



What is it that we still don't get? – Relational pedagogy and why relationships and connections matter in early childhood

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What is it that we still don't get? – relational pedagogy and why relationships and connections matter in early childhood

Abstract

Within this literature-based article the authors consider the importance and power of relationships, within the field of early years education and care (ECEC). Drawing on the lenses of attachment and development theory, alongside current literature and research, the authors critically explore the significance of relationships in child development, including the crucial role that they play in general physical and emotional health and development, as well as more long-term mental health and wellbeing. Children's relational worlds have recently been challenged by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, social isolation and safety measures. This article argues that while the full implications of the pandemic have yet to be realised, the relational implications for children are more important than ever before. Dominant discourses regarding attachment and early bonding are discussed, alongside the lesser explored discourses around companionship attachment and how this connects to relational pedagogy, and wider notions of genetic heritage and eco-cultural literacy.

Key words

Attachment, relationships, connections, power, early childhood, eco-cultural literacy

Introduction

No child is an island, entire of itself; every child is a part of a continent, attached to the main.

Meadows (2010: 7)

In the opening speech for the TIGER's [early years leadership](#) programmes, Suzanne Zeedyk (2017) asked the question "what is it that we still don't get?". She referred to the Scottish curriculum approach for early years education and care (ECEC) at the time, but the question could be asked of any western-based approach to ECEC policy. Zeedyk's point was that educators are often still not 'getting' the importance and power of relationships, neither at policy or practice level.

The dilemma that Zeedyk alluded to emerges clearly when human development is more closely scrutinised. Narvaez (2014: 1) suggests that from a "phylogenetic perspective", [a perspective](#) that considers human evolutionary [relationship](#) development and the diversification of humanity, "something is going terribly

wrong...humans are not who they used to be". She identifies both a declining sociability and a reduction in the abilities and capacities required to know *how* to be part of a community. Interpersonal relationships and connections should be the practice, policy and theory cornerstone within ECEC, for several reasons central to a child's early development. For example, positive relationships facilitate a child's healthy attachment and early bonding (Trevarthen 2005; Narvaez, 2014; Music, 2017; Zeedyk, 2020). These relationships are key to a child's learning, development, social competence, social behaviours and resilience inside and outside of ECEC provision (Lippard et al., 2017). And, incredibly pertinent at present, relationships and connections are paramount protective factors for all children (in fact any individual), but particularly those *living in* or having *lived in* trauma and adversity (see PACEs model Hayes-Grudo and Morris, 2020: 27; Morris et al., 2021: 536). Yet, despite the crucial role positive relationships play, they are largely glossed over in educative discourse and policy. Moss (2010) discusses how the importance afforded them in practice has been marginalised as education becomes more homogenised, with an increasingly narrow focus upon attainment, accountability, measurement and outcomes. Furthermore, Page (2017: 389) argues that while in the UK (and elsewhere in Europe) there is a mandatory key person role within ECEC provision, with the sole intention of ensuring children are assigned specific adults

to focus on attachment-based relationships in daily interactions, guidelines on how to achieve this are vague. Therefore, a huge variance exists regarding expectations, practices and ECEC provision in the effectiveness of these roles and the importance placed on relational pedagogy.

However, many educators, particularly early childhood practitioners (ECPs) in ECEC, *do* consider the importance of prioritising relationships within daily practice (Solvason, Webb and Sutton-Tsang, 2020: 61-63). And even more-so when a child is living through adversity (Mochida, et al., 2021: 52) or an experience on the scale of the recent pandemic (Pascal et al., 2020; Howes, et al., 2020: 29-35; Swadener et al., 2020). However, ECPs, alongside other educators, often find themselves in dichotomous positions regarding the prioritising of relationships: as they work within policy and framework constraints with a focus on restrictive curricula and academic learning (OECD, 2001: 41-42). Page (2017: 388) acknowledges the focus on relationships and caring is often diluted in favour of neoliberal priorities for children and education. This demonstrates a lack of understanding regarding the importance of positive relationships and relational pedagogy within ECEC. Further serving to exacerbate the divide between professional love, care and education, in favour of an over focus on hegemonic academic competencies. Such a disconnected

and reductionist approach marginalises ECEC provision and supports a disregard for the importance of ECP and any professionalisation within the sector. Including grass roots tacit understandings and relational pedagogic approaches. Page (2017: 393) maintains practice tensions emerge alongside continued erosion of professional love, caring and relational pedagogy: due to the increased suspicion and scrutiny relating to the current safeguarding climate within ECEC. It could, therefore, be argued ECPs are being actively discouraged from prioritising relationships for fear of professional repercussions. The implications, therefore, remain that we are simply not investing in relationships in ECEC, and attempts to do so do not go far enough, or remain vague and tokenistic. We are, as Zeedyk suggests, not getting 'it'.

