



Peer-reviewed paper

“Put on your oxygen mask before assisting others”: Exploring the socio-emotional aspects of reciprocity in early relationships

Jean Rockel

The University of Auckland

Norah Fryer

Early childhood education specialist

An awareness of personal feelings in any given situation provides teachers with the opportunity to reflect on the question: *How does the way I am feeling influence my daily behaviour when I am with infants and toddlers?* This article explores pedagogy in relation to the socio-emotional aspects of reciprocity in early relationships and the notion of self-regulation, drawing on the research of Professor Stuart Shanker, York University, Toronto (2016). Self-regulation focuses on how a teacher has the chance to deeply reflect on his or her own level of emotional functioning in order to explore strategies which will support children as they develop competencies to face the stressors that daily living and learning brings. The future of society may depend on the courage of teachers to stop and reflect as to how and why early relationships may best meet the needs of very young children in group settings.

“Throughout our lives, but especially during childhood, relationships with others regulate our stress and fears.”

(Cozolino, 2006)

Introduction

The metaphor of an airline instruction in an emergency situation, where an adult caring for others needs to care for themselves first, illustrates the importance of ensuring there is a person capable of the task. This metaphor may be given to teachers in an early childhood context where the teacher is required to be continually aware of self-care related to his or her own emotional and physical needs in order to be capable of supporting infants and toddlers by evaluating the various ways to meet the range of challenges in group care. Unlike the airline emergency, a teacher is required to constantly update his or her effectiveness with self-knowledge. Relational health implies that we have a need as individuals to develop personal positive patterns for daily interactive behaviour.

The connection between the impact of emotionality for infants in their developing relationships and their subsequent ability to self-regulate raises many questions for teachers. This article poses several questions as a framework for discussion and focuses primarily on the role of reciprocity in relationships as a vehicle for supporting infants in their development of self-regulation. This discussion provides



a framework of professional understandings in regard to theorising infant-toddler pedagogy. The first reflective question as a challenge for teachers that lays the basis for enquiry in this article, is: *How does the way I am feeling influence my daily behaviour when I am with infants and toddlers?* This provocation is the impetus for examining issues related to the socio-emotional aspects of reciprocity, a fundamental element in supporting a child's learning.

In response to this personal challenge there is consideration of a pertinent query related to the development of becoming a professional with very young children: *Do initial teacher-education programmes and ongoing professional learning opportunities provide sufficient focus on teaching and learning in the first years?* Concern has been expressed by teachers about the adequacy of preparation for teaching in the first years. This concern is accompanied with a strong desire to learn more about infants and toddlers specifically in the initial teacher education programmes as a point of difference (Ord, 2010; Bussey, 2012; Carroll-Lind & Angus, 2011). These comments reveal ongoing concerns about the ways in which teachers build their knowledge base regarding the necessary attunement required with children in order to foster holistic development as a result of the relationship.

To provide a historical background to these issues, prior to the emergence of the early childhood curriculum in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1996), there has been low teacher status and high staff turnover, accompanied by a lack of specialised knowledge of the needs of children under two years of age, along with increasing enrolments for this age group, leading to low standards in some services (Carroll-Lind & Angus, 2011). Recent research through a document analysis of initial teacher education programmes revealed that this situation has been exacerbated by an increasingly generalised view of children under five years, rather than specialised understandings of children in their first years (Rockel, 2013).

The professional knowledge relevant for teachers of infants and toddlers undoubtedly includes self-awareness, regarding their role in facilitating the human transformational process. This process specifically refers to the emotional and cognitive aspects of self-regulation and the path to reaching an optimal state for effective communication, initially implemented through a process of co-regulation as a baby begins to 'read' the ways an adult models positive behaviour for limits and boundaries that will build a strong foundation. The following discussion theorises aspects that are specific to pedagogy for the first years of learning, which requires the reflective process of teachers developing self-awareness of their daily behaviour in the care of infants and toddlers. The New Zealand early childhood curriculum document *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) states: "The care of infants is specialised and is neither a scaled-down three- or four-year old programme nor a baby-sitting arrangement" (p. 22). The challenge for the sector is to consider carefully what this specialisation involves with regard to pedagogical approaches to the care and education of children up to three years of age.

What is significant for infant pedagogy in New Zealand?

