

## **TEACHER-CHILD RELATEDNESS IN THE FORE FRONT: MIA-MIA**

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Traditional measures of quality in early childhood settings have focused on structural attributes such as group size, educational preparedness, skills of caregivers and child-to-staff ratios. More recent reports, however, acknowledge the quality of teacher-child relationship, which may be indicated by the security of teacher-child relationships, as being uniquely significant in children's development. The aim of this project is an investigation of the nature consequences of teacher-child relationships in an early childhood setting: Mia-Mia Child and Family Study Centre at Macquarie University, Sydney. The investigation was conducted as a series of videotaped conferences with Mia-Mia staff, focussing on teacher-child interrelatedness narratives. Teachers explained in depth, their understandings of relatedness and connectedness with children, and elaborated on the daily applications of this construct which they felt was the essence of their work. Qualitative analyses of the transcripts and descriptions of child-teacher relatedness vignettes are presented. The overall outcomes of the project yield support to the emerging evidence that underlines the significance of the quality of the teacher-child relationship as a determinant of quality of a child's experiences in childcare.

### **Introduction**

Our quest in this paper, is to investigate from multiple perspectives that very powerful construct of adult-child relatedness in early childhood (EC) settings. As this is a relatively new area of interest, but such a powerful one that it defines the underlying tenets of the early childhood curriculum in New South Wales (2002), and as the field of early childhood is inherently a multidisciplinary one, we would like to explore relatedness and its significance and practice from multiple perspectives. Among these perspectives are adult-child attachment, teacher-child social co-construction of knowledge through nurturing relationships, and teachers' theory of mind, or mindreading of children's states, wishes, desires, communicative intent and conflicts. We attempt our task by briefly providing theoretical and critical bases for these perspectives, and exploring in detail, the teachers' views and understandings of relatedness based on a series of videotaped 'thinking out-loud' meetings we held with Mia-Mia© staff. Mia-Mia Child and Family Study Center is a child care centre for children birth to five, affiliated with the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University, Sydney.

The theoretical perspectives we take may seem dichotomous, as different perspectives are indexed to different domains of development. Attachment literature for example, has a focus on socioemotional development and child mental health, while theories of social construction of cognition tend to foreground children's marvelous abilities for engagement in long, challenging and stimulating projects through seamless unisons between scaffolding children's creativity through social and communal interactions, and environments which are designed to foster and embellish such engagements.

We argue in our study, that the notion of the integrated child-within-ecology, and holistic notions of child development make such emphases as viable avenues to the same desirable consequence of facilitating the children to the daily limits of their ability and well being.

### **Quality, and attachment versus relatedness**

The critical roles played by high-quality EC experiences in the development of young children have been well documented. Traditional measures of quality in EC settings have focused on structural attributes such as group size, educational preparedness, skills of caregivers and child-to-staff ratios. More recent reports, however, acknowledge the *quality* of teacher-child relationship, which may be indicated by the security of teacher-child relatedness, as being uniquely significant in children's development. Secure attachments with adults in EC settings which develop as a result of 'sensitive, warm, responsive and respectful caregiving' (Patten, 2001) are reported to be related to better peer relationships (Essa, Favre, Thweatt, & Waugh, 1999). Children with less secure relationships with their preschool teachers were shown to have more adjustment problems including aggression and disruptive behaviour in Year 2 (Howes, 2000). Not only are teachers being increasingly recognised in their roles and responsibilities with children in contributions to their social, emotional and cognitive development (Birch & Ladd, 1998), but additionally, positive teacher-child relationships can serve as a buffer against risk (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1992).