In response to this context, this paper discusses the potentiality of relationships and connections in child development and the important role they play in mental health and individual and societal wellbeing. First dominant discourses regarding attachment and early bonding are discussed, alongside the lesser explored notion of "companionship attachment" (Trevarthan, 2005: 56; Narvaez, 2014: 86); including how companionship attachment connects to relational pedagogy and Narvaez's (2014) wider notions of genetic heritage. Then, the second half of the paper outlines some of the evidence and implications for concern within current

approaches to ECEC, regarding children's mental health and wellbeing. Finally, a broader understanding of relational pedagogy is explored, to include consideration of eco-cultural and interspecies literacy and discourse. While this argument may appear tangential in nature, we contend that the lack of awareness of the implications of relationships with human and the more-than-human in our worlds, may have wider consequences for children, families and society as a whole, than is currently recognised.

Section one: Inheritances and attachment theory...a case for companion attachment

Humans begin and end in relationship, whether considered horizontally through time on the tree of life, harkening back to organisms from billions of years ago, or vertically in an individual's lifetime, with all the lifeforms that sustain it.

Narvaez (2014: 254)

Born to connect

Narvaez (2014: 16) identifies eleven inheritances that impact on human development; some of which are less well considered within ECEC policy and practice discourse. These inheritances include: biological inheritances, epigenetic inheritances (ancestral and current gene expression), development

plasticity (experience expectant development), microbiome and maternal-ecology inheritances, cultural inheritance, evolutionary inheritances and loving and caring experiences (Narvaez, 2014: 16). While it is beyond the scope of this article to consider each of these in depth, the overarching message that pervades Narvaez's research is that interwoven within each of these inheritances is the notion of complex, dynamic interaction. This interaction is not merely between humans but moves through the relational communications and symbiotic nature between cells and bodily systems, and on into relational experiences (human and more-than-human) that emerge within an individual's daily existence in the world. Narvaez (2014) explains that the relationships and connections generated within and by these inheritances transcend time, space and place. The very fabric of our existence is like a web stretching in all directions simultaneously, with each individual the culmination (or assemblage) of these converging inheritances and the relationships and connections generated in the past, the present and the future. When relationships and connections are so fundamental to who and what we are, it would seem reasonable to consider relationships and connections as central to humanity's survival.

The idea of children being born biologically driven and neurologically wired to form relationships and connect with the world around them is not new (Golding,

2007; Feldman, 2017). From birth babies are active and relationally engaged beings, seeking closer reciprocal relationships and relational experiences as they begin to make sense of their world (Trevarthen, 2005; Music, 2017). In fact, babies are considered to begin experiencing relational encounters within the womb, ensuring that they are *already* connected to their world when they are born. Goddard-Blythe (2017: 2) argues that the connection and sharing of a body, the sharing of physical space that a foetus experiences with their mother is the beginning of empathy; the notion of feeling what it is like to be affected by the experiences of another. This is very much an emotional rather than physical expression of the maternal-ecology inheritance identified by Narvaez (2014:16).

Research into bio-behavioural exchanges within the womb and babies' face-to-face interactions from birth, provide a growing evidence base for these innate relational connections (Feldman, 2017). Behaviour synchronicity for example, is expressed through physical actions and behaviours, gestures and so forth, which build social connections. This was demonstrated through the still face experiment, where the adult retained an emotionless expression, despite the increasing anxiety this caused the child, resulting in distress for both the child and parent (Weinberg et al., 2008). Further evidence is offered in biological and hormonal synchronicity, for example the aligning of heartbeats in the mother-child

dyad when engaging in smiling or face-to-face interactions (Feldman et al., 2011: 574).

With every child already connected and building relationships from conception onward, the importance of early experiences to a child's physical, emotional and mental health and wellbeing is clear. This has always held implications for ECEC, where education and care centres on those first critical years; however, with children increasingly attending provision at younger ages and for longer periods of time, ensuring that early bonding and attachment needs are met is becoming ever more important.

