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Encouraging the development of soft skills through play

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In early childhood education, soft skills are known as learning dispositions (Claxton, Costa & Kallick, 2016; Laureta, 2018). In New Zealand, dispositions are embedded in the early childhood curriculum - *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum*(*Te Whāriki*), (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). The learning dispositions identified in the first curriculum in 1996 were courage and curiosity, trust and playfulness, perseverance, confidence and responsibility (MoE, 1996). A few more learning dispositions have been added recently in the revised 2017 *Te Whāriki* - reciprocity, creativity, imagination and resilience (MoE, 2017). In this article I use the terms soft skills or dispositions interchangeably to discuss how teachers can support the development of soft skills in children through play with reference to self control and creativity.

Supporting soft skills or learning dispositions through play

Soft skills or learning dispositions are best learned when children play. In the early childhood education (ECE) setting, while children are at play, they also learn to share and be responsible for the toys and resources they use. When children wait for their turn to use the bike, when they sit and listen and are quiet at story time, they are learning self control in real situations that occur every day. The learning of skills, knowledge, attitude and behaviour in this context is meaningful because it is relevant to them and is a part of their daily experiences. A good example of dispositional learning relevant to childrens dailiy experiences is in book 14 of *Kei Tua o te Pae*, in the learning story *The Logging Industry: Connor Shares his Knowledge* (MoE, 2007). Connor attends a kindergarten and his play experiences are documented using a series of photos. The pictorial learning story links Connor's keen interest in the different machinery that his father uses for work, to his play interests in the kindergarten. For example, in his artwork Connor draws logs loaded onto a logging truck. In other pictures in the learning story Connor is seen working with other children on a Stop sign which he laters hammers into a plank of wood. In the book, you see teachers provide the environment and support Connor to be creative with art,through making a crane out of rope to lift objects, changing the eye bolts of the swing,and coordinating with others to create signs and a climbing net. Children grow in confidence when they feel supported and they are encouraged in their creativity in play.

A desirable soft skill that we want children to develop in the early childhood setting is creativity. In practice this means having open ended materials and resources that children can play with and where they can create their original works of art. Materials can be playdough, sand, blocks, paper and paint, or any of the hundreds of natural or synthetic loose parts. The teacher's intentional role is to prepare and guide their learning experiences and document their learning afterwards. Epstein (2001) acknowledges that children do create meaning in their lives when they produce their own work, however, she also says that with art, they can also discover meaning when it is created by others and in nature. She had this to say about early childhood art:

> …thinking *in* art is the traditional approach…: planning and doing art activities. Thinking *about* art…is art appreciation: reflecting on artists, artwork, and their meaning in our lives. While we engage children in creating art, we should also connect them to the world of art beyond their own actions (p. 38).

This implies that teachers should not fear the study of art but instead intentionally introduce it to children since it expands their world when teachers talk about composition, colour or technique. There is value in providing blank sheets

for children to draw or paint or make a collage to create artwork for self-expression. There is also value in showing them great works of art to look at, admire and learn different painting techniques.

I was recently reminded of this when I watched a video of the marshmallow test. Over the years I have watched a number of videos on the marshmallow test and I am always amused at children and their myriad of strategies to pass the waiting time which must seem like an eternity, as they have a strong desire for instant gratification to eat the yummy treat in front of them. I have seen versions where children turn their back to the treat, sing songs, close their eyes or make funny faces at it, or pretend to eat it and then take it out of their mouths. The ability to delay gratification is the test here, and if they wait successfully, children will get more of the marshmallow or sweet treat than just the one piece. Success at this test was claimed to have better outcomes later in life. Though I do agree that waiting is an important skill to learn, it is best learned while young, and in natural situations, for example, when children are at play. Waiting for a turn to ride the bike or to roll the dice in a board game or to use a popular toy, refines self-control and when children gain self-control, then they are making progress in self-regulation. Self-regulation is facet of emotional intelligence and in turn is a soft skill.