The word attachment does not adequately describe the quality of the teacher-child relationships in an EC setting, although the emotional security provided by the adults unquestionably influences children's development and wellbeing. For one thing, the adult need not be attached to the child, but would still engage in relational patterns that are precursors and the building blocks of secure attachment, such as sensitive, warm, responsive, respectful and continuous relationships. For another thing, teachers are presumably trained and committed to the appreciation and practice of deep and authentic relationships with children and families; parenting is not predicated on such 'licensing' although many parents are aware of the impact of secure relationship. They also operate within the mental representations of their own experiences of how they were parented. For our purposes here, we use the term *relatedness* to connote constructions of shared meanings and knowledge through the perceptions of, communications with, and appreciations of the transactions that exist within the nexus of children, families and staff within the entirety of the community of early childhood education and care, we call Mia-Mia.

### **Attachment, adult sensitivity and perspective taking**

Secure attachment is unequivocally significant in children's development, and we note the literature that rightfully points to how the evaluation of this construct may be flawed, mainly because of being decontextualised, non-continuous and culture-biased.

We argue here, however, that within the field of early childhood and practice of early care and education, professional duty of care makes it necessary if not imperative, that caregiving behaviors of adults must be within the realm of those which would eventuate in a secure attachment of children's earlier relationships with their caregivers, as determined by the traditional measures of attachment security. Stated differently, the teacher-child relations in an early childhood setting should preclude those relational styles which have traditionally been associated with culmination of insecure attachment groups labelled avoidant, anxious and disorganised (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978).

In identifying the precursors to a secure attachment relationship, Ainsworth and her colleagues (Ainsworth et al, 1978) established four dimensions for assessing maternal behaviour: sensitivity, acceptance, cooperation and accessibility, where *sensitivity* is a

crucial dimension upon which the others hinge. The verdict of the field on sensitivity being the most exclusive element in secure attachment has been confused by more recent findings of a meta-analysis (De Wolff & Van IJzendoorn, 1997), significantly because behavioural descriptors of what is called sensitivity seem to be inconsistent. The consensus seems to be assisted by findings of Meins, Ferynhough, Fradley and Tuckey (2001), who posit that *maternal mind-mindedness*, or the ability of mothers to read the mental states of their infants through the use of appropriate mind-related comments is a better predictor of the attachment relationship. If that is the case, we hypothesise that the appropriate mentalising ability of the caregivers in an early childhood setting will similarly be facilitative.

To support this claim, we note that Robert Pianta and his colleagues (Pianta, Bunosky, Fitz, Hamre, Kraft-Sayre, & Steinberg, 1999) in their assessment tool Teacher Relationship Interview present a scoring system of the teachers' mental representations of their relationship with a child, present perspective taking as a significant dimension in process of teacher-child relatedness. The attributes assessed in narratives of teachers in describing children include indications of *perspective taking*, where the teacher views the child as having independent thoughts, states and feelings which are 'read' as tenable and viable hypotheses of the child's mind and emotions within daily contexts. This ability is indicated to correlate significantly with the teacher-child relationship as a mental representation, and facilitatory teacher behaviors towards that child (Pianta, 1999). We argue here that perspective taking in teacher-child relationships may tap the same or similar construct reflected in mentalising or mind-mindedness of the parent, and that it may be used as a valid indicator/predictor/descriptor of the quality of the relationship between children and their caregivers in EC contexts.

### **Social constructivism and shared meanings**

The practice of early childhood care and education that is strongly embedded within social constructivism reflects the philosophy that claims that mental activity is bound to its social contexts (Wertsch, 1991). Among educators who share this perspective, one major concern is the dynamic features of the transactional and negotiated relationship between the individuals and the sociocultural context (New, 1998). Development built through the relationships between cultural contexts and social activities are dynamic, mutually influential and jointly negotiated and mutually influenced rather than being unilateral and static (Goodnow, Miller & Kessel, 1995). The interplay between social and developmental processes is evident in Vygotsky's (1978) heavy emphasis on social dimensions of knowledge construction: relations between people are fundamental to all higher mental functions which take place within the zone of proximal development. More recent interpretations of this position assert that children depend on both on the sociocultural contexts in which they live, and they thrive on more discrete social exchanges that take place among individuals in that setting (Bruner, 1990).

