Critical Review: Early Years’ Learning Disposition


Abstract

The review begins with the introduction that acquaints the reader with the two researchers who have written the paper – Guy Claxton and Margaret Carr. It also acquaints the reader with the basic construct of the paper to help him or her find an easy way through the critique. The review goes on to examine in what sense the two researchers have posited learning environments and valued responses and finds that a most conducive environment is one that generates a general disposition to learn in children. This is considered much better than simply generating specific learning dispositions that can only help in acquisition of specific packets of knowledge while a general disposition to learn can enable a child from its earliest years on embark on a learning trajectory that is eclectic and sustainable. The review also points out that the paper is in response to a necessity to generate an environment where children from any cultural-historical background can succeed equally with others. The review next examines the learning processes inherent within the process delineated by the paper and finds that the process progressively enables a child to be ready, willing and able to learn
in a collaborative environment, an environment that is particularly suitable for early years when prior knowledge is minimal. The review next examines the role of teachers and finds that the paper uses a subtle meaning to this in that reinforcement is minimal with teachers simply pointing out paths by which the child can allow its own initiative to run in the direction of the intended path of the curriculum. The review concludes favourably and states that the paper has posited a very easy-to-use way in which children in early years settings can acquire knowledge and, at the same time, sustain a trajectory of learning that is general in the sense that it is a disposition to learn in the appropriate manner with all the essential perquisites to allow such learning and that leads lifelong.
Introduction

Professor Guy Claxton, Professor at University of Bristol, UK, has written many papers on the subject of early years education both in conjunction with M. Carr and others and is well-known in this field. Margaret Carr is also as famous in this field and is at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. Since this paper is presented by them it is germane to critically examine it in context of what can be added to the present body of knowledge on techniques to further the purpose and efficiencies of early years education programs worldwide.

The duo draw upon illustrative examples from New Zealand’s early childhood settings (specifically from a New Zealand Ministry of Education funded “Early Childhood Learning and Assessment Exemplar Project” (ECLAEP), published in **** as “Kei Tua o te Pae” – Assessment for Learning: early childhood exemplars – Margaret Carr is a co-director of the project) to demonstrate that it is better for teachers in such settings and classrooms to be explicit about valued responses and their progressive pathways than to be implicit which may incur risk of leaving them often unacknowledged and unattended.

The paper confesses to not trying to define what learning dispositions are which is somewhat admirably and succinctly done in another of M. Carr’s paper posited in conjunction with A. B. Smith in which learning dispositions are defined as – “Dispositions to learn are defined as learning (or ‘coping’) strategies that have become habits of mind and tendencies to respond to, edit and select from, situations in certain ways” (Smith, A. B., & Carr, M., 2004). The definition is presented here for better understanding of the reviewing process. The dynamic approach to learning dispositions in early learners spelled out by the researchers can be incorporated in a learning curriculum
Learning Dispositions 4

that can, they maintain, reinforce valued responses to available learning opportunities by
– ‘increasing their frequency and robustness, widening their domain, and deepening their
complexity and competence’. The researchers assert that such an approach can prevail in
three kinds of learning environments – ‘affording, inviting and potentiating (powerful)’.
The three environments are progressively enabling. In a most enabling environment – a
potentiating one – one in which a teacher, pupil and other collaborators like parents and
peers get maximum opportunity to progress along the learning path, a teacher can
explain, orchestrate, commentate on, model and reify learning responses and other
collaborators can assist as facilely in the processes.

