



TEACHING & LEARNING
RESEARCH INITIATIVE
NĀU I WHATU TE KĀKAHU, HE TĀNIKO TAKU

What's special about teaching and learning in the first years?

Investigating the “what, hows and whys” of relational pedagogy with infants and toddlers

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Introductory statement

What is special about teaching infants and toddlers? How can the “what, hows and whys” of infant toddler pedagogy¹ be articulated and enhanced to support learning? These questions were at the heart of a two-year study in which researchers teamed up with teachers in five infant and toddler centres in Auckland and Wellington to gather practice-based evidence about pedagogy as the art and science of teaching and learning in this under-researched area of early childhood education and care.

Key findings

The study found that theorising about children’s learning through discussions of video data enabled the teachers to “really look” at their teaching and open up taken-for-granted meanings about the “what, hows and whys” of infant and toddler pedagogy.

The “what” of infant toddler pedagogy

1. Teachers understood infant and toddler pedagogy as dependent on attentive adult-child relationships in which the teacher and the child learned to know each other over time, thus making learning visible to the teacher. In two of the five centres primary caregiving approaches were advocated as key strategies to achieve attentive relationships.
2. Teachers talked about under-two-year-olds as discoverers, sense-makers, embodied learners, and future world citizens but also as vulnerable and seeking security, thus reflecting constructions of the ‘child as learner’ embedded within different theoretical and practice traditions.
3. An intriguing co-existence of apparently contradictory views was revealed in the way that teachers spoke about their role. On the one hand the teachers talked about their pedagogy as intentionally responsive to cues from the child, and as having an effect that extended into the children’s future. On the other hand, teachers spoke of children’s learning as spontaneous and as resulting from children’s own agency rather than teachers’ actions. This fundamental tension permeated the project discussions and reflected the multiple theoretical and practice traditions that affected the teachers’ views of the ‘child as learner’.

The “hows and whys” of infant toddler pedagogy

1. Watchful attentiveness within a relationship-based pedagogy was advocated as the way to learn to recognise a child’s learning and respond to it. Watchful attentiveness involved reading the child’s body language and understanding the child in the context of their history, including within their family.
2. Maintaining a calm, slow pace in which children had space and time to lead their learning—without overt teacher action—was seen as part of the specialised work of infant and toddler pedagogy. Appropriate teacher:child ratios were among structural conditions needed to enable this specialised approach.
3. Care, respect, security and belonging were both the “hows” and “whys” of infant and toddler pedagogy.
4. Planning the infant and toddler curriculum was understood as synonymous with ongoing observation of the child so that the child’s cues could be used for enhancing learning.

¹ John Loughran (2010, p. 36) suggests that “pedagogy is concerned with the relationship between teaching and learning ... it really means that the two exist together. The fact that teaching influences learning, and learning influences teaching, and the way that is done, offers insights into the science of education.”

Major implications

1. There is a need for sector leadership to develop a clear articulation of the nature of learning in the early years and of the diverse knowledge bases that inform the relationship-based pedagogy teachers identified as necessary for work with infants and toddlers.
2. The terminology of relationship-based pedagogy uses notions that often mask the specialised nature of infant and toddler practice; this suggests a need to re-valorise these notions within a framework that is clear about its theoretical knowledge bases and associated practices.
3. Narrative discussion methods such as those used in this project could be usefully employed within professional learning activities with teaching teams interested in “really looking” at their practice and becoming more intentional about it. Intentional teaching is based on a knowledge base that is clear about its rationale.

The research

The early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* describes the education and care of infants and toddlers as “specialised” and “neither a scaled-down three- or four-year-old programme nor a baby-sitting arrangement” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 22). Nonetheless, nationally and internationally, viewing infants and toddlers as *learners* still presents a challenging mind shift for some teachers (e.g., Grieshaber & Canella, 2001; Smidt, 2006; Urban, 2008).

