Rethinking early childhood learning environments as sensory spaces: Ummms, ahhhs and listening to what children think

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How did I get here?

When autism came knocking at my family’s door

So, this autism thing…what is it exactly?

What impact did it have on my son’s experiences in ECE?

A pull to teaching...

…then to research as well
Looking to the literature

Indoor and outdoor learning environments

Modern learning environments

Reggio, Malaguzzi and environment as the third teacher

The RIE take on learning environments

Where’s the sensory?

What does occupational therapy have to say on the matter?
How does Te Whāriki describe learning environments?
The concept of a learning environment is mentioned in Te Whāriki 82 times, so it’s obviously an important notion…

Culturally responsive…supportive…language rich…adaptable…appealing…reflects the principles and strands of Te Whāriki…a space for all children no matter their age, background or ability…respectful…warm…accepting…well resourced…conducive to learning…safe…stable…responsive…predictable…calm…empowering…challenging without being hazardous…friendly…a social space…kaitiakitanga…a space children see themselves reflected in…a space children can make their mark in…open-ended…fostering a tangible sense of belonging and meaningful contribution…

The notion of a sensory environment is only mentioned three times, with little explanation provided by way of what it is or what it actually looks like in practice. Two of these mentions are specific to practice with infants, and one urges kaiako to be “mindful of all learners when planning the social, sensory and physical environments” (p30).

Are we being mindful of all learners if we fail to account for the sensory though?
How the project took shape

New materialist and sensory ethnographic approaches as a means of uncovering what mattered

The ethics of researching with under 5’s who “can’t communicate”

Undertaking case studies in two centres

Introducing Sophia, my first focus child

Introducing Ralph, my second focus child

A multiplicity of data collection tools

Making sense of it all
A new materialist lens on findings

People, spaces, objects and practices as relational affects which have the ability to realise agency – the human is not the most important

The intra-activity of people, spaces, objects and practices

Assemblages of affect and how they tell a story

Environments as well as active participation and learning as forever in the making with no end point of ‘achievement’

Thinking about an intra-active pedagogy

Space for sensory meaning making
There were a variety of relational affects produced in this example that shaped Sophia’s experience. First was the winter weather adversely affecting ground conditions in some ‘high use’ areas of the outdoor play area, thus prompting the teachers to move the equipment around in order to let the affected ground recover (spaces and objects ↔ people and practices). Second was the teacher’s notion while moving the equipment around to change the intended purpose of the equipment from tunnel to slide. Sophia’s capacity to cope with these altered relations within the playground environment was not considered (people ↔ spaces, objects and practices). Third, what had been a safe space that Sophia enjoyed and found predictable was now gone. This created uncertainty and anxiety for her, which is a common response from autistic children. Despite this initial anxiety, which she worked through using careful observation, physical touch and the unhurried pedagogic approaches of Aggie and the other children (spaces and objects ↔ people and practices), there was also a glimmer of interest in the new arrangement. That Sophia was consequently able to overcome her anxiety and feel comfortable playing on the equipment, as well as contribute to a group discussion on how to best do this, was a significant affective process of space, objects and the practices of others producing an assemblage of Sophia’s active participation and learning within the event.

The sensory – change I wasn’t warned about, this is all new to me, this is causing me huge anxiety that’s getting in the way of my participation and learning here

What is it now?
There were a number of key relational affects producing this event and consequently an assemblage of Ralph’s active participation and learning, beginning with the kindergarten association’s practice of having kindergartens regularly do kindy swaps with each other to expose children and teachers to new environments, resources and ideas (people and practices ⇔ spaces and objects). The Mahitahi teaching team were conscious of putting more intentional, carefully thought out planning in place so as to make sure that Ralph felt comfortable prior to, as well as, during the kindy swap (people ⇔ objects and practices). This was important in drawing him to the blocks, which for Ralph were a new resource (people and practices ⇔ objects). Despite this newness, Ralph felt confident he knew what to do with the blocks and was able to undertake both the building work on the house, as well as engaging in constructive negotiation. This meant that the house could be built around him without a door, which then meant the other children could not join him and he remained. The other children understandably disagreed with this and told Ralph why (objects and practices ⇔ people and spaces). He listened, processed and eventually agreed to the door going in so the experience of being inside the house could be shared with the other children (practices ⇔ people, objects and spaces). Previously, teachers had said that Ralph would respond to such tension by biting. However on this occasion Ralph was able to cope with his disappointment and frustration at the collapse of the house in a socially appropriate fashion, which was modelled to him by the other children, who understood how invested Ralph was in the event (objects and practices ⇔ people). He was also able to contribute equitably to decision making around the direction of play and this enabled him to realise a meaningful voice respected as ‘knowing’ by the other children (objects and practices ⇔ people).

The sensory - I have confidence to take ownership here, while remaining open to hearing the perspectives of other children as we decide on the direction of this experience together
A sensory ethnographic lens on findings

Seeking to understand places, spaces and ways of being, doing and knowing through getting amongst it all

Diverse sensory processing and integration capacities in children

How many senses?

Contesting interoception and its place in Te Whāriki

Sensory meaning making and inclusive practice
Sensory meaning making in an inclusive learning environment
What did the children have to say about what was important to them?
Walking tour data was a particularly rich source of children’s voice...

| It’s the playdough table. Sophia plays with the playdough here. It’s blue, blue feels good to Sophia’s head. | Sophia likes the green cushion. It’s soft and safe. Sophia likes holding the cushion in her hands and putting it on her face to have quiet time. It feels nice when Sophia has it there, Sophia feels calm. |
| Here’s the playdough table once the spray and wipe dried off. The table in and of itself, as an object played on, is obviously important here as is its colour which clearly works for Sophia. | This cushion is something of a comfort object to Sophia. The colour is appealing to her, as is its softness and the weave of the material. She also mentions using it as something to put her head on. |
| You can see there are many cushions in the room, and many are used for different purposes. One cushion, in particular, is used by Sophia. She seems to enjoy the texture and comfort of the cushion, and uses it to rest her head on. | Sophia likes the green cushion. It’s soft and safe. Sophia likes holding the cushion in her hands and putting it on her face to have quiet time. It feels nice when Sophia has it there, Sophia feels calm. |
The dimensions of their learning environments the children spoke most of related to feelings of...

Safety
  Softness
  Quiet
  Calmness
  Fun
  Laughter
  Kindness
  Comfort
  Acceptance

...but more than anything else, knowing that their diverse sensory meaning making would be sensitively respected, which seemed to produce a sense of belonging, of tūrangawaewae, and of mana.
What does the future hold?

For New Zealand’s early childhood sector as a whole?

For Te Whāriki?

For our tamariki?

For how we look at and think about the learning environments we provide in our centres?

For how we conceptualise inclusive practice?
Any thoughts or questions?

Some key readings:


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