"Kind Hands, Kind Face": An analysis of how pre-school practitioners use children's group behaviour to extend their social and emotional learning.

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Introduction

Tremblay, Brun and Nadel (2005:341) argue "infants at start belong to their social world before they belong to themselves". Asserting that children develop an awareness of themselves in relation to the world, and begin to understand possession, ownership and social roles through play, they conclude that young children need to learn to function socially and emotionally early in life in order to thrive. This positions social and emotional understanding as critical to development. Denham et al (2003) conclude that by pre-school, children are already in possession of component skills comprising emotional competence; being able to discern and express emotions in themselves and others, and are beginning to regulate them. Drawing on Piagetan theory that young children are egocentric and unable to appreciate the perspectives of others (Wilde & Astington, 1994), it could perhaps be argued that SEL in early childhood aids the transition from egocentric views to more sophisticated thinking; Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning would be one example, whereby children develop morality through learning to understand different perspectives (Aldgate, Rose, and Jeffrey, 2006; Carpendale and Lewis, 2008). Indeed, social and emotional intelligence is identified as vital to laying foundations for future educational, social and emotional wellbeing (Berk, 2004, Tickell, 2011, Denham et al, 2003). Early Years education itself is regarded as a transformational process, whereby children learn through shared experience (Chang-Wells and Wells, 1996). Those children who gain complex social and emotional skills are argued to be more able to manage early peer relationships (Denham et al, 2009) and transition successfully to school (Rimm-Kaufmann, 2004).

Thus, how social and emotional competences are taught and to what extent they develop spontaneously are of key consideration. Eisold (2001) argues SEL at pre-school stage happens compulsively due to the volume of time young children spend interacting. However, given that children possess a variable level of SEL by

pre-school stage (Webster-Stratton, 1999), and the significance of factors such as socio-economic and cultural influences (Palmer, 2007, Layard & Dunn, 2007, Eisold, 2001, Siraj-Blatchford, Clarke & Needham, 2007), it is important to consider whether professional practice seeks to "teach" or to enhance, influence and extend this skill set. This article draws on a research study which aimed to understand practitioner strategies in developing these skills in pre-school children, and to identify the critical features of their approach.

Ethics and Positionality

The research methodology involved direct contact with children and staff and prompted issues of informed consent (Thompson, 2011). Following discussion with the setting, minor adjustments were made to the methodology and a letter and FAQ sheet was produced for parents. The research did not commence until written consent had been obtained from every family (Denscombe, 2007).

As the research methodology placed a stranger in the children's environment, it was important to seek the consent of children themselves. Harcourt and Conroy (2011) advocate an open dialogue in negotiating consent and dissent with children, enabling trust, and giving explanations while being led by the child's curiosity. The manager introduced the researcher in age appropriate language and explained she was "finding out about "Pre-school". Children were told they were welcome to talk to her, but also that they didn't have to. Thus the children themselves initiated any direct conversations. As discussed by Harcourt and Conroy (2011) this provided reassurance for the children, and ensured the research had considered children's rights.

Ethical concerns for adults were also considered; it was acknowledged that staff may have felt scrutinised, however they may equally have viewed the research as adding value to their work. It was important that these influences were carefully considered in creating the research relationship. Thus the intentions of the study were shared; that the philosophy was to understand the approach, not to pass judgement, in line with case study research principles (Denscombe, 2007). Staff were directly informed of their right to abstain, granted confidentiality, and reassured that the research was outside of a management agenda (Bell, 2005).

The identified setting was originally known to the researcher personally, and she was aware of the recent Ofsted judgement of Outstanding. This study draws on

Robson's (2011) Social Constructivist perspective, which argues that the researcher is part of the process, and that an objective reality is inevitably informed by individual constructions. Thus the positionality of the researcher was considered particularly important in devising a methodology; a year elapsed between the researcher knowing the setting personally and entering a research role. Conversations helped to shift the relationships, enabling a distancing from previous roles. The familiarity assisted the setting up of the research and the formation of trusting relationships, which later enabled a depth of questioning which may otherwise have been difficult in a limited timeframe. Academic discussion indeed acknowledges this position as a possible strength in a research process; Daly (2007) discusses the influence of a researcher's own perspective; that acknowledging possible subjectivity and balancing this with an objective analysis presents a pragmatic and sound approach to qualitative research. Significantly the researcher also had professional experience of distancing personal views to maintain objectivity (Denscombe 2007).

