

Establishing Empathy in Our Pedagogy

Pedagogy is the learning ‘ecosystem’ in which children grow. It is everything that we do and say as we work with them. It is how we greet the children in the morning, how we join in their play, how we interact and relate. It is about what is displayed on the walls, how the equipment is arranged and how the toys are accessed. It is our very attitude to life, mirrored in our teaching.

As practitioners, we are agents of possibility for children, unlocking the door of each child’s learning potential with the key of empathy. Children can make choices, and become decision makers in their learning simply because of our approach to it. Conversely, children can be swamped with ‘teacher control’, and lose their initiative, their power to choose and decide. They can become pawns in the game of learning rather than the key players.

Pestalozzi, a Swiss social reformer and educator, born in 1746, argued that children must follow their own interests, learning by doing and playing. More importantly, he stressed the education of the head, heart and hands, highlighting *how the heart must lead*. Empathy was thus embedded deep into his pedagogy.

Pestalozzi’s reforms still resonate with most early childhood pedagogies, and many use his philosophy today. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, UK), Montessori, Reggio Emilia and Te Whariki are all examples of a child-led curriculum, each with significantly distinctive principles and values.

The EYFS (UK) believes in the unique child. It considers an enabling and empowering environment to be key, and that warm and positive relationships between adult and child are central to the child's learning and development.

Montessori (Italy and Global) believes in a carefully organised environment which allows children to have uninterrupted blocks of time to explore. Children are seen as very capable learners, especially when supported by the right environment, one that fosters their natural desire to learn.

Reggio Emilia (Italy and Global) also sees the child as competent and capable. Teachers and children explore together. The environment is seen as the 'third teacher', providing endless opportunities for exploration and inquiry.

Te Whariki (New Zealand) has a strong sociocultural vision, where relationships between family and community, child and teacher, school and family are woven into the fabric of the curriculum. Empowerment of the child is key, with a holistic view of the child's development.

Each of these pedagogies was born out of a unique need. Reggio Emilia was created after the Second World War, an uprising against Fascism and a determined vision for a child-centred philosophy, leading to social democracy. Maria Montessori was one of the first female doctors of her time and her pedagogy was born out of her scientific observations of children and how they best learn. Te Whariki was built on the shared vision of a strong and united community, based on the partnership between teachers and families.

Pedagogy will either create an environment of empowered learning or, at worst, one of 'benign neglect'. Pedagogy informs every interaction, activity or routine. It is the foundation of our teaching. Getting it right is vital. All too often we bypass pedagogical theories, unaware of their crucial position in a child's learning and well-being. We need to reflect on our pedagogy, always considering and studying what methods work and why. Such reflection is the greatest lever we possess

for improving and cultivating children's future success and happiness. We need to get it right!

Best practice pedagogy

The best quality settings use the following child-centred pedagogy:

- high-quality interactions
- listening to the child's voice
- learning through play
- assessment and monitoring that informs the child's provision, and provides support for success in learning.

High quality interactions

Children naturally seek out interaction. Think how many times children invite us to play! This built-in need to connect creates the perfect scenario for powerful learning. Such interactions 'will literally change the chemistry of (a child's) brain by establishing the essential connections needed for the child's future social and emotional skills.'¹

The following theories on interaction have impacted pedagogies worldwide:

- **Scaffolding:** Scaffolding is the support we offer to a child's play through *talking together, thinking aloud and modelling*. Again, the quality of our interaction is of paramount importance. 'Tailored' scaffolding boosts the potential for powerful play and learning. If we simply offer a sentence starter here and there, or we ask closed questions, we are falling far short of high-quality interaction. When scaffolding is effective, it kick-starts learning like no other method of teaching. Adult and child become fully absorbed in joint, cooperative

exploration. They discover together, think together and enjoy the play together.

- **What can you do?** Follow the child's interests and play with them. Use plenty of 'discovery' and 'thinking' language: 'I think we'd better find ...' 'Do you know where...' 'I wonder where...' Joint discovery is exciting for the child. Do plenty of it: 'Let's find some bugs under here...' 'Let's ask Mrs S if she knows...' Enjoy the activity, making your enjoyment visible: 'I love doing this with you.' 'I am having fun, are you?' Joint enjoyment is a catalyst. Children feel valued and loved when they know that you are genuinely involved in their play and that you are genuinely enjoying it; it allows their learning to then take on a new, deeper level of interest.
- **Growth mindset:** Children's well-being is affected by how they view themselves. Preconceptions about how 'bright' they are, or how 'well' they can do can impact mindset either negatively or positively. This is known as a 'fixed' mindset, or a 'growth' mindset. When adults interact with a child, praising them for their *effort*, the potential for a growth mindset can flourish. When children are praised for their own *intelligence or cleverness*, the potential for growth mindset is weakened. Practitioners need to know the difference. Ignorance is not bliss, it is damaging.
- **What can you do?** Praise the effort the children make, for example: 'I love your picture, you've worked really hard with the trees and the sky'; 'Great running, look how far you ran!'; 'Your model is so strong, you worked really hard at sticking it together.' It is the process we praise, and not the outcome. In this way, the children are continually encouraged in terms of their effort and persistence and not by how clever they are. Cleverness is limited but growth and development are boundless.