In this study, the teachers were keen to articulate the specialised nature of infant and toddler pedagogy. At the start of the project, one teacher said:

While we regard ourselves as providers of both high quality education and care for very young children, the teaching and learning part of our curriculum proves to be difficult to pinpoint or articulate ... We are very hopeful that our collaboration ... will result in ... more clarity about the what, hows, and whys of very young children’s learning.

Research design

The researchers worked with 12 teachers from five infant and toddler centres in Auckland and Wellington to clarify “the what, hows and whys” of infant and toddler pedagogy within the TLRI kaupapa of research partnership. Within each centre, the project team used qualitative case study methods to investigate learning and teaching through the experiences of three or four children. At the start of the project, interviews with the teachers resulted in a decision to collect slice-of-life video recordings for each child in the study as well as the learning stories that the teachers would normally collate over the two-year period of the project. A total of two hours of footage per child was collected; the number of learning stories collected for each child was more variable. The teachers and researchers met to discuss teacher-selected excerpts from each child’s videos roughly within two weeks of the videos being recorded. The discussions had a narrative focus on identifying the learning occurring for the children, and how teachers understood, enacted and articulated their infant-toddler pedagogy; they frequently made reference to the learning stories the teachers had compiled. Additionally, the teachers and researchers within each city met as a cluster group throughout the project to discuss the data and identify “essential themes” (van Manen, 1997, p. 32) that would open up meanings and understandings around the project questions. Separate meetings of the project researchers advanced the analytic discussions recorded at the cluster meetings, and these became the findings that were further debated and agreed with teachers at subsequent cluster meetings. At the end of the two years, the researchers held an exit interview with each teaching team about their research experience, and the researchers also met with the children’s parents to explore their perceptions of their child’s experiences within their early childhood centre.²

Below, we bring together some of the meanings that were opened up in this project, and their complexities, leading to some implications for future policy and practice.

² Data from the parents are not included in this paper.

The “what” of infant and toddler pedagogy: Teachers’ understandings of learning, learners, teaching and teachers

Relationships as the key to pedagogy: “You need to know the child”, “you have to watch, you have to look back over time”.

Once the teachers started videoing, they reflected that “just about everything a baby or toddler does is learning”. As one teacher explained: “There is learning everywhere—the people, places ... they learn from those things that happen round them—not just here ... all of the things that happen at home”. Yet, despite the ubiquitous and holistic nature of learning—or perhaps because of it—teachers held multiple understandings of what it meant. Puzzling over the challenge of defining learning, they moved between different constructions of learning, holding them in tensions that shifted, settled momentarily, and shifted yet again. A point of agreement in the various suggested definitions was that learning was evident in change:

... when you see them with a skill increasing, when you see them progress, when they are able to talk, or you see the light bulb go on ... when they have learnt something that they didn’t know before. It’s a knowledge thing. It’s the look in the eye ... the excitement.

Pushed to explain how one would recognise learning, teachers were clear that not everyone would be able to recognise an infant’s or toddler’s learning because “you need to know the child ... and how they normally react”, and “it always comes back to relationships”. Additionally, to recognise learning, “you have to watch; you have to look back over time”, which teachers saw as also being a good reason for writing learning stories.

The focus on infants’ and toddlers’ learning becoming visible within relationships was a central motif in the teachers’ talk about learning. For teachers in two of the five case study centres, this translated into a commitment to “primary caregiving” as the key to establishing relationships in which teacher and child learned to know each other in a mutual learning–teaching relationship. The other centres took a different organisational approach but placed equal value on “relationship-based” learning and teaching with the phrase “it always comes back to relationships” being a key refrain that referred back to one of the four principles of *Te Whāriki*. Additionally, in highlighting the importance of attentive relationships “over time”, on which they could “look back”, the teachers explained learning as an outcome of the history of their relationships with the children. Clearly tapping into their intuitive knowledge about the nature of their pedagogy, these statements draw also on a key tenet of sociocultural explanations of learning and development, namely that learning (or mental activity) can only be understood when observed in its formation over time (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). Implicit links of this kind to a range of theoretical understandings about the nature of children, childhood and learning, emerged frequently in the data. Reference to *Te Whāriki*, as the curriculum document, recurred somewhat more explicitly, as did reference to professional knowledge related specifically to working with infants and toddlers, such as the importance of attachment relationships, and views about best practice deriving from the ideas of Magda Gerber (2005) and Emmi Pikler (Tardos, 2007). For example, in responding to a question about priorities in teaching infants and toddlers, members of one teaching team reflected:

... social skills ... and self-care and physical and emotional development ...

