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Added Value: A Dispositional Perspective on Thinking

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Imagine a cluster of students huddled around a picture of animal footprints. The picture shows two sets of tracks proceeding toward each other from opposite sides and meeting in the middle, where they blend together in a chaotic, slightly circular pattern. Only one set of tracks emerges from the circle. Has there been a fight? Has one of the animals been eaten? Students discuss what they think is going on. Eventually, everyone concludes that there has indeed been a fight to the death. Everyone, that is, except Genella.

"How do we know these footprints were made at the same time?" Genella asks. "What if the first animal was wounded or sick and walked to this place and just died? And then later another animal came along and ate the remains." Genella squints again at the picture and then gets out of her seat to walk in long, loping steps across the room, trying to imitate the pattern of footprints. "No, wait," she says, stopping herself. "That's wrong." She looks at the picture again and repeats the walk, this time moving her body more awkwardly. "See?" she says to her classmates. "When you imitate the footsteps, it feels like the animal was limping before it got there."

What teacher wouldn't be pleased with Genella's behavior? Not satisfied to accept an explanation at face value, she proposes and tests an alternative theory. One way of describing Genella's behavior is to say that she has a certain sort of thinking disposition: She is disposed to critique and test explanations.

WHAT ARE THINKING DISPOSITIONS?

Why characterize Genella's behavior in terms of thinking dispositions rather than thinking skills? Thinking dispositions are broad intellectual behaviors that include skill but also include attitudes, motivations, emotions, and other elements typically left out of ability-centered accounts of good thinking. Recall what Genella did. To be sure, she was displaying skill in theory-

testing, an important area of critical thinking. But to characterize her behavior in terms of thinking skills is to capture only a piece of it. Beyond skill, she was also demonstrating behavior that was self-initiated and self-sustained. She recognized that a theory was being proposed, took issue with it, and then invested herself in testing an alternative theory.

Thinking dispositions are a part of a person's character, and a shorthand way to define them is to call them intellectual character traits. Like character traits in general, thinking dispositions can be positive, negative, or neutral. They can be described with a variety of everyday adjectives: detail-oriented, open-minded, close-minded, curious, skeptical, impulsive, and so on. Following the title of this book, *Developing Minds*, this chapter is concerned with positive thinking dispositions—patterns of intellectual behavior that yield insight, rational action, innovation, and understanding.

WHAT KINDS OF DISPOSITIONS EXIST?

What sorts of thinking dispositions would we like young minds to develop? Many educators and psychologists have turned their attention to this question and, over the last decade or so, have put forth several definitions and lists. Some scholars emphasize a single broad disposition toward good thinking, such as Peter and Noreen Facione's notion of the disposition to think critically (Facione & Facione, 1992), or psychologist Ellen Langer's notion of mindfulness (Langer, 1989). Other researchers identify a range of distinct behaviors. For example, Art Costa proposes several habits of mind (Costa & Kallick, 2000). Robert Ennis (1986) identifies several critical thinking dispositions. Naturally, my colleagues and I have discussed several key thinking dispositions (Perkins, Jay, & Tishman, 1993). Although these lists differ in many respects, by and large they all emphasize such tendencies as open-mindedness, reasonableness, curiosity, and metacognitive reflection.