Relationships are intrinsic to collaboration, as collaboration is focal to emergence of new capabilities through *scaffolding* and child and more-able-person collaboration in the child's zone. In fact, curriculum decisions may rely not so much on the children's developmental status, but on the ability of their teachers' alertness to children's ever expanding reach and to stay one step ahead (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Such collaborative cognition, or socially shared cognition is likely to generate exchanges which demonstrate integration of different viewpoints and perspectives, which in turn compel us to reevaluate our traditionally Piagetian-constructivist views of child development: even very young children who are labelled egocentric (e.g., focused on the self and unable to take the perspectives of, relate to and care about the concerns of others) have been observed to generate and debate this social knowledge, including the establishment affiliation behaviors to indicate their joint membership with their peer culture (New, 1998, p. 271).

## **Mia-Mia: Epistemological inclinations**

Pedagogy at Mia-Mia very much reflects a social constructivist approach, in which the Center community is viewed as a genuine one, a place 'in which people face each other everyday over time in all their human variety, good parts, bad parts, and all the rest...promoting the highest quality of life possible, lives of engagement (entanglement) and participation' (Gatto, 1992 in Nimmo, 1998, p. 297). The relationships contained within the school community define it. The image of the child espoused by staff is one of children living in the context of personal and lived history, and cultural heritage; children are viewed as strong and able who can not only make choices about what to learn, but also how and from whom (Stone, 1993). Children are encouraged to work collaboratively, use different media to express their work and their understandings, and the environment is designed with an eye to foster emotional, relational, adaptive, creative and cognitive stimulation and challenge. Children's work is highly valued, documented and displayed. Staff are careful not to place preconceived limits on children's capabilities. Staff have evolved into a common philosophy which prizes relationships, connectedness and communications as being in the forefront of not only curriculum decision making, but in constructing a sense of cohesion with each other, as well as with the parents, and the executive board.

## **Data collection and reflections**

The data was collected through meetings with Mia-Mia staff over six one-hour sessions over a four-month period. Samples of narrative presented below are from transcriptions of these videotaped meetings. The agenda of the meetings was to attempt to explore the concept and practice of teacher-child relatedness and thus develop some shared understandings. The two staff members who were not affiliated with Mia-Mia were the ethnographers, and all available members of the Center teacher/researchers and carers joined in as it suited them. The transcripts and the data analyses were returned to the Mia-Mia staff, who verified, clarified and modified them as they thought necessary.

An interesting development emerged during the process of review of the transcripts and the draft article by Mia-Mia staff. Reflecting on the reflections revealed concerns and apprehensions; these meta-reflections in fact, delved into the heart of the very issue we were attempting to explore. Below, is the summary statement of the collective meta-reflections voiced by one of the teachers:

As a participant, teacher, researcher and theorist, as are my colleagues at Mia-Mia, being a subject, object and protagonist in a piece of research is a complex undertaking. We embarked on this 'thinking out-loud' four months ago and have meandered through the complex entanglement of our emotional lives with children within the context of the school. Throughout, we have struggled with the 'professional' language espoused by various theories, theorists and 'truths' (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999) in early childhood while attempting to describe what is said, felt and unsaid when describing our entanglements. Most of the time, we felt the paucity of vocabulary available, struggling for common meaning over 'professional' phrases such as attachment, quality or caregiving. In some instances words seemed unable to describe in a human sense our emotions. Over time, words that embodied human-ness, crept into our discussion and ranged over our daily experiences in an emotional sense.

However, on reading the first draft {of the paper}, alarm bells rang. We found ourselves cleansing and sanitising the transcript, eliminating or squirming over words such as kiss, cuddle, hug, stroke or tenderness. Our discomfort,

we realised, stemmed from our intense vulnerability. Within our context of trusting colleagues, it had been fine to use such words, but when baldly placed on paper what would readers think? How would they construct meaning from our uncensored chat? Such are the discourses of 'child protection' and the 'teacher as a professional' that we had somehow transgressed the 'rules'. It is the nature of these 'rules' to silence the emotional lives of teachers and children, and to drive them underground. Teachers and children are always entangled with each other and the sensitivity and the depth of the emotionally supportive experience the professional gives the child, is the crux of the matter. I believe we can argue that this silencing allows for little discussion of what actually the nature of the teacher child related-ness is and how it is practiced.