Furthermore, although social and emotional learning are identified as Early Learning Goals and thereby part of the Ofsted inspection framework (Dfe 2012), an "Outstanding" Ofsted judgement does not necessarily mean the setting is "Outstanding" in SEL. Although this verdict potentially evokes a belief that all practice is of highest possible standard, Pole & Lampard (2002) argue that to sustain this over an extended period would be extremely difficult. Ultimately, it was not the intention of this case study research to judge the standard of practice, rather to observe and consider issues arising from the way in which SEL happened.

Methodology

The setting for the research was located in a semi rural area, with a largely middle class demographic and some areas of social housing. The setting has strong relationships with local schools and children progress to a range of primaries. Thus the children's transition away from their peers at the end of the pre-school year is considered significant. The setting is well established and cares for up to 50 children at any one time. It is divided into Baby, Toddler and Pre-school rooms, with teaching planned specifically to age groups. The 2011 Ofsted identified strengths in providing for children's emotional and social needs, pinpointing the leadership skills of the manager in establishing a respectful and analytical ethos within the setting. This

inspection is part of the background to the study; it does not however predetermine the effectiveness of what will be considered here.

The research was conducted from September 2011 – June 2012 within a triangulated qualitative case study methodology. It was of particular value to the study to consider the thinking behind the practice, thus the research methods were identified as practice observations, a semi-structured interview with the manager and a staff focus group. In order to consider the development of SEL through the year, observations were conducted in November, March and July. The process began with a pilot observation to identify aspects of the pre-school day which had potential to elicit rich data. Thus the observations focused on outdoor free play, indoor activities, and practitioner led circle time.

The ethos of the setting was identified through initial conversations with the manager, and further explored in the semi-structured Interview held prior to the first observation. The staff focus group was held in March when enough data had been collected to inform discussions and further observations, such as preparation for school. Identifying the practitioners' perspectives on SEL was key to understanding their intervention, given the significance of practitioners as role models (Hay & Cook, 2007). It was envisaged that SEL would occur through planned activities and spontaneous events, being both taught and caught (Hallam. 2009), that the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum would facilitate learning, but also that staff would foster a reflexive response to naturally occurring learning, with identified strategies for supporting individual needs (Tickell, 2011, Rimm-Kaufmann, 2004, McClelland & Morrison, 2003).

Although the methodology had been carefully constructed to take account of differing perspectives, it must be acknowledged that the manager placed herself in the focus group and therefore staff views may have been compromised. That said, there is no evidence to suggest any dissent, and the rapport between manager and team appeared genuinely warm. The manager frequently referred to them as a team, and given her full-time practitioner role in the setting, it was evident that her management role was in addition to her practice. However, it is acknowledged here that it may be difficult to express a contradictory view in such a context, verified by Denscombe (2007) as a known dynamic within focus group research.

The observation therefore considered planned and spontaneous activities, and staff/child interaction. The richness of relationships within the setting was

considered, as interpersonal dynamics are linked to SEL outcomes for children (MacGillchrist, Myers& Reed, 2004). Analysis therefore sought evidence of an established culture within which children could develop ideas and relationships, and reflect on their experiences. Practitioners were observed as role models within child-initiated learning. Considering the trajectory for social and emotional skills to develop with learning and maturity, the research considered how children's difficulties are addressed; perhaps that difficult behaviour might be regarded as an unfolding developmental need (Webster-Stratton, 1999).

