

Could greater awareness of children's dispositions improve the literacy teaching and learning process? Find out what dispositions are and how positive dispositions are essential for nurturing emergent readers.

Dispositions: Encourage Young Children to Become Life-Long Readers

Mary Swanson and Denise Da Ros-Voseles

In the block center, 4-year-olds Emily, Edwardo, and Katlin select miniature farm animals to walk across a bridge they made with blocks. As each child marches an animal across the bridge, in unison they say, "Trip, trap, trip, trap."

Jack places a troll on the bridge and challenges his playmates by asking, "Who's that tripping and trapping on my bridge?"

Each child identifies her or her animal in a high-pitched voice. In response, Jack's troll figure allows some farm animals to continue across the bridge while others are told, "I'm going to gobble you up!"

The children continue creating variations on *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* folktale using a variety of props as they take turns playing various roles.

Did these children spontaneously role-play a familiar story? Or did their teacher, Sally, create conditions that made it highly likely children would engage in this type of literacy play? This article explores how teachers of young children can nurture their dispositions to be future readers. Teacher beliefs, awareness of dispositions, and the role both play in the literacy climate can enhance the reading process throughout children's educations.

Why Dispositions Matter

What is a *disposition*? "A disposition is a tendency to exhibit frequently, consciously, and voluntarily a pattern of behavior that is directed to a broad goal. It is possible to have the skills and lack a taste for or habit of using them. Similarly, knowledge can be acquired without having the disposition to use it" (Katz, 1993b, p. 1).

What is a *disposition*?

"A disposition is a tendency to exhibit frequently, consciously, and voluntarily a pattern of behavior that is directed to a broad goal" (Katz, 1993b, p. 1).

The possession of a skill or knowledge does not necessarily result in its usage. For example, most elementary children and even adults can read, but some avoid reading whenever possible.

The relevance of dispositions for early educators is clear in the joint position statement on early reading of the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1998).

IRA and NAEYC are committed not only to helping young children learn to read and write but also to

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fostering and sustaining their interest and *disposition* to read and write for their own enjoyment, information, and communication. (p. 2)

Excellent instruction builds on what children already know, and can do, and provides knowledge, skills, and *dispositions* for life-long learning. (p. 7)

Since learning and teaching reading and writing are linked to dispositions, it behooves educators to closely examine and make sense of the meaning of *dispositions*, the “*disposition* to read and write” (p. 2), and the “*dispositions* for life-long learning” (p. 7).

Simultaneously teach children to read and strengthen their disposition to be readers.

Another important characteristic of dispositions is that they are environmentally sensitive. They are acquired, supported, or weakened by interactive experiences in an environment with significant adults and peers (Bertram & Pascal, 2002).

Before Emily, Edwardo, and Katlin recreated the Billy goats fable, their teacher prepared the block area. Sally set out blue cloth to depict water and two shades of green material to represent grass. The children quickly associated the cloth with *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* and eagerly asked to hear the story again. Sally adapted it to include several farm animals. The children then created their own stories in the block area using the props provided.

Through her storytelling, this teacher provided an opportunity for

literacy to thrive as children created their story, negotiated characters’ roles, and creatively used props. Sally understood that oral language is a foundation for future reading success. These are just some of the dispositions related to literacy that she nurtured in her classroom during this experience.

- **Independence**—children constructed characters and scenarios
- **Creativity**—children used props to create stories
- **Self-motivation**—children willingly engaged in the literacy experience
- **Problem solving**—children negotiated who would play various story characters

Emily, Edwardo, Katlin, and Jack exhibited these educative dispositions while they engaged in the emergent reading activity with the Billy goats tale.

Dispositions can be either desirable or undesirable. Desirable dispositions—

Dispositions That Support Early Reading

- Independence
- Creativity
- Self-motivation
- Problem solving
- Resilience

such as resourcefulness, curiosity, persistence, and risk taking—can be strengthened. Diminishing undesirable dispositions such as selfishness, impatience, and intolerance is also a desirable goal.

Katz cautioned teachers to take care not to damage children’s dispositions to be readers while engaging in the process of teaching them to read (1993b, 1995; Katz & Raths, 1985). Avid readers are children with the disposition to be readers. They enjoy reading, find reading beneficial, and seek out reading. It makes sense to simultaneously teach children to read and to strengthen their disposition to be readers.



Kathleen A. Martin & L. Kay Emfinger

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How Dispositions Encourage Readers

Educators enhance children's dispositions to be readers by structuring supportive classroom environments that are likely to create life-long readers. Figure 1 illustrates elements of a literacy culture that cultivate the disposition to be a reader.