- **Modelling:** When practitioners interact by modelling activities or behaviours, the child's natural mimicry copies it. This is powerful learning. The child can embrace a challenge, by watching and mimicking us. We need to keep this carefully tailored to their level. She will quickly tire if the modelling is too arduous.
 - **What can you do?** Take advantage of every activity to model behaviour and expected outcome, keeping your modelling warm, considerate and generous. For example, in the role-play corner: 'Are you making dinner? Shall we lay the table?'; 'Jane's baby is sleeping, do we need to be quiet?' Let children take the lead, modelling expected outcomes as the play progresses: 'We are going to the park with the babies? Shall I bring the buggies?' Model expected behaviour: 'I have to wait, it's not my turn yet.' 'Would you like to share my play dough?'

High-quality interactions build the 'conditions' for playing and learning. We become more adept at such interactions through day-to-day practice and repetition. Children are not the only learners in the classroom!

Listening to the child's voice

All children have a 'voice'. They make decisions and choices, and through these they gradually recognise that they are becoming competent and capable. In this way they become a valued member of the community. Expressing their voice is vital; not only do *they* have something to say, but they can also learn to listen to what *other children* have to say. The setting becomes a communication-rich environment.

All children may have a voice, but not all children are heard. Anxiety and unease can control children's decision-making and so they learn to keep quiet. These children often become passengers in their learning, rather than drivers. A child with

‘agency’, a child with a voice that is heard, operates with autonomy and is a far more effective learner than one who is not.

The child’s voice is their communication tool. Without it she is powerless. And yet ‘listening to the child’s voice’ has a worrying ambiguity. Practitioners set out times to ‘listen to the child’s voice’ and put up displays that ‘show the child’s voice’ and take measures to ‘monitor the child’s voice’. We can become so consumed by protocol and process that we don’t actually *hear* what the child is saying to us over the course of the day. We are at risk of ticking boxes, rather than really listening to the children.

Children become more confident, engaged and cooperative when teachers:²

- listen effectively to how children express themselves
- have sensitive interactions with children, understanding their ability to contribute
- act as facilitators, organising but enabling children to take the lead.

How do we listen to the child’s voice each day?

- **We allow them to become active participants in what happens ‘now and next’** in the day-to-day planning and in the choice of equipment. When children are part of the planning process, they cannot be passive observers. They have agency. We keep these choices small to start with, becoming more open-ended as the children get used to such choice making. Practitioners need to support all decisions, avoiding tokenistic or contrived choice making.
- **We develop the language for choice making.** ‘Shall we ride the bikes through the puddles, or go for a rainy walk?’ This question contains rich language *and* a choice.

- **We listen, watch and observe fastidiously.** We give the children our full attention, taking an active interest and making our enjoyment visible.
- **We wait while children respond to us,** giving them plenty of time. Children often need time and space to work out what their choice/decision/view of the world is and then to express this.

In all of this we need to consider the following:

- **The child's voice does not always use words.** The 'voice' can be silent, withdrawn or absent. Stress, that enemy of learning, may strip the child of a voice, leaving her vulnerable and powerless. We may need to become the child's voice: 'You have sand in your hair. Let's ask James to stop throwing it. It isn't good to throw sand.' In telling 'James' not to throw sand, involve the child: 'Stephen has sand in his hair. He needs you to stop throwing it, doesn't he, Stephen?' Encourage the child's voice; praise her for the smallest of steps: 'Well done for saying no. Saying no tells people what we like and don't like.'
- **A child's voice can be negative.** We must allow that negative voice to speak. When we actively discourage children in expressing their dislikes, they are only expressing half of what they would like to! Once the negative words are out of their mouth, we can model and scaffold the child in finding more positive attitudes: 'You don't like James? I like James. I like it when he rides his bike outside and he laughs as he goes by!' In this way, the child feels heard, but hears another point of view. She might not agree with the 'other' opinion, but she knows that there is one.

Learning through play

Play is not frivolous. It is not a luxury. It is not something to fit in after completing all the normal stuff. Play is the important stuff. Play is a need, a drive, a brain building must-do.³

The urge to play is strong, fixed in our children from birth. This motivation, known as conation, is the inner drive to explore and discover.