Findings

Data was analysed using a coding system (Saldana 2009) which scrutinised identified aspects of practice such as a safe environment, shared vision, children's participation, and both taught and caught SEL strategies. Qualitative data found that the manager viewed the pre-school ethos as underpinned by SEL, played out in a culture of mutual respect between adults and children. Focus group data evidenced that staff referred back to this ethos frequently through an established culture of reflection. The qualitative data was interpreted against broad headings. A more detailed grid was also devised as an analytic tool, which enabled deeper interpretation of the dynamics between children and adults in the setting. The findings focused on the research aims and considered unforeseen themes which emerged as part of the process. One such theme was the centrality of leadership and the way in which the children responded.

Cohen (2001) and Geddes (2006) discuss the need for a safe learning environment, considering children's emotional security with those around them. Ellison (2001) discusses connections between emotion and learning, particularly in early years where emotion orchestrates many vital aspects of brain function. Ellison reflects that, as memories are stored with an emotional connection, they infer meaning; thus experiences share a sensory and emotional bond. How secure children feel in their learning environment therefore has a direct relationship to their feelings about learning. Emotion becomes the mechanism for registering nonverbal cues and adjusting behaviour accordingly, thus children learn to predict how they will feel, or cope with events based on their prior experiences (Ellison 2001). Thus establishing a feeling of safety and security is fundamental to preparing children for future learning, keenly relevant to the pre-school year.

The qualitative data suggests a high regard for children's emotional security within the setting. The manager talked about Maslow's hierarchy of needs in interview and focus groups and staff were observed speaking to children with care and compassion; they listened with sustained eye contact, and used positive non verbal communication. Staff were frequently observed reassuring children with physical contact such as hand holding, and assisting them directly. One child with identified additional needs for behaviour (Beth*) was consistently reminded to choose more positive behaviour with a refrain of "Kind hands, Kind face". It is noteworthy that the dialogue used with this child, and the observed approach of repeating this language with the whole group suggested an intention to instil a sense of safety, and acted as a cue both to Beth and her peers to treat others well.

Interview and focus group data suggested staff had a high regard for the welfare of the children and demonstrated their belief in children as important and capable. Their observable practice indicated their compassion for children and that SEL was valued as important and complex, thus difficulties were seen as learning needs, rather than bad behaviour. The example below suggests the practitioner was conscious of children's vulnerabilities and regarded the event as complex and meaningful for both.

Figure 1

P (Practitioner) was observed calming a situation between Beth and Sally* over a worm ("Crawley") and a ladybird ("Annie"). Sally was willing to share Annie with Beth, but Beth, who had carefully created a habitat for Crawley, was not willing to let Sally hold the worm and showed signs of stress; first with an angry face and then by running away with it. P took Sally's hand to stop her from chasing Beth – which may have escalated the situation, and reassured her that when Beth stopped running away they would be able to talk about Crawley. Beth soon stopped running and P and Sally approached her calmly. P asked Beth if Sally could have a "little hold" of Crawley – thus without stating the worm "belonged" to Beth, P indicated Beth's high status in relation to it, and reassured her Sally would take great care. Beth agreed and Sally held the worm for a few seconds before P returned it to Beth. P gradually stepped back and the girls continued their play amicably for some time.

Fisher (2008) discusses the presentation of disaffected children in early years, stating that, whereas older children might withdraw from the environment, the very young remain within the security of the setting, displaying their withdrawal through tantrums, passively by hiding or simply not doing what is required. An active presentation was evident with Beth, and the practitioner had identified enabling her to stay in the environment as a key strategy. The manager's approach to this child's individual needs was evidenced through interview and observation data.

