

Soft skills and early childhood education: Strange bedfellows or an ideal match?

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I was reading a regional newspaper in Taranaki, New Zealand a few months ago and a question in the article caught my eye. Learning how to communicate our boundaries in a constructive way – is it something we're taught? (Service, 2016, p. 16). The line was not earth-moving or mind-shattering, the kind that may eventually find its way as car stickers, postcards or wall frames later. Rather, it was simple and could even easily be forgotten, however it lingered in my mind hours and even days after.

There are three important words in the question: boundary, communication and constructive. A quick search in the *Merriam-Webster* (2018) online dictionary revealed that boundary is something that indicates or fixes a limit or extent. Communication is described as the ability to listen, to question, to understand and respond to the message being conveyed. This means not only words but also the loudness of one's voice, the manner of address, body language, tone of voice (high and shrill or soft and gentle) and active listening. It also means communicating one-to-one and as a member of a group that helps build relationships. The last word, constructive, means to help develop or improve something instead of being upsetting and negative.

In thinking of boundaries, I thought of the skills, attitudes and behaviour people should possess to communicate boundaries effectively. I reflected on this because it is relevant to the work that I do. I am a teacher educator in New Zealand and I can see the significance of the statement in the education of student teachers and young children, who are important stakeholders in the field of early childhood education.

Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki) (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) guides kaiako (teachers) in New Zealand to provide consistent boundaries for children, respect toddlers' rights and agency, and ensure children know the "limits and boundaries of acceptable behaviour" (p. 24). Consistent, manageable expectations are to be set and the MoE (2017) asks teachers to reflect on what ways they can "adapt the environment and pedagogy to support children's behaviour within the agreed boundaries?" (p. 35).

In early childhood settings in New Zealand kaiako support children to develop a number of skills, attitudes and behaviours relating to boundaries. This includes knowing rules, rights and fairness and have the capacity to discuss and negotiate these. In addition, children are encouraged to understand the rules of their preschool, the reason for these rules and that there are different rules for different places. Moreover, children are taught to understand the consequences when they behave in ways that are considered unacceptable, and to develop the ability to be responsible for their own actions. An important skill as well, is the ability to state a conflicting opinion and resolve a conflict in an appropriate way (MoE, 2017).

Reflecting further, I recalled the list that Robert Fulghum wrote in his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* in 1988. He made a list of skills he learned in kindergarten. This list, when practiced in life and practiced by everyone on earth, will make for a peaceful world. It was a small book that made a big difference and later on, found its way as car stickers, postcards and wall frames. My musings made me think that if children know and understand boundaries in their early education, what is the long term value and impact in their later life? Then I thought about soft skills.

Soft skills are a combination of people skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills and emotional intelligence (Rao, 2012).

Why are soft skills important in early childhood?

Just by looking at the title, one might think that soft skills and early childhood education are strange bedfellows. This is because soft skills are a key element in higher education but not in early childhood. Soft skills is a hot topic in the world of employment, training and career growth but not before this period. So, to jump from early childhood education to tertiary and beyond is too great a leap and gives an impression of overgeneralising the curriculum for young children.

I believe that soft skills and early childhood education are an ideal match and I will provide a few ideas on what has been said. First, Tedesco, Opertti, and Amadio (2014) in their article debating the purpose of curriculum said that the outcome of the education process has changed from participation, a necessity in the industrial revolution when businesses needed workers to know how to read, write and do maths so they will be efficient in factories and industries, to developing competences, necessary at the present time. They even claim that making children soft skill literate is as vital as teaching them the three Rs. In addition, Torrey (2015) in her article on the purpose of education, persuade us that children should be empowered to be lifelong learners and to manage their own learning because the world is changing rapidly and it is important that children adapt quickly. Furthermore, Claxton, Costa and Kallick (2016) propose that soft skills are actually thinking and learning dispositions, they are key concepts in *Te Whāriki*. Finally, it has already been established and proven that investing in early childhood pays off in later years. It is an investment that will have a positive impact on the economy by way of “lower social welfare costs, decreased crime rates, and, increased tax revenue” (Heckman as cited in Diakiw, 2016, p. 40). Therefore, developing soft skills in children will have an even more positive impact to the economy when these children become adults (Diakiw, 2016). All these are pointing to the relevance of incorporating soft skills in early childhood education.

As a teacher educator, I see the value of incorporating soft skills in my own teaching practice, in supporting student teachers to build capacity, a term used often in the business world. In turn, when student teachers are out in the sector, they will build capacity for children in their care.

What are soft skills?

