

Dr S Anandalakshmy

For Dr S Anandalakshmy, teaching has been a vocation, a profession, a passion. After setting up and starting a lively and innovative school in Madras, she moved to New Delhi to teach at Lady Irwin College. She established the Post-Graduate Department of Child Development – which offered a rigorous and people-friendly course to young women – and was Director of the college from 1983 to 1991. She was also involved in the Mobile Creches (a voluntary organisation for the families of labourers on construction sites in Delhi and

Bombay) from its inception, serving as Chairperson for six years.

In this article she argues that, if early childhood development programmes are to be effective for children, they have to be holistic, and profoundly child centred. That includes positively supporting healthy emotional development in young children. To make her case, she draws on an ancient Tamil text and on a recent best-selling book from the USA: Emotional Intelligence¹.

Reaching for the moon

An ancient Tamil text talks of reaching for the moon as it discusses one stage of early childhood development. The moon is both metaphor and symbol and has many layers of meaning. 'Reaching for the moon' alludes to gaining humour, capriciousness and dream-state. I link this to the need of children for a healthy emotional development, something that is best considered in the gentle light of the moon with its fuzzy boundaries, rather than in the harsh light of the sun. The light of the moon allows the development of the child's sense of self to be given sympathetic support in

differing and shifting blends at varied moments: hard edged certainty is inappropriate.

When one sets up a daycare centre or preschool, one starts with providing a safe environment with trusted caregivers, following a programme that includes hygiene, health and supplementary nutrition, and moves on to include play. In the course of growing up in the company of others, children learn listening, responding, speaking, communicating intent, seeking to know, exploring, trying out, establishing social

India: a bubbling child-centred preschool
Taking Care of our Children Project
SEWA
photo: Gerry Salole
(Entry for the 1998 Poster Competition)

Pillai Tamizh: stages of infancy and early childhood

Infancy and early childhood are divided into 10 phases that include: babbling and listening to lullabies; crawling; clapping hands; and walking. At 18 months,



children enter the Moon Phase, when they become more aware of their environment, find the full moon beautiful and long for it to come down to earth as a playmate. Mothers join in the game and plead with the moon to come down and play with their children. The moon is obstinate and does not comply! Mothers try gentle persuasion, flattery, anger, a threat to find another moon, and so on. Subtly they are also indicating to their children different kinds

of punishment for non-compliance. The norms and rules are articulated playfully; adults and children together enjoy the pretence and the fantasy.

India: creative activities build up the Cs
photo: Liane Gertsch

contact. These are intrinsic to childhood, children do them naturally.

However, while hygiene and health, and the development of cognitive and language abilities are usually specifically included in the preschool programme, the emotional development of children is often left out. My view is that the immense potential that young children have can only be developed into power and strength if there is affection from those who spend time with children; if all activities are exciting and enjoyable; and if challenges are stimulating and unthreatening. For me, play, playfulness and a sense of fun are of the essence. Together with these, warmth and a non-judgemental attitude to both competence and incompetence, constitute the 'primordial soup' from which the central self of children emerges, a central self that depends on the expression and cultivation of healthy emotions.

I also believe that healthy emotional development is the basis for the future system of children that, among other things, will help them to avoid psychological problems, to handle situations better, and to fare well academically and in interpersonal relationships. It will also help them to deal with success and to treat negative experiences without a sense of personal humiliation or failure. But this has to be actively supported, first because it may not develop naturally even under optimal conditions; and secondly because, when it is developed in the early years, it helps psychological health throughout life.

Making a good soup

Based on my experiences with young children over many years, I have developed a recipe for that primordial soup mentioned earlier. Into it go myth, song and verse, fun, fantasy and humour. People may argue that myth is irrelevant to young children. But myth is the collective unconscious of a people, to use a Jungian² phrase – within our culture, it's what we all believe. By using this myth in playing with their children, mothers anchor children to their culture and to the cognitive idiom of their people. This enables a contextualising of self, while the make-believe element encourages creativity and imagination.

For their part, dance and music are full of the kinds of metaphors that reflect what we all take for granted as our cultural reality. They make an early impact on children; and what is learned through dance, or music, or through verses, is also learned better – and provides a lot of enjoyment.

In turn, fantasy and imagination open up whole new worlds for children. This does not stop them developing a keen sense of reality, nor does it confuse them. The secret is not to replace reality, nor to overwhelm them with fantasy. Observe what happens if you make a drawing of a baby and show it to children: they'll pretend to be a baby and 'cry' or lovingly pat the drawing. They know it's not a real baby, it is fantasy play in which they engage happily.

