

Fundamental Foundations in Early Childhood Development

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Abstract

This paper is a commentary on the value of ethics, relational pedagogy, and how educators can foster an excellent educational environment, all in the context of early childhood development. Children are susceptible to external influences by nature. That is why ethics and values are indispensable in early childhood education programming. After all, education and the teaching profession are elements that construct a civilized society. Relationship is also a critical element in the classroom. It requires educators to focus on each child's unique learning style and background. Relational pedagogy finds ways to create real-life connections that foster confidence, self-esteem, and increased academic performance. Lastly, but equally important, is the educational environment. The educational environment is more than simply architecture and administration. It is the scholastic and relational atmosphere developed and maintained by the teacher. The paper concludes with an analogy that covers the versatile characteristics of a quality educator, drawing a comparison to the unique attribute of the bamboo.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, ECE, Ethics, Integrity, Values, Educational Environment, Teacher Education, Bamboo Educator, Inclusion, Relational Pedagogy

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Introduction

Learning begins at birth. Education is a process whereby the mind is developed to a higher dimension, enabling an individual to understand and deal with life experiences from an informed perspective. Early childhood programs can result in more alert minds, better school attendance, and lower dropout rates. A lack of school engagement can not only impact dropout rates, but can lead to "other problem behaviors during middle adolescence, late adolescence, and early adulthood." (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2011). Provided the environments are conducive to learning and teaching, quality early childhood experiences can be fostered at home, in the traditional school setting, or at professional care centers. Educators have a massive responsibility to help shape the future and establish a healthy foundation for lifelong learning. Education is, therefore, absolutely indispensable in shaping the personality and building the character of the child. Education undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in producing the well-rounded, productive, and decent citizens of a nation. Education is, and has always been, the greatest purveyor of change. There is a complex interrelationship between home, structured education, society and culture and their influence on typical and atypical developing children. Hence, it is vital to the health of our communities to emphasize and embrace the impact of early childhood development programs.

At its core, there are three pillars critical to support this foundation. First, ethics – the development of personality and values, a vital element to helping children learn their role within society and culture. Secondly, innovative and relational pedagogy – the captivating of a child's mind through curriculum and activities built for specific learning styles, including an intentional effort to build a genuine relationship with each child. Language, sensory, and social interactions with both adults and children, along with warm, loving, and consistent care, are the keys to making it possible for children to form secure attachments to those who care for them and help them grow into curious, confident, and competent learners. Thirdly, the educational environment, providing the platform from which all aspects of development are nourished. For structured academic programs, the educational environment is maintained by the educator. At the same time, one must be sensitive to realize the education environment encompasses more than just the classroom. Unique family, socioeconomic, and cultural differences of each child's situation should be acknowledged and celebrated.

Pillar 1 – Ethics

The term 'ethics' can be traced to the Greek root word ἦθος (êthos), it is defined as "character, moral nature" (Liddell, Scott, Jones, & McKenzie, 1992). It can be further described as one's disposition, traits, and outward expressions. Education and the teaching profession are elements that construct a civilized society. Aristotle argued that education addresses the physical, mental, social, emotional, and moral training of the child. Thus, ethics and moral principles are critical components in early childhood development. The most memorable teachers are the ones that make a child feel genuinely liked, the teacher that truly cares about their welfare. Supportive and caring teachers do their best to help students be successful in class throughout the school year and beyond. Scholars in Early Childhood Education agree that a primary goal with young children is helping them replace conflict with prosocial behaviors like

sharing, cooperating, empathizing, and helping one another (Siu, Shek, & Law, 2012). Teaching young children to take the perspective of another child, such that blame can be diffused and credit can be shared, is essential and achievable with most toddlers.

These norms often include “reciprocity” which suggests that people should help those who help them and the norm of “social responsibility” which suggests that we should assist people who need help or who depend on us. By being responsible, a person accepts moral and social responsibility and has the ability to make a prosocial decision and a corresponding action that concern issues of justice, rights, and the welfare of others. The concepts of reciprocity and social responsibility can be extended to the citizenship and social contract in some countries—one has the obligation to take care of their own people. (Siu, Shek, & Law, 2012)

Examples of ethics are indispensable in the formative years of a child’s life. A focus on ethics in the classroom requires the teacher to set an example and adhere to unwavering standards of inclusion and respect.

