

# The dispositions of exemplary school librarians

How professional dispositions relate to student learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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*As former students ourselves, we know instinctively the qualities of exemplary educators even if we have difficulty naming these ourselves. A review of the extensive body of dispositional literature indicates that educators struggle with the concept of dispositions, what these entail, and their assessment; however, little has been written about the dispositions of school librarians. Interest in this topic has increased since the development of Dispositions in Action as an essential component of the American Library Association's American Association of School Librarians Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learner published in 2007. The authors provide foundational information about dispositions and justification of their importance to student learning and present a self-assessment instrument which is the first step to understanding one's dispositional strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, a theoretical framework for obtaining dispositions is presented.*

*Dispositions, behaviors, characteristics, affective domain, relational*

## What are dispositions?

As former students ourselves, we know instinctively the qualities of exemplary educators even if we have difficulty naming these qualities. A natural responsive step of accomplished teachers is to simply ask students what their expectations are of us, which is exactly what education scholar Kathleen Cushman did in 2006. When Cushman (2006) asked 65 students to describe the qualities of the teacher they most wanted, these students responded that teachers must like their students, be trustworthy, and treat students as smart and capable of challenging work. In addition, students want engaging classes that are taught by teachers who like and care about the material they teach. Students want teachers who exhibit dispositions of care, trustworthiness, and respect for them.

A decade earlier, Vivienne Collinson (1996), Associate Professor of Education at Michigan State University, USA, asked the most capable teachers she knew to describe the characteristics of exemplary teachers. The study reveals strengths in the following three areas: professional knowledge of the subject and pedagogy; interpersonal knowledge of students and the community; and intrapersonal knowledge such as reflection, ethics, and dispositions. But what are dispositions *exactly*? And why be concerned?

According to early childhood education scholar and leading expert on this topic, Lilian G. Katz (1993), dispositions are a “pattern of behavior exhibited frequently...in the absence of coercion...constituting a habit of mind under some conscious and voluntary control...intentional and oriented to broad goals” that can be taught and caught through modelling (16). Dispositions are a “pattern of acts that were chosen by the teacher in particular contexts and at particular times” (Katz & Rath 1986, p. 7).

### *The rationale for professional dispositions to improve student learning*

Dispositions that are seen as essential for student learning are in the forefront of school and educational improvement as a result of the standards movement in the 1980s in response to the concern for quality education in the United States. The three groups largely responsible for these standards are the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS).

Their efforts culminated in 1996 with the publication of *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future* by the 26-member panel of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future that places teacher quality at the center of discussion about “improving our nation's schools [which] must include and is heavily dependent upon improving the quality of our teacher workforce” (Clark, 2005, p. 16).

The NBPTS and INTASC organized what teachers need to know into three categories: knowledge, performances, and dispositions; the latter being a “new dimension that had not always been overtly assessed by teacher education” (Clark, 2005, p 17). The term disposition includes references to caring teachers and moral professionals who are flexible, adaptive, and creative. Clark (1990) urged educators and community members to recognize the importance of the moral dimension of teaching and view it as equally important as students' test scores. He writes, “to educate is to lead responsibly—to influence students' knowledge, skills, and dispositions in ways that will serve them and their society well and to do so in morally defensible ways” (pp. 251-251). Indeed, Dewey (1916/1944) led the discussion of moral education noting that “unless the learning which accrues ... affects character, it is futile to conceive the moral end as the unifying and culminating end of education” (p. 360).

Several contemporary researchers and authors have described the relational aspects of education and suggested that instructing teachers in aspects of the disposition of care should be an important component of teacher preparation programs (Noblit, Rogers, & McCadden, 1995; Noddings, 1984, 1992, 1995). These authors believe that current forms of education value pedagogical dimensions of teaching and learning over relational aspects. Caring, in contrast to the technical dimensions of teaching, gives priority to relationships and how these relationships are socially constructed.

The resilience research tells us that engaging each student's intrinsic motivation is key to meeting young people's basic psychological needs to experience belonging and safety, to gain competence, to feel what they are learning is meaningful, and to develop autonomy that schools can tap this intrinsic motivation (Benard, 2004, p. 68). Engagement is central to academic development. Students who become disengaged are likely to become at risk of academic failure and dropout.

