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Doireann O'Connor

Univeristy of Notre Dame Australia, dee.oconnor@nd.edu.au

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PEDAGOGIES AND POLICIES OF IMPEDIMENT: HOW A LACK OF CONNECTIVITY IS A BARRIER TO LEARNING WITHIN EARLY YEARS EDUCATION

O'CONNOR, DOIREANN

IT Sligo, Ireland

oconnor.doireann@itsligo.ie

Abstract

Connectivity is a multi-faceted concept. It relates to three main central pillars of early years learning. These are; the inter-personal connections between educators and children, the connections between the children themselves and the connectivity to learning that exists within each individual child. The interpersonal connections, whether they are between the children and their educator or peer to peer are important because their level of positivity leaves the child either free to learn or unable to progress. If there is a lack of positive inter-personal connectivity within a child's central relationships, they are unable to focus on anything else to any degree of productivity. Amiable and connected relationships free a child to learn unhindered. For this reason, the educator must be very connected to the inner worlds of all the children in their group. They must be mindful, aware, reflective and caring, creating an environment where the children feel loved and valued. This is not simply good practice from a perspective of *care*, although that too is important, it is also of vital importance from an *education* perspective. Freedom from feelings of unconnectedness and anxiety about the implications and ramifications of a negative interpersonal relationship leaves a child uninhibited to engage productively in their own learning journey.

Equally important is the child's inner connectivity to their learning journey. This too requires both an informed and mindful pedagogical approach as well as national educational policies that are knowledgeable and supportive of the way young children learn. Young children learn in a connected and integrated way. Their main vehicle for learning is play. Rich play experiences should incorporate the full sensory gauntlet. Sensory learning is cellular learning. In the early years, sensory integrated learning creates a powerful vehicle for connected learning experiences that have a formidable impact on foundational learning for important educational skills such as numeracy and literacy. Pedagogies and policies which seek to deliver universal educational goals such as numeracy and literacy skills to children under age six without due consideration of the principle of connectivity within the child's inner learning journey will ultimately impede and potentially damage the child's ability to reach those very educational goals.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Teacher Student Relationship, Student Peer Relationships, Early Years, Primary School, Teachers, Practitioners, Connectivity, Holistic Education, Child-Centred, Empowerment, Life History, Learning Stories.

1 INTRODUCTION

A well-formed understanding of the unique way that children learn, needs to be at the core of pedagogy. Educators in early year's settings and primary schools alike need to consider the depth of what they are working with when it comes to connectivity and its power within learning. These stories should help. They emerged thematically during a data analysis process involving the transcripts of four life history studies of Irish people, Rachel aged 26, Dorothy aged 36, Melissa aged 42 and Morris aged 52. All four are successful in their various endeavours, Rachel established and runs a successful and unique private pre-school service as well as being a successful craft business woman, Dorothy is a successful recording musician and exhibiting artist, Melissa is a leading engineer currently

coordinating a large scale EU commission design project relating to industrial automation processes and Morris is a leading research scientist and university professor. These are their stories.

2 INTER-PERSONAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN EDUCATORS AND CHILDREN

The relationship that a child has with his or her teacher has a profound impact on the child. Any negativity within this relationship becomes an obstacle to the child's learning journey. While overcoming such obstacles can also yield rich learning opportunities, the learning potential within a positive relationship proved far greater for the participants of this study. When asked about the relationship they experienced with their childhood educators, they each shared stories of both negative and positive connections and examined how they felt these connections impacted on their development. These are their stories.

Rachel spent her early years in the very free and exploratory care of her mother who supported her to learn outdoors in the wilds of her rural community. She remembers running through forests and rolling down hills, digging soil with her bare hands and following butterflies on their silent journeys. Starting school was difficult for Rachel and she felt stifled by the classroom environment. She recalls how her first teacher supported her needs.

