

Stories students tell themselves

We hear more and more in schools about 'dispositions' and 'habits of minds'. These expressions refer to a 'tendency to think or behave in certain ways under certain conditions'. An important aim of schools is to help young people develop the kinds of behaviours that lead to effective thinking and independent learning. We want them, for example, to be curious, patient, collaborative and strategic. But the willingness of young people to adopt positive dispositions are influenced by the stories they tell themselves based on previous experiences and the ways they have been encouraged or discouraged by others. So, for example, an early aptitude for games or an effective short-term memory can lead children, with parental approval, to tell themselves stories like: 'I'm good at sport' or 'I'm clever'. On the other hand, popular opinion amongst a peer group can lead pupils to reject things they might otherwise find fulfilling, as in: 'writing poetry is for girls'. Therefore, when teachers try to extend positive dispositions into new areas they should be aware that their task is personal and cultural. It is not just a matter of tweaks to the curriculum or alterations to teaching methods.

Teachers who want their pupils to develop positive dispositions for learning, such as collaboration, will most likely weave them into stories they tell about the world, the culture and the people around them. They might tell stories about the collaboration of great scientists and musicians. They might reflect on times when they themselves succeeded or failed to collaborate. They will seek out examples of collaboration by pupils in the school and work those into stories of celebration to share in lessons, assemblies and school literature. Most importantly, they will hold the door open for students to enter, as characters, stories involving collaboration and other positive dispositions. It is often said in educational circles that what isn't assessed isn't taught. It is even truer to say that what isn't made part of a story isn't noticed and certainly isn't taken to heart. The importance of teachers trying to enliven schools with stories involving combinations of positive dispositions cannot be overstated. The greater challenge is to have pupils accept that they can be willing actors in those stories.

The encouragement of positive dispositions is essential. However, it is not sufficient if the goal of schools is to sustain students on the road to persistent and positive self-development. This is the problem with many self-help books and motivational initiatives. They tend to assume that:

- everyone can succeed with anything if they have the right attitude or disposition
- the concept of success is unproblematic

We know that neither of these assumptions is true. Some people lack the talents or skills to make quick progress towards their goals. Others find the values of their advisers in conflict with their own. Both these realities undermine the good intentions and nostrums that lie behind many motivational projects. The development of skills, dispositions and values go hand in hand.

The important point to make is that without positive dispositions, students will not use skills and strategies independently. Without skills and strategies, dispositions cannot be sustained. And, without encouragement, neither positive dispositions nor abilities can flourish in a growing range of contexts. The combination of people's dispositions, skills and strategies could be called their 'resources' – those things they draw on to help them meet challenges and develop intellectually, emotionally or interpersonally. The main goal of *Teaching Thinking and Creativity* is to help teachers help students to develop their resources.

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