There are several challenges to a teacher's self-awareness of how he or she influences the relationship processes with a very young child - challenges that require confrontation within the reflective process. For example, the notion of the



image of a child, and conversely the image of a teacher that impacts on pedagogy and practice, can be illuminating or restricting. This challenge was initially introduced to New Zealand through visits of teachers to early childhood centres in Reggio, Italy (Lee, 2002). Teachers explore these concepts with regard to whether they perceive a child as vulnerable and passively dependent on others, or an active learner who is competent and capable. The early childhood curriculum document *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) has aspirations for children “to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators” (p. 9). Drawing upon such ideas has assisted teachers to theorise pedagogy in regard to infants and toddlers (Education Review Office, 2009).

An important question to consider is: *How does the teacher’s emotional stability influence the interpretation of cues from the child in regard to developing a reciprocal and responsive interaction?* An examination of self-compassion has been viewed as a process that can lead to a positive association with factors such as personal initiative, agreeableness and conscientiousness in research undertaken by Neff, Rude and Kirkpatrick in 2007 in the United States. The authors found that self-compassion entails balanced awareness of one’s emotions.

When examining the emotionality of teacher practice, inspiration may also come from using the slowed-down, gentle and calm approach that is advocated in the philosophy from the Pikler Institute in Budapest (Rockel & Sansom, 2015). This approach shows particular sensitivity to interpreting cues from the body language of infants. The body language used by teachers with infants is expressive, with the use of the hands being offered to aid communication, as well as the voice, in addition to face to face contact.

The literature base from educators in Italy and Hungary is based on respect for an infant’s potential and has been drawn on initially by teachers in New Zealand to establish pedagogy with infants and toddlers (ERO, 2009). Empathy is also a key aspect of an infant-teacher relationship, as outlined by Hungarian researcher Vincze (2006), as it enables a teacher to create a sense of intersubjectivity and reciprocal learning. For empathy to be called upon, the teacher needs to have a level of self-awareness of his or her emotional state.

In recent years there has been emerging influence from indigenous philosophies, as evident in the formal document *Te Whatu Pōkeka* (Ministry of Education, 2009) that elaborates on how goals for Māori pedagogy are holistic in nature, involving the four dimensions of being which connect to the spirit, mind, body and heart. This outlines perspectives such as *Ako*, which is where both the learner and teacher engage in reciprocal, collaborative learning relationships (Hemara, 2000 in Walker, 2008).

In summary, the implementation of such philosophical positions for teachers in New Zealand gained through international or local research may provide tensions created by contextual differences in early childhood education and care services, where, without leadership, unqualified staff may misunderstand pedagogical ideas. For example, the socio-cultural context in Aotearoa/New Zealand relies on understandings of diverse cultural perspectives, taking into consideration *tikanga* Māori and protocols of Pacific nations peoples. These knowledge systems impact on the implementation of the curriculum in New Zealand and in relationships with communities. This is a vital part of the understandings of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of



Education, 1996) which are enacted with professional leadership when a teacher's self-awareness of his or her lack of understandings may need to rely upon guidance from mentors.

The experience and research from a range of international and local philosophies and theories will help guide deeper learning for teachers and create a pedagogical framework until further local research is undertaken. Nevertheless, consideration of contextual and cultural differences must be kept in mind. For example, the Pikler philosophy was developed in a residential nursery with low adult per child ratios in groups for 24-hour care without parents or family. The key idea of free movement was developed under research conditions from the paediatric basis of Dr Pikler's investigations and implemented within nursery conditions (Rockel & Sansom, 2015). Such theories are valuable when integrated in a pedagogical manner, as comparisons and contrasts can be considered within the New Zealand context of the early childhood curriculum.

What does the human transformation process involve?

When the landmark report *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development Research* (2000) was commissioned, the committee members writing the report focused attention on several basic conclusions, two of which are at the heart of this article: the growth of self-regulation as a foundation of early childhood development and influencing all domains, and that nurturing human relationships are the active ingredients of healthy development. These two conclusions imply that parents and early childhood teachers will need to acknowledge the complexities surrounding the co-creating of meaningful reciprocal relationships from a holistic perspective for 21st century living and learning. For example, the early childhood curriculum framework has as one of its four principles, holistic development. Early childhood programmes must reflect the holistic view, which means observing the child as a developing human being and the many ways they learn and develop in their early childhood years. A holistic view in turn creates a priority for understanding how developing and functioning within positive relationships within our world may also prove to be essential for the functioning of our social brain.