Soft skills are known in different ways. Terminologies vary from country to country (Wats & Wats, 2009). There is no one term that encompass what experts refer to as skills that are in contrast to hard skills, which denote cognitive abilities, academic knowledge and skills, technical experience, specialised skills or discipline-specific expertise. Some refer to soft skills as mind-set or habits of mind. 21st century learning skills (Allvin, 2016) are commonly used, though have varying categories and information, but, have common themes. Soffel (2016) of the World Economic Forum refined this even further into three categories: foundational literacies, competencies and character qualities. Duckworth (2016) calls it grit. Claxton, Costa and Kallick (2016) identified this as thinking and learning dispositions. In her book *The Toddler Brain*, Laura Jana (2017) propose calling it Qi skills and have identified seven categories: me, we, why, will, wiggle, wobble and what if.

Rao (2012) in his article on the myths about soft skills explained that these are “polite and pleasing ways of presenting to others and are mostly related to personality, attitude and behaviour” (p. 50). He goes on further to describe soft skills as a collection of skills and abilities relevant to communication, managing time, problem solving, negotiating, writing, listening, reading and decision-making. Diakiw (2016) adds that softs skills include the ability to complete a task, self-regulation, self-awareness, developing and maintaining positive relationships and positive and healthy

interaction with peers and adults. Bayrami and Gordon (2017) in their article on a peaceful future, identify empathy as an essential skill and important to have now more than ever as countries try to find ways to reduce or avoid violence and foster inclusion.

In addition, Tedesco, Opertti, and Amadio (2014) in their article on the soft skills versus hard skills curriculum debate, reflected on the necessity to strike a balance between integrating universal values and respect for diversity within nations and within societies of these nations. This is a place where people are able to live the lifestyle they want, to abide by their beliefs, and at the same time respect others who live differently and have different beliefs. This is where applying the right soft skills in situations is important, as de Haan, Kuiper and Pijpers (2011) advise in their article on skills needed with digital information. They propose four steps: reading the [social] situation, assessing the effectiveness of the soft skill on the situation, synthesising and reflecting on the soft skill used. Overall, soft skills is a broad set of skills, and in early childhood is an umbrella concept that has yet to be given a definite structure.

What soft skills are needed in early childhood and beyond?

Soft skills in early childhood is new and literature is still emerging. To start with, a useful framework for teachers and children is the taxonomy of soft skills developed for higher education and employment (Succi, 2015). Table 1 shows a range of soft skills divided in three areas: personal, social and methodological. Personal soft skills are abilities that pertain to the individual alone, for example, commitment and tolerance to stress. Social soft skills are abilities required to relate to another person, such as teamwork, leadership and negotiation. Methodological soft skills are techniques or procedures used to solve a problem, question or situation. Though the taxonomy was created to outline employability skills, they go beyond employment, in fact these skills, attitude and behaviour are relevant to early childhood education.

Table 1

TAXONOMY OF SOFT SKILLS

Personal	Social	Content reliant/ Methodological
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning skills • Commitment • Professional ethics • Tolerance to stress • Self-awareness • Life balance • Cultural adaptability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Customer/user orientation • Teamwork • Leadership • Negotiation • Conflict management • Contact network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity/ innovation • Decision making • Analysis skills • Management skills • Adaptability to changes • Continuous improvement • Research & information management skills

(ADAPTED FROM [Haselberger](#), [Oberheumer](#), [Perez](#), [Cinque](#) & [Capasso](#) as cited in [Succi](#), 2015, pp. 252-254)

Where does soft skill sit within New Zealand early childhood education?

Soft skills sit well within the *Te Whāriki* framework, especially in the five Strands: Belonging, Wellbeing, Exploration, Communication and Contribution (MoE, 2017). For each strand, children are supported, guided, encouraged to develop certain knowledge, skills and attitudes, and when combined, form learning dispositions. Some learning dispositions are: courage and curiosity, trust and playfulness, perseverance, confidence and responsibility, and for each disposition, teachers support and encourage particular actions and behaviours that will eventually develop into habits. For example, taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty, challenge and uncertainty, expressing a point of view or feeling and taking responsibility (Carr, 1998). When children respond according to their “growing repertoire of dispositions” in their everyday interactions (MoE, 2017, p. 22), these become their identity. Consequently, when new situations arise they apply them in new contexts in ways that are sensitive, and as well as apply them across time (MoE, 2017). Soft skills is another way of referring to learning dispositions.

How do we assess soft skills?

