

# 'a Survey

## that elusive dance

by Billie Young

*The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.*

— Alan Watts

Change. Why is it so elusive yet ever-present? Why do we embrace and anticipate with delight some changes, and dread and resist others? We spend enormous amounts of time, energy, and resources trying to create lasting change in ourselves, our colleagues, our programs, and systems of care and education. And yet, far too often, the change we seek eludes us, or we are unable to maintain it over time.

Consider Helen, director of a large urban child care center with a long tradition of excellence and lead teachers who all have college degrees in early childhood education. Last year, Helen launched an 18-month effort to transform her center from teacher-directed classrooms using a Reggio Emilia-inspired approach. She funded her staff to go to workshops on the new constructivist approach, brought

in an on-site trainer, sent staff to observe at a model center nearby, and hired a coach to work with staff. After 18 months, fewer than half of her staff had changed their classroom practices. Why wasn't Helen's change effort more successful?

What insight can we gain from emerging research on teacher dispositions and change readiness?

### What inspires change?

I change because you tell me I have to.	I change because I get rewards for it.
I change because I want to please you.	I change because it's better for me – things are better, easier, more effective, or more fun. I embrace it because it feels <i>right</i> .

Many of us are familiar with this model for motivation for change and understand that the only kind of change that really sticks is change that is embraced because we recognize on a deep level that it makes things better, easier, more effective, or more fun.

Teaching is a blend of knowledge, pedagogical skills, environmental factors, and personal dispositions. Experience tells us

that we can successfully impact knowledge, skills, and environmental factors. Dispositions are harder to change.

Recently Abby Cohen and I led a Dialogue on Dispositions for the First Focus on Kids project of the United Way of Southern Arizona. After a spirited discussion about the importance of dispositions vs. professional education, one participant exclaimed, "Education is necessary, but not sufficient." To which, Naomi Karp, First Focus on Kids Project Director replied, "Well, you wouldn't go to a dentist that hadn't graduated from dental school but who loved molars, would you?" Point taken, but just how much do personal dispositions impact teachers' classroom practices and their ability to change?

### What are 'dispositions' and what does research tell us about them?

NCATE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) defines dispositions as "Professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities." Other definitions include values, com-



Billie Young, M.S.W., has worked on organizational change and development on local, state, and federal levels and delights in linking people to resources and new ideas.

mitments, or ethics that are internally held and externally exhibited. They may be unconsciously held assumptions about how children learn, and the impact of families and environment. Examples of key dispositions linked to effective teaching include a caring attitude, sensitivity to student differences, democratic values, and a commitment to teaching (Schulte, Edick, Edwards, & Mackiel, 2004).

Teacher beliefs are one filter for training and education and may be highly resistant to change (Pajares, 1992). In reviewing the research literature on four key dispositions (modernity, job motivation, beliefs about intentional teaching, and readiness to change), Zaslow found that these dispositions were linked to classroom quality, were difficult to change, and that change faded over time for at least the first two (ChildTrends, 2010). However, emerging research on readiness to change demonstrated good results, particularly if the change process is understood and addressed.

Dispositions — beliefs, attitudes, and experiences — can play a powerful role in the decision making and administrative practices of child care center directors, too. The Urban Institute's Understanding Quality in Context study (Rohacek, Adams, & Kisker, 2010) compared child care center directors' beliefs and training to measures of observed quality in their centers' classrooms. Researchers coded the relationship between directors' beliefs in three categories:

- **Intrinsic beliefs:** Program decisions were based mainly on instincts, intuition, and personal experiences.
- **Learning:** Directors worked to inform their intrinsic beliefs with additional knowledge.
- **Informed beliefs:** Directors fully integrated beliefs and knowledge, demonstrating understanding of the reasons behind new ideas.