Emotional well-being—I’m thinking *Te Whāriki* at the back of my head—I’m almost feeling that without that well-being you can’t have belonging. It’s almost sequential.

You need those foundations—and from that something else can build; and those attachments in the early days ... those are the keys as to ... how they might react to others.

Reflecting on this mix of implicit and explicit knowledge which teachers used as reference points in explaining pedagogy, one teacher offered the following explanation:

What I feel is that those ideas you meet [in teacher education courses], they kinda blend together. [The ideas] give you the basis to build on—and once you have that you start seeing things happen. What I find is that the different ideas helped me make sense/clarified what I think about learning. You see patterns. And also that one size does not fit all—even the needs of the community are different.

Multiple constructions of the child as 'learner'

Dialogue between the researchers and the teachers opened up a range of ways that the teachers constructed the child as a learner, including: the child as discoverer; as sense-maker; as embodied learner; as a future world citizen; but also as vulnerable and seeking security.

Strongly emphasised was the idea of the child as a biological organism, whose development unfolds naturally in a logical progression through interaction with the physical environment. In one centre, this Piagetian image of the child as discoverer and sense-maker was supported by ideas from the Pikler philosophy (Tardos, 2007), in particular the importance of allowing the child to experience free movement. One teacher explained:

You can see how intrinsically motivated they are to learn with their bodies and with their minds and their emotions ... so they can move with intent and achieve the goals they are setting ... we've noticed that with these children who have free movement, their spatial awareness is so good.

The following description likewise presents the child as an embodied learner who works things out by "placing their body in different places" and expressing their learning with it. Watching a video recording of an 18-month old lying on her mother soon after arrival at the centre, teachers at one centre reflected: "See how she really lies back; she's quite knowing ... while she is there and she's on mum, she can keep her there; she can keep her mum there as long as she stays on her back". In this construction, the child is also a sense-maker who is agentic in setting her own goals and achieving them. Later, sharing this video excerpt in a cluster meeting, the teachers said: "Everything she did that afternoon had a purpose". Another aspect of this image was that of the child as autonomous learner who enquires into the world: "He's experimenting with sound; just practising, seeing what his body can do; he's learning that he is free to explore, trying out different things".

These teacher narrations about children's learning indicate that the teachers did not construct children as learners in the traditional school sense of learning defineable content. Rather, they saw them as learners about, and for, life as a holistic and all-encompassing experience; as becoming "prepared for the world":

Starting from infancy ... looking at things from a social justice curriculum point of view ... and what we need in a community ... our impact on the world is as an individual, ... all these things are really important for the children ... we have to help them as best as we can to be prepared for the world.

We are thinking about the future as well. [Do we want] people who press this button, or do we want children who are able to think for themselves, able to use their initiative [in] caring relationships with each other?

Yet, concurrently with these images of the child as competent, and as a citizen of the world, the teachers also operated with images of children as vulnerable and needing protection, security and guidance, captured in statements such as "we are the safety blanket that will come up and offer her a hand" or:

I'm hoping that my *presence* [emphasised] will be the emotional anchor for her; ... I'm not ignoring what is happening ... but I'm not saying to her ... 'that's really hard' or 'what can I do next'; I don't think that we really need to. I put my hand out and then put it on the board, just to show that she could place her hand there.

The different images of the child discernible in the teachers' narrative discussions of the video data provide a valuable insight into teachers' multi-layered views of children: one image of the child did not fit all, and not at all times.