### **Data analysis: themes/threads**

The analysis of the data was thus a collaborative process and was validated by the participants. The following themes and threads emerged:

- The limiting use of language in description of concepts explored is evident. Participants felt that the conventional child development and education terms did not quite reflect their understandings of their practice.

*Quality (in ECE) is a word so fraught with appendages...its really how deep and how rich the quality is..*

*It's trying to find words for what we are doing that are not attached to other bodies of thinking that I find difficult..*

- Metaphors for relatedness are complex, dynamic, multidimensional and malleable. They transcend terms that are commonly used to denote them. It seems to be experiential, personal and arches beyond the traditional institutions' tendencies not to respond to emotions. Recognition of children's distress particularly, has primacy.

*Mapping is a good word; it goes into different areas and directions..*

*Its not a straight big line...it is a landscape...it is logically making an imaginative and emotional landscape..*

*I think [staff in some centres] are actually institutionalised not to respond to emotional stimuli such as the sound of a baby crying, and don't hear the inner alarm ringing...never abandon children in this terrible time of their crying...*

- Staff exhibit an understanding and an appreciation for the journey they have collectively embarked on, and place it within its social historical context. An awareness of changing, evolving and collectively reflecting for inclusive relations and communications is apparent, as evidenced by documents, language use and other contextual markers.

*Looking back on our strategic plan, it sounds very teacher directed... we will do this and we will do that...instead of we will engage in...or we will explore...and that was only three years ago!*



- Having a nurturing relationship, but not necessarily an attachment relationship, with each child has primacy.

*I would say I don't have deep attachments to a number of children but we have relationships with all of them...*

*Entanglement has with it mental and emotional images..it's a better word than attachment...In a place where children are not loved and attached to the same degree, they are still entangled with those teachers; they cannot NOT be, because they have to live their lives with staff..*

- Conflicts are faced by the practitioners in the field of EC in understanding the importance of relatedness in their lives and work, yet having the language constraints to expound on their work, as well as being constrained by cultural views and professional preparedness with respect to emotions.

*Practitioners don't give themselves credit [for doing things that transcend their training]; they just do it...if they had time away from the children to reflect, they might...*

*Emotions are prickly and uncomfortable...[staff when they meet, tend to] talk not about the emotional entanglements, but the program...*

*It is hard; as a part of professional practice, you were not supposed involve yourself emotionally..*

*[There seems to be] an element of silencing talk about [intense] emotions of children...enjoyment and pleasure beyond delight may be enrapturement...we describe neither ours nor children's emotional lives [with strong descriptives]...reduction in the palate of words gives us a cleansed, anesthetic, sanitised professional way of thinking about emotions..*

- There seems to be a need to reconceptualise and to recast the mold of 'getting through the day' as building relationships such that emotional entanglements are understood as functional professionalism. Please also refer to the mini-case study below to illustrate this point.

*[Talking about unsettled toddlers one morning], I asked if we could have lunch earlier so they can go to bed earlier...emotional entanglement with the group is such that[their wellbeing] is not jeopardised by sticking to timetables...*

- Staff recognise the spectrum of emotions as genuine states to be shared. Instead of placating or distracting children with toys or objects when they were distressed or unhappy, they voiced preferences for being in the moment with them. Staff seemed to attribute agency to even very young children in mutuality of affect.

*There are moments of astonishing tenderness or realisation that they know where you are. Children give that back...*

*Instead of conning kids out of emotions and conning yourself out of taking that journey to stop being sad, you do it together: We'll stop being sad together and when you feel you can come out of this sadness, we might move forward together...*

- Staff assume the professional responsibility in emotional involvement with children in guarding them from harm by displacement of teachers' negative moods. They underlined the necessity of self-awareness and sensitivity to their *own* emotional states which may have repercussion in their relationships with the children.