Educators of young children have a great effect on children's dispositions to be readers (Noyes, 2000). Katz (1995) recommended striking "an optimal balance between generality and specificity" (p. 66).

Structure supportive environments to create life-long readers.

Pascal and Bertram (2000) identified and described these critical core elements for effective early learning: "dispositions to learn; social competence and self-concept; emotional well being" (p. 246). Similarly, four educative dispositions indicative of "the Effective Learner" were identified as independence, creativity, self-motivation, and resilience (Bertram & Pascal, 2002).

Emily, Edwardo, Katlin, and Jack are now 9 years old. They again retell *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. By this time in their reading journeys, they can identify the story elements and the powerful significance of three in fairy and folk tales. They continue hearing the "clip, clap, clip, clap," but their focus is onomatopoeia (words that sound like the actions to which they refer).

The dispositions they use are their creativity and problem

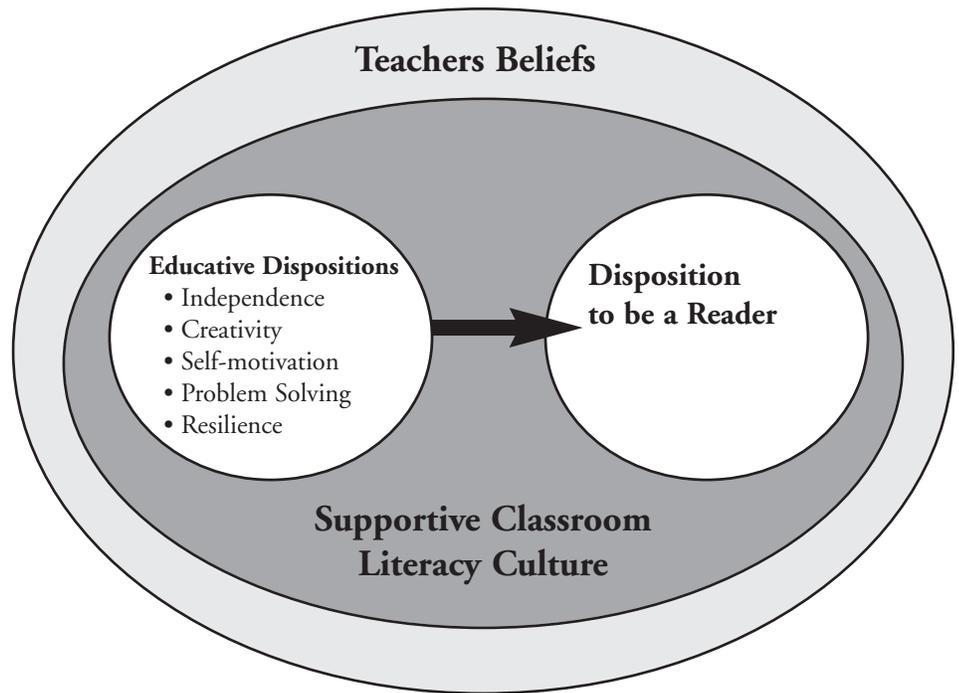


Figure 1. Relationships Among Dispositions, Classroom Culture, and Teacher Beliefs

solving to write and present an original transformation to their third grade classroom. Their assignment was to present a story that included the principle of three, onomatopoeia, and be entertaining. The other two dispositions, motivation and choice, are inherent in the task.

As they mature, these children will be ready to compare the folk tale's transformation from Scandinavia to Germany to Germany/Poland and focus on differing points of view.

What Teaching Strategies Support Dispositions to be Readers?

Educative dispositions are nurtured through developmentally appropriate

activities in the early childhood curriculum and are developed throughout the remaining school years (see Figure 2). Several of the most important educative dispositions for emergent reading are briefly described here along with supportive classroom strategies.

Independence. Independence is the ability to be self-sufficient, to self-organize, and to self-manage (Pascal & Bertram, 2000). Independence is related to self-regulated learning (Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000) because children's ability to self-monitor enhances their reading and enables them to self-correct. Children's abilities to regulate their own learning can be influenced by their beliefs about the relationships among performance, effort, and responsibility.

Classroom strategies that support independence in reading include:

- Provide opportunities for children to set their own goals.