Constructions of the 'teacher' and teaching

Emerging in the reflective space created by the research methodology, the teachers' narrations about their own teaching role were likewise multi-faceted and embedded in complexity.

Without exception, the teachers talked about relationships as the core of pedagogy and central to children's learning. Relationships that enabled learning were ones marked by respect, opportunities for exploration, and an atmosphere in which children could feel valued:

I see learning for infants and toddlers as the right to free independent exploration, respect, warm reciprocal meaningful relationships with adults and children, being a valued part of the centre community, being given time to learn and having their wishes respected and advocated for.

Metaphors such as the teacher being the “safety blanket” or the “emotional anchor” additionally indicate the teachers’ awareness of the emotional nature of infant and toddler pedagogy (Leavitt, 1994). When these ideas are also linked to the view that the teacher’s role was to “help [children] be prepared for the world”, then teaching emerges as an all-encompassing activity the effect of which extends beyond the here and now and into future learning.

However, this last construction of the role of the teacher was often shaky in other parts of the project data, exposing an intriguing co-existence of contradictory views about the nature of infant and toddler pedagogy. For example, teachers who elsewhere had articulately explained many aspects of their practice with reference to relevant theoretical ideas and to *Te Whāriki* made statements about their teaching which suggested that they viewed it as existing in the background of children’s learning rather than as an intentional activity. This is exemplified in the following statement by one of the teachers who earlier had explained her view of teaching as requiring presence and the building of relationships:

Learning is letting them develop at their own pace, and being there to support them if they need you. I think they learn through experiencing things for themselves. Basically that’s it, they learn through their own experiences.

As this statement seemed contradictory with her earlier statements, one of the researchers asked the teacher why she was “writing herself out of the learning equation”. The ensuing discussion led to further elaboration of the “hows” and “whys” of teaching under-twos.

The “hows” and “whys” of infant and toddler pedagogy: A specialised activity

Although at the start of the project the notion of *pedagogy* was not embedded in the daily discourse of the teachers, once it was introduced it became a useful word to talk about the interconnected nature of teaching and learning (Loughran, 2010) with infants and toddlers.

How to “know the child”: Watchful attentiveness within a relationship-based pedagogy

A key insight about how one might come to “know the child” was offered by one teaching team towards the end of the project. Asked to sum up one lesson from the project, one teacher said that it had made her realise once more the importance of “watchful attentiveness” for recognising learning and responding to it. To supportive nods from her colleague, the teacher had earlier commented that a strength of their approach was “that we see relationships as the most important part of learning; we are all aware that children need responsive teachers around”. Asked to elaborate what this meant in terms of pedagogical strategies, the teacher explained:

We purposefully watch all their signals and listen for their cues, and try and figure out what they are saying to us when they are brand new, so that we can get to know them. And of course, we build on that over time.

“Watchful attentiveness” also made the teachers feel they were learning from the children themselves and that, as Lee (2006) also reported in her study of infant–caregiver relationships in a childcare setting in New York, learning and teaching were reciprocal activities between teachers and infants. The following dialogue during one of the cluster meetings illustrates this:

Teacher 1: The more I looked at the video and thought about it [the more I thought that] I was putting M (child) in the teaching position, she was teaching us to understand her. A lot of the communication, and the look on her face when she achieves what she wants ... there is an episode when Anne (teacher) had put balls down in the garden, and M loves balls, we know that; she really likes balls, and they were talking about the balls, ... M points to the swing, and Anne responded and went to the swing. Actually, M went to the swing first ... and Anne followed her, and she said “oh, so you do want a swing”—Anne was talking all the time this was happening—and she put M on the swing, and the look on M’s face: it was like she was totally empowered. [Teacher 1 takes on voice of child] “I actually got her to do this for me, you know, all through my communication”. And that’s what I was thinking, she’s the teacher, she’s teaching us to understand her, you know; it’s quite powerful.

Researcher: Ok, she's teaching you, but from your point of view as a teacher, what do you do? What is the action that you do, to be able to learn from what she's teaching you?

Teacher 1: Be responsive.

