Learning Dispositions

The concept of a disposition in developmental psychology stems from Dewey’s (1966) work. It is seen as a quality or attribute possessed by a person, often used to signal temperament, and have been variously termed dispositions (Katz, 1988; Perkins, Jay & Tishman, 1993), orientations (Dweck, 1999), and habits of mind (Costa, 2000), for example “she has a cheerful disposition”. However, Carr (2001) notes that, when motivation is considered in the description, learning dispositions comprise a set of participation repertoires from which the learner recognises, selects, edits, responds to, resists, searches for and constructs learning opportunities. Alternatively, learning dispositions indicate that a learner is “ready, willing and able to participate in various ways: a combination of inclination, sensitivity to occasion, and the relevant skill and knowledge” (p. 21). In drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Comber (2000) argues that young children bring to school their “economic, cultural, social, symbolic and linguistic capital and their habitus, sets of dispositions acquired in daily life, that incline people to act in particular ways” (p. 46, my italics). Despite children bringing these sets of dispositions with them, Claxton (2008) argues that education can and should influence the development of these particular inclinations, alongside influencing the development of knowledge and skills associated with different subject areas. Further, Claxton and Carr (2004) argue that when learning dispositions form the basis of an educational approach,
attention is given to the long-term trajectories, rather than to the accumulation of particular bodies of knowledge and skills. Additionally, Claxton (2007) contends that when educators think only in terms of teaching skills, or problem-solving competencies and neglect the need to cultivate dispositions, they often find that any apparent gains in acquiring such skills and competencies are relatively short lived – they fail to “last, spread or deepen” (p. 6).

A dispositional framework does not negate the teaching of particular content, knowledge, and skills. Although necessary and important, they are viewed as one part of a larger picture. A dispositional framework is concerned not so much with the short-term aim of having students acquire particular content knowledge but rather with the long-term trajectory which includes the habits and orientations towards learning in general. These are strengthened (or perhaps, weakened) in the learning process. It is concerned with how students learn – the process – rather than with what they learn, since these processes can be applied across disciplines. A dispositional framework then shifts attention towards the process of learning, and the ways in which students’ learning dispositions grow and change (Claxton, 2007). In the Australian educational context, this represents a significant movement away from the traditional content-focused curriculum aiming for demonstrable competencies and benchmarks.

In her work in early childhood contexts in New Zealand, and linked to the strands of the national early childhood curriculum Te Whariki (Ministry of Education, 1996), Carr (2001) identified five domains of dispositions: taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty or uncertainty, communicating with others, and taking responsibility. These are intended to contribute towards the development of orientations, or habits of mind, across a range of discipline areas comprising the early childhood curriculum. Drawing upon Carr’s work and other references to the literature in education and in religious education, more specifically, Hyde (2010a) refined these domains of learning dispositions for religious education in the Early Years in Australian Catholic schools. Accordingly, he identified five domains: curiosity, being dialogical, persisting and living with uncertainty, meaning-making, and taking responsibility. Although refined initially with Early
Years Religious Education in mind, these particular domains of learning dispositions are discussed, next, in the context of how each might nurture the spirituality of children.

Curiosity

Curiosity is the first domain of learning dispositions. Being curious entails not only capturing interest, but also concerns an individual having a sense of wonder and awe. Hay and Nye (2006) strongly describe curiosity in terms of mystery-sensing, which pertains to the sense of wonder and awe, and to the fascination and questioning that is characteristic of children as they interact with their world. They note that for young children in particular, any distinction between the commonplace and the profound may not yet have meaning. Therefore, children’s sense of wonder can be awakened by that which may appear to an adult to be ordinary and mundane, such as striking a match, or turning on a tap.

The notion of curiosity – and wonder – may offer a way of talking with children about the Transcendent (God). Children (as well as adults) encounter mystery through wonder and through imagination. For instance, Godly Play (Berryman, 2002, 2009) explicitly utilizes the notion of wonder (and develops children’s predisposition towards it) as a way of enabling children to use and play with religious language to discern meaning in life. A sense of curiosity and wonder enables children to use their imagination and to open up the creative process in relation to religious language. The story teller, through her or his “dependable presence” (Melchert & Proffitt, 1998), and through her or his own disposition towards curiosity, allows children the freedom to be curious, and to wonder:

When the teacher is truly wondering, the children sense wonder in the air. It manifests itself in the playfulness present in the room. Permission and reinforcement are present to encourage it. When the teacher enters religious language with wonder, he or she shows the children by example how to open the creative process (Berryman, 1991, p. 62).
A key responsibility for teachers here is to acknowledge children’s predisposition towards wonder, and to nurture it using their own sense of wonder as an impetus:

...not only in their way of being with students, but also in shaping the learning process to include and honour learners’ wonder. They must be aware of, and willing to let into the classroom the contingency of life, at the same time creating a sense of dependability for the learners (Melchert & Proffit, 1998, p. 31).