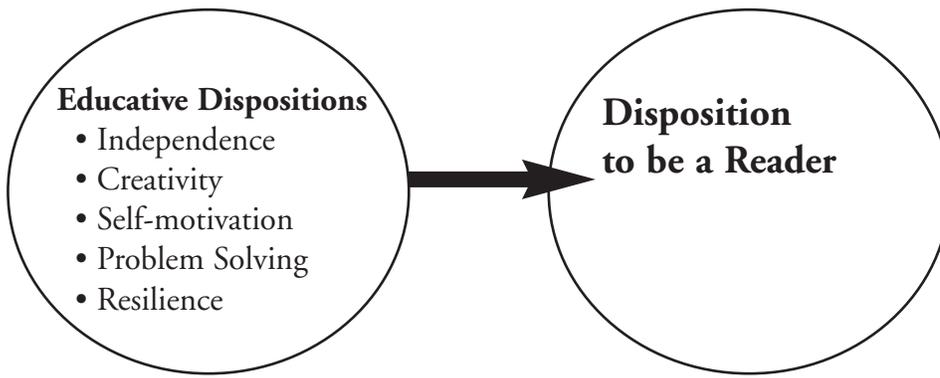


Figure 2. The Relationship of Educative Dispositions to Reading

- Encourage children to take multiple paths to achieve their goals.
- Monitor children's effectiveness of their choices to reach goals.

For example, teachers who urge young children to select books and share them with others in multiple formats and presentation styles encourage the disposition of independence.

Elementary-age children can be involved in setting their own goals for reading and self-assessment. They can select literacy experiences and

identify what they do well in reading and what they need to improve. They can demonstrate their learning by reflection and using multiple reading and writing activities. They can self evaluate by using rubrics. Through choices like these, students develop more responsibility for their work and ownership of their accomplishments. Contracts and goal setting can also provide opportunities for independence for older children.

Creativity. Creativity is “characterized by those children who show curiosity and interest in their world” (Pascal & Bertram, 2000, p. 248). Readers who exhibit creativity explore the world of print and become cognitively involved. Creativity is needed in the reading process to fill in all of the gaps in schema, logic, or print so readers can construct meaningful comprehension.

Teaching strategies that support literacy creativity include:

- Plan an environment that is conducive to the creative process and supports children's risk taking.
- Appreciate and exhibit creativity and curiosity in the presence of children.
- Provide children with frequent, regular opportunities to be creative and value their own curiosity.

For example, teachers scaffold the creative process with a variety of materials (art supplies, manipulatives, props, picture books, puppets) and opportunities for children to freely and expressively represent their literary experiences. Children's curiosity is stimulated as they explore ideas and express them individually.

All children can be encouraged to express their knowledge using creative literacy experiences. For example, one child might choose to express his or her comprehension in a visual format; another child could create a video presentation. Children typically use their strongest learning styles when asked to express what they are learning. One group of second graders chose to create puppets from paper bags and put on a puppet show.

Self-motivated readers internalize the reasons for success and challenges.

Self-motivation. Self-motivation “enables children, independently, to become deeply involved and engrossed in activities and challenges” (Pascal & Bertram, p. 249). Self-motivated readers understand and internalize the reasons for accomplishments and challenges.

Teaching strategies that foster self-motivated readers include:

- Provide choices in medium of expression and procedures within learning experiences.
- Critique the reading process rather than the product.
- Offer encouragement that is specific rather than general.

For example, teachers who value authentic self-expression within literacy



Subjects & Predicates

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activities foster self-motivation. Students who feel that they have ownership of their literacy learning are more intrinsically motivated, place a greater value on reading, and view themselves as readers. Self-motivated children can select the product as well as the process to acquire and represent their knowledge.

Problem solving. Problem solving in reading is directly related to success in reading. Children strive to think and internalize the information they read by selecting the best procedures, strategies, and activities. In so doing, children repeat the pattern of identifying, monitoring, and finding solutions (Vacca & Vacca, 2008).

Teaching strategies that foster problem solving include:

- Encourage readers to think like scientists, historians, or artists.
- Ask readers to recognize the importance of using multiple strategies, analyze the task, and then select plans to complete the literacy task correctly.
- Model metacognition and the importance for self-regulated readers to identify a problem and select a strategy to remediate it.

For example, teachers who encourage elementary-age readers to research a historical figure might comment, “You did exactly what a historian would do to understand the characters in the novel.”

Resilience. Resilience is “the disposition to bounce back after setback, hindrance, or frustration and retain

temperament, personality and spirit” (Pascal & Bertram, 2000, p. 249).