Children don't play simply because it is fun or enjoyable. These are the by-products of play. Children play because they are wired to play.⁴

There are many other by-products to play. In the first 260 weeks of their lives, children learn to talk, walk, think, understand and interact. They become cooperative, working out how to regulate their own behaviour. Through playful exploration, children's learning potential is improved, their memory is built and their self-esteem is established. There are no losers in the game of play!

Since children have a natural desire to play, their intrinsic motivation is already in place, along with vital positive dispositions, such as curiosity, persistence and enthusiasm. However, these dispositions will be lacking if a child has experienced significant negativity during the first 260 weeks of their life. What do we do then?

How can we create positive play in our setting? How do we restore positive dispositions?

Create a physical environment that is inviting, engaging and rewarding

The physical environment has the most immediate effect on a child's sense of enjoyment and learning. Recent research in Lucknow, India,⁵ showed a dramatic increase in learning once the physical environment had been transformed. Initially the early years classroom for three-year-olds was furnished with desks, a timetable and very limited areas for free play. Children's learning

indicated a marked lack in social and emotional learning, but high achievement in mathematics and literacy. The classroom was transformed into a welcoming space, where the children could play, access toys for themselves and make choices for the first time. The children could explore and learn on their own terms. As a result, their learning was transformed. *Social and emotional learning, along with listening skills and understanding all increased significantly within three months.*

Children who are absorbed and intent on their play will learn more. Not only this, but their potential for empathy will be increased. Why? Positive dispositions such as resilience, self-motivation and perseverance are all highly sensitive to an enabling physical environment. In other words, children's dispositions are developed, supported or weakened by the physical environment. The environment can be used to 'grow' positive dispositions and eliminate the negative ones.

Create a social and emotional environment that is warm, safe and trusting

Practitioners set the daily emotional tone of the setting. Nurturing relationships between practitioners and children generate a sense of safety and trust. This in turn supports the child as she develops vital social and emotional skills.

A child is either a willing participant in a thriving ecosystem of warmth and trust, or a victim of an environment that is not a 'good fit' for her temperament, however loving the adults may be.

As practitioners, we need to be meticulous in how we deliver our emotional environment. Research indicates that teacher training is critical in developing such skills. Lack of training and knowledge can cause damage to learning, however well-meaning we are. How can we ensure that social and emotional skills are supported and encouraged?

Nurturing and positive interactions promote brain development. Children need to talk about their problems, their challenges and their joys. Our job is to connect with them, and to actively

listen to them. The quality of a child's relationships affects the physical structure of their brain⁶ and it is through these positive relationships that children develop persistence, competence and enthusiasm for learning.

Supportive relationships can compensate for early negative relationships. It is possible for children to develop well, despite all sorts of hardships, providing they have the opportunity to build positive and healthy relationships with caring and sensitive adults.

The emotional tone of our setting literally builds the brains of our children, making them more effective and engaged learners. Let's set the right tone!

Create an intellectual environment that is full of encouragement, exploration and inquiry

Research supports the theory that children who engage in high-quality play do better at school, and have superior language, comprehension, attention, concentration, cooperation, collaborative and empathetic skills. This is quite a list!

Our intellectual environment needs to meet the needs of the child and her ever-growing brain. For the older children 'mature' play is vital within the intellectual environment. Mature play is what it says on the tin, when play reaches its more mature level. Children can play to their heart's content, but if such play is more typical of a much younger child's activities, the benefits will be largely absent.

Mature play consists of children imagining, taking on diverse roles, making increasingly complex rules, and developing greater flexibility. Mature play is long-lasting, sometimes spanning days and weeks.

Language is key to this play, as children work out what exactly they are playing, how they will play it, and explain its workings to other children wanting to join in. This language can be complex or simple, but there will always be an element of negotiation, where children discuss the best way to plan the play.

This is where we come in. We need to support the children without becoming too involved or directive. Our genuine interest in the activity is important.

We can have many potential roles as mature play partners:

- We can *support* the child in her play, offering ideas, extending her thinking and giving her as much time as she needs to work out what she wants.
- We can *model* what we wish the child to be or do. For example, if the child wants to know more about a dinosaur, we can model 'asking' another adult for some information.
- We can *listen* very carefully to her, giving our full attention. This is extremely powerful for the child, having an adult hanging on every word, and reflecting her ideas and thoughts back to her.
- We can *plan* with the child. When we see her interest in an area is evident, we can go about planning further interactions together, or create new and different activities that will engage the child and extend that learning.

