

## Building Resilience and the Important Place of Empathy

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*Kia hora te marino, Kia whakapapa pounamu te moana, Kia tere te Karohirohi i mua i to huarahi.  
May the calm be widespread, May the ocean glisten as greenstone, May the shimmer of light ever dance across your pathway.*

*Over the last several years of teaching at Pigeon Mountain Kindergarten we gave much consideration as a teaching team to the importance of Resilience in supporting children's learning. As we explored this disposition with children and considered teaching practices that support and build children's resilience as learners, the importance of empathy came to the fore.*

Like Te Whaariki (the woven mat with the strands and goals of learning interwoven), so too are the many intrinsic and external values and practices that build and support resilience in learning. Some of the considerations that were interwoven into our whaariki at Pigeon Mountain Kindergarten (PMK) included the language we use and the modeling we provide, the concept of ako - teaching and learning, the importance of Whanaungatanga, Manaakitanga and an environment that believes in play as a foundation for learning through providing opportunities for rich exploration and revisiting over time.

A key area of teaching practice that emerged through exploring dispositional teaching and learning was that of 'feeling' when working with children and families. That a lot of teaching is about feeling ... feeling when to move in and move out of interactions with children. When to listen and when to contribute. When to observe and when to participate/engage. It is a fine dance or balancing act supported by the notions of noticing, recognising and re-

sponding. Guy Claxton (2002) talks of intuitive teaching and Reggio Emilia talks of listening to children. Perhaps this 'feeling of learning' is also about the spiritual aspect of teaching. That of wairua or hinen-garo - developing a finer awareness.

Certainly the image or view we hold of the child central to our curriculum (Te Whaariki), is also central to our everyday practice, interaction and connection with children and whanau. The Maori world view recognises the mana of the child - that the child has power and potential. Our role is to support children's view of themselves as powerful learners - capable and competent. Jean Rockel, (2002) in her article 'Images of the child - an historical overview' writes of equal importance is our image of the teacher we choose for ourselves. Teaching and learning is contextual, complex and an interwoven dance or play of many considerations between teachers, children, families and the learning context.

Our research into the importance of resilience led us to experience the transformation that empathy can bring to this process and to children's learning, through children developing an understanding of each other as learners with different learning paths. This is strengthened through a shared understanding in which children's differing paths is respected. In this way, we are enculturating or cultivating an environment that supports children's growing trust and sense of belonging, which leads to supporting the development of courage and resilience. A developing sense of peace for the child encultured through a caring consideration of their holistic self strengthens the mana of each child. This notion of peace is not about passiveness

but more about what Rita Walker, (2008) describes as the mauri being in balance.

“The child’s body is emotionally, physically and socially well ... the mind is active and learning has no boundaries”

### **Jaymee’s Story**

“As children develop empathy, they become more adept at finding the humanity in one another. Without empathy, we can’t get to conflict resolution, altruism or peace.” Gordon, M p. 14

An example of this is reflected in Jaymee’s story. Jaymee joined us as a 3 year old in our afternoon session and after initially settling happily she became upset separating from her mother. We observed and worked collectively to really consider what was happening for Jaymee and how we could best ensure that this was a safe and happy place for her. Over this time what was highlighted to us was the trust that her mother had in us. She trusted that her daughter was being left in an environment of care and one that had her daughter’s best interests at heart.

In discussion with her mother, we learnt of Jaymee’s keen interest in fairy tales and dressing up. Each day she would enjoy music and songs from her favourite tales. We discovered her wealth of knowledge and the joy that these would bring. She did find some sense of peace through developing trust in her relationships with teachers here and the opportunity to enjoy revisiting fairy tales. We decided to explore a little deeper and intentionally giving thought to teaching practices that support and encourage emotional resilience. It was at this time we came to understand her sensitivity to the behaviour of others around her and how this affected her sense of a secure and peaceful self - her mauri being in balance.

PMK’s teaching philosophy shared our belief in “...working to establish responsive and reciprocal relationships with a view to

dignifying the lives of all who are a part of our learning community“. We thought about how we reflect or live this philosophy in our practice. The question we asked of ourselves was; how can we maintain the dignity of all children and support the building of resilient learners so that they feel, not only a sense of trust and safety, but a view of themselves as capable, competent and powerful learners who feel that they are a valued member of this community?