She used to let me get the milk for the lunchtime. It was my favourite part of the day. Leaving the classroom and running to get the milk, I loved it. I knew even then that she knew how hard it was for me to be in the classroom all day and it was her way of giving me a bit of space – space that I really needed. It helped me to trust her on other things and I engaged more with the classroom stuff because I knew that if it was important for her then it was important for me because I knew she was on my side. I always felt that she thought that I was good so I felt I could be good and that I could do things well in her class. I knew that she knew me and that she knew what I needed. I was greatly comforted by that and felt very loyal to her. I still feel like that now, thankful to her for seeing the real me and working out how to help me.

What Rachel's teacher did was simple yet very meaningful for Rachel's learning journey. School could have proved a more difficult cultural shift for Rachel had her teacher not taken the time to notice her restlessness and create a valve for her to release some energy by leaving the classroom to get the milk. At this early age, Rachel understood that her teacher had seen her need and addressed it. The connection that this provided for Rachel allowed her to establish a good relationship with her own learning journey and with the school experience.

Morris had a very different early years' experience where he felt a lack of connection with his early year's educator. He explains it thus;

Unusually for my generation, I went to a child-minder because my mother was a widow and she worked during the day. None of my friends on the street went and I always wished that I could just stay with them but my mother was very big on me not being a burden to the neighbours so I had to go to Nuala's. Nuala was the local child-minder, she minded eight or ten kids in her house. She was ok I suppose. I know a few of the others she minded really liked her but me and her never connected so I didn't ever feel good about her.

When asked if he could recall why they had no connection, Morris took a moment to think and then told the following story;

I think I can pinpoint it. My father died when I was three, nearly four and we had no money at all so my mam took a job cleaning the local factory and it was decided that I would go to Nuala's. I think I was probably pretty put out by it and was

probably thorny enough with her anyway but she didn't help matters either. She was all rules and bossiness and it was her way or the highway. I tried my best to get on with it and in fairness to her, she did do stuff with us, we weren't just hanging around, but again it was all Nuala's way. We did painting but it had to be a house and she'd give out if she thought it didn't look like a house. She cut shapes out for us to learn them and I wanted to do the cutting but she wouldn't let me use the scissors. I often used a scissor at home and I told her that but she wouldn't believe me. I remember feeling sore in my stomach because she didn't believe me. I didn't even try with her after that. I just went through the motions. I kept my mouth shut and just did what she told me today. I remember waking up in the mornings with cold feet and my breath making fog of the morning air and feeling like I had a brick in my stomach at the thought of having to get up and go spend the day with Nuala. It seems like an overreaction now but I guess I was a sensitive child, I suppose with my dad dying and all, I was going through a bad time anyway.

Where Rachel's teacher was mindful of the individuality of her students, Morris's child-minder was not. The result for these two children was that Rachel's' connection with her educator was positive and freed her up to follow her learning journey and Morris's connection with his educator was negative and acted as a barrier to his learning journey. He was left unable to engage with his learning as he felt disconnected from the whole experience. Thankfully for Morris, he only spent six months with Nuala and when he moved on to school, his connection with his junior infants teacher was a positive one. In telling this story he echoes much of what Rachel expressed in her story of positive connection.

I was so glad when school started because I knew I was leaving Nuala's' for good. I remember starting school full of hope and thank God that hope was rewarded and I didn't have another bad experience because from day one I loved my junior infant's teacher. I needed so badly for someone to see me and I really felt she did. She listened to me and was kind to me. It was such a relief that I'm afraid I lost my heart to her entirely and I would have done anything to please her. I used to pick flowers for her on the way to school. I wanted so much to please her that I learnt everything as quick as I could. She responded with praise and more kindness and it just went from there. I think looking back that that was the start of my love of learning. I really believe that because I felt that she could really see me, I wanted to be worth seeing. I wanted to be good and I wanted to be good at things. I was great at school from that class on. No one in my family went beyond primary school and I went all the way. I really believe that that was down to Mrs. _____. I'm getting a bit emotional just thinking about it. I'm convinced of that.

