Commentary

Connecting With Children—Something That Cannot Be Taught

Tim Peters, The Priory School

ABSTRACT

Tim Peters always knew he wanted to be a teacher but it was his experience as a ski instructor and the special connection he had with his students that confirmed his choice. In this interview, Mr. Peters explains that a key component of early childhood curriculum is to provide balance between structure and novelty and among school, extracurricular activities, and play. While the mandated curriculum has to be addressed, he advocates setting aside time for projects to create engagement both for the children and the teachers. He also expresses his views on differentiated learning and the importance of collaboration. Lastly, he believes that hiring teachers who are able to connect with students is key to creating an optimal learning environment.

What attracted you to early childhood education?

Growing up I always thought I would be a high school history teacher. When I went through university, that's what I thought I was going to be. I had a love for history and a love for educating—or I thought I did at that time—and I had a love for learning. I was a ski instructor in Switzerland and what happened was, because I was the new guy, they gave me the classes nobody else wanted. I found myself with six year-olds who didn't speak English…they were from all over Europe. I've never worked harder than that first week in my life. I was just trying to communicate with these children, but the main thing that was happening was that I was connecting with them. When I was finished that week I was exhausted but I felt so rewarded. I realized then

that I had a lot of patience and a way of connecting with children that didn't necessarily have to be verbal. I got more clients like that and ended up ski instructing for a small international school. I enjoyed it so much that I decided to back to Queen's University for my teaching degree in early childhood education.

What do you consider to be the most important components of an early childhood curriculum?

We know that children like structure to their day but they also like novelty in the exercises. If teachers can set their day where the children can expect but also be surprised as to how it's going to be delivered…I think it makes children feel comfortable, but it also gives them that element of engagement that comes when something is new. I found when I was a grade one/two teacher for many years that, particularly when I was beginning, I was very set on how the day should run. But of course what happens then is you start to lose all the teachable moments because you're not as flexible as you learn to be as you get more experience. When you're setting the curriculum you should look for those non-negotiables that children have to learn, but look for novel ways for them to approach it. For example, I was substitute teaching in grade one last week, and the children were learning an alphabet song. The children said, "This is our song; it's right here." But I said, "We're going to up make a new one today." You could see that they were a little bit surprised, and maybe even a little bit frightened, so I got my guitar out and we said, "This is the way the song's going to go now." We made up our own song and within 10 minutes of singing that song the children knew it...it was in their memory…and it was novel for them. They had had the same song for the last six or eight weeks, then all of a sudden learned a new one. I think little shots to the curriculum like that can really go a long way.

For very young children what do you consider to be the optimal balance among school, extracurricular activities, and play?

If a school is going to achieve an optimal balance for all their children, they have to have a really nice "menu." They have to have a menu that is flexible and convenient for parents in today's age. The majority of our parents, both parents are working, so we make sure that whatever we're offering is very flexible and easy for the children to access without the parents having to shift them around here and there.

We're going to continue with a liberal arts grounded curriculum, but at the same time if there's a couple of periods in the week where they can have a choice of what they're going to do—whether they want to do some robotics or a cross-curricular

bilingual project with the French teacher and the English teacher—I think that's a balance you need as well. Again, it goes back to the novelty aspect of it where it's not the same week over and over again; there are new things that they're looking forward to. I think it also goes for teacher engagement too when you have something like that. Last year, being new to this school, I asked the teachers—we had a vision-planning session in January—I asked them what they would see as something that they would find really engaging as teachers and would be exciting for them in the future. And they said, "To have some kind of 'throw out the curriculum' time and do a cross-curricular exercise or project that was undefined…" The idea was to see what learning comes out of it and after year two you can project what kind of learning comes out of it and set some metrics to it…but in the first year just to try something completely new. That's what we're doing this year after the November report comes out, we have this window of time from the third week of November to the second week of December where the teachers are encouraged to put their curriculum on hold for a while, meet up with a partner in the school, and do something exciting, whether it be with Music and French, or Art and English, or computers and what have you… And there will be no judgment on it and we'll see what kind of learning can come out it…the teachers are excited about it—to be honest, some are a little bit scared about it too—there's no expectations for me as to what's actually going to come out of it, other than something new, and we'll see where it goes from there. I think you need that balance, and then we'll go back to the curriculum. Of course, living in Quebec you have the non-negotiable competencies that are mandated by the Quebec government. Every school in Quebec has to report on those and we will continue to do so, but I think giving that novelty is important.

