

WHY WE NEED TEACHERS WITH PRESENCE

- The search for sense and meaning -

by Wendy Ellyatt

One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child.

- *Carl Jung*

Teaching is an extraordinarily important profession, especially when it involves the responsibility of nurturing, and helping shape, young and highly sensitive minds. Some people seem to draw children to them and to hold the attention of a whole room easily. Others struggle to maintain any true connections. What is it that goes on in a classroom that makes such a difference? It clearly has something to do with personal energy as children sense it so quickly without a word being said. We are all giving out and receiving energy all the time. It is a kind of 'life-force' that is particularly strong and present when we are fully in the moment. We have 'presence' when others feel that we are fully 'there' with them. And in some people this vital and empathic presence is particularly strong.

When we are born we are full of this presence that connects us to everyone else. In fact when we are born we have no sense of being 'other'. It is only as we grow that we develop a sense of separate 'self', but this self is intimately bound to the experiences and reflections that we receive from the environment. We are social beings and create our value and belief systems through immersion in the surrounding culture. Each one of us is unique, however, and, as such, we are drawn to some activities more than others and have certain things that we are particularly good at. This is something that happens in any healthy natural system as it is the parts that go to make up the whole and the whole works best if every part is functioning to maximum efficiency.

We are clearly not designed to be the same and it is the strengths and weaknesses that we experience within ourselves that help guide us both to what we will find most fulfilling, and to what therefore serves the larger whole. There is some kind of "vital force" that gives us a sense of meaning and purpose over and above our day-to-day activities. It invites us into challenge and the excitement of reaching out beyond ourselves into the unknown. The best teachers come into the profession because they are fascinated with how children learn and are deeply fulfilled by being participants in the process. Children sense both their passion and empathy and this creates environments that are open, safe and full of creative possibility. The relationship between a teacher and pupil is, therefore, much more than just something based upon passing on prescribed information. Instead there is a constant exchange of energy with children reacting to both verbal and non verbal messages.

Young children are particularly sensitive to the energy of the adults that they spend time with. They are also at their most responsive in terms of how they engage with the world around them. To know that you are in a space with adults who care for you, who make you feel safe, loved and that you matter, is essential for healthy development.

It is particularly important, therefore, for early years teachers to have this special quality of empathic presence if the children in their care are to feel secure. The dilemma that we currently face is that this quality is something that historically comes from mature, reflective personal development rather than academic achievement. It requires the teacher to have reached a particular level of inner understanding about their own value and belief systems and how they might impact on the environment. In the old days nursery school teachers were likely to have been mature women with a great deal of life experience and children of their own. Now we have increasing numbers of very young practitioners who have had no time to develop this inner reflectiveness and empathic sensitivity.

Can this be taught? Loris Malaguzzi was faced with the problem when he created the first schools in Reggio Emilia. He was horrified by the inexperience of the young girls left to care for the children.

'The Preparation of teachers to work with young children is, I believe, a sort of legally sanctioned farce, really unspeakable.'

He believed that teachers should be as involved in the search for self and meaning as the children and that it was this co-construction of meaning that created the spirit and presence of the classroom. Teacher training wasn't something isolated to the dry material of curricular modules, rather it was something very alive and of the moment – more reminiscent of Maria Montessori's call to her directresses to be more 'psychologists and scientists' than traditional teachers. Such deep and active involvement in the moment allowed both children and teachers to be both challenged and nurtured by the process as co-learners. And that involvement resulted in the joy and passion that was so evident in so many Reggio teachers – no matter what their age.

There are certain core processes that seem to nurture a sense of presence in teachers:

- 1) Being invited to explore personal belief and value systems, to understand how these have been created and to have an appreciation for alternative points of view
- 2) Learning how we communicate both verbally and non-verbally
- 3) Reflecting on how we engage with others; how we look, listen, think, feel and learn
- 4) Deep involvement with the environment
- 5) Co-creative activities and acknowledging yourself as a co-learner
- 6) Experiencing and sharing children's wonder and awe
- 7) Ongoing and creative dialogue and debate with peers

With the current focus on young teachers entering the field it is more important than ever that their training should encompass such processes. Joyful, passionate, fully engaged teachers should be the norm for the early years. There are real and substantial dangers in rushing through a workforce based on teacher training modules that neglect the inner world of the teacher, when a mature understanding and sense of self is so essential to the job.

The young child is like a small seed – full of extraordinary possibilities. The adults that are part of his or her environment can help or hinder growth depending on their own maturity and energetic state and the implications of this are something that I think deserve much more attention.

It's common to say that trees come from seeds. But how could a tiny seed create a huge tree? Seeds do not contain the resources needed to grow a tree. These must come from the medium or environment within which the tree grows. But the seed does provide something that is crucial: a place where the whole of the tree starts to form. As resources such as water and nutrients are drawn in, the seed organizes the process that generates growth. In a sense, the seed is a gateway through which the future possibility of the living tree emerges.