Stephen Porges (2010) suggests that teachers need to make an effort to understand the complexities of the human engagement system with the ability as individuals to be engaging, expressive and understanding. He believes reciprocal positive interaction helps to regulate each person's sense of safety. He is also concerned that we have a moral overlay as the feature in our society that pushes us to evaluate behaviour as 'good or bad' and we do not see the adaptive function of the behaviour as regulating the physiological and behavioural state of the person. He suggests that for the future it is going to be necessary to view inappropriate social behaviour as compromising the person's ability to recruit the neural circuits that support safety and positive social interaction.

As a parent or teacher responsible for the holistic development of children – one can support, one can harm, or one can be indifferent to the individual needs of the person. The informed adult practices self-reflection within their daily interactions with others, selecting those which support one another – which in turn can create interpersonal attunement. The process of building human relationships begins with noticing, then recognising the strategies required to positively respond to



others to build, sustain and foster a network of personal relationships for the developing child.

Understanding the importance of being genuinely seen and held in the mind of another person, understanding that minds create minds and that we all have the power to shape relationships (and brains) throughout life, can provide a personal and professional anchor for self-reflection and influence how and what we bring to our relationships. According to Siegel and Shahmoon-Sanok (2010), “A reliable, responsive service provider - no matter the discipline - is able to be aware of self and other and is also able to promote regularity, reflectiveness, and relational capacities in another being” (p. 5).

Early childhood teachers are not scientists, so the knowledge and skill they need to acquire, in order to understand the scientific perspective of human development and learning from the teaching perspective, requires a complete picture of the human transformational process. Substantial neuroscience research is now establishing the importance of early childhood experiences for the healthy development of the mind and body throughout the life-span (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000). Studying the neuroscience research findings could give a better understanding of how each human life is lived, and the sort of environments that optimise each person’s growth and development. This hopefully will enable teachers to support children to develop and maintain a healthy holistic developmental trajectory throughout their early years.

How is research developing our understanding of self-regulation?

To address this question, teachers have been aware of the importance of attachment and early adult/child interactions for many years, but there is now a growing body of evidence indicating that the key to an infant’s wellbeing and sense of belonging is to help them to connect with their physical states, their psychological states, their skill for paying attention, interacting with others and the desire and ability to understand and help others (Shanker, 2012). This process indicates a willingness for the teacher to co-regulate with an infant in support of their developing abilities to self-regulate.

Shanker (2013) suggests that the new developmental neuroscience findings that parents and teachers should explore are based on five domains of human development. These represent the five primary sources of stress in a person’s life, beginning at birth to the end of adolescence, and affecting the person’s life-span. The five domains are: biological, emotional, cognitive, social, and pro-social. These five domains require the support of five critical steps that teachers can learn about. First, read the signs of stress and reframe the behaviour; second, recognise the stressors; third, reduce the stress; fourth, reflect; and, finally, respond. These are effective steps towards supporting individuals towards leading a happier and healthier life-style.

According to Shanker (2013), at its core, self-regulation refers to the manner in which a child recovers from the expenditure of energy required to deal with stressors in their daily environments. Stressors emerge from the way the five interconnected human development domains of biological, emotional, cognitive, social and pro-social are assimilated by the individual through their seven senses.



These seven senses are: auditory (hearing), visual (sight), tactile (touch, both light touch and deep touch), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), vestibular (movement), and proprioception (which refers to sensory information telling us about the position, force, direction and movement of body parts).

A typical nervous system has the ability to maintain an optimal arousal level. The child is adaptable and flexible, so has a good recovery rate. A defensive nervous system has poor recovery, with poor adaptability and flexibility and hypersensitivity to sensation. Non-harmful sensations are enhanced and perceived as threatening, utilising the fright/flight/fright chemistry. Examples of this include children who withdraw or react aggressively to touch or fear movement or heights – resulting in sensation accumulation (Edmands, 2008).