Can you talk a little bit about this new venture you're doing with cross-curricular activities and how it looks in kindergarten, grade one, and grade two?

My projection is it will look very messy, but it will also look natural. For the children in grade one and two they'll just see it as something that's exciting: *Why are these two teachers together? I've never seen this before*. Whereas the teachers will have an idea of where it's going but the children really will be exposed to something new. I don't have the plans for what our grade one and two teachers are doing but I'm assuming they'll probably get the specialist involved. It will be something like…perhaps they'll do a composition in music for which they'll write some words that will based upon the vocabulary that the grade one teacher is hoping that they would achieve at this level. Or it could be a French skit where our art teacher is involved, helping the students build some kind of a skit in French. It will be a messy process, a busy process, and one that will involve what I think is the healthiest of classrooms; when you probably walk in and can't find the teacher because they're all over the place trying to figure out where children

are learning best. I think it will be messy but it will be fun. We think that "happy children learn best" at our school—that's our theme and I think this initiative fits with the mission of what we're trying to do.

What are some of the ways that you ensure that the early childhood classrooms in your school have differentiated instruction?

I think the best way for us to make sure we're having differentiated instruction is to first know what the objective is. At the beginning of the year I spoke with teachers about the fact that on the wall should be what are the learning objectives right now in the classroom. Differentiated learning doesn't mean you have different learning objectives—well it can in a drastic case, but generally speaking differentiation means you are flexible on how one can achieve the objective, how are you going to differentiate so that everyone is successful at achieving these objectives. And the objectives should be loose enough so that children can surpass them if that's their maturity level or their capability at this time in their life. For example, in grade one if you walk into the classroom…in the fall they were talking about "how do trees affect our ecosystem?" The children should be able to know that's what their learning objective is and from there as long as the teacher is comfortable with that objective…then they're able to break it down and figure out the different ways that children can achieve that objective. Some of them might be able to read a couple of books, watch a movie, do some research that is guided or self-directed but occasionally overseen by the teacher, or in a group can and be able to write out what their learning is to this point. Other children would never be able to write how a tree is important in the ecosystem…they would have to do drawings for it…another might have to dictate it…another one might have to find a way of showing how they achieved this objective that the teacher did not even think about when planning the lesson.

I think the first step of differentiated learning is to say, "It's okay: we do all actually have an objective here," and to feel comfortable and solid in that and then be able to chop it down from there to allow children the voice to determine how they are going to show you that they understand. When parents get concerned about differentiated learning, they think that the teacher is going to label certain kids as gifted and certain kids as challenged and everyone is going to have a different learning objective. Then, the focus is not going to be on getting everybody to those non-negotiable objectives, which children have to learn. That's my starting point for differentiated learning. I also think as a small independent school where we have a lovely environment for that, we're very fortunate we have classes of 12 for many of our classes. Just that alone enables us to have small group work, to have less distractions that a bigger group provides. I think

you have the right environment and you also have the right philosophy of teachers… you have teachers who realize that when 12 kids come into the classroom, those are 12 different individuals that are going to learn 12 different ways and for the teacher to realize that "it's my job to affect them"; it's not their job come into my mould. You need that frame of mind and that goes right back to the hiring process.

How can collaboration be fostered among young children while at the same time preparing them to handle some of the competitive aspects of life that they will face as they get older?