In being curious, and in possessing a sense of wonder, children are then able to recognise the familiar, while also being empowered to enjoy the unfamiliar and to wonder about it. Spirituality may be nurtured through this disposition since the wonder, curiosity and awe experienced by children often incorporates a sense of mystery and, at times, sacredness in what they see (Adams, Hyde, & Woolley, 2008). For many children, the predisposition towards curiosity provides a gateway for speaking about the transcendent, and may provide an impetus for introducing appropriate religious and spiritual language for children’s exploration and use.

**Being dialogical**

Being dialogical refers to more than being willing to speak and to enter into conversation with others. Being dialogical refers to the disposition of being a willing participant in the type of dialogue that leads to genuine understanding. It involves the willingness to enter into discourse with another without having a predetermined agenda – to be open to the possibilities of new insights that may be developed between the dialogue partners.

The philosophical thought of Gadamer (1989) sheds light upon this particular disposition. Gadamer put forward the metaphor of *conversation* as an ideal for that which ought to occur during the hermeneutical process. Conversation exemplifies the qualities of responsiveness, creativity and freedom that are central to genuine understanding. Of importance is the notion that genuine dialogue cannot be controlled by the conversation partners:
We say that we ‘conduct’ a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one we want to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less leaders of than the led. No one knows in advance what will be the ‘outcome’ of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. Thus we can say that something was a good conversation or that it was ill fated (p. 383).

Dialogue works most effectively when the subject matter of the conversation assumes control, while those in dialogue allow themselves to be led by it. A conversation is foiled when one dialogue partner seeks to dominate by imposing her or his own point of view. The prerequisite for genuine dialogue is that the conversation partners give in to the “ebb and flow of the conversation as the subject matter unfolds” (Sharkey, 2001, p. 23). The object of the dialogue then is that which both partners seek to understand. It is this joint object, rather than the partners, that conducts the dialogue (Weinsheimer, 1985).

That those involved in the dialogue are partners is important. In Gadamer’s philosophical thought, the concept of a partner implies equality (Weinsheimer, 1985). Therefore, both conversation partners – student and student, or student and teacher – are equal and contribute to the ebb and flow of the dialogue in valuable, albeit different ways. Being dialogical then entails that both dialogue partners exhibit respect for the opinion of the other.

In this particular disposition, being dialogical entails deep listening and trust on the part of the dialogue partners. It entails the partners being “seriously playful” (Berryman, 2009) in their exchange of ideas, and playfulness is one of the indicators which may signal spirituality (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008; Berryman, 2001). Spirituality may be nurtured through this disposition when students enter into dialogue with others as genuine dialogue partners. The other with whom
the students dialogue may involve another student, the teacher, or indeed the texts and artefacts of a particular religious tradition. Each brings its own horizon of meaning (Gadamer, 1989) to the dialogue. These horizons are fused together by the dialogue partners, thereby creating meaning and understanding.

**Persisting and living with uncertainty**

Persisting and living with uncertainty reflects the predisposition of being able to hold in tension different ways of being in the world and of confronting life’s existential concerns and issues. Horell (2003) notes the ambiguity which exists as a result of the shift towards cultural postmodernity and both the challenges and opportunities this presents for educators. While such a shift generally involves movement away from a strict adherence to the traditional religious worldviews, it also involves a greater emphasis on spiritual experiences, and of being able to connect spiritually with Self, other, the world, and with God (p. 102). In exploring the importance of spirituality and connecting beyond the Self, Hyde (2008) notes how children draw upon many frameworks of meaning to weave together their respective worldviews and, in many cases, envision more authentic and life-giving ways of being in the world. Often, these frameworks reflect the uncertainty, the ambiguity and multiplicity of cultural postmodernity. This particular disposition then describes the inclination towards being able to sit with ambiguity, and to engage in deep questioning and genuine wondering about existential issues and questions.

Drawing from psychotherapy and, in particular, from the works of Reinhardt (1960), Yalom (1980), and Cooper (2003), Berryman (1991, 2009), maintains that existential issues mark the boundaries of human experience. They include the experience of what happens at death, the sense of aloneness, the need to create meaning, and an appreciation of the experience of freedom. According to Berryman, these limits are as fundamental to the lives of children as they are to adults. While children may experience them, speak of them and approach them in ways different to adults, they are, nonetheless, real for them.
For children to be disposed to persist and to live with uncertainty, therefore, requires them to be able to problem-solve, think laterally, and to wonder deeply and imaginatively in confronting existential issues and that this is the case is supported by a growing body of research. For instance, the work of Berryman (1991, 2009) and, more recently, Hyde (2010b, 2010c) indicates that young children, when given agency and freedom to choose their own work and materials, will return continually to stories and presentations that contain for them meaningful images and motifs in order to persist and make meaning from these. Persisting and living with uncertainty is then a pertinent learning disposition which, potentially, nurtures spirituality in children, and aids in its development.