*Entanglement has a dark side...we shouldn't knowingly and deliberately poison entanglements [by strife in our lives]; as a professional, one should be able to come away a bit, have somebody else step in...we have a duty not to take life out on children yet life is happening around them...*

- Staff are concerned about being interpreted as hierarchical and dehumanising in relationships with the parents, and engaging in power-based relationships with children. They expressed a willingness for establishing an atmosphere of equity and democratic communications and a desire to share decision making with the members of the school community.

*The notion of letting go of power...'Well, I am the teacher and you are the child and I need to be in charge'...a lot of what we do is to break down that sense in children.*

*I think we dehumanise families...when there's that professional fine line, and so much we have to be aware...how do you make it humane [and convey] that 'you are a member of this community' rather than 'we are staff, and you are family'...words that say and divide..*

*Even though one person may be working with a child, there's a collective decision making about what's working and what's not...*

- Concepts regarding children, their abilities, and their connectedness to peers are fluid and dynamic. Close observation of children's interests, development, social and environmental relationships and constructing learning as relationships appear to be focal.

*We've tracked down one child's colour preference of yellow to when she was about 8 months old...*

*Really, what you want for the children in the long run is to be at peace here and to enjoy it and have trusting relationships to be able to move on from.*

*Planning for children not in isolation but in the context of their peer group, their play group and what was happening in the room...children's world is their relationships with others...*

*I would never consider the children as a group of individuals; I would consider them as an individual within a group...The group therefore has a status which is a companion in their life, the group with its failings and joys and sorrows and achievements and skills and integrity which it brings to a child's life, which it also brings to the group's life...*

*I can see why Barry and Leon like each other; they both have a fun sense of humour, a bit on the wild side...They cannot talk yet. Scaring each other witless with the plastic lion is a good way of getting to know someone...that's what they do!*

- Accepting and respecting the individual differences among children, and viewing connectedness as a central human need are fundamental. There appeared to be considerable flexibility in accomodating the program to the child, and not the child to the program, particularly when children experienced distress.

*You can't homogenise children or your relationships with them; they are all so different you can't.*

*I've never met a child who didn't need a connection with some one .But some children make a connection with a lot of people, and others with just one or two...[and it is not frivolous]..it's like 'I can't be bothered with anyone else; you're all I need'...*

- Perspective taking skills, mind-mindedness and empathy with children's emotional states and needs form the crux of their practice.

*[Children's] inner imaginative emotional life...going on and on as they were watching Mulan Disney video...like living in this other world for a time...it took them a while to untangle and return to the preschool world..*

*We [adults] know what tired is, what thirsty is...we know the words for those..[with an infant] it takes someone to notice that you haven't had anything to drink and offer it. Physical wellbeing is not separate from emotional wellbeing.*

*[Talking about a child who voiced 'no one's my friend' at home] In communities and teachers, bells should ring when children become aware of the power of friendships and withdrawal of friendship...how central it is to life...A child doesn't want to come to school because someone said they are not his friend...they never say 'I don't want to go to school because I cannot sit on the red chair'...it's always because 'she doesn't like me...I don't like them...the teacher isn't nice'.*

*All of us sitting here could say that we hadn't wanted to go to work one day..And just like with children, it has to be worked through and sorted out...*

*With some [infants], falling in love with another person and early friendships are like an obsessive love...they are completely [preoccupied] with it.*

- Staff exhibit an awareness of professional practices, which trade convenience for severing children's emotional bonds to adults and their peers.