Teacher 2: Yeah, be absolutely responsive.

Researcher: How can you be responsive, what do you do?

Teacher 1: You have to read her body language, and know a bit of history about her.

Knowing the history also meant getting to know the child's context (family/whānau, friends, siblings) and understanding the child in that context. This knowledge is evident in the following excerpt from a narrative discussion of a video segment which also illustrates how the teachers valued their own learning from children. In other words, the teachers valued watchful attentiveness of the children and saw it as informing their teaching:

This is a baby—Clara's new sister—come in to have a bath [in our centre] and Kerry who's right there next to Jack and there's Mica as well. Mica, Kerry and Jack [all under-twos] were absolutely mesmerised. They were so interesting to watch because I thought they would stay for two seconds and wander off but I got the camera quickly because I thought it was quite an interesting thing about how they saw themselves in relation to this tiny baby, and they were just so totally attentive.

Another teacher pointed to the care routines as important times for the child and the teacher to get to know each other. This description of mealtimes with T (child) also illustrates that a relationship-based pedagogy focused on attentiveness and an ethic of care offers the child both freedom and guidance to learn:

He is able to tell me when he is not ready for the mouthful, so he learns that I will listen to him when he's wanting to tell me things. He's able to communicate with me about the light, he let me know that he wanted some water before ... he's worked that out after a while, and he knows that I'll wait for him when he's ready.

A focus on having a calm, slow pace: 'This is our work'

Being attentive to children also meant "doing by not doing", or "being actively present while standing still and quiet". In these statements, stillness or presence is not only physical but refers to emotional attunement, an ability to orient oneself to "the child's experience rather than focusing on techniques and strategies" (Goodfellow, 2008, p. 18). In the following exchange, the researchers had been exploring the meaning of "presence" with the teachers, and, in an echo of the earlier tension about how to explain the role of the infant and toddler teacher as an intentional versus a hands-off one, one researcher challenged whether presence meant "the absence of action". Firmly, one teacher replied:

Teacher: You are observing and thinking the whole time you are there. And you are thinking about—is this a teaching moment? Can I say something? For me, I have given myself permission to not butt in. Because other people around you think that you should be doing, actively doing something but sometimes they just need you to shut up and leave them alone for a minute.

Researcher: So, if somebody came and saw you not doing anything, what would you say?

Teacher: I am! I am observing! I am considering where this child is at and I'm considering where she might go next, and whether I need to step in or not, or whether I need to say something or not.

Another teacher eloquently expressed how a calm slow pace was part of what marked out infant and toddler pedagogy as a specialised activity:

I think you really have to slow yourself down when you're working with this age group, because life generally is quite busy. We're used to rushing around and being very organised, and you've got a lot to do and you try to do it quickly, not just within work but other parts of your life, but with this age group you just have to do things in a totally different way, really, from other things in your life, 'cause ... you do have to slow yourself down to get into it, it's not just the same as the rest of your life.

Elsewhere another teacher explained that a slow calm pace gave children the opportunity to play: “They can do these things because they are given that space and the time; they’re not interrupted—they will check in with you, smile at you”. For this teacher, giving space and time was also part of building continuity in relationships:

They know what to expect from you ... they know they’re safe. [It] happens with discussion. [We say] “if you don’t feel it’s safe, just take your time, just do as much as you can do, I’m here for you but just take your time and do as much as you can do”.

However, the ability to give space and time, and to observe as the basis of a responsive pedagogy was dependent on supportive structural conditions (see also Lee, 2006; Dalli et al., 2011):

Especially ... the ratio of teachers to children; you’ve just got to have enough people for the children, otherwise it becomes a minding business [where] you’ve just got a bunch of little kids in a room, that you’re just trying to keep happy and occupied. But if you’ve got enough people, then you can do a good job, a thorough job, of putting into [contributing to] each child’s life. . . . You’ve got time to observe, if you’ve got enough people; if you haven’t got enough people, you haven’t got time to sit there and watch them.