According to Narvaez (2014) and Zeedyk (2017, 2020), ECEC policy and practice fails to reflect the growing body of research and evidence demonstrating how important early relationships are. Narvaez (2014) argues that as a race, 'we' are not treading the evolutionary pathway 'we' might be expected to follow, particularly when we consider that humanity's roots are embedded in a sense of community and sociocultural interdependence. From this perspective survival as a race has always been dependent on social and community acceptance and social support for physiological needs such as food, shelter and protection (Narvaez, 2014: 35). For example, the longevity of the dependence of babies in

terms of their physical needs (longer than any other mammal), requires high levels of social interaction in order to ensure these needs are fulfilled over time, thereby ensuring survival (Zeedyk, 2020: 11). However, Howe (2011: 21) argues that survival and thriving have always been so much more than the meeting of basic physiological needs; and that social competence and being psychologically curious and psychologically smart are equally important. From an evolutionary perspective the desire to understand self and others, and being understood in turn, lays the foundations for the ability to live and work in collaboration with others: to share an existence. If Narvaez (2014) is correct in suggesting that there is a decline in both sociability and social competence, then our ability to successfully function as a community is increasingly under threat.

Attachment and companionship attachment

Research into early bonding and attachment theory, spearheaded by Bowlby (1988), suggests that babies instinctively employ proximity-seeking behaviours with significant others for the purposes of protection, security, nurturing, warmth, emotional regulation and relief from distress (Meadows, 2010: 122). In Western society it is now culturally accepted that human needs are more than just physiological, that to thrive there are additional requirements for warmth, love and

positive regard. Babies slowly move from total dependence towards more risky interdependence as they grow and mature and their experiences of their world becomes more complex. Attachment behaviours at this time, including various levels of separation anxiety, are normal survival states from an evolutionary perspective (Zeedyk, 2020: 9). The adult's role within a child's life is to provide the physical and emotional safe space that children can emerge from when they are ready and return to when needed. Golding (2007: 13) describes this as children being provided with "roots" and feeling safe enough to "find their wings".

Attachment theory, according to Golding (2007: 14), diverts the focus from individuals; initially child and parent, and (re)focuses on the nature of the relationship between them. The power in this (re)focus becomes particularly apparent when working with children who have experienced early trauma. By moving away from blame and deficit beliefs about behaviours and resilience, the emphasis shifts from the challenge residing in the child or parent (or ECP) to residing within the relationship. Adjusting and adapting the relationship to accommodate emerging issues provides a way forward for both child and adult, or indeed any individual in an attachment bond whether this is child and parent, child and ECP, peer-to-peer or adult-to-adult. The mental shift becomes 'what has happened to you or is happening for you', rather than wondering what is

inherently 'wrong' with an individual, allowing further consideration of how to re-establish a feeling of love and security. While Golding's (2007) notion is presented initially for moving out of challenging or dysfunctional attachment spaces, it is just as relevant for any attachment relationship. The key is always the importance of what happens *within* and *the nature of* reciprocal relational encounters.

However, Trevarthen (2005), Narvaez (2014) and Zeedyk (2020) suggest this approach to attachment is rarely fully realised within ECEC practices. They claim traditional attachment understandings represent a more reductive approach that does not go far enough in addressing children's early bonding needs. For example, Trevarthen (2005: 55) observes that traditional attachment perspectives diminish babies and young children's innate agency, and Zeedyk (2020: 10) argues an expanded view of attachment acknowledges the "repeated moments by which we learn the core elements of human relationships: how to trust and how to forgive". Of course, this is not to suggest that traditional attachment behaviours are not important, more that they may not represent the full story, unless considered alongside other attachment needs, such as the less well considered "companionship attachment" (Narvaez, 2014: 86; Trevarthen, 2005: 56).

As previously discussed, from an evolutionary perspective, humanity is considered pack orientated. As individuals we are biologically primed to seek out shared experiences and to connect with others (Narvaez, 2014; Zeedyk, 2020). While western-based notions of attachment theory rely heavily on the notion of love and warmth, initially from primary attachments figures then from secondary attachment figures; other cultures question this individualistic approach. Community-based notions of attachment consider group, community and cultural attachments as the norm, with child rearing undertaken by multiple members of the group (Quinn and Mageo, 2013). This not only provides support for the biological parents, but develops a sense of sociability, community and a rich sense of belonging that aligns more closely with the tenets of companion attachment needs.

More than just proximity for food and safety, early relationships provide messages about social capacities such as love and trust, “what can and cannot be shared” (Zeedyk, 2020: 23), what can and cannot be said and done, what can be felt, expressed, or experienced within a child’s sociocultural world (Zeedyk, 2020: 23). Trevarthen (2005: 55) describes this as “dynamically responsive company” in the form of “collaborative friendships”. Learning and development is not only

experience dependent, but needs to be actively shared with familiar others who are also open to, and engaged with, social exploration as part of the reciprocal social interaction (Trevarthen, 2005: 58). Companionship attachment is about building a life with meaning and purpose and sharing that life with significant others.