Classrooms in centers with directors who were guided by informed beliefs or were most likely to have learned were most likely to have higher scores on the ECERS-R and the CLASS. Those with directors who use intrinsic beliefs to guide programmatic decision making were more likely to have classrooms with lower scores. Again, we see the impact of dispositions on decision making and practice and how beliefs and personal experiences are filters for learning that may be barriers to change.

What we have learned is that tools we traditionally use to motivate change, such as coaching, mentoring, training, and technical assistance, will be more effective if they acknowledge the element of dispositions, help people integrate beliefs and new knowledge, and focus on the change process.

Perhaps the first thing our center director, Helen, needs to do is to reflect on her own dispositions and those of her teaching team, and to engage in a discussion with them about how their personal dispositions may be in conflict with, or supportive of, the Reggio approach. Once there is deeper understanding and awareness of how dispositions may be impacting their ability

### What can we learn from change management theorists?

*One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.*

— Friedrich Nietzsche

The key to supporting changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behavior may be to first understand the stage of change that each individual is in and what they need. Only then can we begin to tailor interventions to help move them along the change continuum. Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross (1994) developed a model for understanding a person's readiness to change.

### Stages of change model

DiClemente (n.d.) tells us that people are most likely to change only when they have an awareness about the need for change, they are convinced that the change will meet their needs or "will benefit them more than cost them," they have a plan of action that they are committed to, and they take the necessary actions to make and sustain the change.

So, it would seem that after understanding her team's dispositions, Helen's next challenge is to determine each staff member's stage of change and to devise a plan for helping them to move from one stage to the next. She has some 'early adapters' who have already moved from contemplation to action and are in the maintenance stage of adopting the Reggio approach. Perhaps they can serve as mentors to staff who are in earlier stages of change, helping those who are most resistant to change to develop an interest in this new approach and to gain insight into how it might benefit them and the children in their classrooms.

### How can we use this research and theory to change the tune and lead the dance?

*Some people seem to think that good dancers are born.*

— Fred Astaire

Like great dancers, great teachers bring innate qualities to their work that pose both challenges and opportunities. Readiness and ability to change are impacted by a number of factors: dispositions, intrinsic beliefs, our ability to inform intrinsic beliefs with new knowledge, the environment and the resources available (including time), available support and mentoring, clarity about the pathway and what needs to be done, and an ability to build on our strengths. Heath and Heath (2010) suggest that we think the sequence of change is 'analyze-think-change' when really it's

## Stages of Change Model

Stage	Tasks
<b>Pre-contemplation:</b> Not interested	Get interested, concerned
<b>Contemplation:</b> Considering	Costs/benefits analysis and making decision to change
<b>Preparation:</b> Getting ready	Commitment and creating a plan
<b>Action:</b> Starting to change	Implementing plan and revising it, taking steps
<b>Maintenance:</b> Sustaining the change	Embedding change into lifestyle
<b>Relapse:</b> Falling back into old behaviors, ways of thinking	Learning and getting back on track

*Adapted from Prochaska, DiClemente, Norcross (1994).*

'see-feel-change.' People change after they've been presented with evidence that touches them in a feeling place, they understand clearly what needs to be done, and it feels manageable. What looks like resistance can in reality be a lack of clarity. "For an individual to change, you've got to influence not only their environment, but their hearts and minds. The problem is this: often the heart and mind disagree. Fervently."

Helen might ask herself the following questions:

- Do I understand the dispositions of each team member and how they are impacting readiness to change?
- Where is each team member on the Stages of Change scale and what goals and strategies should I use to move them along the scale?
- Is the environment in my center set up for success? Do staff have the knowledge, resources, time, and support they need to make this change?
- Have I broken down the change into manageable steps? We can't leap from a teacher-directed approach to Reggio in one bound. We need to choreograph the steps from here to there.
- How can I engage my team's hearts and minds? How can I bring them into the dance?

Helen is on the right track. She has provided vision, training, and support. If she can add to the mix some attention to dispositions and readiness to change, she and her team are sure to find success.

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