Children are susceptible, impressionable, unresisting to any stimulus. Since children are hero worshippers, they are prone to be influenced by the adults, teachers, or caregivers who spend a large amount of time with them, leaving a vital impact on the personality of the child. The child unconsciously or sub-consciously picks up the teacher’s personality traits, and thus the teacher must be a good role model (Siu, Shek, & Law, 2012). Since the child trusts almost every adult, one should never betray the confidence of the child. The younger the children are, the more honest they are. One should always respect the child’s spirit of honesty and sincerity. Also, the child is forgiving. They are quick to forgive. Again, the younger the children are, the quicker they forgive. Keeping in mind the uniqueness of each personality, teachers should deal with them on individual basis. An educator cannot use one and the same method for all children indiscriminately. One must use discernment and empathy in order to focus on the complexity of diversity, including the influence of individual, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, social and cognitive differences, as well as abilities and disabilities. A culture is a way of life of a group of people - the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next. Hence, there is a great responsibility for educators to conduct themselves with courtesy and professionalism; and interact with children by expressing love and respect.

Ethics and morals relate right and wrong conduct. While they are sometimes used interchangeably, they are different. Ethics refers to rules provided by an external source – e.g., code of conduct in workplaces or principles in religions. Morals refer to individual’s own principles regarding right and wrong. An educator’s ethics can be divided into two primary categories, values and integrity. Values are the standards or qualities regarded as worthwhile and desirable. They are the moral ethic codes, rights and wrongs that we find in personal ideals. Values have a major influence on a person’s behavior, serving as a broad guideline in all situations. Socrates, the Greek philosopher connected morality and education, “the purpose of education is not only to make the people smart but also to make the people good.” Next, but no less important, is the concept of integrity. Integrity is the firm adherence to a standard of values. It is demonstrated through honesty, decency, fairness, sincerity, and

commitment to truthfulness. Corruption is the opposite of integrity. Integrity must be constantly watched, guarded, and protected from corruption.

This topic is closely related with the ancient proverb “Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it.” Thus, we find why the ethics are critical to early childhood development. This is a pivotal point in formulating ones understanding of social norms:

Based on cognitive dissonance theory, the foot-in-the-door technique postulates that there is a strong tendency for us to adjust our attitude in order to make it consistent with what we have done; that is, we justify our choices of prosocial actions after we are required to “put our foot” into it. Parents, schools, or (and) youth centers can require adolescents to fulfill prosocial tasks and responsibilities, which will gradually help to modify their attitudes (become more positive) toward prosocial norms and behavior. (Siu, Shek, & Law, 2012)

While many prosocial actions are learned through cultural norms and foot-in-the-door experiences, it is important to consider some of the in-born characteristics of a child:

Forgiving	→	Quick to forgive / slow to anger
Susceptible	→	Impressionable / capable of being affected emotionally
Teachable	→	Capable of being taught/instructed
Trusting	→	Quick to trusting someone
Truthful	→	Honest / expressing the truth

These five characteristics are important for early childhood educators to contemplate. One must remain cognizant of the susceptibility and influence they can have during these formative years. Whether intentional or not, one’s action can have great impact on a child’s development and understanding of prosocial norms. Any action committed irresponsibly will not be inconsequential. Educators should always remain pleasant, positive, and productive. In the case of early childhood education, the word “productive” is synonymous with “patience.” The caregiver must exude these traits in order to help demonstrate an example of well-balanced and productive citizenship in the classroom.

