Connection:

The beating heart that drives learning

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(peer reviewed)

Connection, with each other and with our environments, is crucial to the act of learning, and thus as teachers we must strive to improve the connections for children in our care with the people, places and things in their world. Being in tune with awe and wonder, finding the extraordinary in the ordinary, loving and being loved… What if these were the principle notions driving teacher practice? What if…? Would teachers be more present, more connected, more of everything that is important for very young children to thrive as learners?

In what follows I share some reflections on these questions, alongside provocative readings and quotations, inviting readers to experience these principles for themselves. It is my hope that you can find something wonder-ful, extraordinary in these passages and make connections between love, life, and practice that enhance your teaching and learning every day. Let's begin…

What would early childhood settings look, feel, and sound like if we started from the premise that learning ought to be "irresistibly engaging" (Fullan, 2013)? This kind of setting would pulse with energy, passion and spirited engagement. Roald Dahl, describing one of his characters, made me think long and hard about the degree of intensity required for the moment by moment building of strong, long connections when I read this:

> *"I began to realise how important it was to be an enthusiast in life. He taught me that if you are interested in something, no matter what it is, go at it at full speed ahead. Embrace it with both arms, hug it, love it and above all become passionate about it. Lukewarm is no good. Hot is no good either. White hot and passionate is the only thing to be."* Roald Dahl, My Uncle Oswald. (Goodreads, 2016)

And when I think we have only one chance to be a baby, a toddler, a very young child, those of us responsible for influencing their lives, have to be 'way beyond ordinary' in the way we live, learn and love *with and alongside* them. Gone are the days when we thought a little distance was necessary between a teacher and a child, a little objective professionalism. Neuroscience research gives us all the rationale we need to justify emotional connection (Gerhardt, 2011; Gopnik, 2010; Grille, 2015). What we have to do, as teachers working inside the myriad of settings here in Aotearoa New Zealand, is stand up and advocate for the conditions that will nurture connection and **stay in children's lives.** The ideas that lead out of this kind of thinking, I hope, will generate further conversations because every setting will have its own unique rhythms and rituals for taking principled learning, into heart-energised practice. Maya Angelou once said:

> *"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."* (Goodreads, 2016)

In the first thousands days of an infant's life, as their limbic brains, their feeling, emotional brains, continue to be formed, the neural pathways are strengthened, so these pathways must be the ones that lay down trust, resilience, and relational connection. These are the characteristics of lifelong, successful learners. Consider also what the Sector Advisory Group Report (2012) had to say:

> *"There is widespread acceptance that good outcomes for children depend on high quality early childhood experiences and that poor quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) is harmful. Gluckman et al. noted that 'Early childhood is the critical period in which executive functions such as the fundamentals of self-control, judgement, evaluation of risk, reward behaviours and what might be called wisdom are established'. The evidence is clear: the provision of quality ECE is essential to ensure infants and toddlers have good experiences in ECE services that lead to better outcomes in both the present and the future."* (p. 2)

We have been gifted a treasure in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), for its value based, socio-cultural curriculum asks much of us as learning communities. *Te Whāriki's* Principles frame the work we do. It is thoughtful engagement with these learning principles that lead to fascinating learning spaces where wonder and awe, the extraordinary, and love may abound… Wherever we put the task to be done, the routine to be accomplished first, we risk failing those high stakes principles. If connection is indeed the beating heart that drives learning, then everything that happens in early learning settings, for everything that happens is the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996), must have strong relational connection at its core.

"But what children observe most closely, explore most obsessively and imagine most vividly are the people around them. There are no perfect toys; there is no magic formula. Parents and other caregivers teach young children by paying attention and interacting with them naturally and, most of all, by just allowing them to play" (Gopnik, 2010, p. 4).

Thus that rich environment for very young children is the *people* in it. It is the strength of the attachment relationships that enable children to keep stretching their responses to the outside world of *places and things*. Creating an environment that is calm and predictable for children as they explore, is a goal worth pursuing. Ensuring children feel contentment and curiosity in a relationally warm setting, is a moment by moment responsibility.

Te Whatu Pōkeka (Ministry of Education, 2009) is a wonderful place for teachers to investigate connection possibilities, as the thinking behind the research is a stunning example of traditional Te Āo Māori perspectives. There are no sharp edges and relationships, past and present, are the anchor for moving into the wider world. This assessment framework takes on the shape of the child through its metaphor of enfolding babies in the strength and softness of a muka-flax blanket and keeping them snuggly warm from the blanket's carefully interwoven albatross feathers. Each baby is enveloped in a blanket that flexibly shifts with the growing child. The child does not fit the routines, the tasks, the activities. Instead, the mātauranga, the curriculum is wrapped around the child and learning stays connected, stays meaningful, as a result. Lesley Rameka and Rita Walker (2012, p.18) refer to this whakatauki, *Mā te huruhuru ka rere: Birds require feathers to fly.* This is about unfolding potential as teachers invest time and effort into understanding the contexts of children's lives. Rameka and Walker say there is complexity in figuring this out because there are multiple stories involved.