Resilient readers have a special form of self-confidence and believe that they are effective learners. They also have a willingness to take a risk because their interest motivates them to read material for interest or content. If they fail or if the task is difficult, good readers continue to strive to accomplish their task.



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Teachers support resilient readers when they:

- Provide open and challenging opportunities within a nurturing classroom environment.
- Focus on successes by giving constructive comments that maintain children’s self-esteem and self-efficacy.
- Identify the processes and mechanisms that are stressful or too risky and substitute more appropriate procedures.

For example, classrooms that nurture and respect all children and provide challenging opportunities for success support resilience. Teacher evaluations, self-evaluations, and continuing professional development such as attendance at conferences are tools to encourage development of appropriate teaching activities and goals.

Offering materials and strategies, some of which may be challenging, along with positive feedback and encouragement, creates a comfortable climate. Children feel at ease when they can approach challenging tasks without fear of failure. This example demonstrates how teachers support resilient readers.

In their fourth grade language arts class, Emily, Edwardo, Katlin, and Jack are eager to engage in research about a state animal. The class discusses the vital components of a complete report and students design a rubric that they will use to assess their projects.

Emily and Katlin decide to study the state wildlife animal. Edwardo selects the state reptile, a snake. Jack chooses the state bird.

The teacher then explains two important guidelines: The study may be presented in any format EXCEPT a written report. A study can be conducted in partnership but must be a more polished, complete project.

Emily and Katlin are delighted. They want to prepare an illustrated collection of original and published poetry about their animal. Edwardo enlists his parents in a video presentation similar to a television show. Jack makes a detailed, labeled diorama with a replica of the bird in its natural habitat. He plays a recording of its song with the exhibit.

Others in the group decide to make realistic drawings of the animals in their habitats, present extensive fact files on colorful cards, and write and illustrate picture books.

The dispositions that this assignment for older children nurtured were:

- Creativity and independence, because children could represent their knowledge in their chosen format.
- Self-motivation, which is supported when children make their own choices.
- Problem solving, including when children designed their displays and negotiated the assessment rubric.

These examples demonstrate how five dispositions—*independence, creativity, self-motivation, problem solving, and resilience*—can be maintained from early childhood throughout the elementary grades.

How Do Teacher Beliefs Affect a Culture of Literacy?

Each teacher establishes the foundation for a classroom literacy culture based on one's beliefs about literary experiences. This literacy culture reflects a teacher's general beliefs

about learning, teaching, and the nature of children. These beliefs are often implicit, yet they influence teachers' judgments, perceptions, and decisions and undergird a teacher's actions (Bowman, 1989; Vartuli & Marcon, 2005).

Mills and Clyde (1991) wrote compellingly about the impact of differing teachers' views about a kindergartner's success as a reader and writer. As their case study unfolds, it becomes increasingly apparent how teaching and curriculum decisions are inextricably linked to a teacher's belief system.

Teacher beliefs and the curriculum create children's attitudes about reading.

A teacher's attitude toward literacy directly affects how much children involve themselves in reading (Alexander & Filler, 1976) and whether or not their dispositions to be readers are strengthened or weakened. Beliefs about the role of teachers and preferred methods for nurturing learning occur early and subliminally during childhood years that are spent in home, preschool, and elementary school settings (Greenberg, 1998).

Some instructional processes may even damage or undermine the disposition to read (Katz, 1993a). Katz (1995) warned that introducing academics too early could jeopardize learning and eventually lower achievement. Others have pointed out that too much drill or extrinsic motivation could also negatively affect children's disposition to read (Alvermann, 2004; Johnston, 2005).

Teachers are urged to examine their assumptions about early reading because not all belief systems are beneficial to teachers nor do they benefit children. Beliefs about how children learn and the curriculum have an enormous impact on creating and strengthening children's life-long positive attitudes about reading. Teachers can either support or undermine the disposition to be a reader and ultimately influence the most important disposition of all: to be a life-long learner.

Although the literacy strategies reviewed here are not new, from time to time teachers are urged to self-assess to ensure these research-based practices are embedded in their classrooms. Self-assessments, such as the one in Figure 3, are necessary because every day more and more young children are being subjected to narrow, limiting early literacy instruction (Neuman & Roskos, 2005).

Enhancing the disposition to read inspires children's appetites for learning and literature. Ideally, teachers establish an emotional climate of warmth, playfulness, and calmness as well as the dispositions to read. Well-informed teachers construct safe learning environments and provide ample engaging opportunities to read.