Seasoning the soup

There is so much fun when you deal in the undefined, or add extra elements to something, or playfully juxtapose two unlikely things. Children have a natural sense of humour: as young as two and three, I have seen them creating their own jokes and laughing at them – they know a joke from serious stuff.

Away down south where bananas grow
A grasshopper stepped on an elephant's toe
The elephant said with tears in his eyes
'Pick on somebody your own size.'

Children do see the point of this little rhyme, and when they laugh, you understand how humour is one of the most human aspects of human beings. We, as adults, use humour hesitantly with children because we are a little too serious about what we do.

Rationalising the recipe

A nourishing soup is necessarily complex. Rationalise this recipe and you reduce its goodness. For example, some people stress the need for a scientific temperament and argue for a more mechanistic approach. But science is full of questions; uncertainty is of the essence; and creativity and imagination are the most valuable faculties for the creative scientist and the inventor. Artistic and scientific activities are not necessarily pursued by totally different sorts of people: creativity and imagination are important to both and have the same source. That means that they need the same kind of nourishment. It also means

that we must not focus on the obviously useful at the expense of those lovely 'useless' activities that relate to fantasy. I defend the useless – that which is not immediately useful – and I claim that there is a great advantage in a large horizon of information, experiences and so on. We need a wide sweep that encompasses, rather than a narrow neck that restricts.

The wrong soup?

One has to answer seriously the counter arguments of those who stress legitimate priorities such as health, hygiene and nutrition. My suggestion is that the imparting of those services should include the fostering of emotional development. It is in no sense a question of either/or. Similarly, preparation for primary schools is an important objective but it is not a question of preschools either emphasising cognitive development and measurable achievements or supporting only healthy emotional development. They can keep in mind wider foci: what children need to be, to know, to be capable of in life. For example, if language and verbalisation are on the agenda, the context selected for the work could easily include social conversation, feelings and compassion for those in pain.

This approach may appear to cause conflict at key times – for example, at the time of transition from preschool to a formal primary school. Primary school teachers know that children who attend child-centred preschools tend to be happy, self-confident and ebullient: they are forever exploring and doing new

things and coming up with wonderful new ideas and pieces of work. In short, they don't look as if they will do well in such areas as formal tests. Teachers need to recognise and build on the fact that these children are actually very well equipped to deal with any situation that they encounter, and to succeed in tests or examinations or anything else.

The implication is that the formal system must be more child friendly, and must continue the preschool initiated support of the development of the central self. At the same time, it must resist attempts to impose the adult dichotomy of work and play on children. For children, work is playing with things, playing with peers, playing at roles. Playing requires no external motivation: children love challenges and they love to play, and thereby to work, to learn, to know.

What exactly must this soup nourish?

A couple of years ago, I read a book called *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman and I realised afresh that the 20th century has been a celebration of left brain functions: language; cognition; and numeracy. At the same time there has been an inadvertent neglect of the right brain functions: creativity; imagination; intuition and so on. Although there has been virtually an explosion of knowledge in several fields, insights about human development do not seem to have kept pace and we have engendered 'emotional illiteracy' (Goleman's term for a lack of emotional development). In contrast, the categories of infancy and early childhood developed in the Tamil

Play



India: busy learning nothing really
photo: Dr S. Anandalakshmy

The mother comes at noon to take him home
Asking earnestly what has he learned today.
What has he learned? Nothing really,
If you don't count growing up and learning
to live.

Tumbling over, laughing
Repeating sounds, repeating words
Doing everything just one more time
Until the mastery
Gives a sense of personhood.

The fear of tigers that eat up children
Is conquered when the child becomes a tiger,
Growling and prowling.

In the far corner of the room cuddling a doll,
Playing at baby and mother,
Both roles at once,
Understanding love.

Being a bus driver,
taking people on
Giving tickets and taking change
Stopping for oil
Steering away into the future.

tradition reflect the importance of nurturing, and of affectionate and playful interaction between children and their parents. For me, finding the Tamil tradition was like finding an amber gemstone washed up by the tide: it sharpened my perceptions about ourselves and about the young of our species.

The soup that I am steadily revealing the recipe for, nourishes exactly those attributes in children that together indicate healthy emotional development and show that the central self is in place. I call them the 'Nine Cs': Competence, Communication and Creativity; Confidence, Curiosity and Control; and Conviviality, Compassion and Cooperation. You will notice that I have grouped them in threes.