I often think babies have x-ray vision, for they seem to be able to see straight into an adult's heart. You only have to watch a baby and a 'tuned in' adult to see the intensity of the conversation that happens; the pauses as each responds, the eye connection acting like a *tractor beam*, drawing each to the other, and the suspension of time as the two find that flow-state that fuels connection. Then watch a disinterested adult, or equally as tricky, for a baby trying to figure out this world, so new and intriguing, a busy adult. Babies know the difference. They know and yet they are incredibly vulnerable to that difference because one relationship grows their brain in healthy ways. And the other? Well, this is the tragedy that leads to long term issues with so many adverse health effects.

Miriam McCaleb and Nathan Mikaere -Wallis, reflecting on their experiences at Infantastic, April 2005, write about risk, resilience and relationships. What they say is particularly poignant for teachers working with infants and toddlers in early learning settings:

"Why is it that some children succeed in the face of adversity while others do not? A look at the literature concerning risk and resilience supports the importance of quality relationships (e.g. Gellert, 2002; Linke, 2001; Robinson, 2000). Gellert (2002) highlights the relational aspects of resilience and makes the salient point to teachers that all children identified as 'resilient' had "the consistent presence of a person outside the family circle who bonds with the child. In some studies this person is identified as a teacher..." (p. 24). This research indicates a clear responsibility for the teacher in their role as carer, decision maker and, we propose, relationship-shaper, in the formative lives of children. The quality of relationship we are able to create thereby has a direct impact on the child's sense of a safe and secure world. This message needs to be heard by uncles, aunties, neighbours and all individuals in the lives of children, but is particularly relevant to teachers considering the number of hours many children spend with them." (McCaleb & Mikaere-Wallis, 2005, p. 4)

Babies' brains then, are designed to grow in connection with adults who care deeply about them. The neuroscience research is now very clear about this. This growing brain is fully driven by learning that sits within a cultural perspective, not development as we once thought. We have insights now that we could only surmise at 30 or more years ago (Gopnik, 2010). The research shows that a baby's learning flourishes inside an incredibly strong relationship with a main adult, most often inside their family, where a conversation unfolds over time (Gerhardt, 2011). The very beginnings of conversation, of respect and mutual trust happen here through skin-to-skin contact and eye-to-eye connection - and love ensues. The adult and baby listen to each other's voice, their emotions, their heart beats and the biggest learning leap that will ever happen in a person's life, in the space of one year, unfurls. The brain map begins its relentless drive for connection, for understanding, for knowledge. So too does the notion of developing working theories which ever after we constantly review, adapt, rethink, modify, query, firm up and then reconsider. Knowledge is always in process (Gilbert, 2005), like that of a scientist researcher, as Alison Gopnik et al. describe babies' brain processes in their book, *How Babies Think: The Science of Childhood* (2001):

"Babies think, observe and reason. They consider evidence and draw conclusions, do experiments, solve problems and search for the truth.....even the youngest babies know a great deal about the world and actively work to find out more". (p. 13)

Now fast forward a few years and where is that brain? Many things have happened

on the way to being around 5 or 6. Many good things and many less than ideal connections with adults who have enormous power in the shaping of those brains. One thing that has happened, to many children, is that they have joined a 'group setting' of some kind. The dyadic relationship within their family has been extended to include a wider number of adults. Imagine being in an early learning setting, for example, where routines and rosters drive the ways teachers engage with babies. The uniqueness of those unfolding lives is sublimated inside expectations for the group. Ratios are often the root cause for this, because when adults are short on the ground, grouping children together, for changing nappies, food and sleep, becomes a system for ensuring children's physical needs are cared for. However, we risk institutionalising babies when the roster is more important than the opportunity for learning and the time it takes to engage, with utmost respect, during care moments. If connection is to thrive, babies must be partners in this process.

And yet, there are administrators and teachers who view rosters and routines as necessary accountability measures. In some ways this is understandable for our adult brains have short-circuited the thinking process to enable us to go straight to an answer. We don't wander around the streets from home to work. We know the quickest way. But this economy of thinking, this need to be organised, has its downside, for we have also short-circuited creativity, art, appreciation of beauty, and curious investigation when we race through the day to complete the long lists of tasks we set ourselves. Very often, we have hijacked play. We must think deeply to ensure we see the world from each child's perspective, the extraordinary not the ordinary; a world full of potential for puzzling inquiry. And yet, what does this world need, if not a fresh appreciation of its value and a deep consideration of its future. We can't risk squandering its natural beauty, its diversity, and its children's potential. Babies, toddlers, and young children are relentless researchers. They negotiate a world they are just beginning to understand. This takes time and focus because worthwhile exploration requires time and focus.