Learning Environment and Valued Responses

The researchers posit that both Carr and Claxton have presented in their previous papers
the view that a 21st century curriculum must not only incorporate content that presents
students with valuable and engaging topics but it also must be accompanied by attention
to the attitudes, values and habits towards learning in general that are being strengthened
or weakened in the process. At the very onset of this review it must be noted that the
researchers present findings from a study of early years learners in a relatively multi-
cultural society like New Zealand where there are Polynesian, Asian and communities
with Western outlooks as well as other possible communities. It must also be noted that
both New Zealand and Australia are moving towards a direction where a “new world
view of early child education” (Fleer, M., 2005) can be fostered and supported. So what
exactly is “new world view”? It is a particular dynamic learning construct still in the
process of evolving which strives not to alienate any child at all from its cultural-
historical background in any learning environment (Fleer, M., 2005). According to
William Winn and Mark Windschitl, as posited in their paper – “Towards an Explanatory Framework for Learning in Artificial Environments”, 2001, human social institutions and, more generally, human culture, with its norms and artefacts, are very much a part of their natural environment (Winn, W. and Windschitl, M., 2001). Thus, though educational environments, even for early years, are somewhat structured and artificial, there must be sufficient provision within it to allow children from diverse cultural-historical backgrounds to adapt to it and interact successfully with it. It is presumed here, and by the nature of the examples cited in the paper, it is also assumed that the purpose of the paper is to construct a dynamic approach that allows such an environment. In this context the intention of the researchers to bring out the valued responses to light is of particular importance in observing that a particular child is responding positively to the learning environment provided, which includes the curriculum. Thus, attention to learning dispositions and valued responses therefrom and otherwise impromptu responses, also just as valued and necessary for innovative endeavours, is of paramount importance. As Hedegaard (2004) observes, a child develops through interaction with societal institutions. She views child development as a relationship between a child and society. It is not something that is within the child but something that evolves as the child interacts with its cultural community. When such development does not take place normally it is not the fault of the child but of society, which must foster it (Fleer, M., 2005). With the assumption of the new world view a learning setting can be the child’s community and is responsible for its development. For maximum interaction to take place between child and community the attention of the instructor and other collaborators must be focused on the child’s responses to the learning environment so that positive
ones can be fostered and furthered to assist in the child’s progressive development. This is the central point of the construct of Carr and Claxton’s paper. It is also an explanation of why the researchers have chosen not to mention learning dispositions in isolation to other impromptu responses that may be generated not by the dispositions but by often instantaneous interaction with the learning environment. The example of Sarah cited in the paper is a prime one illustrating what the researchers exactly mean by ‘valued responses’. Sarah progressively acquired sophisticated and creative problem-posing and problem-solving abilities in the company of others. Thus, this is a perfect example of how a valued response was spotted - Tane’s initiative to the sewing project with Sarah and the others and the subsequent collaborative responses of Sarah and the others to it - and fostered and furthered, by teachers, parents and peers, to reification till it generated a sustained healthy interest in Sarah and the others. This is the best kind of learning environment – a potentiating one, as defined by the researchers.

From the perspective of what the review has just unravelled of the researchers’ positions on learning environment and valued responses in the paper the three types of environments suggested in the paper are as follows:

- **affording** – an environment that allows a child to use its own initiative without actually actively participating in its generation or future course,
- **inviting** – an environment that actively seeks participation by the child by using its own initiative without actually nurturing its future course, and
- **potentiating** – an environment, the most potent of the three, that invites a child to participate by its own initiatives and fosters such initiatives to the point of reification and sustained interest.
Initiatives of the right kind, that allows a child to learn along the intended path of the curriculum, even indirectly through effective play-learning situations (Walsh G. and Gardner J., 2005), are taken as valued responses in the particular examples cited in the paper. As the researchers say, the assessment is on how ready, willing and able the children are to ‘engage profitably in learning’ and the intention of the environment is to promote these dispositions as actively as possible in a collaborative manner to fruition.

The three kinds of environments enumerated in the paper have a central role in its construct. The ‘affording’ environment requires much of the child’s prior knowledge and, hence its already instilled learning dispositions, to allow it to initiate new learning. The ‘inviting’ environment, though it actively invites the child to participate, nevertheless depends to some extent on the child’s prior knowledge again to bring new learning to fruition. On the other hand, the potentiating environment, by progressively inviting and nurturing the child’s participation, allows it to use new initiative beyond its prior knowledge to learn. Again, this is another view of the researchers’ dynamic approach.

The other kind of environment, the ‘prohibiting’ one, is in antithesis and discourages learning in the sense that it stifles a child’s desire to innovative and, thus, share power.

The idea of making valued responses observable by allowing them to become explicit by creating the right learning environment is not entirely novel to the paper. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2005, Great Britain, has published a singular DVD entitled “Seeing steps in children’s learning” which features children learning in early years settings. The very title of the DVD suggests observation of the learning activities of children in these settings and intervention as appropriate to enhance the learning process. Also, the document is explicit on the point that a curriculum suited to
this purpose should incorporate the following ability – “Practitioners must be able to observe and respond appropriately to children, informed by a knowledge of how children develop and learn and a clear understanding of possible next steps in their development and learning” (Seeing steps in children’s learning, 2005). This corroborates perfectly with the researchers’ views posited in the paper. What does make the paper somewhat unique are some of the reasons posited for the necessity to make valued responses to learning environments explicit. These reasons shall be studied hereafter.

