

In Pursuit of Pleasure in the Early Years

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I recently began learning to play tennis by watching instruction on Youtube. I soon learnt that each of the main strokes, forehand and backhand, corresponds to particular grips of the racket, described in terms of finger positions in relation to bevels on the handle. A video on the FeelTennis (2020) channel took a different approach which seems pedagogically exemplary. Tomasz begins by explaining why a proper grip is important and how it feels when you hold the handle correctly. In other words he encourages the learner to develop their sense of the subjective experience of holding a racket and hitting the ball with the correct grip. As any teacher knows, the practice of teaching techniques is far from simple. Firstly, although many different techniques may be considered correct, as with different types of acceptable tennis grip, one usually predominates while others are marginalised as unconventional alternatives. Although Australian cricketer Steve Smith has been called the greatest batsman of his generation, his technique is wrong by any established norms, so there are not just different versions of correct, dependent on individual or context, but also the blatantly incorrect may appear correct when practised by a certain individual. Hence, in considering how to teach a technique, there is the problem of which technique to choose. The alternative approach is to help students discover a functional technique for themselves and find what feels right for them in the context. Tomasz's approach to teaching racket grip works because it enables the learner to develop the experience of feeling right within wider understanding of the physical properties of balls, arms, wrists and racquets. Everything goes better in life when it feels right; accordingly, I propose that one aspect of any successful pedagogical encounter must be subjective feeling.

The EYFS devotes a separate section to feelings, or rather managing feelings and behaviour. With the emphasis distinctly on the latter, it focuses mostly on recognising feelings in others and thus managing emotions and behaviour towards others in a way that facilitates routines central to classroom practice. There are more progressive approaches to the pedagogy of feelings and emotions. For example Hakkarainen and Bredikyte (2014) suggest that children may explore feelings and emotions by imagining themselves in the characters of fairy tales. They identify that young children need some help with creating narrative in order to support play, enabling them to explore emotions and feelings from the inside by adopting the role of an imaginary character. The authors present their approach to narrative intervention in which the child's lead and interest are the main drivers. The adult's role is to support children with narrative tools and experience of traditional stories so that the play helps to 'creat[e] collective higher mental functions' (Hakkarainen and Bredikyte, 2014, p.249). In other words, the adult guides the narrative, so that children maintain a shared participation through collective understanding and engagement with the evolving story. Collective engagement in a narrative structure scaffolds a kind of mental function that otherwise requires an internally managed narrative. The authors provide an example to illustrate such adult support with narrative during a role-play re-enactment of Sleeping Beauty with a group of four year old girls. They suggest that the children were not able to proceed with such expectation because 'the teacher's questions did not help the children to understand the message of the tale' (Hakkarianen and Bredikyte, 2014, p.244). In other words, the children were not able to put themselves into the roles of characters within the story because the adult had not prepared the narrative for them in a way that was engaging. This is perhaps so; however, observations show that one child was fully immersed in a different, inner, felt narrative. Indeed, Anna's remark, 'Please, do something! Don't stand like a snowman!' was, not only a creative piece of role play, it was also a thoroughly felt one. The snowman, deriving from Snow White, is not only a creative metaphor for the stillness and non-action of her friends, it is also an emotional call to action. Later on, after some more coordination, when the other

children still did not know what to do, Anna repeated the simile, 'Don't stand like snowmen!', but now her chain of thought continued as she elaborated, manifesting more creativity as she logically, both connected a snowman with Christmas, and blended her desire for gifts with the sleeping aspect of the story: 'Give me the presents! Give me the presents or I'll fall asleep and take my day nap' (Hakkarainen and Bredikyte, 2014, pp.246-247). I imagine that something of the passivity of her friends and her own festive anticipation triggers an emotional response that becomes expressed by Anna taking on the role of the director of the play. She explores emotions and feelings in accord with the purpose of the exercise, regardless of whether or not these are the particular emotions and feelings that should have been suggested by the inspirational narrative. Anna's subjective exploration flows through a series of Vygotskian 'surprising transitions, and startling associations' (Vygotsky, 1986, p.118) that an adult would find difficult to mimic because it does not appear to follow a rational pattern. I suggest that the search for an objective pattern, rational or otherwise, misses what is essential in Anna's experience.