The first group consists of Competence, Communication and Creativity. The resources and opportunities required for fostering these are usually found in good preschools – for instance, materials and space for art, provision and opportunities for the development of speaking and listening, and opportunities for the development of basic competence. Most teachers and parents accept these as necessary for children. Moreover, there are tangible – or at least measurable – aspects to them.

The second group is directly related to healthy emotional development: Confidence, Curiosity and Control. However, they may not be provided for. Confidence would be welcomed in most places but its absence may go unnoticed. Similarly, when children do not show Curiosity, teachers don't necessarily feel the need to

comment or react – in some cultures, Curiosity may even be considered bad manners! On the other hand, the absence of Control will generate attention.

Conviviality, Compassion and Cooperation – the third set of attributes – are also central to healthy emotional development, but may be invisible or absent because they are not identified as needing conscious cultivation. They only develop in interactions with others, especially the peer group. We assume, perhaps, that these will emerge as the by-products of the highly individualised preschool agenda, but that assumption may be wrong. The preschool must not only be child centred, it must be children centred.

How can these attributes be developed? It's not a matter of saying 'OK, it's now 10 in the morning so we'll have a go at giving children warm and positive personalities'. The moon metaphor gives us the feel of the approach; and this should be complemented by teachers acting as themselves, as fellow human beings. Then their guidance will emerge naturally and it will be the right sort of guidance. The settings will also develop slowly. These may be the ones that children already share with their teachers, with just a little emphasis here, or taking advantage of something that is naturally occurring there. Or they may not have a physical existence: they may only be created in the minds of the children.

One can also make things lively: that will help simply because children are happy. Find the fun, laugh a bit, make these natural day to day elements in the

environment that children experience. In addition, the nine Cs develop through play; through interaction; through children talking; through realising how they feel; through knowing that their concerns are taken into account; through using their imagination; through being aware of the needs of others; and so on. Preschool children are not too young for this.

Let me illustrate how to support the development of Compassion. We consider this as abstract and difficult but only because we try to protect young children from knowing too much about sad things. Yet young children do feel compassion and want to express it. For example, one of my former students lost her mother but still went to work in her preschool. She was naturally very sad and one child sensed this and brought a favourite toy and just placed it on her lap. So Compassion was there and was expressed tenderly.

One way to approach the development of Compassion is by helping children become aware of others, who they are, who their siblings are, and so on: Compassion starts with a sense of other people. Children themselves are a great source of this information: their own names, their family, their own history, and so on. Work like this needs to be done more consciously – but it only takes a little thinking or rethinking on the teacher's part. It is also a matter of taking advantage of situations that arise, or of using fantasy and creativity to enable children to experience and analyse suitable incidents or situations. For example, when one of the children is absent from school for a while, get the others to find out why. Upon return the child should be given the chance to tell the others about the reasons for being absent.

Digesting the soup

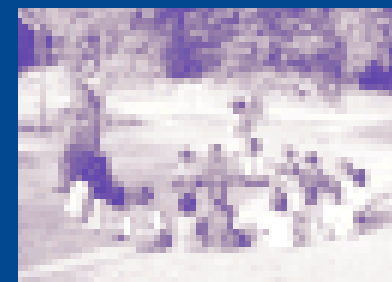
I have observed many good preschools where, typically, each child is received warmly, there is a well-planned schedule of activities, the children's artwork is up on the walls, and there is a word for the parents who come to take the children home. Yet, even when everything seems right, I have found that most communication from the teachers consists of instructions to the children. Only a small portion goes into actual conversation. There is almost no communication in the reciprocal sense of the word and the opinions of children are seldom solicited.

There is no manual or handbook to move from this situation to one that naturally and effectively supports the emotional development of young children, that helps to give them that central self. But I hope I have shown how the preschool teacher can help to navigate the child's moon landing! ○

1. Goleman D, *Emotional Intelligence*; (1995) Bantam Books, New York, USA.

2. Carl Jung was a Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist who founded analytical psychology. He proposed and developed concepts such as extrovert and introvert personalities, archetypes and the collective unconscious.

Emotional soup



India: seasoning the soup
photo: Dr S Anandalakshmy

My neighbour's granddaughter is very bright and strong willed. One day, her grandmother said to her 'You know, it's not good for children to get angry', and the three year old replied 'Is it ok for big people to get angry?'. Such a comment could only have emerged because she had self-assurance and complete trust in the adult. I would predict that she can handle the anger of other people better than children who meekly obey and resent authority. Adults around her will have to shift their perceptions: if they think of a child as 'only a child' they lose some insight. They have to accept firmly that a child is a person.