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Knowledge, understanding, and the disposition to seek both

by Lilian G. Katz

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.

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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.