**Meaning-making**

Meaning-making is the predisposition of being able to makes sense of signs, symbols and events. For young children, play is one of the key means through which they discover and make meaning (see for instance Copple, Cocking & Matthews, 1984; Sawyers & Carrick, 2008), and through which they may also express their spirituality (Berryman 2009). Exploring this notion further, there are two particular theories about the way in which children make meaning through play – script theory and emotive theory. Shank and Abelson (1977) maintain that script theory involves the type of play in which children imitate events they have experienced. They follow a type of “script” in imitating and making meaning from the event. Emotive play refers to the way in which children may enact events which enable them to express emotions as a key to their meaning-making (Fein, 1991).

Sociodramatic play (pretend play) is also a key feature of young children’s play which enables them to make meaning. Bretherton (cited in Hymans, 1996) describes pretend play as consisting of two levels. The first level – make-believe play – pertains to the “as if” dimension in which children are involved in familiar situations, such as shopping, or having a party. In this type of play, children shop or play party games as if they were actually involved in the real event itself. The second level comprises the “what if” dimension. Here, children transform the real world into a
fictional, or fantasy world, in which a spoon or block of wood becomes the telephone, and in which children pretend to be doctors, nurses, teachers or parents.

Through immersion in these types of deep play, children are able to use both verbal and non-verbal communication as a means to discover and unpack the meaning of an event or story in their lives. In using non-verbal communication in play, their response may be intuitive and beyond words. Through these types of play children may be moved to express or make visible their meaning-making in some way – through art work, drawing, writing and the like. In creating meaning through play, children learn “the meaning of many of our cultural artefacts, to construct their own meaning in and through those artefacts, and to manipulate meanings according to context” (MacNaughton, 2004, p. 43). When children construct their own meaning in this way, they are, as discussed, potentially expressing something of their spirituality.

Taking responsibility

As Carr (2001) describes it, taking responsibility includes contributing to shared activities and episodes of joint attention. Several studies indicate the learning potential present in contexts involving reciprocal and responsive relationships with others (e.g., Moore & Durham, 1992; Smith, 1999). However, taking responsibility as it is viewed here extends such understandings. It is concerned with taking action that matters. That is, an inclination to own the learning and to ‘think’ the learning through into action with positive consequences for the wellbeing of one’s self and others. In this way, children are empowered to engage in “reciprocal and responsive relationships with people that weave together the affective, the cognitive and the social into rich fabrics of learning” (Carr, 2001, p. 77).

Taking responsibility empowers children and encourages a commitment to social justice. It inclines children towards being able to recognise situations in which injustice of one kind or another prevails, and to act accordingly. It involves the inclination to make a difference for the good.
Several authors (for example Buchanan & Hyde, 2008; de Souza, 2006; Moffett, 1994) argue that learning experiences which have the power to be transformative ought to lead the learner to act upon what has been learnt in ways that benefit self and others. Such action and relationship towards the other accords with the literature’s understanding and description of spirituality (see for example, de Souza, 2006; Hay with Nye, 2006; Hyde 2008). The disposition of taking responsibility reflects this notion.

**Conclusion**

Each of the five domains of learning dispositions represents the orientations, or habits of mind, that many young children bring with them to early childhood centres and early years’ classrooms in schools. They are also avenues through which the spirituality of children may be nurtured and given expression. Therefore, the dispositional framework represents one practical means by which educators in the Australian context might address and nurture the spiritual dimension of children’s lives through the curriculum.

However, and while emanating from the Australian context, it is important to note that this work has broader application to educators and classroom practitioners elsewhere. Since the dispositional framework outlined in this chapter draws upon an extensive body of research, its applicability for nurturing the spirituality of *all* children is noted because it represents a shared approach to and understanding of both spirituality and the notion of learning dispositions. For instance, the dispositional framework, with its focus on the processes of how children learn, may provide an alternative perspective to the outcomes based philosophy that drives contemporary education in many countries. Since the framework is based on contemporary research, it may also provide education policy makers with a valid stance from which to challenge the outcomes based approach. Classroom practitioners using this framework are well positioned to discover the processes through which their students learn, and the ways in which they are predisposed to learn. With such pedagogical learner knowledge at their disposal, they may, consciously and deliberately,
plan learning experiences which take account of the ways in which their students are predisposed to learn and include opportunities for the nurturing of their spirituality.

The task now is to devise ways in which such opportunities for the nurturing and expression of these domains of learning dispositions might be incorporated in the curriculum of early years’ classrooms. Preliminary work has already begun in this area (see Hyde, 2012; Hyde & Leening 2012) with a view to devising and articulating possible learning and teaching strategies for nurturing and expressing these learning dispositions, as well as the development of practical tracking tools that can be utilized by educators for recording purposes. In this way, it is hoped that the use of a dispositional framework in early years’ education might have the potential to enable Australian educators to consider children’s spirituality in learning and wellbeing. In doing this, early years’ educators will be well positioned to be attentive to “[the] Physical, social, emotional, spiritual, creative, cognitive and linguistic aspects of learning [which] are all intricately interwoven and interrelated” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9, my italics).

References