Pillar 2 - Relational Pedagogy

It is widely accepted that any program of academic rigor should include the three R's; reading, writing, and arithmetic; these are critical to a well-rounded pedagogy. While not discussed as frequently, but equally important, is the fourth “R”, which stands for relationship. The lack of students' relationship among themselves and/or between teachers can be a cause of discipline issues. Developing deeper connections with students is a significant way teachers contribute to students’ academic and social development:

Relational pedagogy opens up the possibilities of educating the whole child in every aspect, not simply academic content. This approach holds that academic content should only be approached from a solid relational base—that when students feel empowered and safe, the pathway to academic success becomes possible and enjoyable. When such a base is not constructed, academic success is not only made

more difficult, it becomes irrelevant. A relational approach to schooling can become the catalyst that causes students to restructure how they view difference and otherness because relational pedagogy insists on empathy, a requirement for combating bullying. Relational pedagogy can dismantle the hierarchical structures that dictate how beliefs about difference are formed and understood; thus, relational pedagogy can engender more accepting schools, and by extension, a more accepting society. (Crowover & Jones, 2018)

Relational pedagogy is multifaceted, it includes more than technique, it involves the exercise of empathy and sensitivity to help increase a child's self-esteem. Healthy relationships should always include respect, responsibility, and restraint. Conversely, one must avoid revenge, reprisal, and retribution. A mutual respect between the teacher and pupil must be maintained. There is a two-way component in respect, it involves both sides sharing responsibility. It is the responsibility of the educator to set expectations, and the responsibility of the pupil to respond through the learning process. Restraint is also needed in all relationships – restraint can be difficult when dealing with classroom management, but as outlined earlier, children are susceptible to influence. A pleasant, positive, patient environment must be preserved to help foster an accepting and safe school environment.

Creating an atmosphere of safety is another way to increase self-esteem. Recognition, confidence, and performance go hand-in-hand. Even the most minute accomplishment, should be recognized immediately. As the expression goes “justice delayed is justice denied.” Do not delay the recognition as the impact becomes diminished. Do not let the opportunity to offer praise pass in the moment. Recognition is directly related to building confidence. It boosts self-esteem. The child's performance will increase with continued recognition. It is human nature to want to please someone again, to seek continued affirmation. As a practice, educators should reprimand in private, helping avoid tearing down student's self-esteem and confidence. Public reprimand can cause individuals to give up and to avoid even trying, for fear of failure.

Another part of relational pedagogy is developing innovative strategies to help capture the unique learning styles of the students.

John Dewey felt it was important for children to learn by doing. He felt that allowing children to explore their questions helps them make real life connections and continually question and increase learning by investigating these questions. Dewey thought education should come from natural curiosity with direction and guidance coming from the teacher. He viewed children as eager learners and felt that it was important for children to learn through activities in which they enjoyed. Learning needs to be relevant to the children. Dewey stressed the importance of using situations that children can relate to when teaching. He felt that when children could understand why learning was important, they could understand how to apply learning into their lives. (Platz, Donald; Arellano, Jennifer, 2011)

Not every student connects with the teacher and activities in the same manner. Therefore it is important to incorporate various sensory methodology – auditory, visual, and kinesthetic/tactile. In auditory learning, a learner depends on listening and

speaking as a primary way of gaining knowledge. A visual learner utilizes graphs, charts, maps, and diagrams to enhance scholarship. Kinesthetic or tactile learning is a learning style in which discovery takes place by the students carrying out physical activities rather than just listening to a lecture or watching demonstration. Creativity in the classroom is essential to creating lasting impressions at an early age. William Wordsworth wrote a beautiful poetic couplet emphasizing the value of imagination:

*For oft, when on my couch I lie; in vacant or in pensive mood
They flash upon that inward eye which in the bliss of solitude
And then my heart with pleasure fills, and dances with the daffodils*

Additionally, one can incorporate elements of literature, philosophical thought, intellectual and poetic imagery, historical context, international monuments/architecture – all with an emphasis on stimulating the child to learn through these real-life connections.

Pillar 3 - Educational Environment

Educational environment is more than just the brick and mortar structure of an educational institution. It is more than decorations in a classroom or demographics of a surrounding neighborhood. The educational environment is imagined, developed, cultivated, and sustained by the teacher. The environment must be conducive to learning and teaching. Conversely, a classroom that lacks structure is chaotic and in constant turmoil. Constant vigilance and attention to classroom management techniques is required to maintain a healthy academic environment. While there is typically an iterative adaptation of style year-over-year, educators must exhibit specific qualities to remain successful and effective. Educators have a great responsibility in society. They establish the foundation for how children will understand their place in the world. Visualizing the educator as the architect of the learning environment allows one to set the tone and intentionally focus on the versatile characteristics that create an ideal setting for academic growth.