According to the *National Dropout Prevention Center/Network*, key risk factors for school dropout are: early adult responsibilities; low school performance; low school engagement; low family expectations and commitment to education; and high-risk behaviors. Each of these risk factors is addressed by strategies in the resiliency research to strengthen youth by (1) building resiliency in the environment as well as (2) lessening risk factors in the environment. Resiliency is built into the environment by providing care and support, setting and communicating high expectations, and providing opportunities for meaningful participation. Likewise, students are strengthened when risk factors in the environment are lessened by increasing pro-social bonding, setting clear and consistent boundaries, and teaching life skills (Henderson & Milstein, 2003).

A common finding in resilience research is the power of a teacher to tip the scale from risk to resilience (Benard, 2004). “Among the most frequently encountered positive role models in the lives of children..., outside of the family circle, was a favourite teacher...who was not just an instructor for academic skills, but also a confidant and positive model for personal identification” (Werner, 2000, p. 126).

Breese and Nawrocki-Chabin (2002) conclude that relational dispositions must indeed be cultivated through intentional activities in order to ensure that teachers enter the field with acceptable dispositions. Reflection and peer conferencing are two ways to identify specific actions and to engage educators or beginning teachers to analyze and consider the dispositions they need or need to develop to impact student learning and achievement.

### *The problematic nature of dispositions*

Dispositions pose a problem for educators seeking clean, lean assessment measures for four reasons: semantics; determination of dispositions; acquisition of dispositions; and assessment of dispositions (Jones & Bush, 2009).

The difficulty understanding dispositions is evidenced by the questions raised by approximately 45 participants (school library supervisors, school librarians, and faculty) at the American Association of School Librarians’-sponsored Webinar on March 13, 2009 held to understand the dispositions in action identified in the recently released *Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Learner*. Although dispositions have been a topic in educational literature since the 1960s, these have entered the radar of American school librarians with the release in 2007 of the AASL *Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Learner*. During this Webinar several concerns about dispositions were expressed that mirror those in the literature. The four concerns expressed by Webinar attendees about dispositions are: (1) What is the meaning of dispositions? (2) What do dispositions look like? (3) How are dispositions acquired? (4) How are dispositions assessed?

**Semantics.** Educators may confuse terms such as skills, traits, attitude, belief, and characteristic with the meaning of dispositions as defined by Katz. Dispositions are not skills, traits, attitudes, and habits. **Skills** “carries with it a sense of mastery” (Katz & Raths, 1986, p. 5). One can be skilled without having a disposition for that skill. For example, even when students are skilful and comprehending readings, this does not ensure they will frequently and voluntarily engage with reading—in other words, exhibit the disposition of reading. **Traits** are consistent and enduring and independent of a situation. For instance, eye color, height, and extroversion/introversion are inborn traits that cannot be changed. Traits and characteristics are often related to personality and temperament. **Attitudes** are judgments regarding likes and dislikes that can be changed, and are often measured using various scales

that gauge one's positive or negative stances toward a situation or issue. Habits are learned behaviors displayed routinely without forethought or reflection. For instance, putting on a seat belt is a habit when we get into a car (ibid., pp. 6-8). Other nouns such as belief and characteristic lend to the semantic confusion of the meaning of disposition. A *belief* is an opinion or conviction that may not be substantiated; whereas a *characteristic* pertains to a quality of a person or thing.

*Determination of dispositions.* Educators have numerous examples of dispositions to inform individual self-assessment of one's dispositional strengths and weaknesses. For American educators these dispositions are embedded in the standards of the NCATE, NBPTS, and the CCSSO's Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC). For school librarians, dispositions are embedded in standards of the American Library Association's American Association of School Librarians (AASL).

NCATE describes dispositions as the "professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities." NCATE "expects institutions to assess professional dispositions based on observable behaviors in educational settings." The two professional dispositions explicitly recognized by NCATE are fairness and the belief that all children can learn.

The National Board of Professional Teaching Standards does not define dispositions but expects that proficient teachers are able to employ the necessary "skills, capacities, and dispositions" (2002).

A robust example of teacher dispositions is found in INTASC Standards. The operating premise of INTASC is that an effective teacher must be able to integrate content knowledge with pedagogical understanding to ensure that all students learn and perform at high levels. INTASC Standards state that teachers must hold certain dispositions that are congruent with effective teaching, which are included as part of the 10 INTASC principles. According to the INTASC Standards, the teacher is disposed toward:

- embracing reflection and being a lifelong learner and communicator
- understanding the diversity of students and recognizing and promoting growth in others
- promoting positive social interaction and developing healthy and helping relationships with children and youth
- integrity and collaboration to advocate for children
- understanding and using a variety of instructional strategies, planning, organizing, and goal setting (INTASC).