*The practice [in some centres] of moving children at six-monthly intervals when they are small...not only involves moving them away from a loved adult and a cohort of children that they have just begun to realise the features of and make tentative friendships with...but when moved to the next room, you'll say they're socially inept... It is institutional and professional neglect because we are unwilling, ourselves, to accept the relationship we have with the children, that we don't accept how powerful it is to the children themselves...*

- Staff voice an appreciation of change over time of children's emotional needs, yet recognise the significance of the historical continuity of relatedness. In discussing a child who had been at Mia-Mia from 6 months to 5 years of age:

*Lucy was always the one to come to you and lean against you and you could put your arm around her and she loved it when you gave her a quick cuddle...*

*[When Lucy came to visit Mia-Mia some time after her 'graduation'] She was looking at me and tapping her foot...I just put one arm out and she was in there! Not too big to still have a cuddle but I made it brief as knew we must unravel and she must be able to move away from me and know that I am letting her go...Watching myself in the middle of that (how we both of us decided how this was going to happen)...The professional self and the emotional*



*self...solving this problem...if you excise from yourself that emotionality, you are saying 'the last 5 years are over...'*

*You can't just ignore what has been...a lot of our time is spent in reflection and discussion [of such issues].*

These stands appear to be interrelated and interdependent, and the views expressed seem to be the self-perpetuating and mutually reinforced working ethos at Mia-Mia.

### **A mini case study in relatedness as practice of early childhood**

Staff related the following episode, which challenges the traditional conceptions of a day's work at a generic early childhood setting. We present it here, as it embodies most of the strands analysed above.

I can remember a child that was so emotionally overwhelmed at being here that he had to lie by the door, breathing fresh air under the door. He was too big to lift, so we used to say, 'well, we don't live in the 2's and 3's room anymore..we can't live by the front door and in the 2's and 3's room' as well, and so we would run the program at the front door. We said we were going to have the program at the front door as he wasn't going to move and I can't carry him. We can't leave him abandoned in his distress, so we ran the program there for about a month. The trick was getting him off the ground and sitting up, because then he could see what was going on, but he wouldn't let you touch him. He would not accept any kind of physical contact, so it was hard; you couldn't kiss him, you couldn't touch him to make him feel OK. And then, we decided to move the TV in front of him with a video from home, and then as he responded we slowly crept the TV about a foot a day until we were all back in the room and that's how we got him to see the fun!

### **What have we learned? Implications and concluding thoughts**

We find in the analyses of the discourse from the teachers and staff at Mia-Mia that there is a propensity for being attuned to the mental and emotional states of the children. This mentalising ability and perspective taking of, and on behalf of the children seem rampant, and would mark these caregivers as building and sustaining secure relationships, as posited by attachment paradigms mentioned (i.e., Meins, et al., 2001; Pianta, 1999). We note however, that we make no inference to attachment behavior per se, but only to those relatedness indices which are built on mutuality of affect, recognition and individuation of affective relational responses to each child'd demands, based on shared principles of authentic, genuine, vulnerable and child-serving connectedness within the nexus of the whole community of Mia-Mia.

Our aim in this project was to attempt to 'operationalise' relatedness in early childhood settings as a determinant of quality. The concepts of such deep, sensitive, cross-cutting relatedness that underpins all other objectives and is foundational to early childhood care and education, are beyond words and prescriptions. We feel we can define them through words and constructs and still not capture their true flavour. It is the practitioners who need to feel an urgency for it, and be recognised and emulated as they commit to it, and mentor those who need to cross the distance, as our colleagues at Mia-Mia have demonstrated to us.

We nevertheless cull some guidelines which we present for empirical and experiential scrutiny by the early childhood community towards predicating our practice on relatedness with children, families, ourselves and all who is around us who form the collaborative community:

- Make it your business to reflect on relationships of everyday life within the workplace for our humanness shines through them;
- Be vulnerable as one must in analysing and developing in self- and other-related emotional awareness and their impact;
- Question and query traditional historically and socioculturally-rooted early childhood practice which places conformity before the pleasures of being and expressing;
- Build a community and find meanings to share at your work setting; and
- Value your work for it contributes to human-beings-in-the-unfolding.

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