On my PGCE placement, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to guide some reception children through freely participatory story-scribing on the theme of Christmas. Striking for me was the enjoyment that the children so obviously experienced as these stories emerged from their imaginations. For some children, creative energy did not flow smoothly and they would come to a stop, unsure what to say next. In these circumstances I was there to keep the momentum going with helpful questions and suggestions (Cooper, 2005). It might be said that in some cases the children were really only playing at telling a story, however, contrary to Hakkarainen and Bredikyte (2014), this exercise does try to engage children in a particular narrative structure. By giving them something they love to imagine (Christmas) and an adult to listen and assist, children are introduced to the subjective experience of telling a story. In other words, they get to experience the pleasure that can be derived from the act of narration. We know this pleasure from enjoyable conversation, or more generally, from any kind of 'sustained shared thinking' which is so pedagogically important that it has a dedicated Early Years Teacher Standard (Gov.uk, 2013). It has been demonstrated that shared thoughts generally begin to occur in primary dyads from very early on as part of natural human development (Parker-Rees, 2014). This familiar pleasure may be utilised by a skilful teacher to guide the child through a voyage of discovery that may begin only with the repeated articulation of a single word and continue throughout the primary years (Heppner, 2016). This progressive pedagogical encounter seems to involve a particularly pure form of finding what feels right through pleasure.

However, in every classroom, as with any other collective enterprise, a dominant discourse rules. When the child is asked to draw a picture of Spring, no subjective experience of blossoms or playgrounds will be recalled because, according to Tesar (2014), this child is in a 'familiar situation' (2014, p.361) in which they know the correct way to respond. From the first day in an early years setting, young children are immersed in teacher-led collective activities of the classroom routine. The experienced teacher, following best practice, incorporates routines that children enjoy engaging with as a group; these activities are governed by simple rules picked up from the teacher and other children. Again, this engagement is sustained by pleasure in collective consciousness that is an extension of similar experiences from the child's primary dyad. The relationship between this pleasure, derived from external conformity and Anna's, derived from the internal flow of storycrafting is left as a subject for debate.

Since Donaldson (1987) challenged Piaget's experiments for failing to take account of the contextual aspects of the experimental setups, it has been generally accepted in the field of childhood research that the child usually will try to *get the right answer*. Accordingly, modern researchers go to some lengths trying to capture the genuine child voice (Corsaro, 2003; Christensen, 2004). That children

appear to perform in this way is not a fault of any particular education system or a defect in society. Rather, this shows children trying to find their way in a world measured to fit adults. Indeed, education is fundamentally about becoming familiar with the dominant techniques for accurately measuring, predicting and describing this world. The ability to conform to such techniques, fine-tuned by centuries of collective endeavour, qualifies expertise in particular field such as building bridges, driving or baking cakes. But nothing yet determines how you go about making this person, in this body, with this mind coordinate this conformity. Steve Smith, for example, has to conform to the rules of cricket. When tragedy changed the life of Steven Hawking, he had to find a way to coordinate himself within the mathematical realm. I believe Anna was also trying to feel her way through the exercise that was presented to her and she found what Gibson (1979) refers to as an affordance. This recalls an encounter of mine with a child who never went into the playground and instead spent most of his time in the art corner of the classroom where he occupied himself drawing and painting. However, when I was reading *Edward Goes Exploring* during one circle time, I noticed that he was unusually engaged. After the story, he happily participated in the related activity of exploring the outside with magnifying glasses and notebooks. Suddenly, he had found an affordance with the outdoor area that enabled him to extend his experience. Specifically, he found a relationship within his world that was pleasurable for him and that was previously invisible. I agree that 'the teacher's task is to try to *make the invisible visible*' (Pramling-Samuelsson and Asplund-Carlsson, 2008, p.635, orig ital). However, we coordinate ourselves within this discovered world through subjectively felt experience that may encourage us with pleasure or dissuade us with fear or confusion.

Watkins' (2015) practical pedagogy is centred around three activities: noticing, narrating and navigating. All three emerge in the early years as children notice both the world around them and their relationship to it, pleasurable or otherwise. Narration also progressively emerges through pleasurable interactions. Supporting the other two, navigation is also founded in pleasurable experience, as when we sometimes hit a tennis ball with all the components of the movement coordinated. Awareness of this pleasure is awareness of one's own learning, and also the way to further learning. This feeling of doing something right is the natural sensation of discovering affordance. In other words, finding your way or navigating. Therefore, the emerging awareness of pleasurable experience in the Early Years should be valued and supported.

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