We had been researching the Building Learning Power framework developed by Guy Claxton for several years in response to our desire to strengthen the value of dispositional teaching and learning. This included what we came to know as ‘the language of learning’. Reflecting on this framework, we began to intentionally change our language from having a behavioral emphasis to a learning emphasis. In this way, we sought to uphold all children’s dignity and mana. Other practices we began to explore further included:

- Being with Jaymee and when in the presence of others explaining their learning experiences and ways of being.
- Promoting the view of all children as being capable and competent learners.
- Sharing children’s strengths and modeling language that supported dispositional understandings recognising the child/ren as a learner.
- Sharing understandings with family and building connections with home.
- Developing a shared language between home and the kindergarten.

One of our dances as teachers was finding the balance between acknowledging and showing empathy towards the feelings of Jaymee, and holding onto the view of her as a capable and competent learner. But perhaps this is the difference between empathy and sympathy? The importance of understanding the difference impacts on our teaching practice and our interactions and/or responses with children.



*“What does being brave mean?”. To which you replied, “I don’t know!”. I too questioned myself as to what being brave meant and I suggested to you whether it was about trying something even though you might be a little bit unsure whether or not you could do it? “Yeah that’s it”, you replied nodding your head in agreement.*

### **Empathy and Sympathy**

“Empathy means entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming at home in it. It means temporarily living his/her life, moving in it delicately without making judgements ...To be with another in this way means that for the time being you lay aside the views and values you hold for yourself in order enter another’s world” Carl Rogers, quoted in ‘Building Learning Power’ p.42

When giving thought to the difference between empathy and sympathy Neel Burton (2015) @ Psychology Today explains empathy being defined as “ ... a persons ability to recognise and share the emotions of another person ...”. Sympathy on the other hand is “... a feeling of care and concern for someone ... accompanied by a wish to see him better off or happier”.

Stephen Covey (2004) writes of the importance of empathic listening - listening to understand. When we considered the relationship between empathy and resilience we were considering empathy in the light of building an understanding of each other, including the ‘other’ as learners. Building an understanding of each other’s different learning paths became important.

Brene’ Brown (2013) talks of the difference between empathy and sympathy and highlights that empathy is about about “the ability to take a perspective of another person” and “staying out of judgement”. That it is connection that makes something better - not silver lining shared experience’s but “feeling with people”.

There were many stories of resilience at our place of learning. These included stories around children taking risks, finding the confidence to have a go at new challenges, setting and assessing their own learning goals and persevering to accomplish these. Other stories were about the importance of becoming absorbed in learning and learning about tolerating the feelings of learning. However Jaymee’s story highlighted to us the important connection of empathy and resilience.

Our understanding of resilience was grown from Guy Claxton’s, (2005), description as being “... about locking onto learning: being able to get absorbed, and to stay engaged despite external extractions”. This understanding is intrinsically connected to one’s emotional resilience and supports one “as being *ready, willing* and *able* to engage profitably in learning” Claxton and Carr, (2004).

Jaymee grew to recognise what it means to be a learner at PMK - for herself and for others and that this path can be different. She found a sense of peace, a balanced sense of wellbeing and went on to explore what it feels like to take risks and to be brave. (see learning story ‘Being Brave’). One of her paths to finding this safety and sense of trust was through her developing

understanding of the learning paths of others.

### Being at our Teaching Best

We were reminded of how powerful the modeling of language can be. But this language does not sit on its own. It is an area of practice that is intertwined with our overall dance as a teacher. As Mary Gordon, (2005) writes:

“Children develop social and emotional competence through the quality of the relationships they first develop with parents and those closest to them. What we say to them is important but more crucial still is how we say it and what we are conveying about our respect for them as individuals” p.133.

“How we say it” reflects our presence and connection with children - the quality of our relationships that connect us with others through the feelings we project towards one another. We were working with care not to make judgements but connecting through building an understanding of each other. And I write “being careful to not make judgement” because in my experience it is being intentional that makes the change and builds a community space of shared understanding.