Children's play can remain stereotyped and dull. When we step in we can extend it, deepen it and help them to transform their play into a richer learning experience. Children may well be the play 'experts' but we are the support system for informing and scaffolding play, and perhaps regenerating tired play, converting it into something truly captivating and riveting.

Create an environment that measures the learning by the activity rather than by the clock

Children need an environment where there is plenty of time to play, and where they have the luxury of developing their emerging ideas in large blocks of time. Ample time is key.

Play is a complicated old business. While it veers from fun to serious, from silly to solemn, it is always engaging. The point

of a child's play is to make sense of the world, to make sense of all the people in their world, of the way things work, the way things connect and relate to each other. It is hard work, and it takes time.

Child 'agency' is vital, where the child feels in control of the things around her, and where she feels she can influence those things. While we can act as a support to this play, we should never undermine the child's agency by hijacking it and pursuing our ideas instead of the child's. Neither should we remove children's agency by limiting her time and space to immerse herself in the learning process. We habitually put things away, tidying up, as if that is the goal, and not the learning that took place beforehand!

Allowing time and space to explore supports a child's agency. Children need to be able to examine, consider, delve, ask questions, get things right, get things wrong and learn from their mistakes. This won't happen in a setting where we look at the clock rather than the activity. Clearly, we should be guided by the physical time. However, if we create a mindset that thinks long term, providing as much uninterrupted and continuous play as possible, children will reap the benefits.

Assessment

Assessment has to be meaningful. It informs children's learning. In the same way that a doctor needs to carefully observe patients and prescribe the relevant treatment, practitioners need to carefully observe children and deliver the appropriate planning.

We have an advantage over a doctor. We know the children well. We play and interact with them, building an understanding of them. We know their families and their community. We can build up a three-dimensional, all-round knowledge of the child's personality, temperament and interests.

Empathy is part of assessment because assessment demands connection. When we observe, we need to 'tune in' to the

child. Such tuning in is at the heart of empathy. We block out distractions and interruptions. We play with the child until we understand what motivates and interests them. We step into their shoes and see the world through their eyes.

It is at this point that we are ready to deliver tailored and relevant planning,

What is the best method of assessment? How do we best understand the child and support her learning? Meaningful assessment:

1. Takes place in a variety of contexts: inside, outside, individually, in groups, at different times of the day and in different activities.
2. Demonstrates what a child can do, not what she cannot; assessment follows the child's interests, focusing on what is significant and meaningful in her world.
3. Observes the child's dispositions, both positive and negative; considering the process as more significant than the outcome.
4. Emphasizes what a child can do when provided with support and encouragement, rather than only measuring what a child can do unaided.
5. Informs and promotes future learning.⁷

From this list, we can see that the uniqueness of the child is central to assessment and that 'tuning in' (empathy) is knitted into the process. Highly effective assessment means that we really 'see' the child. We consider the child's interests, joys and concerns and we marry this consideration with a sound understanding of holistic child development. Highly effective assessment requires us to get down in the trenches with the children, to support and encourage them through the ups and downs of early childhood – in short, to walk in their shoes and see with their eyes.

Conclusion

Pedagogy is deeply personal. It develops from theories, practice, reflections, experiences and needs. It is often culturally informed – relevant to a particular community or social group. It is based on our knowledge of play, learning, child development, environment and relationships. It influences every classroom and child. We need to clarify the principles of our pedagogy – what it is exactly – if we are to optimise our children’s chances of success.

In clarifying...[pedagogy] we can develop a deeper understanding of what is informing our practice, and importantly why we work in particular ways. This in turn can enable us to make our practice, and the impact of our practice, more visible not only to others but also to ourselves.⁸

A strong, informed pedagogy is a gamechanger because it creates a community of inquiry into what we do and why we do it. It is out of this shared and ongoing reflection that we ‘grow’ our pedagogy. Pedagogy is crucially built out of communal understanding.

And finally, it is the quality of early interactions that ‘wire’ the brain. This must be at the very heart of our pedagogy. When we fully understand this, when we consider it as we practise on a daily basis, we plant the child in an emotional ecosystem that encourages and stimulates learning and development, and has long-lasting effects on lifelong physical and mental health.

Notes

1. Garnett, H. (2016) ‘Play: Part one.’ Accessed on 26/6/2017 at <http://wonderfulmama.com>.
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3. Johnson, J.A. and Dinger, D. (2012) *Let Them Play: An Early Learning (Un) Curriculum*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, p.1.

4. Garnett (2016).
5. Harland, J. (2017) 'A comparative study on the impact of curriculum emphasis on children's developmental patterns in an Indian and UK preschool context.' Unpublished MA research/coursework at Anglia Ruskin University.
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