Maintaining a balance in power between adults and children, (figure 2), was also evidenced by staff demonstrating a clear intention to shape children's behaviour. Effective role modelling occurs where children perceive adults as high status, and where the behaviour is rewarded; assuming that children maintain attention, and have the ability and motivation to retain and reproduce modelled behaviours (Green, 2010). This process was evident in interview and focus group data, and observed in practice. The Manager and staff spoke about establishing respect for others from the first sessions of the pre-school year. During the interview, the manager was asked what she considered to be a show of respect from young children. She answered;

"That they give us their attention, and listen, and treat one another nicely...that they treat us well too. And we demonstrate it first – they can't do it without being shown. We show them by treating them with respect because that's what we want them to learn"

The strategy for instilling this respect was clearly identified among the team. Observation data indicated practice was overwhelmingly consistent and is exemplified below:

Figure 2

All staff were observed using the rhetoric of "good sitting, good listening, good looking...well done" at key stages during the day. Details of established practice were observed as each adult articulated this in the same manner each time. Each started by gaining the children's attention through calling "Pre-school* Children", waiting for all children to give their attention, then speaking slowly and clearly with a

smile. Any negative behaviour was returned to this framework, so that staff were heard to ask "was that good listening? Is that good sitting?", in a reflective pattern.

Clear sanctions were communicated to children repeatedly. When one member of staff found children were not sitting and listening well for a story, the book was quietly folded away and placed in her lap. Children quickly adjusted how they were sitting and looked directly at the staff member, who acknowledged them by name; "Good sitting Daisy*, good looking Jack*.." etc. When all children had followed, the story began. This strategy was delivered without criticism, but with clear reinforcement that the story would only begin when children met behavioural expectations.

Green (2010) discusses Erikson's work on children's psycho-social development and the transition from autonomy vs. shame and doubt at age 2-3, to initiative vs. guilt at age 4-5, where children have an emerging sense of independence. These developments comprise building blocks of children's self assurance but are vulnerable to punitive responses which may curtail their willingness to explore. A behaviourist approach, constructed of clear boundaries and reinforcement, offers a consistent and reliable framework for children. The data could therefore suggest the setting employs a behaviourist approach as a foundation, while guiding children towards what the practitioners consider to be autonomous choices, suggesting that Erikson's theories and subsequent behavioural shifts are utilised in the setting. However, given the high representation of specific expectations of the children, the authenticity of their autonomy remains in question. Blank & Schneider (2011) discuss a similar study of pre-school children's negotiation of behaviour through language. Their subject setting also reveals a "shared language", similarly pinned around a given ethos. However, here children are encouraged to find their own language, arguing that heavily constructed resolution strategies are less effective, providing an image of children's agency, when in fact they are pinned to received wisdom and authority. In both studies, professionals have been observed to wrestle with the place of the child's voice vs. the adult guidance, both referencing a notion of "expectations" rather than "rules".

Berk (2004) argues that children's interdependency first develops through adult-child interactions but that over time peer groups and reinforced ideas become more influential, supporting children's ability to react and communicate appropriately

and independently. Similarly Whitebread (2012) argues that children should be able to choose appropriate behaviours with understanding. Cohen (2001) asserts this ability to interpret the perspectives of others is similar to learning phonics, a process of decoding as relevant to literacy as reading and writing. This deep level process enables the child to recognise behaviour as meaningful, thus nurturing an empathetic and appropriate set of responses, and is equally relevant to both adult–child and child-child relationships within education, familial and social settings (Laevers, 2000). Thus this suggests that children's ability to understand others and rationalise events will determine their success in negotiating the relationships which dominate their environment.

Cohen (2001), Webster-Stratton (1999), and Hallam (2009) assert that exploring dilemmas can stimulate children to compile known and unknown information, to begin to understand complex dynamics. Whitebread (2012) argues it is essential that children reflect on experiences, and that their behaviour and performance improves accordingly. This process is used at all life stages, in resolving conflicts, making informed choices, and in adult life (Moshman 2011). The ability to overcome difficulties through relationships is linked to resilience in children, itself acknowledged as a determining factor in future success and wellbeing and relevant throughout life (Cohen, 2001, Whitebread, 2012). Reflection is therefore key to children's early social learning, emotional maturity and a positive first experience of education.

