with others and listen to another point of view (or voice) (Rogoff, 1990).

Example:

The example of dramatic play with Nick Tony and Rachel is an example: children are listening to each other, explaining (using 'cos') what they think is going on, and making compromises. Nick combines the interests of Tony with those of Rachel by suggesting that although Tony is not eligible to 'go to the party' nevertheless he can have a role: to make the food that Nick and Rachel will take. Nick keeps an eye on the story line: "Cos these are just for us for the party" and "It's a bit of pizza, OK?". He also checks that Rachel feels happy about the arrangement (using "eh?" and "will he, Rachel?"). Tony salvages his subordinate role by quickly saying "I'm cutting" when the dinner is to be shared, and Nick agrees ("'K"). In collaborative exchanges like this,

(v) responsibility

children are often working at the edge of their communicative ability: imagining another person's beliefs needs desires and understandings.

In a group setting we have also found that children look out for each other, and involve others in their concern that things should be fair. An early childhood setting is also a place where children receive their first messages about fairness and justice (Katz, 1984). They also pick up and construct messages about what it is to be 'clever', 'good', a 'girl' and a 'boy'. They are likely to have conservative and stereotyped notions of these communities or 'collectives' (Davies, 1987). When they begin to question these received definitions, they can be said to be developing a disposition to be mindful (as opposed to 'mindless'; Langer, 1989; Salomon and Globerson, 1987). Children are balancing the need for belonging against the risks of exploration; the value of quality early childhood experiences is that they have a safe place in which to learn when and how it is right for them to display their membership in a valued community, and when and how it is valuable to question the definitions, push at the boundaries, and try out new ways of being.

Examples:

Andy (aged three) moves little Paul (aged two) away from Bruce's vigorous sand throwing. Andy: "Look out Paulie in case you get sand in your eyes". Amber-Jane is sawing wood at the carpentry table. Isaac comes over and says "I'll do that for you". Although on previous occasions she had allowed the boys to do the 'hard' work, this time she shakes her head and keeps on sawing.

As an outcome of their early childhood experiences, therefore, we would like children to have the dispositions to be courageous, attentive, persistent, confident, and responsible. Learning in early childhood is about interrelationships between the children's dispositions and the dispositional nature of the learning environment. This has been called a 'transactional' model (Woodhead, 1988); both the children's dispositions and the learning environment are changed by the relationship. I suggest that we see the early childhood learning environment as a dispositional milieu, where children are immersed in an environment characterised by those qualities: courage (and curiosity), trust (and playfulness), perseverance, responsibility (and mindfulness) and confident expressions of viewpoints and feelings. Adults will model these qualities and there will be an expectation by the community that everyone here is working towards them. Bruner (1996) p.87 suggests that a crucial outcome for children is to acquire 'an enlivened sense of what a learning culture can be like'. And Ratner and Stettner (1991) p.8, writing about the role of feelings and relationships in learning, suggest that:

an adult's joy, enthusiasm and interest will interest or maintain a child's attention, creating a shared context and making learning possible. Indeed, secure attachments, revolving around positive affect, are related to children's greater attention, patience, and persistence in cognitive tasks.

Activities will afford the behaviours that reflect the dispositions: they will be interesting, involving and challenging; they will encourage opportunities for expression and provide collaborative contexts. Therefore, one way to evaluate the learning environments we provide is to see them as 'dispositional milieux' (Carr, 1997a). We could advocate for sound dispositional milieux elsewhere as well: in schools for instance.

Acknowledgement

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