Collaboration among children is best when there's less "shoulder checking." If you can set an environment where the children aren't saying, "Why's he doing that and why am I doing something different?" An environment where they can really understand what their learning objective is and what their respectful task is. Every child in the class at all times should have a respectful task so they know what they need to achieve and they feel comfortable that they can achieve it…and they have been a part of the goal-setting process so they know where they're trying to get to. From then on they're not frightened about working in a group because when people get frightened about working in a group what they're really frightened about is exposing what they don't know. If the children are comfortable, saying, "He's working on that, I'm working on this…", that's okay, we're all going to get to the same place eventually, we're all going to graduate from the school, go to a good high school…life is going to be fine. It doesn't matter right now what your challenge is and what my challenge is because they are both valid goals. Then you can put students together and they can learn from each other in a way that isn't threatening.

Many people have spoken about how collaboration now would have been seen as cheating a generation ago, and that's part of just not having that shoulder check. So when people say, "He's looking at my work," I reply: "Well good for you, there must be something there that he likes about your work. It's okay; it's your work. Just because he might get an idea from your work doesn't necessarily mean that he hasn't changed it a little bit…it's now his work too." I think you have to set the environment to make sure that collaboration isn't competitive, and then set an intrinsic competitive aspect to it. I think that in school the competition should be internal, something where you are really striving to achieve a certain level of mastery for yourself—sorry, I don't love the word "mastery" because it means there's nowhere else to go from there—what I mean is a certain level of fulfilment in achieving the task or goal that you have set for yourself.

If you look for example at The Priory the way the Heritage Fair is run: all the children in the entire school participate in it. There are different expectations for different classes. At the end of it we have, just like a science fair would do, we have all the children in the gym displaying their projects and what have you. However, the judges aren't judging one against the other; they're judging each project on its effectiveness, on how well it was presented, what the judge learned from that project. Then, the awards are given out, but there's not first, second, third place awards. There are simply awards for all the projects that the judges feel have taught them something new today. Some years there may be three awards given, others there may be 10. It's a lovely experience. Everyone gets a participation award, and there are certain ones that are recognized but they're not recognized as one, two, three, four. And it's the same thing for our public speaking competition that we started last year, where we don't give out medals for certain places; we give recognition for a certain competency that we think is a respectful task for a certain grade.

What are the best ways to give young learners a good start at becoming bilingual?

The best way is for it to just again be natural. The thing that we have to do for children is give them this lovely gift of bilingualism, living in Quebec, where it's natural. Children should never think, "I do French in that room." It needs to be that French is a way of life…it's not a subject…it's not three competencies on a report card…it's a way of living your life. Many schools, including The Priory, would say the same thing, and we make sure there are many different disciplines in French…so they're going through their day being exposed to French in many different ways.

I think that the parents ultimately have to "role model" that as well. I need to recognize what a struggle it is for an English learner to sit in a 90-minute French class—it's exhausting. And I find it exhausting. We need to make sure that we're adapting our 90-minute French classes so that there's a lot of movement and breaks in it for them as well. I need to role model it. I need to go into the French classroom…I was in grade four French yesterday and they were doing Halloween poems and standing up and dictating the poem and some of them had memorized it, so I got up and did one too, to show them how hard it was. Of course, I wasn't very good at it but I tried. They saw, "Mr Peters is trying too" and I think they need to see that from their parents as well. English mother-tongue families will send their children to a school saying, "You have a good French program, make them bilingual." If there's no way for them to attach their French to real life then it's just an abstract thing. School needs to be life; it can't be a separate thing to prepare you for life. Children need to go home and be validated for this amazing adventure they're on to learn French and they need their parents trying

to learn French, and they need to do some activities on the weekend that are French. You'll never achieve bilingualism if you don't have that.

Growing up in Ontario is probably why my poem in grade four yesterday was so terrible. I grew up in Ontario and went through a bilingual program in an English city with all English families. As much as the teachers were trying to teach me French, I didn't really have any connection to what French really was. It has to mean something.

What are the most important qualities you look for when hiring an early childhood classroom teacher?