Whilst traditional attachment characteristics of love and warmth address emotional needs, sharing interests and experiences with a group or community provide the sense of belonging and purpose necessary for positive mental health (Trevarthen, 2005: 56). This is exemplified in Pascal and Bertram's (2021: 28) account of a child's actions during the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. They explain that a child was found singing the "gathering song" at home as it had been sung before lockdown and during distance learning. They interpreted the singing of the song as the child seeking security and comfort, emotionally 'managing self' in the current isolated and stressful situation.

Beyond human boundaries

However, unlike traditional attachment approaches that focus on human and human-centric interactions, companionship attachment is not necessarily confined to these parameters. Drawing on Taylor and Giugni's (2012: 111) notion of "common worlds" where the barriers between species and environmental factors are fluid, relationships and encounters that have meaning and purpose

can translate easily into interactions with both human and more-than-human kin. Within this interpretation more-than-human kin aligns with the definition encompassed by Martin (2007, cited in Taylor and Giugni, 2012: 116) to include “people, plants, animals, waterways, climate, land and skies”. Acknowledging this expanded view of relational dynamics provides a level of flexibility to companionship attachment that resonates with a deeper notion of relational pedagogy. The underlying premise is that the need and developmental drive for companionship is more than just what is encompassed within adult-child, parent-child or ECP-child dyads. A sense of wellbeing, peace, belonging and contentment can arise within and transcend species boundaries. According to Taylor and Giugni (2012: 11) it is within this notion of reality that a stronger commitment to relational ethics emerges, alongside the willingness to shoulder a deeper moral and ethical responsibility that encompasses “self, world and other”. This is not socialisation by another name, this is about actively seeking out authentic and purposeful encounters with animals and/or the natural world, that move beyond traditional notions of shared thinking and dialogue into something more akin to moments of shared awareness and resonance.

Whilst in the UK the key person system has been mandatory since the inception of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008) as a sector response to the importance of the

attachment agenda, in practice there is far from universal equitable practice in this area. The updated version of the EYFS (DFE, 2021), mentions forming positive attachments on just two occasions. The first explaining that “underpinning [a child’s] personal development are the important attachments that shape their social world”; then, as an early learning goal (ELG) for personal, social and emotional development (PSED), the framework establishes an expectation that children “form positive attachments to adults and friendships with peers” (DFE, 2021:12). It could be argued that this aspect is inferred within statements such as the need for “strong, warm and supportive relationships with adults enable children to learn how to understand their own feelings and those of others” (DFE, 2021: 8-9) and the development of “warm, positive interactions” (DFE, 2021: 16). However, there is little official guidance as to *how* to form secure positive attachments nor a consistent message defining what this could or should look like in practice.

Spirit of family and belonging

Moore (1993: 28) argued that people cannot “digest life” in ways that create greater wisdom, creativity and imagination, nor can they build emotional resilience and self-regulating capacities, without care for the soul. Within this argument Moore is not referring necessarily to a religious analogy, more that

feeding and tending the soul requires an awareness of spirituality that is less transcendent and more related to nurturing the “spirit of family” (Moore, 1993: 28); the values, beliefs and traditions that emerge in every family unit. In many ways this acknowledges the concepts behind both traditional and companionship attachment theory, alongside Narvaez’s (2014) inheritances and Maslow’s (1949; 263) notions of self-actualisation and transcendence, moving through to a broader view of community-actualisation and cultural perpetuity (Blackstock, 2011). Maslow’s (1949) understanding of self-actualisation considers intrinsic growth, the development that occurs from an individual’s internal make-up; “or more accurately of what is the organism itself”, an idea that appears very close to Moore’s notions of the soul.

However, Maslow’s idea have been criticised for overly conforming to western and individualistic views of human needs (Blackstock, 2011:3). Maslow is thought to have missed the power and importance of ancestral inheritance, spirituality and the transcendence of time, place and space (Cross, 2007; Blackstock, 2011), essentially, principles inherent in a wider relational worldview. According to Blackstock (2011: 3), the relational worldview includes the theory of everything: the breath of life, encompassing a view of potential and meaningful relationships with ‘everything’ human and more-than-human as previous defined by Martin

(2007, cited in Taylor and Giugni, 2012: 116). There is also an acknowledgement that a deep, spiritual connection arises from the notion that as individuals, nature can be loved and respected and that in true reciprocal fashion it will love back, forming a 'sacred bond' (Narvaez, 2014: 230). Within these teachings the definition of spirituality aligns closely with Moore (1993: 5) in that it is a "personally defined force that centres a sense of self, community, and world across time". When this 'force' is in balance it culminates in a sense of community-actualisation and cultural perpetuity. In many ways akin to that which Moore is inferring has far reaching consequences for self and society.