The American Association for School Librarians, a division within the American Library Association, released in 2007 its new *Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Learner*, which comprise four learning standards each consisting of four strands—skills, dispositions, responsibilities, and self-assessment strategies. The *Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Learner* are the best example of dispositions for school librarians. Although these dispositions are intended for students, they serve as the *de facto* dispositions for school librarians until

additional dispositions for this profession are identified (Jones & Bush, 2009). Let us use the backward design strategy as we begin to consider what we want our students to learn.

The full spectrum of 21<sup>st</sup>-century learner dispositions as crafted by AASL are:

- display initiative, engagement, emotional resilience, persistence, curiosity
- demonstrate confidence, self-direction, creativity, adaptability, flexibility, personal productivity, leadership, teamwork, motivation
- maintain (and employ) a critical stance, openness to new ideas
- use both divergent and convergent thinking
- have (and show) an appreciation for social responsibility (AASL).

The dispositions identified in the AASL *Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Learner* are student dispositions but must first be acquired by school librarians who then model these dispositions. In essence, the AASL *Standards* become the *de facto* dispositions of school librarians by virtue of the fact that dispositions are best ‘acquired, taught, and caught through modelling’ (Bush & Jones, in press). Bush and Jones write about professional dispositions of schools librarians—leadership, communications, intellectual freedom, and professional ethics in preparation for further study on the subject.

*Acquisition of dispositions.* Shari Tishman and David Perkins of Project Zero at the Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, collaborate as principal investigators in the Patterns of Thinking Project sponsored by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Tishman, Jay, and Perkins (1994, 1997) have identified three essential components of dispositional behavior; for illustrative purposes, let’s assume that you have a leadership professional disposition to illustrate each component:

- sensitivity—to have your antennae up as you register or notice opportunities to carry out a specific behavior. *Do you recognize an appropriate occasion to act in a leadership role in a particular situation?*
- inclination—to have the tendency and the impulse to act upon opportunities to carry out a specific behavior. *Do you feel inclined or motivated to invest in acting in a leadership role in this specific situation?*
- ability—to have the follow-through knowledge that will allow you to successfully act upon this opportunity to carry out a specific behavior. *Do you have the capacity to act in a leadership role in this situation effectively?*

Notice that each of the three components relate to a specific behavior at a unique opportunity. Identifying the components in this directed and focused fashion is helpful in making the distinctions explicit. We can then begin to recognize these components and implications for both practice and improvement. Findings were surprising to these researchers as their gathered data uncovered a particular illumination of the sensitivity component. It seems to be the entry point for dispositional behavior. This gives us a specific direction for learning, acquiring, and developing. Tishman and Perkins’s research on patterns of dispositional behaviors on thinking dispositions are related to Costa and Kallick’s “habits of

mind” (2000). In fact, they are often asked to distinguish between the terms. The Harvard Graduate School of Education Project Zero researchers readily appreciate the fundamental work of Drs. Costa and Kallick but are of the opinion that the word ‘habit’ connotes a fixed behavior and their preference in discussing dispositions is to imply growth and change.

Observational and qualitative research on the “bedside manner” of doctors provides insight into the frequently posed question “Can dispositions be taught?” Drs. Weissmann, Branch, Gracey, Haidet, and Frankel (2006) studied 12 clinical faculty identified by medical residents as excellent teachers of humanistic care, popularly known as “bedside manner,” which consists of the affective domain and includes patient care and communication skills, to determine how these dispositions were taught to medical residents. Doctors are often criticized for their lack of ‘bedside manner.’ The findings of this 18-month qualitative and observational research indicate that clinical faculty teach humanism and professional values almost exclusively by role modelling and “generally, the assumed that learners would recognize, learn, and emulate their behaviors without added comment or direction” (Weissmann, et. al. 2006, n.p.). The authors of this research identified a “rich array of role modelling” to teach ‘bedside manner’ including:

- nonverbal cues such as demonstrating care, tone of voice, and appropriate touching
- demonstrations of respect such as making proper introductions or asking the patient’s permission before turning down the volume of the television
- building personal connection by using shared experiences to bond with the patient
- awareness of their influence on students and residents.