I guess if you go back to what I was saying about how I came into early childhood education, I didn't have a curriculum and I didn't have even knowledge of what a grade one student should be learning. When I first realized I was meant for this profession it was because I had a connection with children. I think that the way that we interview for positions is really completely on its head. I think that the first thing we should do is make time for potential teachers to come in and teach the children, read them a story, see what they're like on recess duty—how do they handle the situation where there is a conflict on the soccer field. Something like that where you can see what the person is and how they relate to children. From there, I think if someone has that connection with children at their core then you can teach anybody what grade one or two needs to look like and so forth. You can teach the pedagogical part of it but you can't teach the connection with children. And, of course, when children come home parents will often often ask: "How was school and how are you doing?" but the first thing the child wants to know is, "Was my teacher nice and does my teacher get me?" Years ago I worked with someone who said, "It's not my job for children to like me." And I remember hearing that in one of my first years of teaching and thinking the opposite: "If you don't have that, you've got nothing. You're pushing a stone uphill for the entire year." I think that connecting with children on a personal level is the first thing that children need.

Can you describe an early childhood success story that stands out in your experience as an educator?

When I was teaching years ago there was a boy who was constantly getting into trouble with other students, mainly in his own grade. He was an only boy, an only child and one of these children who could speak to adults with no problems but he just didn't know how to speak to children. It was a real problem for a while; we weren't sure what to do. And I said, "You know what? We're going to put him in charge of the younger children's recess. We're going to give him a little bit of training but he's actually going to

be in charge…" because he was a great *policeman*, as you can imagine. We gave him a couple of skill sets like, "This is how you defuse the situation." "Let them talk it out first." "Make sure the children come up with a solution—you don't give them the solution; let them come up with it so they're part of the problem-solving process." The boy that we saw helping out with the younger children, because we knew he had a certain level of maturity, was completely a different boy than the one we saw interacting with his peers because what he needed was responsibility; he needed to be seen almost as an adult. The younger children adored him…and he walked a different way; physically you could see that he was walking a different way by the end of that year. I think that that made a huge change in his life. I see his parents on the streets of Westmount decades later and they still are thankful for the experience their son had. I think recognizing his uniqueness and harnessing it instead of making him conform to the structure of the school was the big part of his growth.

The other example was a boy who, he broke my heart, he was a really nice boy but very immature for grade one. I don't know if he was a "dérogation" or just one of those boys that was at a completely different maturity level. He couldn't get anybody to come to his house for a play date and it was getting in the way of all his learning, as you can imagine. Here's a child who has no friends and he can't seem to make any. I had a meeting with the parents and said, "Let's get some play dates going" because that will just open up all kinds of avenues for him. But no one would take him up on it. What I did is I announced to the class that *I was going to his house* for a play date—this is when I was a grade one teacher. He lived in Saint-Lambert and I had never been there before on the South Shore and I remember the mom just saying, "Really? You're going to come for a play date?" And I said, "Yeah, I'm going to come for a play date and talk about all the cool things that this kid has for a week." I was going to refer back to it in class. I went to his house and we played LEGO, we did stuff, I met his sister, the mom cooked us a little snack after school and I had a play date. And then I went back, and sure enough, the other kids were amazed and they had some kind of a connection with this new boy that they never…they just didn't have the maturity to ask him about or to explore themselves. Not that I have the time to do that all the time, but it was one of those times in my life where I thought, "I gave up an hour or two and it made a real difference and I'll never forget it." That's the way I live my life now, I try not to miss those moments. If you think it's the right thing to do, chances are it probably is.

Tim Peters is Head of The Priory School, where he feels very fortunate to be able to help create an environment in which "Happy Children Learn Best." Having spent his previous five years as Assistant Head of School at St. George's School of Montreal, and seven years at Selwyn House School as a kindergarten and grade one/two teacher, Tim has had experience with all aspects of elementary school life. Tim believes that the elementary years of education are the most important and that it is during this time of development that children learn who they are, how they learn, and how they can have a positive impact on their well-being and the well-being of others. Tim is the father of three young children.

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