The Learning Process
The researchers state that they want each child to be “disposed” to learn rather than have learning dispositions. They call this their proposition of having learning processes defined as a verb – ‘disposed’ – in contrast to ‘disposition’ – a noun. They maintain that learning is a lifelong process and having mere dispositions is a static position that is not entirely desirable in all situations though having the right kind of dispositions will generally assist in the overall lifelong learning process. Instead they construe dynamism as having incorporated in the child the prime quality of being ‘disposed’ to learn, which is dynamic in the sense that it is a readiness to learn in all available situations regardless, to some extent of what prior knowledge the child already has. Thus, Tane has the knowledge of sewing, which she learned from her grandmother, but she positively influences Sarah and the others, who have absolutely no prior knowledge of sewing, to try and learn the art and gain a sustained interest in it. This sustention of interest is very important in context of the paper as the researchers are as concerned in instilling a viable learning trajectory in the children as they are in fostering and nurturing valued responses, two acts whose legitimate culmination is the sustention.
In the context of children being ‘disposed’ to learn the researchers posit that a child’s degree of robustness, breadth and richness of a particular learning attribute enables it to learn successfully. In the context of the paper the three qualities are explained from the examples cited. William’s dedication and perseverance to draw the budgies may be taken as his robustness in learning. Flynn’s numerous collaborative activities with his peers may be taken as his breadth as well as his robustness in learning, as the researchers themselves note. Sarah and the others’ sewing project, which ultimately incorporated many designs, show up their richness in learning. It does seem to the review that the learning attribute these qualities are appended to is collaboration and all the examples cited are examples of it to some degree or other. Robustness sustains interest, breadth indicates width of perspective and richness indicates the complexities and competence of the learning experience. The researchers state that they would have these qualities taken as adverbs to the verb ‘disposed’ to learn. This is their dynamics of learning centred on collaborative efforts. Recent research in human cognitive processes suggests that successfully learning requires interaction of learner, materials (curriculum), teachers and others (peers and family members). This, in turn, requires effective communication and collaboration (Tinzmann, M. B., et al, 1990). Carr and Claxton’s dynamic approach is especially relevant in this context as early years learning is based on minimal prior knowledge and the child must be constantly guided to effectively acquire knowledge.

**The Teacher’s Role**

Up to this point the review has been basically concerned with the way the researchers have planned a dynamic approach to learning from what Katz calls a ‘bottom-up perspective of quality’ which is how the children experience the learning process. In this
context the review has examined the way in which the learning and developmental needs of the children has been met (Walsh, G. and Gardner, J., 2005). It must be noted that the entire paper is set in this perspective but the researchers have analysed the responses of the teachers to the children’s initiating responses. The role of teachers in early years settings cannot be overemphasised as much of what children are subjected to in this environment is with them all their lives and reflects upon their later careers in life. This is specifically noted by the researchers and they cite this as one reason why valued responses and long-term learning trajectories should be made explicit. Curricula are made up by Central Education Authorities of a country or region but the outcomes it generates in children have to be assessed by the local authorities, the teachers primarily. Thus, they are very important factors in a learning environment, even a previously structured one.

The researchers enumerate four aspects teachers can reinforce curricula:

- teachers explain, in specific context of the existing learning situation, to make explicit the curriculum,
- teachers orchestrate the resources and activities of a classroom so that an inviting and potentiating atmosphere is generated,
- teachers commentate on the learning process as it evolves and thus assist in successful evolution setting a long-term trajectory for early learners, and
- teachers model the responses of the child so that he or she is guided into a most efficient learning process.

This is quite in line with recent cognitive learning reinforcement techniques in the following sense. When the teacher explains the subject is made meaningful for the child and, thus, more amenable for learning induction. After the meaning has been generated
either by the teacher, the child itself or a peer or any other collaborator, the teacher helps orchestrate resources and activities so that the meaning is now placed in a sequence that makes sense. Next the teacher commentates, providing feedback or adding more meaning and sequence. Lastly, the teacher models the child’s learning abilities so that it becomes more facile and meaningful and the child acquires not only the particular body of knowledge but a general disposition to learn, in this case collaboratively. This is makes the learning process a meaningful, organised and effective system that can be easily inducted by the child on its own (Mergel, B., 1998). Sarah and the sewing project provide a perfect example of the teacher’s role, as the researchers themselves note.

**Conclusion**

Thus, the paper presents positions that delineate a learning environment that can easily elicit valued responses from children of any cultural-historical background. The teacher plays a role where the child’s disposition to learn is gently coaxed, in imperceptible ways, to a path similar to the one delineated by the curriculum till the child acquires an intended disposition to learn by collaboration. The teacher gently but without much coercion allows the child to develop its own trajectory of learning modelling it if necessary so that it is sustained in the long-term. The paper does present very viable attempts to enable early years learning which has to be put into practice with some amount of expertise and tact by those in authority. Glenda Walsh and John Gardner reiterate this view in their article – “Assessing the Quality of Early Years Learning Environment” – where they too critically and favourably assess this paper from a similar perspective which holds that children in early years settings should be allowed some freedom to generate ideas on their own so that they feel empowered to do as they please while, all the time, the teacher
Learning Dispositions 12

maintains a quiet presence that oversees the freedom is nurtured to a long-term pathway to knowledge and satisfaction.
References


