

### Supporting Sustained Empathic Connections in Early Years Pedagogical Practice

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Synopsis of a current research project

*Key words: empathy, empathic practice, connections, early years workforce*

This doctoral research aims to evaluate the extent to which a practice-support programme, focused on reflection and revision of emotional constructs, enables Early Years (EY) pedagogues to engage in sustained empathic practice. Empathic practice is characterised by the pedagogue accepting, labelling and validating a young child's emotions, modelling and teaching the child ways to express their emotional needs. With a focus on the communication and expression of emotion within a safe, secure and accepting relationship, empathic practice supports young children's emotional development (Siegel, 2012).

Previous Action Research details the process of developing empathic approaches in a Scottish nursery (Shaw, 2018). Results highlight an improvement in young children's emotional understanding and self-regulatory behaviours in response to the empathic interactions from staff. Recommendations from this study advocate that EY practitioners require training to develop an empathically-aware pedagogy that supports young children. Dingwall and Sebba (2018) identify that practitioners often highlight empathic practice as an area in which they require further focused training.

This PhD research is grounded in Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955), with links to Social Neuroscience (Lieberman, 2013) and Interpersonal Neurobiology (Siegel, 1999). This social constructivist perspective recognises that individuals construct ways to construe their world, shaped by interpretations of their own successive experiences. Therefore, for pedagogues to engage in empathic practice, there must be an emphasis on developing their personal constructs of emotion and empathy through practice.

This six-month evaluative case study of a relational and empathic practice-support programme utilises participant observation, reflective discussion and video-enhanced reflective practice (VERP). Following refresher training on the neuroscience of emotion, practitioners participate in experiential learning cycles within their practice setting. Through successive cycles of

experience and reflection, emotional constructs are re-evaluated and revised through the lens of empathy and emotional understanding.

Ethical considerations are informed by an awareness that the reality of this experience for participants is subjective and grounded in the participants' interpretations of their own emotional experience. Containment, reciprocity and empathy are key to all communications and interactions with participants, reflecting the researcher's own professional practice experience and training.

Realising the Ambition (2020), may guide practitioners towards adopting an 'empathic understanding' of children's emotions, however, engaging in consistent empathic practice is challenging. Following a programme of experiential learning which aims to develop an empathic understanding of emotions, pedagogues will feel enabled to offer sustained empathic connections which support children's emotional regulation.

### References

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