According to Moore (1993: 29), the consequences of not adequately caring for the soul, are evidenced in current societal issues, including diminishing social competence and a downward spiral in mental health and wellbeing. Although on the surface the age of technology ensures that people are more connected and well-informed than ever, Moore suggests a lack of attention to the soul creates not just the potential for life "adjustment disorders" (Moore,1993: 29) but the inability to consider the modern world with any critical discernment. This fosters a "blind faith" (Moore,1993: 29) in mechanistic and technicist approaches and rationalistic and essentialistic understandings. The importance of emotions for wellbeing *and* in formulating new knowledge has been discussed in detail

previously (Cliffe and Solvason, 2020) so will not be detailed here, however, it is a sobering thought.

The current relational world has more recently been challenged by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, social isolation and safety measures. Although the full impacts of the pandemic have yet to be realised, the relational implications for children are already emerging in many poignant first-hand accounts. A preschool teacher cited in Swadener et al. (2020: 314) described “the loss of physical contact feeling like having our central language with the kids silenced”, and another stated simply: “I lost them”. One practitioner described how although she longed to comfort a child in her online classroom, she found she was “paralyzed... in the utter impotence of the zoom classroom” that she could “do nothing” (Swadener et al., 2020: 320).

While not everyone would agree with Moore’s (1993) assumptions, it is not unreasonable moving forward, to expect ECEC (and education as a whole) to challenge and disrupt practices and policies that favour more sterile emotional environments, and retain a central commitment to relationships, relational encounters and a sense of belonging. If nothing else, the pandemic has shown that making a commitment to relational pedagogy and (re)positioning the

importance of relationships and connections, can provide the relational connectedness that humans are preprogramed to seek; even in, or in spite of, virtual interactions. During distance learning, ECPs (and other educational professionals) rallied to provide the sense of belonging and the safe spaces children needed for “laughter”, “sadness”, “hard moments” and “joy” (Swadener et al., 2020:315-316). There was a tacit understanding that above all else children needed relationships, connections and belonging, however they needed this to be provided in a different way. In the midst of this challenge each professional’s innate commitment to relational pedagogy emerged. May and Coulston (2021: 96) reported one educator’s observation that it was “heartening” to see how the commitment to stay connected had kept their community together. They went on to describe the positive implications of whanaungatanga; a Maori concept that honours close relationships or kinships formed through a shared existence which is fundamental to wellbeing. May and Coulston (2021: 96) stated: “we felt the whole spirit of whanaungatanga; relationships that fostered a sense of belonging to the kindergarten”. It was this strong connection with each other and their community, fostered culturally and within normal ECEC provision, that unified and strengthened everyone in the face of such adversity, epitomising the power of relationships and a relational pedagogic focus.

Ruth (2018: 224) draws on the wisdom of the Mauri hunting cycles to argue that education should be a gift involving more than just 'give and take'. She explains how Mauri hunters engage in a cycle of relationship and connection: "the forest gives to the hunters; the hunters to the priests; and the priests give back to the forest" (Ruth, 2018: 224). Applying this philosophy to ECEC would see education as gift giving, reinforced within authentic and ethical reciprocal interactions that rely on relationship and community to 'pass the gift on'. This cyclical process is not only commensurate with relational pedagogy, but, equally, with power of community-actualisation, with companionship attachment; it acknowledges care of the soul by enacting the values and beliefs of the spirit of the community within provision. From this perspective ECEC could become the relational guide for relationships with self, peers and society at large, developing respect for human and non-human entities, which is essential for holistic health and wellbeing, as well as for the future of the planet.

Section two: the scale of the problem...what are we not getting and why?

The problem with where society is now

Drawing on Narvaez's (2014: 1-2) meta-analysis of research from the US ([drawn from a plethora of research, government and health publications and surveys, UNICEFF and OECD reports](#) which has been detailed in her account, so paraphrased here) she notes that worrying trends are emerging. These trends

include: deterioration of the desire and ability to be social; increased society distrust (across all age bands); declining mental health of young people; rising levels of depression (across all age bands); a rise in psychotropic drug use and avoidant attachment and narcissism in college and university students. While these tendencies represent the US, the emerging picture in England is equally stark. UNICEF (2007: 2) positioned the UK in last place (out of 21 OECD nations) on all six dimensions of wellbeing including: material wellbeing, health and safety, educational wellbeing, family and peer relationships, behaviours and risks and subjective wellbeing. It is hard to imagine that our standing has since improved. The Good Childhood Report (The Children's Society, 2020), published each year, provides a correlation with the UK and many of the US findings over the last decade. The UK was placed 14th out of 15 countries for subjective wellbeing, with the rather damning indictment that children in the UK are among the saddest and least satisfied in Europe. Robson, Brogaard-Clausen and Hargreaves (2019:1147) argue that in research, policy and practice, wellbeing in education is considered something to aspire to. Yet, while it has been afforded greater importance generally (Department of Health and Social Care and DFE, 2018) and is considered mandatory to address within ECEC (OFSTED, 2021), there is little guidance on what constitutes wellbeing and how schools should accommodate it.