Children vary considerably in their capacity for optimal regulation: i.e., their capacity to make gradual and rapid changes across the arousal continuum, recover back to baseline, and modulate the highs and lows of energy within a given state. The self-regulation concept is always searching for hidden stressors. The concept of self-control looks only at the surface behaviours of how the individual's control, or lack of control, of the personal impulses is demonstrated and observed (Shanker, 2016).

How can emotional and cognitive aspects of self-regulation be achieved in the path to reaching an optimal state for effective communication with others?

Emotional regulation refers to two basic aspects of this core element in a child's/person's life: first, the ability to experience those positive emotions that fuel the ability to learn and control impulses – emotions like curiosity, love, happiness, and, secondly, the ability to manage those strong negative emotions that can quite significantly deplete the ability to learn or control impulses – emotions like fear, frustration and anxiety.

The cognitive aspects relate to the intellectual processes such as memory, attention, the acquisition and retention of information, and problem solving. Optimal self-regulation in this domain means that a person can efficiently sustain and switch attention, sequence thoughts, keep several pieces of information in mind at the same time, ignore distractions, and inhibit or control impulsive behaviour (Shanker 2016). Understanding the emotional and cognitive aspects of self-regulation is a significant background to carrying out teaching responsibilities.

The ethical responsibilities of teachers

“We teach who we are.” (Parker J. Palmer, 2007)

Teaching is viewed in New Zealand as a process that involves ethical responsibilities (Education Council, 2015). Taking an ethical position regarding teaching practice leads to the question of *How do people really care for others?* For inspiration in New Zealand, it is helpful to re-visit early history and the beginnings of ethical care in New Zealand. This is illustrated in the historical roots of childcare for infants when Mother Aubert established the first successful childcare centre in Buckle Street, Wellington, in 1903 (Munro, 2009). Her concern



was for the wellbeing of infants and the welfare of mothers who were in stressful situations. Aubert took the ethical position of deciding that she did care enough to set up a childcare centre so that there was an alternative to mothers abandoning babies or having a stressful life with very poor outcomes for children. New Zealand early childhood education was fortunate to have a person with compassion for humanity, who valued Māori and indigenous beliefs, and established the notion of ethical care in the early beginnings of New Zealand childcare experiences.

The progress of shared care has benefitted from such strong advocacy and helped provide subsequent funding for the education and care of this age group. The contemporary acknowledgement that education begins from birth has meant that professional knowledge is sought with regard to each New Zealand service being guided by the early childhood education curriculum. The pedagogy for an infant-toddler curriculum is now becoming more clearly articulated by teachers through the support of ongoing professional learning.

How can the principles and strands of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996) be implemented?

The following aspirations are outlined in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education 1996) for all children: “to grow up 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” (p. 9). In order to achieve this, the document outlines principles with four broad concepts. The principles are: *Whakamana* Empowerment; *Kotahitanga* Holistic development; *Whānau Tangata* Family and Community; and *Ngā Hononga* Relationships (p. 14). The strands are interwoven in order to achieve this and arise from the four principles which are considered the essential areas for learning and development: *Mana Atua* Wellbeing; *Mana Whenua* Belonging; *Mana Tangata* Contribution; *Mana Reo* Communication, and *Mana Aoturoā* Exploration (pp. 15-16). These very meaningful aspects create an integrated and values-based curriculum which can become a reality for all children and their families when the environments are created for living and learning by teachers who have explored and are inspired by new discoveries from neuroscientists, writers and researchers.

For example, teachers may ask: *What does empowerment mean for an infant?* With regard to the philosophy of free movement that is outlined in the Pikler approach, it can mean providing opportunities for infants to move freely and confidently to explore, while being closely observed by the teacher (Rockel & Sansom, 2015). This is in opposition to placing an infant in a position that he or she cannot get out of themselves, where the infant may be frustrated in his or her desire to explore. If the environment is also stressful through overcrowding or excessive noise, then the child’s desire to move and explore may also be stifled. All of the strands of the curriculum come into play and so establish the environment, where the child feels a sense of belonging, and is able to make a contribution, along with other aspects that would be taken into account in order to empower the child in his or her learning.

Despite the guidance from such a comprehensive curriculum document, there continue to be challenges. In a recent Education Review Office (ERO) report



(2015) of 235 services in New Zealand, it was found that only just over half of the services had a responsive curriculum that supported infants and toddlers to become competent and confident communicators and explorers – concepts at the heart of human learning to self-regulate. This situation remains of concern.