A regard for this philosophy was evidenced by interview, focus group and observation data with children's own self regulation of the environment being evident towards the end of the pre-school year. Staff were observed managing disagreements between children within a reflective process and spoke about their approach during the focus group. The setting ethos evidently acted as their foundation for managing these conflicts, and exemplified the management vision. The consistency of the mantra of "good listening" and "kind hands, kind face" acted as a foundation for reflecting with children on their behaviour. It laid down expectations with children, and given its simplicity seemed to be easily understood by them. Children were not reprimanded, but asked whether they thought they had "done good listening" or "shown a kind face"; they were encouraged to think and reflect on their behaviour and the consequences of it, following the current trends of behaviour management and prevention of bullying (Woods, 2013). However children

were consistently returned to the "correct" behaviour, raising a question as to whether this was truly evidence of sustained shared thinking, acknowledged as best practice (Great Britain 2004, Siraj-Blatchford, Clarke & Needham 2007).

The simplicity and strength of the shared vision (Novick, Kress and Elias, 2002) appeared very effective in communicating the expectations to children, and acted as a clear framework for staff. Staff agreed what signified "good listening". For example sitting calmly, not pushing and shoving others, and maintaining eye contact would gain a positive response from adults. Smiles from the children would be received warmly. Children expressing anger, frustration or sadness would be spoken to gently to ascertain the problem and demonstrate care, but also to remind children of expectations. The dynamics played out in the rhetoric of the ethos, but moreover in the warmth and trust between the staff team (Novick, Kress & Elias, 2002), clearly linked with the manager's own view that staff need to role model positive relationships for children. The calm happy atmosphere was testimony to this, and perhaps helped create security for the children (Ellison, 2001).

Penn (2011) comments that "good" European settings are observed to have a concept of Solidarity amongst staff – they are self motivated to help each other, and display genuine warmth and friendship. However, in contrast settings in the UK and US are argued to focus on individual practice – a shared vision appears harder to achieve and management is more formal. Likewise Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) (Great Britain 2004) concluded strong leadership is indicative of a strong setting. The focus group data suggested staff had a genuinely cohesive vision, indicated by their energetic and thoughtful conversations regarding shared creative approaches with children. Data records how staff shared plans demonstrating a high regard for the key worker role and collaboration, indicative perhaps of the EPPE notion of Solidarity. It is possible though that although staff appeared to display such elements, that this also has been constructed.

The research data suggests that this approach has resulted in a clearly defined and accepted way of being together in pre-school, in an environment which promotes deep thinking in young children (Laevers, 2000). Paige-Smith and Craft (2008) argue that such practice enables children to thrive, especially where children and adults engage in shared thinking, and is attributed to a particularly strong SEL curriculum (Rose & Rogers, 2012). The research data indicated this through the reflective discussion between adults and children, and later in the year, among the

children themselves. However although the dialogue was reflective, children were consistently returned to the "correct" behaviour; this does not give a sense of proactively building an ethos together. Reflexive responses to children are acknowledged as high quality practice by EPPE (Great Britain 2004), particularly where children are able to rationalise their conflicts though talk. Whilst this was evident in the practice of both staff (figure 1) and manager, who helped Beth reconcile the destruction of her play-doh worm, itself representing an earlier conflict with the same child over a real worm "Crawley", it was the mantra of "kind hands, kind face" and "good listening" which were most prominent in the environment.

Thus the strength of the social messages conveyed so routinely to children, may have diluted the scope to explore issues and arrive at a genuinely reflective conclusion. Reflection clearly existed in a context where the overriding mantra was laid down as a clear expectation; children would adhere to it, staff would gear their practice around it. Given academic conclusions that rationalising and reflecting on behaviour elicits the most positive outcomes for children (EPPE, Great Britain 2004, Blank & Schneider, 2011, Fisher, 2008, and Penn, 2011) there is perhaps something lacking here. Children, used to hearing the approved way of conducting themselves, may perceive ideals as imposed rather than co-constructed, which may be less powerful.