The wellbeing 'picture' within ECEC is even less clear than in other areas of education. The measurement of subjective wellbeing applied within the Good Childhood Report was only for young people aged 8 to 13 years, children in ECEC were not even represented. Corroboratively, Robson, Brogaard-Clausen and Hargreaves (2019: 1147) observe that a particular problem when addressing wellbeing in ECEC is that children under 8 years are "largely ignored" within research, and therefore the true wellbeing picture within ECEC remains indistinct. These trends are troubling in light of developmentally appropriate practice and maturation theory. Within ECEC children are still considered to be learning how to *be* in their social worlds, discovering boundaries, self-regulation, emotional regulation and that there are consequences for their actions. If social competence is under threat in the way Narvaez (2014) has suggested, then it is imperative to retain a relational pedagogic focus at a time when children are developmentally engaging with these very skills. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that a policy and practice priority in ECEC should be on the importance of relationships and connections and the benefits of early bonding and attachment.

Narvaez (2014: 2) considers the "less than optimal way" children are developing is becoming the "new normal", with the focus on resiliency themes and "good

enough” development merely presenting the “downward slide of child wellbeing”. She goes on to contend that there is an unspoken ‘settling’ of views in terms of what can be expected regarding development, subsequent wellbeing and social relationships and interactions; rather than aspiring for change and something better. Considering ECEC practice through a relational pedagogic discourse that (re)prioritises time and attention on what happens *within* relationships and fostering strong connections, would ensure that the child-adolescent-adult that babies develop in to might be better prepared and better placed for the current rigors of 21st century life (Zeedyk, 2020: 14).

Practice tensions

Although ECPs are well placed to speak out about the dangers of ignoring the significance of relational encounters within children’s development and wellbeing, their tacit knowledge is rarely recognised, valued or respected (Brock, 2012: 36-37). The OECD (2001) report *Starting Strong: Early Education and Care*, demonstrates the lack of policy clarity for ECPs whilst noting that downward schoolification pressure “can lead to neglect of other important areas of learning and development” (Brock, 2012: 41). Whilst the OECD report clarifies that “the main purpose of ECEC is *not* to influence later school or workforce performance” (Brock, 2012:42), it also states that “early childhood professionals recognise their

responsibility to provide children with a range of appropriate experiences so that they will begin school as capable learners” (Brock, 2012: 44). Although the report includes reference to confidence, flexibility and relationships, it suggests the development of these capacities through a more reductionist approach to ECEC, based upon the implicit link to preparedness for school. In light of this ECPs could be forgiven for feeling confused about where they are expected to place their focus and priorities. When a governments’ fundamental values are based in social capital and global competition, even if this is not explicitly depicted in policy, it will implicitly exist as a form of performativity, enacted daily in practice as micro inequitable strategies, designed to improve access, quality and accountability (Ruth, 2018: 214).

Within policy-based ECEC provision, a second practice tension emerges to challenge a commitment to relational pedagogy (Basford, 2019:867). Relational pedagogy inherently seeks to acknowledge the importance of relationships and present child interactions, encounters and experiences in early learning (Hayes and Filipovic, 2018: 224); however, ECEC practice is bound within epistemological positions founded in cognition, developmentally appropriate practice and developmental psychology (Moss and Cameron, 2020). This does not preclude PSED, nor does it discredit the importance of building positive

relationships with children and their families, instead it rather insidiously eclipses them, until only kernels of tokenistic relational-based policy and practice remain.

The schoolification agenda largely side-lines and constrains relation-based practices and experiences in favour of those which are relevant to later schooling. In effect, this means social and emotional development in the 'now' is being assessed against future-focused needs, rather than focusing on experiences that benefit present-child development (Hayes and Filipovic, 2018; Moss and Cameron, 2020). Although this distinction may feel small, it is significant, as this approach cannot adequately address children's relationship and attachments needs in the moment. Nor can it allow ECPs to focus fully on the power and developmental opportunities of reciprocal co-created sense and meaning making possibilities within relational encounters. When the ability to relate to the world is paramount for social cohesion, this does not seem to make sense.