The teachers were also mindful that not everyone understood the need for these conditions, including management and other early childhood colleagues. During one cluster meeting, the teachers discussed the dilemma of:

having a manager come in, and here’s me saying “calm down, chill out”, you know, and this ... manager saying “well, get busy”.

As the discussion continued, the teachers commented that it was “almost like you have to defend your position as a professional teacher ...”, including:

to other professional teachers, that’s what gets me! ‘cause they don’t understand the nature of the group, they don’t see it. All they see is low numbers, high ratios.

Care, respect, security and belonging as both the **hows** and **whys** of the curriculum

The teachers pointed to the way they worked with children—with care and respect—as both the approach as well as the intended outcome of their practice:

There’s a lot of focus around the care moments ... of our curriculum ... so that the children get their emotional cup filled in those care moments and in those times that you spend with them ... there’s a range of ways you can care for children and help them feel safe and secure about you being there as well.

This focus on care and security was also about ensuring “a sense of belonging; [she] knows her mum and dad feel safe about her being here; she knows her friends; we all know who her family is; and she can see her friends at the weekend too”; here, belonging is not just a characteristic that stops with the child but is further seen to be connected with the teachers’ relationships to the child’s family.

Planning as ongoing observation: “I’m thinking she’s thinking”

Planning was described by one teacher as a matter of “following their [the children’s] current interests and preparing resources that could be used flexibly when interests changed, or when things happened as part of daily life”. Often planning was a result of a conscious process of thinking about what the child might be thinking, putting oneself in the child’s shoes, and “taking the cue” from that. In this sense, planning was a process in which decisions were made “in the moment” (Sands & Weston, 2010, p. 15) with the teacher “poised as provocateur, as listener, as learner, as teacher, ever vigilant for opportunities to widen and deepen knowledge” (p. 15).

By contrast, the idea of planning in a more formal way—such as through setting specific goals for individual children weeks ahead—was strongly resisted by the teachers. One teaching team recounted the debate in their centre sparked by a request from the Education Review Office to list specific learning outcomes in learning stories. From the teachers’ perspective, the request was problematic because it meant that they might end up “choosing the goal that isn’t the child’s goal” and “setting them up for something that they might not

necessarily be [interested in]”. They saw the request as conflicting with their commitment to following the child’s interest. Describing how planning worked with under-two-year-olds, they said: “It’s like liquid, and moves around all the time”; “you do it because it feels right, and you’re in with that child”; “it’s intuitive, because it’s built on observation, and understanding”.

Implications

This paper has highlighted some of the “what, hows and whys” of infant and toddler pedagogy as understood within this project. At least three key implications are indicated by these findings:

1. The initial difficulty encountered by teachers in articulating the nature of learning and pedagogy with under-two-year-olds indicates a need for sector leadership to draw on the multiple knowledges (e.g., Dalli et al., 2011) and perspectives that can help untangle the complex discourses at play within the settings of this project; this would help make the “what, hows and whys” of infant and toddler pedagogy more broadly understood.
2. The pedagogy indicated by the findings of this project is built on well-rehearsed notions about high quality practice with infants and toddlers: care and respect; relationship-based practice, including through watchful attentiveness; and a calm and slow pace to the day. That many of the teachers assumed these aspects of practice to be part of intuitive rather than intentional practice suggests that there is a need to consciously re-valorise these notions within a new framework, one that is clear about its theoretical knowledge base or bases and associated practices.
3. Reflecting on the video data proved a powerful catalyst for teachers to become more aware of the detail of children’s learning and of their own practices. This suggests such an activity could usefully be integrated into professional learning initiatives aimed at enhancing reflective practice and articulate intentional teaching among infant and toddler teachers. This would include an enhanced focus on the “whys” (or rationale) of establishing a pedagogical approach with infants and toddlers that prioritises relationships as the basis for learning when this is understood in terms of long-term life goals such as supporting a child’s sense of agency, self-efficacy, empathy towards others, and resilience through the emotional security that the teachers sought so hard to achieve.

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