*Assessment of dispositions.* Upon analysis of Katz’s definition of dispositions, the most important facet is its observable nature; however, Fang (1996) maintains that the interest in dispositions “signals that research on teaching and learning has shifted from unidirectional emphasis on the correlates of observable teacher behavior with student achievement to the focus of teachers’ thinking, beliefs, planning, and decision-making processes” (p. 47). All observable behaviors can be assessed using such instruments as rubrics, checklists, and rating scales.

It is worth repeating that dispositions are observable behaviors and as such can be assessed. It is also important to address the developmental nature of dispositions—it is not a situation whereby we either have desired dispositions or not. If teachers are weak in desired dispositions this is an opportunity for professional development and mentoring and for other teachers to become role models to help promote the desired dispositions in colleagues.

### **A theoretical framework for acquiring dispositions by school librarians**

In the words of NBPTS, accomplished teachers are “models of educated persons, exemplifying the virtues they inspire in students” (NBPTS). A theoretical framework for acquiring dispositions to inspire student learning is presented below. To successfully acquire dispositions, school librarians must

- be sensitive and aware of the need to acquire a particular disposition
- understand what the disposition ‘looks’ like
- acquire the disposition through reflection, role modelling, and professional development
- employ the disposition in appropriate contexts to meet specific goals
- refine the disposition so it becomes intentional and a “pattern of behavior exhibited frequently” (Katz & Raths, 1986, p. 7)
- continually assess the disposition to determine that development is progressing along the continuum from awareness to the highest level—“patterns of acts that were chosen by the teacher in particular contexts and at particular times” that constitute a “habit of mind” (ibid).

However, the initial step underpinning this theoretical framework is self-assessment. Dispositions that define exemplary professional practice do need to be explicitly identified and recognized within the field. That being said, it is confounding to consider someone other than oneself determining that one is lacking as a professional and subsequently wilfully taking the requisite steps to develop into a more effective practitioner without first having an opportunity to self assess. This also alerts us to the ongoing discussion regarding the “having” thoughts and “doing” behavior dilemma within the field of psychology (Cantor, 1990). Teacher educators Koeppen and Davison-Jenkins (2007) posit that teacher educators can support teacher candidates in developing new dispositions. Perhaps a well-respected mentor is in a position to have a positive impact on both the improvement of inadequate dispositional behaviors and development of new dispositions. It is more likely that upon *self* reflection, we might identify the dispositions that are recognized as exemplary and that might be lacking as potential areas indicated to improve one’s practice (Schön, 1987). Self-assessments might be used as formative assessments throughout our professional education and then again as evaluation tools once we are engaged in professional practice.

The proposed self-assessment tool below is a framework model that might be used in school library education and also as an evaluation tool for administrators. It is a working draft of a theoretical framework for acquiring dispositions by school librarians. Perhaps it seems that creating an assessment tool is premature in this discussion of dispositions within the school library field. The value of this backward design is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of this tool and to use it in further studies of the professional dispositions of exemplary school librarians. How our professional dispositions relate to 21<sup>st</sup> century learners is embedded in the self-assessment. By measuring our own dispositions, we benefit our students as we seek to model the dispositions for all learners. This self-assessment is an adaptation for the school library field based upon an internal document in the Reading and Language Department at National-Louis University developed for pre-service reading specialists (McMahon & Quiroa, 2009).