In early childhood classrooms, literacy instruction is play based. Playful literacy experiences and enjoyable learning activities are a winning combination that continue throughout the elementary years. In the elementary years, educators develop child-centered literacy classrooms by consciously selecting research-based practices that have meaningful contexts, create multiple activities, and scaffold for success.

Simultaneously in all classrooms, the teacher, as the educational leader

Figure 3. Questions to Ask About Whether Early Literacy Teaching Strategies Are Researched Based—A Teacher Self-Assessment

- Is literacy teaching interrelated with what children already know and are interested in?
- Is instruction cohesive rather than based on isolated skills?
- Do children have real-world experiences filled with concrete objects, events, and settings? Are sensory experiences rich and abundant? Are there frequent, diverse culturally based experiences?
- Is the curriculum self-directive with tasks and/or procedures? How often do children have choices in topics, texts, tasks, and media? Is there always opportunity for self-monitoring and self-regulation?
- Are a variety of topics, styles, and materials or multiple text formats available across a wide range of difficulty?
- Is there social collaboration for children to listen and talk? Are there opportunities for individual work, partnerships, small teams, and whole-class collaboration?
- Are there multiple opportunities for children's self-expression and creative expression? Does the teacher facilitate authentic discourse?
- Does the teacher model reading and alternatives for problem solving when reading and writing texts?
- Is there sufficient time to explore reading materials and experiences in depth?
- Do children feel that the environment is safe in which to test and succeed in their literacy skills?
- Does the teacher actively link the classroom with children's homes? Are families urged to build children's literacy? Are community resources adapted to meet children's early literacy needs?
- If a packaged curriculum is used, does the teacher adapt it to construct developmentally appropriate literacy experiences?

of literacy, builds strong bridges to involve families as partners to build children's literacy and eagerness to learn. Teachers guide family literacy efforts, frequently exchange communication, and find ways to share literacy goals.

For example, Bring a Reader to School is a great way to involve a meaningful adult in the classroom. Students invite a parent, grandparent, or another adult to read their favorite books to the class. Each child introduces the guest and interviews the reader

about the book and why it is a favorite book.

* * *

The overarching goal to create life-long learners who are enthusiastic readers requires a two-pronged approach: enhancing dispositions and simultaneously teaching reading skills. The approach is powerfully portrayed in the children's book, *Thank You, Mr. Falker* (Polacco, 1998). One cannot help but wonder what would have happened if Patricia had not been taught to read by

Mr. Falker, who instilled her love of literacy by enhancing the disposition to read.

The current focus of early literacy on teaching isolated knowledge and skills is done at the expense of nurturing children's positive dispositions toward life-long reading and learning. "The acquisition of reading skills and the disposition to be a reader should be mutually inclusive goals of education" (Katz, 1993b, p. 1). When a classroom offers appropriate literacy experiences, desirable dispositions are developed, and opportunities for children to become life-long readers and life-long learners are greatly increased.

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Put These Ideas Into Practice!

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Dispositions That Support Early Reading

- Independence
- Creativity
- Self-motivation
- Problem solving
- Resilience

Activities to Help Staff Understand Dispositions

- Reflect on life experiences. Fold paper lengthwise. Write + on the left side and – on the right side. Think of a teacher who made a positive impact on your life. Write words that describe that teacher under the + sign. Under the –, describe a teacher who was less supportive. Share lists and combine descriptions. Together determine which characteristics are dispositions and which are teaching strategies.
- Brainstorm a list of desirable dispositions you want children to possess. Choose one on which to focus. What can teachers do to encourage this disposition? Create a web with the disposition at the center and link supportive strategies to it.

Ways Teachers Support Early Literacy Dispositions

Support independence

- Provide opportunities for children to set their own goals.
- Encourage children to take multiple paths to achieve goals.
- Monitor children's effectiveness of their choices.

Build creativity

- Plan an environment that is conducive to the creative process and supports risk taking.
- Appreciate and exhibit creativity and curiosity.
- Provide children with frequent, regular opportunities to be creative and value their curiosity.

Foster self-motivated readers

- Provide choices in medium of expression and procedures.
- Critique the reading process rather than the product.
- Provide specific encouragement.

Encourage children's problem solving

- Support readers to think like scientists or artists.
- Promote successful strategies to complete the literacy task.
- Model the importance of self-regulated reading.

Create resilient readers

- Provide open and challenging opportunities within a nurturing environment.
- Focus on successes by giving constructive comments that maintain children's self-esteem and self-efficacy.
- Identify stressful processes and substitute more appropriate procedures.



Reference

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Note: *Dimensions of Early Childhood* readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.