Clearly Morris's connection with his junior infant teacher was positive and influential in his learning. He needed it to be positive and so it was. This meeting of his needs was important for Morris and it helped him to connect with his learning. The value he felt that his teacher placed on him helped him to value himself and to invest in his own learning to great effect.

Melissa shared stories of her most favourite and least favourite teachers and clearly illustrates what kind of connection a teacher can facilitate from both positive and negative perspectives.

Melissa's least favourite teacher;

I got a new teacher in senior infants and I thought she was ok and I was getting to know her and we were doing ok and getting along quite well in the early days. Then one day, not too long after she started with our class, I got into a bit of trouble. I was sitting beside my friend and she was all excited about her family getting an au-pair, I understood that it was exciting, I mean, I never heard of anyone getting an au pair before but I wasn't really getting a word in edgeways here because she was all chat about it. I actually remember opening my mouth a few times to ask what colour hair she had but I never got a chance. The next thing I was given out to for talking in class, I was so annoyed, especially because I had been trying to talk but

not succeeding. Anyway my friend kept quiet then and we got on with our work sheet but I remember feeling annoyed and also feeling that it was unjust. Anyway I had calmed down by lunchtime and I decided to reach out to my teacher to try to get us back on a good footing so I offered her my mandarin orange. She said 'is this your way of saying sorry'. Oh God, I can't tell you what it was like. It was like a bee sting or something. I couldn't believe it because I most certainly was not saying *sorry*, I was saying, *I forgive you*. I wanted to snatch that orange back but it was too late, she had it and she was smiling and she thought we were all good but I could never like her after that. Its sounds strange now as an adult telling that story, I was only 6 or 7, why couldn't she understand me, she went one worse she misunderstood me –twice!. We never recovered from that. I mean what did she want?

Melissa's favourite teacher;

That would be my fifth class teacher. He really made me feel special. He asked questions that were about what I thought rather than about an answer in a book. I knew he was genuinely interested in the real me, not just as someone to learn things off but as someone who could think. There was always space in his classroom for ideas and feelings and thoughts and we really did have big class chats about everything. You knew what you had to say was welcome and valued. I met him when my marriage broke down and he asked me about it and the tears streamed down my face. I hadn't cried at all up to that point but the flood gates just opened up that day. He didn't say anything but I knew that I wasn't being judged. It really struck me then that that was exactly what he was like in the classroom. We could just be completely real and he was never phased by it, only interested and supportive. I think those qualities are both rare and wonderful in a teacher. I had him for the last two years of national school and the experience of that respect and freedom really shaped my belief in myself as a person with something to offer. I always follow my gut and believe in my own ideas and I think he taught me that just by being himself.

3 INTER-PERSONAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE CHILDREN

The relationships that a child has with his or her fellow students both individually and with the collective group play an important part in a child's learning journey. Two of the participants – Dorothy and Melissa, both told the following stories in response to being asked what the most dramatic thing to happen to them in school was. Both stories show how important the peer relationship within the school setting can be and how much learning occurs for students outside of the awareness of their teachers.

Dorothy's story;

We moved when I was ten. We moved from the city to the country and I had to change schools. I was really excited to start in my new school and I remember doing my hair and being very fussy about my dress and shoes and my lunch and stationary and the whole lot. It was a bit of a shock when I got to school, I had really misjudged it and all the other kids were in mucky clothes and wellies. I was like something from outer space. It wasn't a great way to start. I was kind of an outsider from the beginning and they mostly laughed at me. I think looking back that it was mostly good natured and that I could have handled it differently and things might have been different but as it was all I felt was the isolation. Over the next two months I turned into a real little toughie. I wore the dirty jeans and the wellies and the messy ponytail and the scowl. I mostly ignored the other children and looking back now I'm not sure if they kept me out or if I kept them out. All