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Children relish companions who resist being sidetracked into tasks and routines and instead set their sights on teaching and learning that strengthens the characteristics of successful life long learners. Are we relentlessly building learning cultures that enable infants, toddlers, and young children to follow their energies, passions and spirit? Do we have competence, judgment, insight, inspiration, and the capacity for improvisation as we strive to make a difference in children's learning lives? Most importantly - *how do we know*?

Let's think about the fabulous side of being connected to teachers who care deeply for babies. A baby cries, there is a listening teacher who responds to the cue within seconds and the baby learns that this world is a place that cares. A growing child has ideas and plans they can't, as yet, articulate verbally. However, like a wellspring from deep within, they are driven to experiment, pursue with depth and personal investment and find answers. Children seek connection and when they continually find it, they thrive as learners. Connections lead to relationships that generate a feeling of belonging and well being. It is always from this sense of safety that learners choose to explore further and stretch themselves beyond what they know. Teachers who enable this to happen, nurture learning intensity by offering environments, time and space that provoke curiosity, and in doing so, help to shape those brains in ways that in the long term, communities, indeed and the world, celebrate: innovative, creative, hard working, diligent, socially ethical learners who contribute to their communities and beyond.

So how is this made possible? The detail will be yours to discover, yet we start with a listening heart, an empathic one that is finely tuned into the conversations very young children want to pursue with us. We must know them deeply. We must see them with an 'aroha gaze'. Rita Walker (2008) can help us here:

> *"Adults working with [Māori] children must establish meaningful and intimate relationships, encouraging and supporting them in a way that is unrushed, peaceful and tranquil by interacting in a manner that motivates and ignites a passion to learn."* (p. 8)

In Aotearoa New Zealand, children, families, and teachers in early childhood stand on a whāriki that honours connected, empowered communities of learners (Wenger, 1998; Ministry of Education, 1996). The partners in Te Tiriti o Waitangi find themselves with a learning model that nourishes community cohesion and is committed to, in Tilly Reedy's (2013) words: "a freedom that dreams dreams and seeks answers on distant horizons, ... a freedom that takes responsibility for the footprints left behind; ... a freedom that recognises the beauty of individuality; ... a freedom that weaves nations together for tomorrow's unity" (p. 36).

Tilly says there is a challenge, for there is no single story. Each child's language, culture and identity is the vital lynchpin that will drive their view of the world and this means that teachers must listen. Lisa Delpit (1988) has said:

> *"To do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment - and that is not easy."* (p. 297)

Carlina Rinaldi (2005) often speaks so eloquently about listening. Eloquent because she makes it seem so profound; so unerringly important.

> *"If we believe that children possess their own theories, interpretations, and questions, and we are protagonists in the knowledge building processes, then the most important verbs in educational practice are no longer 'to talk' 'to speak' or 'to transmit' but to listen."* (2005, pp. 125-126)

We have a real opportunity, as we assess children's learning, to write about connection and share with families and whānau the meaning of *Te Whāriki's* aspiration statement:

> *"To grow as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society."* (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9)

When I read Arthur's Learning Story, written by Karen Hose, I felt the stillness wash over me as I settled into the feeling captured by Karen as she described these events. Here is an excerpt:

> *Arthur lay under the tree with his friend Hazel. The leaves moved in the slight breeze. His mindful gaze was captivated by the tree. Hazel lying beside him was intent on engaging Arthur's attention, but Arthur was intrigued by the tree.*
>
> *Hazel was disappointed by Arthur's lack of attention, so together we lay on our backs, just like Arthur, looking up into the tree, to find out for ourselves what Arthur was studying. We discovered, that in doing this your body first must relax. Together, like Arthur, our bodies stopped fidgeting and we too became enveloped under an umbrella of leaves. I felt totally wrapped within the tree and began to notice the movement of the leaves and the filtered light that shone through the gaps in the branches and leaves. The colour of the leaves changed with the amount of light they received and just like magic, I too was caught under the tree's spell. This was a very empowering moment for Hazel and me for we could see that Arthur was not just a quiet baby with nothing much going on, but a person feeling, observing, listening, thinking, engaging and finding real knowledge about his world…*

And so we have come full circle. When we think about connection as the beating heart that drives learning we realise that connection begins with listening; the deep, active, *I care about you*, kind of listening that sits at the heart of a wise, loving teacher's practice. The question for us all is how do we engage 'moment by moment' with each and every child in our setting and make certain that our listening is the kind that makes a difference to this child's growing identity? This would be a research inquiry question worth pursuing.

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