While children's voices are clearly valued in the setting, the behaviour which results from professional interventions do not necessarily indicate genuine agency (Corsaro, 2011). It also raises a question of how valued would those voices be, should they not corroborate the ethos and expectations of the setting. This approach merely hints at a Children's Rights perspective, an example of participation hailed as autonomy, when in fact children are curtailed by adult control rather than genuine self-determination (Nutbrown, 2003). However, the data reflects practitioners' perspectives that children are invited to arrive at a predetermined conclusion, and that the staff aim for children to engage with this willingly and with understanding.

Despite some possible limitations, the dialogue between staff during the focus group and the exchange of creative ideas suggests their intention to develop children's sense of self-determination was thoughtful and genuine. Data revealed that practitioners were determined to build children's understanding of social behaviour rather than simply correct it. This willingness to foster deep thinking within an adult-led agenda reflects Chamber's (2012) discussion of children's agency,

acknowledging that some discomfort has arisen around the balance of power and responsibility afforded to children through the participation agenda, suggesting the balance between children's and adults' leadership should perhaps be brought back into focus. Likewise Green (2010) charters the shift in children's status from being at the mercy of adult decision making, to the contemporary view of children as capable of informing the decisions made about them.

During the summer term, one aspect of evidence suggested children had begun to police the environment themselves. They were observed referencing one another's behaviour, and in complaining about peers referred back to the message they had received so consistently.

Figure 3

Ben* was seen running through the indoor setting during a busy time. He was stopped by a member of staff (P*) who said "Ben, which is better, walking or running?" Ben replied "running". The staff member turned to the rest of the children, most of whom had turned to look;

P (to Ben); "Ooh let's see what everyone thinks... Children, which is best walking or running?"

Children chorus "Walking!"

P; "Oh! They all think walking! What do you think is best, Ben, walking or running?"

Ben; "I think walking is best"

P' to Ben "Well done"

This exchange demonstrated the aim to influence behaviour without criticising, and to offer children "choices"; the manager comments: "*We don't engage in confrontation but show ... there is a different way, with a happier outcome – revisit and reflect...; was that a better choice?*" However it also demonstrates the place of the peer group in this setting, suggesting that by this stage in the year, the message to children had been so consistent that practitioners could rely on children's own involvement in upholding the expectations of the setting. Ben's attempt to push the boundaries did not need to be challenged by a practitioner as the children did this for

her by responding to a single question. However this question was clearly constructed. The children were arguably led into an anticipated response which bore out the expectations conveyed to them. The positive reinforcement they received from adhering to this acted as a motivator to replicate the expectations to their peers. This was also an example of where reflection was not used with the child but the behaviour was simply curtailed.

Ben was not openly criticised, but his actions were positioned by the practitioner to be outside of the expectations. He was exposed to the weight of peer influence, which seemingly felt onerous, as he immediately corrected himself. This was evidence of an emerging moral code – the guilt of contradicting the expectations is exemplified by Ben's immediate willingness to follow his peers, corroborating Bandura's social learning theory, and Erikson's work on children's emerging sense of guilt (Green 2010). Putallaz and Gottman (1981) conclude that gaining entry to peer groups presents a challenge for children, and they are vulnerable to rejection if they disagree with the status quo. Thus Ben's experience of being told the "right" response so clearly by his peers could have fed directly into a fear of rejection.

This was a striking indication of the strength of the social learning ethic imparted to the children; the clear understanding that there is clearly a right and wrong way of behaving, and that they should remind one another of the expectations. However, this example also suggests the interplay between the adult-led and child-led agendas; that while it would appear that the children arrive at this conclusion themselves, the data would suggest they are, more simplistically, reproducing behaviour they have learnt is "good" by referencing the adults in the environment (Cowie, 2012). The concept of social and emotional literacy extends beyond being able to reproduce a set of sanctioned ideals; in adolescence for example, a marker of emotional intelligence would be to be able to make an informed choice and dissent, particularly in relation to "negative identity" (Green 2010).