Jean Rockel’s, (2002) reminder of the importance, not only of the image we hold of children but about our image we hold of the teacher leads me to consider the notion and importance of ‘being in balance’. If we are considering the importance of ‘being in balance’ for children, then of equal value must be the ‘being in balance of the teacher’. This balance supports the dance of the teacher as we intuitively and thoughtfully notice, recognise and respond to children. It is the power of our everyday ways of being and doing that we are modeling to children, sharing perhaps both subtle but powerful messages to them about the valued learning paths of all, that we are enculturating in our learning envi-



*“Rose was kind and helped me, but now, now I can do it by myself.” It is wonderful to see your excitement in your learning Jaymee - we know that this is what motivates good learners and that through these experiences you are strengthening dispositions that will continue to support your ongoing learning.*

ronments. As Guy Claxton, (2005) points out:

“We are built to learn by imitation. Evolution has equipped us with brains that are designed from the moment of birth to do what people around us are doing ... it’s through this kind of unconscious osmosis that children learn the habits of language and culture into which they have been born. They pick up the speech sounds and accents they hear and the emotional reactions they see being modeled ... so we need to be careful to be at our learning best around young children, especially if they like or admire us, for their ‘hero’s are the people whose habits they will find most contagious”

Our experience at PMK was that, through thoughtful investigation into promoting learning that is valued, we move together as a team encouraged by pedagogical dialogue. Shared understandings and the ex-

citement of the shared learning that develops promotes further development. I think that what is important is the sustained ability to reflect and adapt - "to be at our teaching best" as Guy Claxton, (2002) reminds us. When we intentionally research or investigate areas of learning that we are curious about, we build a community of understanding through shared dialogue or discourse. A quote from Tishman, Jay and Perkins (1993) that has impacted on my practice and the importance of intentional teaching comes to mind;

"We are enculturating whether we like it or not so we may as well take heed and enculture what we want"

Carr and Claxton, (2008), in their article, 'A framework for teaching learning: the dynamics of disposition' highlight the importance of a programme or a learning environment that 'affords the negotiation of meaning'. They look to the work of Wenger (1998) who argues the importance of a balance of two process's - 'reification (making public, making concrete) and participation' p. 94. Working to explore how we could build shared understandings of positive learning dispositions led us to step back from being the ones (as teachers) who transmit knowledge. It led us to being in a role where a greater awareness of the building of collective understanding developed. Again, I would say this was part of the dance we play as teachers and, on reflection, the balance we work to achieve between offering understanding, developing understanding and recognising children's shared understandings.

Reification through learning stories highlights the dialogue (child voice, parent voice, teachers voice) and shared understandings that shape and share messages with children and families about learning that is valued. It is a public platform that makes visible the learning dialogue and the identity of the child as a successful learner. Participation within the learning environment is founded on the importance

of the quality of child's relationships and connections with both adults and others.

"It is the participation in a classroom or and early childhood setting with others who orient their action to common values that contributes to a sense of belonging to a community of learners, and to strengthening identity as learners" Carr and Claxton, (2004) p.95.

Again it is about balance and authenticity. The balance between reification and participation in enculturating learning environments that support children in both developing and building an awareness of the importance of robust learning dispositions that are founded on a strong sense of belonging and responsive, attuned relationships.

Recently, at a workshop with Nathan-Mikaere Wallis, sharing research on children's brain development, he highlighted the importance of the quality of the dyad (relationship between 2 people). This dyad he shared, forms the blueprint for all other relationships.

### **Being and Becoming On reflection ...**

Now, several years later, as I reflect on this learning, I also think about the notions of 'being' and 'becoming', something that we talked much about as a teaching team. Gordon-Burns, Gunn, Purdue and Surtees (2012) in their book 'Te Aoturoa Tātaki; Inclusive early childhood education' bring to light the importance of children's voices as shared by James and Prout (1997) in the discussion of 'being' and 'becoming'. Children's Voice supports the notion of children retaining their mana or agency as we view children as 'being' rather than 'becoming'.

"When adults (Kaiako and whanau) view children as *being* rather than *becoming* and as *beings* in their own right (James & Prout, 1997; Lansdown, 2004; Smith, 2007), they tend to engage in discourses

that focus in children as having agency, as of being competent'. P. 83

They share that when teachers view children as being "...they are more likely to position themselves as sharing power and decision making with children" (p.83).

Children come to us as capable and competent. Empathy then means understanding that as Jaymee traversed the transition into kindergarten, she was **being** brave. Certainly, developing the recognition or awareness of others as learners, was captured for Jaymee as we researched the language or discourses of learning towards shared empathic understandings of each others learning paths. This was a key process in helping her develop resilience. Her learning stories were a powerful platform to share her strengthening confidence and active engagement in her identity as a successful learner.

"According to James and Prout (1997), children are not passive recipients of social norms, but they are actively engaged in creating their own identities and those of others. Their identities are linked to their everyday experiences within their culture and their setting" Gordon-Burns, Gunn, Purdue and Surtees p.83.

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