The challenge in higher education is measuring an outcome that falls outside a solid framework. Claxton et al. remark, “There are no right answers to prove a student has developed one of these traits, no test scores to compare, no averages to standard deviations to yield” (2016, p. 62). This dilemma is outside the purview of early childhood education, especially in New Zealand where we do not test young children to measure their subject content knowledge or academic performance. When we assess children we identify dispositional learning through learning stories.

An example of dispositional learning and at the same time, soft skill development is in the learning story *The Logging Industry: Connor Shares his Knowledge* in Book 14 of *Kei Tua o te Pae* (MoE, 2007). The focus of the learning story is communication and this disposition, as well as other dispositions or soft skills, was documented over a period of time. In the learning story, Connor brought some photos from home to share with friends. They were his dad’s machinery when he works in the bush. Connor’s play patterns show interests relating to the photos and he was seen playing in the different areas of the kindergarten, and, in different ways, through construction, artwork and pretend play. For example, he made a crane from rope, drew machineries his dad uses and changed the eye bolts of the swing frame. The teacher that documented the learning had this to say after observing Connor over a period of time (MoE, 2007, p. 11):

Connor ... has many learning dispositions, skills and attitudes ... which make him a competent and a confident learner. He will persist with his task even when it becomes difficult. He experiments with resources, using them in many different ways, sees himself as a resource for others, asks adults and other children to help and is able to direct others to get an outcome. Connor can express his ideas and feelings verbally, express his ideas through his work, and most importantly, Connor has the disposition to want to go on learning. He is so keen to achieve.

We can see many of Connor’s dispositions in the taxonomy of soft skills that was created for adults. For example, Connor showed commitment, self-awareness, teamwork, leadership, decision-making skills, and management. This shows that soft skills are nothing new in early childhood. In fact, Rhian Allvin (2016) advocates for us in early childhood education to step up and assume a leadership role in the soft skills conversation because these soft skills are the very skills that the field has been researching, writing about and teaching young children for decades. She suggests that instead of pushing down education, we in early childhood should push up our knowledge to the education reform movement. This way higher education, business and the government will take notice of what we have already achieved in the field for decades.

Conley (as cited in Claxton, Costa & Kallick, 2016) questions the possibility to teach dispositions directly. *Is it possible to isolate a particular behaviour, support children to develop it and assess afterwards?* The answer is yes. It has been done, it is being done, and it will continue to do so, in early childhood education. Just note Connor’s story of learning. Early childhood education in New Zealand, I feel, is doing it the right way around. Early childhood services build social competence, support self-regulation, then in primary school and beyond, learn subject-specific skills.

How to support soft skills? Where are we at?

A starting point is to reflect on the soft skills we already have. As a teacher educator, we should reflect on *How far are we already soft skills trainers or coaches?* For ECE teachers, we can ask - *How far are we already supporting soft skills in children?* A starting point is to make the connection between early learning and soft skills, however, it may be a challenge to begin the process of finding out if working alone. Therefore, Allvin (2016) makes a few recommendations such as creating a learning community that includes primary teachers and doing research to find new connections. She adds that we should also consider using social media to spread the word and relate your experience and involve parents and elected officials by inviting them to the classroom and having conversations about classroom activities and soft skills that children develop. Tulgan (2016) suggests teachers to have conversations and agree on high-priority soft skills to include in the curriculum.

For student teachers and young children, we can ask - *What soft skills do they already have, and What else do they have to learn?* We support children to develop soft skills so they become habits. Then in their everyday lives, children are able to use the right soft skill to the right situation. Though Claxton et al. (2016) suggest children need to be aware of how they “plan, process, and present their products [ideas, solutions, suggestions]” (p. 63) and avoid soft skills becoming mindless habits. With this in mind they suggest that teachers should support children to make the soft skills explicit by “reflect[ing] on the strategies they used, how those strategies helped them with their final product, and in what other situations...they might apply” (p. 63) the same soft skills. This is similar to Tulgan’s advice to spend time with children and talk to them (2016). His additional advice is to model soft skills, and this is especially useful because soft skills are a challenge to develop without the help of another person who will observe and provide feedback.

I now go back to the question that started this article: *Learning how to communicate our boundaries in a constructive way – is it something we’re taught?* The answer is yes. Certainly knowing others’ boundaries, to others knowing your boundaries, and, being able to communicate this, is important to each person when they interact with others within their families, communities and in wider society. Soft skills are key. In the business world, there is a cliché that goes: *People are hired because of their soft skills. People get fired because of their lack of soft skills.* All things considered, when children learn them early, they become habits and serve as an “internal compass to guide decisions and actions (Costa & Kallick as cited in Claxton et al., 2016, p. 64) in their childhood and in later life. The best time to support the development of soft skills is in early childhood, they are an ideal match.

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