The marshmallow test has now been debunked since a recent study replicated and then scaled it, with results vastly different from the original study conducted in the 1960s to the 70s. The new study tested more than 900 children, (the original 90), and, the children were diverse in terms of race, ethnicity and parental education, in comparison to the white, middle class children enrolled in the preschool within the Stanford University campus of the original study. In testing more and diverse children, the recent study found that class or the social and economic background of the children had more influence on the ability to delay gratification, and that success with the marshmallow test does not really lead to better outcomes later in life. I was disheartened to read such a disappointing result. As an educator, do I stop teaching the skill of waiting for delayed gratification just because it does not make a difference in our lives? It didn't take me long to reflect; of course not. Delaying gratification is a valuable skill to learn in childhood, and it's not a skill learned in isolation. Other important skills such as motivation, persistence, impulse control, mood regulation, empathy and hope can be learned alongside the ability to wait. Daniel Goleman (1996) termed this range of abilities as emotional intelligence. The World Economic Forum in their *Future of Jobs Report* predicts that in 2020, in order for people to thrive, emotional intelligence is one of the ten top skills needed. On a broader scale, it is also part and parcel of a combination of other skills such as people skills, interpersonal skills and communication skills that make up soft skills (Rao, 2012).

Children do get frustrated and angry when at play, for example, when they have to give up the bike because their time is up but they still want to ride it, or when they waited for their turn to play with a toy and they cannot because it's morning tea time. This means that managing anger by tolerating frustration and controlling their impulse is important, because these are socially acceptable behaviours and a sign of emotional intelligence.

Forrester and Albrecht (2014), in their book *Social and Emotional Tools for Life,* recommend that the role of the teacher is to be intentional with teaching social emotional skills. They provided an example of self-control where they said that to support children to learn the skill, teachers need to know that it develops along a continuum, first, from external adult control, then to adult-assisted self-control, and finally to independent self-control. Progress happens when "children become more independent, needing less and less direct adult support to make good choices, stay safe, and play successfully" (p. 114). Though they do stress that to maintain self-control, children need adult support at all points of the continuum, and this is particularly important during the toddler and young children stages. The support at each progression is the intentionality in teaching and this technique that starts with being teacher directed and over time becomes child directed, can be used to successfully teach other dispositions.

Forrester and Albrecht (2014) suggest a range of specific teaching strategies to support self-control (2014) to enhance emotional intelligence. The first is to use physical proximity and touch where the teachers stay close to the child to help control impulses during play. The teacher uses non-verbal cues such as nodding or smiling and verbal cues such as providing suggestions of practices that may work. They also suggest using physical proximity such as a hand on the shoulder and this might work for children who may act without thinking by giving them a moment to think of what they are about to do. Their second suggestion is to help children notice when they are beginning to lose control by verbalising what is happening or verbalising the offer of support. The teacher can help by saying "I can help you figure this out; your hands are in tight fists—looks like you are feeling angry; if you need my help, I can help you; this looks very hard. How are you feeling?" (p. 261). These reminders can help children control their impulses during play and reflect before they act in ways that are not acceptable while playing. The third is to scaffold emerging control by giving children the choice of complying on their own or with the teacher's help. For example, "You wanted more time on the swings, and it is time for lunch. We will have more outdoor time later. Would you like to hold my hand, or walk to the door on your own?" (p. 263). The fourth is to validate children's feelings of frustration. When children hear words like "I see that you are frustrated with your sipper. Would you like my help?" or "It is hard to want to do it and not be able to do it" (p. 264), they may cope with a frustrating situation when they hear adults' validation. The last is to help children build skills to tolerate frustration. This is where teachers help children to wonder about why things did not work and explore options for success, and, celebrate with them when they persevere to complete the task.

The Center for the Developing Child (2007) recommends that teachers should teach soft skills or dispositions not with the intention of preparing children for the future but because it provides on-going benefits in the present. They also stated that these skills establish a healthy brain architecture that will create strong foundation on which higher level skills can be built. Soft skills or dispositions are desirable for young children to learn and use so that they will play well with other children and behave in socially acceptable ways in the early childhood setting. They will develop other important skills which will "expand the children's competence and confidence and, over time, enable them to direct their own lives" (MoE, 2017, p. 18) which does not only mean for the far future, but, for the present.

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