Section three: common worlds and relational pedagogy

Not only did they [children] establish scientific relationships with frogs, by learning how to be junior frog scientists...they [children] also constructed an emplaced and embodied relationship with frogs based upon their actual encounters with frogs in frog worlds.

Taylor (2013:120)

(De/re)constructing relational pedagogy

According to Basford (2019: 867), relational pedagogy has its roots in authentic reciprocal relational encounters that both acknowledge, and make a commitment to, the contributions of all agents within an interaction. This commitment is subsequently embedded within everyday provision at all levels of ECEC, therefore it should be a cornerstone of ECEC. However, Taylor and Giugni (2012) and Ritchie (2017) argue that a focus on just the human world and human society separates humans from the more-than-human around us (Taylor and Giugni, 2012: 11). Whilst on the surface this may seem unproblematic, Taylor and Giugni (2012) and Ritchie (2017) suggest that this human-centric approach marginalises the importance of the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world. They both argue that a deeper understanding of relational pedagogy is needed to address rising ecocultural literacy concerns, which impact on societal wellbeing.

From the moment of conception children are assemblages of symbiotic relationships and connections; they are already part of the greater relational rhizomatic web of life. According to Narvaez (2014: 32) only around one-tenth of the body's cells are human, the rest belong to other "organisms" (mostly non-human, including bacteria, viruses and so forth) whose existence symbiotically supports the function of the body making up what is called the microbiome. Not

only then, are we (humans) in relationship with 'something' from such early beginnings inside our own bodies, but from a maternal micro-ecological and epigenetic perspective the interconnected relationship continues. As previously discussed, children cannot be separated from the greater macro-ecological environment as the child's biological drive ensures a curiosity in significant people for survival and companionship purposes. This develops into a curiosity for places, things and the human and non-human alike as children grow and their experiences broaden, and their world expands.

It makes no coherent sense, therefore, for relational pedagogy to discount the more-than-human, by occupying a human-centric perspective that serves to separate children's relational encounters and to ignore those that occur in and with the natural world. Recent research suggests that children are inherently more rhizomatic by nature, working with diverse connections within spaces of blurred relational boundaries (Sellers, 2013; Cliffe and Solvason, 2019). Children often move freely and with agency between different aspects of their lives, blending and engaging what might be considered a range of heterogeneous and disparate elements within their environment, into their play and the building of new knowledge, sense and meaning. Anyone that has worked with, or lived with young children, will understand this very well. Consider the joy, curiosity, wonder

and potential that can be found when young children encounter objects such as, a rock, a feather or a shell. The surprise and wonder shared between a child and an animal companion who become forever-friends, or even encounters with plants, bugs or insects are all pregnant with possibility. Children naturally respect the “web of ecological relations” (Narvaez, 2014: 287) they are born into, almost as if they have an instinctive awareness of the ecocultural and relational heritages that are required not just for human survival but human flourishing.

This aspect of relational pedagogy is particularly relevant not only in awareness of the ‘moral heritages’ honoured within the “unity of mind and nature” (Narvaez, 2014: 181), but also as a relationally responsible retort to the current Anthropogenic implications the world faces (Ritchie, 2017). Ours is the age where humanity’s damaging impact on climate, eco-systems and biodiversity has reached critical levels. From a western, human-centric perspective, the damage to the planet, animals and disrespect for ecocultural concerns remain separated from conceptions of human flourishing. *We (as a human race) are disconnecting from the deeper relationships we have with each other, our planet and every other living organism, in favour of a human-centric individualist approach to life. This moves us further away from a relational pedagogy, secure attachments and secure bonding with the world around us.* Narvaez (2014: 182) argues that when

free-thinking, agentic beings act in ways focused upon competition, excess, accumulation and maximisation of profit, this becomes almost an anti-attachment ideology. From an evolutionary perspective this self-preservation stance is in direct tension with humanity's innate, pro-socially orientated nature, and relational inheritances (Narvaez, 2014:181). Narvaez (2014:15) claims it is natural when people become sick that they revert to a self-focused orientation. Through ignoring ecocultural heritages, causing hyper-separation and increasing self-focused orientation, society's physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing are deteriorating, in an almost ever-decreasing self-fulfilling prophesy. This implies that without readdressing the trend and drawing on relational pedagogy, and (re)conceptions of relational pedagogy, to reposition the importance of relationships, this self-focus will continue to prevail with a further downward spiral as explored above.