conversations were confrontational to some extent; the *you shut up, no you shut up* variety. One day, there was a yard conversation about boys being better than girls because they are stronger and I was totally against that and arguing away. It ended up in me saying that I could fight any of the boys and win. The boys took up this gauntlet and decided that this kid called _____ would fight me. I remember feeling so hepped up and confident and ready. He went at me hard, I had never been hit before and I can still feel the shock running through me, I don't think I managed to lift a hand at all, he mashed me up completely. The other kids stopped the fight and I remember a complete sense of collective silent agreement that what had happened was both wrong and also must never be spoken about. We all went on our way. I went to the bathroom to tidy up. Another girl came in, I remember her so well, we became friends after that day, she is a nurse now in the hospital and we still meet up sometimes, our kids are the around the same age. She came in and said she'd tell the teacher I had a stomach ache and that I should go home. I walked home pushing my bike, too sore to ride it. I cried most of the way, bitter bitter tears of frustration and impotence. I feel so sorry for the ten year old me. It was such a hard lesson to learn. My mam was quite good, I told her the story and I begged not to have to go back. She convinced to go back the next day to show them that I hadn't been beaten and wasn't afraid. I think that was the right thing to do. Things were a bit better after that anyway. I suppose everyone kind of felt bad about what had happened. I feel like I learnt a lot from that, I learnt that confidence doesn't relate to victory and that you have to go back and face the music, you can never run away but mostly I think it made me understand how vulnerable we all are, so human and so flawed, I knew that the boy who fought me struggled for years as the boy who beat up a girl. He apologised to me fifteen years later and I felt nothing but compassion for him.

Dorothy's story highlights how much of the student experience in a school can occur without adult knowledge or intervention. It is difficult to imagine that the teachers were completely unaware but if as Dorothy is convinced, this is the case, then their connection to their students must have been weak. If on the other hand, there was teacher awareness but no action was taken to address this situation, then it is equally serious from a pedagogical perspective. Ideally the exclusion should have been spotted in week one and some attempts made to integrate Dorothy into the peer group. The teachers in Dorothy's school could have intervened sooner and prevented both the two months of isolation and also the physical and emotional trauma of the fight. However, Dorothy still takes positive learning from this peer experience and feels that it was a catalyst of sorts in ending the exclusion and isolation. It turned the page on her negative peer relations and became a process by which things improved thereafter.

Melissa's story of her most dramatic day at school also related to her connection with her peers. It is an equally moving story but one that shows Melissa's unity with her peer group and what that meant to her. Her description of the events leading up to the day in question is thus;

There was one thing that really sticks in my mind as very dramatic, it is now and it was then too. When I was in second class, what's that? About 8? We had a brute of a teacher. He had a row of sticks hung on the wall behind his desk, all sorts, thick, thin, knobbly, smooth, willows and blackthorn, you name it, he had it. Now nobody liked this but I was particularly obsessed with it. I used to get hit a lot, I was that type of child, always annoying him, I never learnt what it was that he wanted me to do, everything that I tried annoyed him whether it was asking questions or staying quiet, I just couldn't get it right. I eventually decided that I was going to do something about those sticks. I got a group together and we broke into the school through the toilet window one evening. It must have been winter because it was dark and I remember being freezing. We robbed all the sticks and took them down to the river and threw them in. I remember feeling great and we all roared and shouted. We ran home feeling high about it all and I woke up the next morning still feeling elated and free but over breakfast the dread of what lay ahead crept in. I was feeling really scared by the time we got to school. All the kids knew about it and I got a few winks going in and started to feel even worse, I mean it felt good that all the kids thought it was a good