This use of the peer influence highlights possible future dynamics in these children's lives. As Berk (2004) states, children are primarily dependent on adult-child relationships, but as they mature, peer groups become more influential in their lives. Perhaps this early encouragement to adhere to peer culture could play out in a different manner when children reach adolescence and peer influence signifies achieving/failing in education and maintaining emotional and social wellbeing. Dodge

et al (2003) conjecture that future outcomes of aggressive children are clearly exacerbated by peer rejection – a hypothesis relevant to the early years setting. Ben experienced the power and unity of his peer group at first hand, a finding which resonates with Beth, discussed previously. Children are understood to require a consistent value base in order to thrive in learning (Elias, 2006, Mascolo & Fischer, 2007), verifying the social cognition process whereby humans process and evaluate values, norms and attitudes (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). A genuinely inclusive environment for children is therefore extremely important (Dodge et al, 2003). The setting may need to consider the social consequences for a child whose additional needs or conflicting home environment prevents them from understanding their expectations, and question whether theirs is a truly inclusive approach.

Despite this reservation, observation data indeed revealed children's spontaneous reflection and intention to understand their peers:

Figure 4

Amy and Jacob talk about 2 other children:

Amy; "Beth is very gentle with creatures"

Jacob; "Yes, and Jake is"

Amy; "Yes Jake is too"

This was a striking example of the children's SEL development, as Beth frequently had outbursts of anger, experienced at first hand by her peers, often causing them distress. Amy and Jacob appeared able to see Beth's strengths beyond her challenging behaviour, even when her gentleness with creatures contradicted other aspects of her behaviour. However, the process by which Amy and Jacob arrived at this conclusion, whether independently, or through messages conveyed to them about Beth, might also be considered. Wohlwend (2007) discusses children's 'laminated' spaces, that is, patterns of play and behaviour which are actively constructed to be understood in a given way. Wohlwend also comments that girls, in particular, tend to re-voice teacher's preferences, extending to chastisement and or verification of others. There are overtones here of the same

example; Amy and Jacob have learnt the expectations of them and are now appear able to apply that to other children.

The staff approach to Beth's peer relationships was discussed within the focus group. Practitioners revealed that they were motivated by a concern that if Beth did not learn to adhere to the social expectations of the setting, she would face rejection at school. This is corroborated by Dockett & Perry's (2007) view that children are expected to meet the given social and academic expectations of school from early on. They viewed positive reinforcement as of paramount importance (this was also observed routinely in practice). Instances of minor achievements, for example, Beth putting on her shoes as asked, were celebrated, gaining the attention of peers and staff members and eliciting smiles from Beth. It is possible therefore that the resolutely positive manner in which all children were spoken about, and the way in which adverse behaviour was acknowledged as stressful and difficult for the children themselves had imparted a similar philosophy upon the peer group.

Discussion herein has concluded that children thrive when their spheres of influence share a common ideology (Novick, Kress & Elias, 2002, Eisold, 2001). The setting manager and staff discussed partnership with parents, and were able to discuss individual children's progress in detail, pinning much of their success in the partnership approach. However with such a strong ethic, it is possible that these children might struggle to understand different expectations, perhaps when they start school and meet peers from a wide variety of early years settings. Green (2010) states that young children consider morality in the context of reprimands and approval for certain actions, thus this early foundation could instigate a narrowly defined notion of morality. Cowie (2012) maintains that the security of cohesive peer relationships and collaborative play is an essential part of children's developing self esteem between 2 and 4 years, suggesting there is reassurance for children in adhering collectively to norms, as exemplified in the setting. However Chambers (2012) comments that over time notions of societal roles have shifted towards individualisation, with far less consensus as to right and wrong, inferring that there may be significant variations in acceptable behaviour amongst children's home environments. Perhaps therefore, contemporary SEL involves recognising and tolerating individual differences in oneself and others, inviting a question as to whether the setting has allowed for this given the persistent reinforcement of expected behaviours. The manager's resolution to this point comes in her conclusion

that their task is to prepare children for the expectations placed upon them at school; that regardless of their individual differences, in her view, they will all be expected to conform. This comment revealed her motivation to prepare children so that they might thrive in their new environment. The obvious problem with this, is that the future schools will doubtless have their own ethos and the children's experience of pre-school may not prepare them to meet that particular approach.