Common world paradigms

(Re)conceptualising relational pedagogy does require a paradigmatic shift in the way that children and humanity consider, relate to, and assume responsibility for human and the more-than-human. However, this shift is not a new concept in other cultures and communities and can be seen in post-humanist onto-epistemological cultural teachings from the Aboriginal Quandamookah (Martin,

2007, cited in Taylor and Giugni, 2012: 116), First Nation (Cross, 2007; Blackstock, 2011) and Māori (Ritchie, 2017) communities. As previously mentioned, these cultures consider a common worlds paradigm, acknowledging relationships and connections with and between humans and more-than-humans. Acknowledging and accommodating the concept that relationships and connections are 'first practice' and accepting the tenets of companionship attachment, alongside companion species curricula, would position ECEC closer to this common world's paradigm (Taylor and Giugni, 2012).

Within this approach relatedness becomes paramount, alongside a growing awareness of the need to assume the mantel of responsibility for Other whether human or more-than-human. Martin (2007, cited in Taylor and Giugni, 2012: 116) argues that the education of children, therefore, should aspire to incorporate;

Childhood as a cyclical component of 'lifehood'...not a separate and linear life stage...children are grown up through 'ever-increasing sets of relatedness...to people, plants, animals, waterways, climate, land and skies.

Essentially, this suggests a need to “relocate children within common worlds” shifting the pedagogical focus into what 'occurs' within relationships in whatever

form these relationships take (Taylor, 2013:122). Education from this paradigmatic perspective circumvents the view of “children-as-subjects learning about nature-as-object” (Taylor, 2013: 123) moving away from *learning about* and toward *learning with* and *becoming with*. Within this alternative reality educating children is not about grasping the more-than-human world, controlling and dominating it, or possessing, assimilating or appropriating it. Instead, it considers an approach that relates more to being in companionship with everything in the world around us. In this way humanity becomes “de-centred but not discounted” (Taylor and Giugni, 2012: 112).

Taylor and Giugni (2012: 117) boldly claim the 21st century child faces “the most confronting political and ethical issues...their world is at stake...a world they share with a host of others not all of them human”. Children both “inhabit and will inherit” an “ecologically interdependent yet human-dominated and damaged planetary environment” (Taylor, 2013: 116). The power relations within this reality will often be asymmetrical and inequitable but are essential for the survival and sustainability of all. Essentially, the challenge of our children will be to embrace their evolutionary purpose to “co-exist peacefully with those who are not necessarily like them” in a kind of ultimate inclusion within an increasingly complex and interconnected world (Taylor, 2013: 122). Ritchie (2017) argues that

within ECEC, ECPs occupy a unique position to support and cultivate transformative ways of being and living in more sustainable and relationally embedded ways. Without such approaches the consequences for children's long-term wellbeing may be bleaker than previously considered.

The common world is a rich and heterogeneous rhizomatic web of connections in which humanity is deeply connected. In many ways it is probably the most significant aspect of the relationship tensions that Zeedyk (2014) claims 'we' have 'yet to get', as it involves problematising human-centric and self-preserving ontological orientations. However, as Taylor (2013: 116) observes, children have been "bequeathed this world", and their eco and relational inheritances, along with the Anthropogenic impacts this brings. There is, therefore, an ethical responsibility as parents, educators and members of society to "equip them, as well as we can, to deal with it" (Taylor, 2013:116).

Questions and conclusions

The purpose of this article was to 'stop' and 'think' about the critical question that Zeedyk (2017) alludes to when she asks what it is 'we' still don't get. Upon consideration it would appear there is a persuasive argument to suggest that 'we' are still not getting the power, potential and importance of relational pedagogy,

relationships, and connections for the human species, or the need for a greater awareness of the potential implications of discursive policy and government directives, human inheritances, companionship attachment and the importance of ecocultural literacy.

As a profession with significant influence upon the future generation, ECEC has a key role to play in ‘getting it’ and ‘getting it’ soon... but it is not yet determined what ‘it’ will look and feel like at practice level. For transformative and authentic change; change that is beyond surface or tokenistic, it will require more than just adopting an ‘outdoor or nature pedagogy’, developing a forest school or adding natural resources to the learning environment. Although these are still worthy additions and approaches to any provision, change will require a fundamental pedagogic shift at research, policy and practice levels that challenges and problematizes current political and societal refrains. A deviation from future-focused and prophetic-pedagogy with its measurement and outcomes driven agenda. It will mean aspiring to *learning with* and *becoming with* human and the more-than-human in common world paradigms, as we shift from “social relationships to heterogeneous relations” (Taylor and Giugni, 2012: 112) that allow children to become world-wise in new and creative ways. It is a risk, and it

is for each of us to decide whether it is a risk we can afford to take, but the question remains whether it is one we can afford *not* to take.

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