### **School Library Professional Dispositions Self-Assessment**

<b>Disposition</b>	<b>Aware</b>	<b>Approach</b>	<b>Accomplish</b>
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<b>I demonstrate caring, collegiality and collaboration in interactions and communication.</b>			
<u>Exemplars:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I demonstrate care for students through respect for them as unique individuals with full lives and promising futures beyond their experiences in the school environment.</li> <li>• I demonstrate care for students by “creating a warm environment” as documented in the AASL Standards for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learners. I value learning as an exciting, engaging, and inspired lifelong pursuit and demonstrate that value through my practice in the school library media program.</li> <li>• I demonstrate care for students through attention to their interests, motivation, and abilities.</li> <li>• I demonstrate care for students through use of appropriate communication methods and modeling appropriate communication behaviors. I value students as social and expressive learners and understand technology as a both an instructional and communication tool.</li> <li>• I prepare for collaboration with colleagues by studying the general curriculum, identifying optimal interdisciplinary units for collaboration, and by actively listening to my colleagues.</li> <li>• I collaborate with colleagues to best serve all students to reach their potential.</li> <li>• I collaborate with colleagues in the assessment of student learning in the school library to best integrate the library program into the general curriculum.</li> <li>• I seek out collaboration both within and outside of the school learning community to best serve all students. Effective educator collaboration requires that the library is not restricted to the physical facility of the library.</li> <li>• I research and apply best practices to best serve all students; I share best practices with colleagues through professional development.</li> <li>• I demonstrate intellectual curiosity and interest in the scholarship and professional dispositions of others as well as my own.</li> <li>• I share knowledge to enhance the practice of my colleagues.</li> <li>• I demonstrate an attitude of respect toward administrators and colleagues.</li> <li>• I attend to feedback from administrators and colleagues.</li> </ul>	<u>Comments and Proposed Action:</u>		
<b>I demonstrate professionalism through a commitment to intellectual freedom, leadership and professional ethics.</b>			
<u>Exemplars:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I demonstrate professionalism through a transparent commitment to intellectual freedom.</li> <li>• I demonstrate leadership through a purposeful and deliberate approach to advocacy.</li> <li>• I demonstrate professionalism by administering an exemplary learner-centered school library program both physically and virtually that meets the needs of all students and faculty through staffing, facilities, budgeting, and collection development.</li> <li>• I demonstrate professionalism through the development of a collection that both supports the general curriculum and fosters independent learners and readers.</li> <li>• I demonstrate professionalism through relevant and engaging programming that inspires learners to pursue individual interests; I share myself as a model of a lifelong reader and learner.</li> </ul>	<u>Comments and Proposed Action:</u>		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I demonstrate professionalism through seeking supplemental funding through grants and awards that highlight strengths of the school library program and supports needs as assessed.</li> <li>• I demonstrate professionalism by reporting to administrators and the school learning community regarding the impact of the school library program on student learning. I invite parents to engage with the library in a variety of ways.</li> <li>• I act in accordance with professional standards of practice in the education field including demeanor, behavior, attire, and appropriate response to administrative responsibilities.</li> <li>• I demonstrate leadership by placing a value on the networking relationships of other school library and professional educators locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally.</li> <li>• I actively pursue professional development to ensure that I am best serving my school learning community. I seek to learn emerging technologies and determine their value within the school library media program.</li> <li>• I continually reflect on my practice to identify dispositions, relationships, practices, ideas, and knowledge that would benefit from strengthening.</li> </ul>			
<b>I model Dispositions in Action for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Standards for Learners</b>			
<u>Exemplars:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I display initiative, engagement, emotional resilience, persistence, and curiosity.</li> <li>• I demonstrate confidence, self-direction, creativity, adaptability, flexibility, personal productivity, leadership, teamwork, and motivation.</li> <li>• I maintain and employ a critical stance and an openness to new ideas and alternative perspectives.</li> <li>• I use both divergent and convergent thinking.</li> <li>• I demonstrate an appreciation and commitment for social responsibility; I am fair and non-discriminatory toward others and I treat all persons with respect and regard for their individual worth and dignity.</li> </ul>	<u>Comments and Proposed Action:</u>		

The concept of dispositions for school librarians is relatively new, not particularly welcomed by all, and confusing to many. As professionals, we are accustomed to collecting circulation statistics, identifying measurable outcomes of learning, and struggling with inadequate staff, facilities, and funding. Add to this discomfort the reality that the nature assessment of dispositions is problematic. Teacher educators struggle with evaluating the dispositional behaviors of teacher candidates. There is a strong implication that modelling is the preferred method of the instruction; “this point may be subtle, but it is critical. If the faculty model the dispositions they want candidates to hold, then the candidates are more likely to develop them” (Sockett, p. 65).

The discussion of dispositions and the proposed self-assessment contained in this article is a bold first step to understand dispositions of school librarians who are preparing students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Naturally this discussion begs the question about instruction for dispositions in school library education. As our research agenda continues, dispositions are identified and documented, our self-assessment evolves, it is the authors’ plan to develop and recommend signature pedagogies (Falk, 2006) that will benefit school library educators as they integrate dispositional practices into their instruction. It is at that juncture that our field will have the requisite tools to produce the next generation of practitioners who will serve all

21<sup>st</sup> century learners and who, in their caring wisdom, will continue to deepen the value of their own contributions to our field as they develop into exemplary school librarians.

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## **Biography**

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## **Statement of Originality**

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others are referenced.