The Eastern part of the world utilizes bamboo for all types of purposes: clothing, construction, food, musical instruments, bridge reinforcement, scaffolding, and even toys. A successful teacher can be compared to a bamboo stalk, many parallels can be drawn between the two. Teachers demonstrate these attributes by adapting to the versatile characteristics of bamboo. Bamboo is amusing, it is often made into musical instruments both wind and percussion, providing pleasant entertainment. Educators can perform in a similar manner, incorporating humor and creativity into entertaining classroom activities. A multi-disciplined approach to teaching, incorporating innovations, entertainment, and creativity are essential.

A stalk of bamboo is also hospitable and generous. It provides food for the largest of animals, the elephant. In the same manner, a teacher provides another critical nourishment, knowledge. Knowledge is founded in the facts, information, and skills acquired by a person through experience or education, the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject. Teachers can express this characteristic through adapting pedagogy to meet the needs of their unique students. In a similar manner, teachers provide a stable and safe harbor for learning, fostering an environment of safety and acceptance.

Bamboo has another unique quality; it is both flexible and rigid. Flexibility of the stalk and its strong protective housing helps prevent its destruction during a storm. While other plants fall or uproot, the bamboo adapts to winds of change. The stalk is flexible enough to sway with the wind currents yet resilient enough to not stay down after the storm, we often gain more by bending with the wind rather than standing upright in a rigid defiance (as cited in Komarnicki, 2004). Educators must remain flexible in the midst of change, but always rigid and steadfast in matters of ethics. Today, in the 21st century, as the world embraces unprecedented advances in communication technology, we are seeing the creation of a culture born with a global identity unlike any we have seen before. The changes in the way we communicate globally have necessarily affected the language and academic skills necessary to succeed in today's world. Just as technology is in a state of constant metamorphosis, so are the skills needed to utilize it. It is incumbent upon educators not only to understand the immensity of the changes occurring in global communication, but also to recognize how technology and globalization affect the changing identities and need for instruction in language and academic skills.

Part of embracing flexibility and resiliency is found in how educators handle failure. Do not deny you have failed, accept and deal with it. Never shift the blame on others, admit and own failure considering how you can do better in the future. Do not build your ego on the failures of others. You do not want to establish a standard off the failure of others, you must find a higher standard. Do not emulate failure, rather innovate success. Always set your standard to the maximum. While it sounds cliché, reach for the stars. Even if you fall back to the moon, at least you attempted the best within your ability and capability. As Mark Twain declared, "Always do right [what is right] this will gratify some people and astonish the rest." (Twain & DeVito, 2015).

The root system of bamboo is supported by numerous shoots. A single stalk is never found alone; instead, they grow cohesively to support one another through a unified root structure. Teachers must partner with peers, interns, master teachers, community resources, and student families in the same way, developing local support communities. Gandhi spoke on the essence of unity "I believe in the absolute oneness of God and therefore of humanity. What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source. I cannot, therefore, detach myself from the wickedest soul nor may I be denied identity with the most virtuous" (Gandhi, 1922).

Unity provides strength. This cohesiveness is demonstrated in the classroom through respect for diversity. Diversity is all around us; it includes all of us since we have different beliefs, styles, and abilities. This is especially evident with children coming from foreign lands. They are greatly impacted by their move to the new culture, causing potential confusion about their cultural identity. It is important to help these students merge into the mainstream without jeopardizing the quality of education to all students. Empowering these students to share their cultural identity offers other students a global perspective, it also helps embed the individual's home culture into daily school life.

Each of the three pillars discussed – ethics, relational pedagogy, and the educational environment - help to create a solid foundation for early childhood development. Like the bamboo stalk, one must adapt to change by incorporating these concepts in the

classroom. Ethics and values will assist in creating well informed and productive citizens. A focus on relational pedagogy will increase student self-esteem and productivity. Lastly, quality educators that embrace the bamboo characteristics of hospitality, humor, flexibility, and unity will create a safe and welcoming educational environment. All of these attributes are the fundamental foundations for helping educators increase effectiveness and engagement in their classrooms.

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