idea but it made me worry more that we would get caught. I started to think I should have done it on my own and then no one would be able to rat on me. Once we were inside the building, it was obvious that it was a big deal for the school, all four rooms were in one room – not our usual room and all the teachers were already in there, looking very grim. The headmaster was livid and spend ages shouting about criminal activity and calling the guards if the culprit didn't show himself. He kept talking about the culprit as a boy and that made me feel better that they weren't on to us, I mean I was the ring leader and I had three helpers – all also girls. They kept us in that room for a long time but nobody caved and then they divided us up into our classes and we went back to our rooms. Back in the room we were made stand in a line and given another sharp talk about the law and responsibility and the guards. Then each of us was asked individually if we knew who had done it, The first two said no and I was third, I said no and then everyone after me said no and what I remember quite clearly was thinking how great it was that no one was getting hit because there was nothing to hit anyone with. It blew over pretty quick. The guards did actually come during lunchtime and they asked the same questions but didn't seem quite as upset as the teachers and then it all died down. You know the funny thing? The window was fixed pretty quickly but the holder for the sticks was taken down and they were never replaced. For years I thought I had achieved that and it made me feel ten feet tall. When I was a teenager I started to wonder why that was. I mean it was strange no? It was kind of a childish plan, stealing the sticks and thinking that would solve everything but it did work. So why didn't he replace them? I didn't figure that out for years but one day it struck me that corporal punishment was illegal then, I mean it still happened but it was illegal so the guards probably had a word and said knock it off. Amazing how things work out isn't it?

Melissa described what this event meant for her as follows;

I think the biggest thing was the feeling of support from my classmates, that no-one ratted me out. I felt more comfortable in class after that and I don't think it was just the removal of the physical threat, I think it was the sense of belonging or being part of something. It helped free me up, I got better at school after that and I never got on with that teacher but I knew I was part of something bigger than him. I also think that it was important for me to have that sense of achievement, that feeling that I made a decision, planned, acted and solved a problem. It's a good feeling but it's a particular feeling, I recognise it happening many times since when things work out. It's even sweeter when it's part of a group experience though, even now in a work context, when something is achieved, when we have a breakthrough, it's a team thing and it makes us better at what we do. I don't know if I'm explaining it well enough, what I mean is that solving a problem feels good but solving a problem with other people feels better.

The message within Melissa's story is that friendship matters and that there is educational value within peer dynamics. A sense of belonging and identity is very grounding for any child. This is just as important in an educational setting as in the child's home. A child who feels accepted and supported by their peer group is indeed free to learn and free to engage in their learning journey. As Melissa also pointed out, a collective experience of overcoming adversity brings a great sense of well-being and confidence. A confidence that can translate into greater risk taking within the problem solving domain and reap greater learning rewards as judgment and ability grows.

4 THE CHILD'S CONNECTIONS TO THEIR LEARNING JOURNEY

Learning and development are functions of education and as such feature strongly within the priorities of all good educators. Those who espouse a mindful pedagogy and support the child by facilitating a

positive connection between themselves and each child and between each child and their peers are essentially facilitating each child to achieve connection to their learning journey and become truly engaged in and stimulated by their educational experience. Stories of engagement and connection arose from questions looking at favourite activities or happiest memories in school.

Rachel recalls;

My favourite thing to do in school was anything to do with arts or crafts. I remember we all made a cardigan. I loved that. I made a really different one, multi-coloured with both horizontal and vertical stripes. It was my pride and joy, that cardigan. I remember when I heard we were going to make a cardigan and we could design it ourselves, I was so excited. Actually most of the class was excited but everyone else picked their favourite colour whereas I picked tons of colours. I must dig it out and see how many colours there were. I remember red and blue and orange and pink and green and yellow and brown and cream, God it sounds horrible but I swear it was beautiful. I remember going through the wool at home and picking out my colours and there being no red and really wanting red in it and my Mam saying no because there was plenty of other choices and I decided that I had to have red but understanding that I'd have to get it myself. I actually made buns and sold them to the other kids for 5p each. I just remembered that now, I haven't thought of that in years. Anyway, I got the red wool and made the best cardigan I have ever owned; I wanted to wear it all the time. I think I understood from then on that a) I was happiest making things and b) that I could make money if I needed it. It probably was quite connected to the choices I have made in my life, I mean, I make everything I possibly can and if I can't I'll do it anyway and I set up my own business in an area that lets me both embrace creation and support children in their creative development too, it has to be connected right? Maybe I was born like this but I think it's more to do with a) all the freedom, b) key experiences like making that cardigan, making it lit a fire in me, that was actually the first thing I made.