Conclusion

It is important to heed the concerns expressed by ERO (2015) in regard to the ways in which the curriculum is being understood and implemented. For children, it is by living and learning within emotionally safe environments that will foster the core concepts involved in establishing and maintaining a foundation for internal regulation of personal wants and desires. When infant-toddler teachers are mindful of monitoring their own actions within reciprocal relationships, while initially co-regulating infants' self-regulation capabilities, then children and teachers will truly have opportunities to fulfil the aspirations of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996).

References

- Bussey, K. A. (2012). *Care as curriculum: Investigating the learning in care*. (Unpublished Master's thesis.) Auckland, New Zealand: University of Auckland.
- Carroll-Lind, J. & Angus, J. (2011). *Through their lens: An inquiry into non-parental education and care of infants and toddlers*. Wellington, New Zealand: Office of the Children's Commissioner.
- Cozolino, L. (2006) *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Edmunds, K. (2008). *Occupational Therapist's handout for teachers*. (May, 2008) Education Council. (2015). *Graduating teacher standards*. Retrieved from <https://educationcouncil.org.nz/sites/default/files/gts-poster.pdf>
- Education Review Office. (2009). *Early childhood monograph: The quality of education and care in infant and toddler centres*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.
- Education Review Office. (2015). *Infants and toddlers: Confident and competent communicators and explorers, June 2015*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author
- Lee, D. (2002). Passion, participation and pedagogy: Reflections on the Reggio Emilia approach to infant and toddler care and education. *The First Years Ngā Tau Tuatahi. New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education* 4(1), 13-16.
- Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te whāriki: He whariki natauranga mo ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2009). *Te whatu pōkeka: Kaupapa Māori assessment for learning: early childhood exemplars*. Wellington, New Zealand. Ministry of Education: Learning Media.
- Munro, J. (2009). *Letters on the go: The correspondence of Suzanne Aubert*. Wellington, New Zealand: Bridget Williams Books.
- National Research Council & Institute of Medicine. (2000). From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development. In J.P. Shonkoff & D.A. Phillips (Eds), *Commission on Behavioural and Social Sciences and Education*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.



- Neff, K.D., Rude, S.S., & Kirkpatrick, K.L. (2007). An examination of self-compassion in relation to positive psychological functioning and personality traits. *Journal of research in personality* 41, 908-916.
- Ord, K. (2010). *Bodies of knowledge: early childhood teachers' experiences of their initial teacher education programme and sense of preparedness for teaching*. (Unpublished doctoral thesis.) Manawatu, New Zealand: Massey University.
- Palmer, Parker, J. (2007). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life, 10th ed.* San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey Bass.
- Porges, S. W. (2011) *The Polyvagal Theory. Neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, self-regulation.* New York; NY: W.W. Norton.
- Rockel, J. (2013). Critical professional issues in labour force development for teachers with children up to two years of age: A New Zealand perspective. *Early Child Development and Care, 184*(2), 161-176. doi:10.1080/03004430.2013.773993
- Rockel, J. & Sansom, A. (2015). The language of the body: Body wisdom in the first years. *The First Years Ngā Tau Tuatahi. New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education, 17*(1), 11-16.
- Siegel, D. & Shahmoon-Shanok, R. (2010) Reflective communication: Cultivating mindsight through nurturing relationships. *Zero to Three, 31*(2), 4-5.
- Shanker, S. (2012). Handout for teacher programme. (Unpublished)
- Shanker, S. G. (2013). *Calm, alert and learning: Classroom strategies for self-regulation.* Toronto: Pearson Canada Inc.
- Shanker, S. G. with Barker, T. (2016). *Self-reg: How to help your child (and you) break the stress cycle and successfully engage with life.* New York: Penguin Press.
- Vincze, M. (2006). Empathy: The joy of being together. *The First Years Ngā Tau Tuatahi. New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education, 8*(2), 13-20.
- Walker, R. (2008). The philosophy of Te Whatu Pokeka: Kaupapa Māori assessment and learning exemplars. *The First Years Ngā Tau Tuatahi New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education, 10*(2), 5-10.