This case study sought to investigate this one example of pre-school social and emotional learning, and has not had the scope to look at long-term implications of what is learnt, nor indicate practice elsewhere in the sector (Silverman 2005). It is duly noted that while the strong social learning ethic may prepare children expertly for the future, it could alternatively evoke conflict elsewhere, where a clash with this strong ideology could elicit confusion for young children – a state of cognitive dissonance, where perceptions of what should be contradict experiences of what is (Elliot & Devine 1994) and could be confusing for young children.

Conclusion;
"Kind Face, Kind Hands" – A Mantra for Social & Emotional Learning.

This study has observed social and emotional development in one pre-school setting and has raised some questions in regard to it. Analysis of the data indicated a particularly strong ethos and leadership style with overwhelmingly consistent practice, evidenced by the repetitive language recorded in all aspects of the methodology and re-voiced by children.

The manager's presence during the focus group, and her willingness to answer questions put to the whole team indicated she could have influenced the data and had the potential to influence the validity of the research. It is also possible that had the manager not been present staff voices may have been stronger and underpinned the set philosophy independently. Denscombe (2007) suggests that focus groups have particular relevance for understanding the motivations of participants and the dynamics between them. Thus, while it is possible that the presence of the manager may have stifled independent professional views, the evidence suggests the team including the manager appeared highly cohesive. All staff talked about the value of reflecting together, and the manager frequently referred to individual's strengths. Individual practitioners engaged actively in the focus group conversation and their responses became more detailed as the meeting

progressed. In fact, responses were so consistent and enthusiastic it was at times difficult to separate out independent views, and at several stages all staff were so keen to corroborate each other's views they talked over each other. Thus dialogue suggested solidarity between practitioners, independent of management direction.

The data indicates a strong value base in the importance and complexity of SEL. Staff frequently stated their intention to provide a secure environment and the ethos maintained a clear trajectory from bringing children through transition from nursery, developing the kudos afforded to "pre-school children", and towards the new horizon of formal education. Care was taken to consider the developmental needs and abilities across the timeframe, regarding summer term as a time of specific preparation. In this term the expectations and opportunities shifted with new activities and sense of ownership. Efforts were made to build children's resilience, competence and self-belief towards transition.

The data indicates a balance of engaging pre-planned and spontaneous learning, managed within the prescribed ethos. Data evidence did not reveal any specifically gendered notions however the research lacks enough data herein to draw any specific conclusions on this, and it would be interesting to investigate this further. The data suggests children's experience of the setting is fundamentally positive, given the warmth and regard for individual children. SEL was acknowledged as complex and difficult and staff responded by taking time to develop children's understanding and give positive reinforcement. Furthermore there was a striking indication that children took the setting's ethos so seriously it appeared to act as a moral code in its own right. Interactions between children appeared particularly rich in social learning as they began to take account of other's perspectives towards the end of the year, indicative perhaps of the transition in thinking from egocentric to sociocentric perspectives, alongside the learning and re-voicing of the setting ethos.

In conclusion, this research has attempted to scrutinise one example of practice and cannot attempt to project conclusions as to SEL outside of this context. The intention for the staff and manager is to ensure the children experience a socially and emotionally enriching pre-school year, and that they are prepared for school. The manager comments;

"Regardless of their differences, they will all be expected to reach the same level – for these children, that level is starting school. We have to make sure they

can cope. The curriculum may stay the same for them, but it will be different from here".

The research has raised some questions about the power of the socio-moral code displayed in the setting; that it is possible for a conflicting perspective to prove complicated for young children when removed from this environment. However the overriding observation is that the children's engagement in reflection, and their willingness to confidently place themselves within social dynamics by the end of the year speaks highly of their social and emotional development.

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