Later on in the interview Rachel shared this insight into her connection to her learning journey and her connection to her teacher and peers;

I didn't mind that my cardigan was so different, I was proud of it. I wanted it to be different, I felt different and so it felt right that my cardigan should be different too. I had loved school ever since junior infants because I had loved my junior infant's teacher so much so I never felt out on a limb being different; I felt that that was ok. The other kids never made me feel that that was any kind of problem; I mean they did laugh at my cardigan but I was happy to make them laugh. It made me laugh too; it was fun, that was kind of the point. I didn't feel it was ridicule, I felt that it was appreciation. I guess that was confidence eh? How did I get so confident? I just felt like I could be myself so that meant I could make whatever I wanted. I knew what I wanted and I just did it.

Rachel clearly felt a connection with her learning journey. As an adult she can even make connections between these educational experiences and her life choices. It is also clear that being supported through positive connections with her teacher, her classmates and her school made her feel confident in expressing herself, a key skill which has stood her in good stead thus far in life.

Morris shared the following story in answer to a question about his favourite activity in early childhood;

God, I loved stories. The excitement of fairy tales and the drama and what was going to happen next. I mean even when I knew well what was going to happen next, I was still moved to distraction by the excitement of it all, I mean would the wolf get in or not? Would the pig make it to his brother's house in time, I'm not joking, it was edge of your seat stuff for me [laughs]. It was mostly my mam that read to me in those years, at bedtime and the likes. Nuala wasn't big into books

and I probably wouldn't have liked her stories anyway. Actually there's a thought that just struck me. Did I love the stories because I loved the close time with my mam? And if Nuala had told stories would I have not liked stories because I didn't like Nuala? I never thought of that before but you know it makes sense to me now and I'll tell you something else, the power of the hold of stories had a really big impact on my life because I was dying to read. I couldn't wait to open that world of stories for myself; I remember feeling so hungry for it. When I started school and I loved my teacher and I found out that she was going to teach me to read I thought I would burst with happiness. I remember pouring over my books at night after bedtimes and the magic of unlocking the meaning of the words, it was exhilarating, and it was intoxicating. I remember reading my first story from start to finish one night and letting out this breath, I didn't even know I was holding it but letting it out made pleasure fly down to my fingers and toes. I don't remember a thing about how I learnt maths in those early years but I'll never forget learning to read.

What Morris is describing is true connection with his learning journey. The desire, the effort and the reward. For the first time, he also reaches the realisation that his connection to the educator who introduced the magic of the story was key and how lucky he was that it was his mother whom he loved and not Nuala with whom he had no real connection.

When asked what he felt was the importance of this literacy learning journey, Morris had this to say;

I think loving stories made me want to learn to read and in turn, made me love reading. I went all the way with my education, the first in my family to do so. Loving reading really helped me through every stage of my education including university and beyond. Even now, I love reading new research in my field and love using reading as a medium of soaking up new knowledge. When I see students that don't love to read, who find it a bore, I can't help but be grateful that I developed a love of reading through my love of stories and that for me it will always be pleasurable rather than painful. It's a great gift. A few years ago I read that a woman asked Albert Einstein how to make her son clever and Albert said 'read him fairy stories' and the woman said 'ok and after I have done that, what should I do?' and Albert said 'read him more fairy stories'. That really made me smile, that's my story right there.

5 CONCLUSION

Connectivity is very important in children learning journeys. Its absence is a barrier to being free to learn. Educators can support children's connectivity through a mindful pedagogy of seeking to see children as unique individuals, to identify their needs and to meet them to the best of their ability as simply and effectively as possible. Prioritising the need to establish a positive connection with each child early in the relationship will pay great learning dividends for the children. Advocating for positive peer connections and awareness of cohesion in the classroom is also helpful to children's learning as both educator and peer connectivity leave the children free to connect to their learning in the most meaningful and deep way imaginable.