FOCUS
Focus on pedagogues in current ECEC practice

Ellen Rutgeerts: Among all the developments in ECEC of curricula, pedagogical frameworks, quality systems etcetera, we at KIDDO thought it would be good to maybe step back a bit and look at several writings on pedagogy, or raising children in general. Not only did we look for the views, theories and opinions of pedagogues but also of other ‘great minds’ to see if and how these still shape the way we relate to and work with children in ECEC. The final selection contains not only pedagogues of different schools and periods in time, but also other professionals such as a doctor, a journalist and even a painter, Picasso. With Jean Jacques Rousseau being the eldest, and several already deceased, some are also younger and still alive today, like Haim Omer. This way, we made a list of 22 thinkers, going from Rudolf Steiner to Emmi Pikler, from Jean Piaget to Micha De Winter, or from Maria Montessori to Tom Hodgkinson.

Since 2013, every issue of KIDDO focused on one person. We would shortly describe his or her background and life experiences, possibly explaining parts of their vision and opinions as professionals. E.g. Bowlby may not have been so focused on attachment if, as a child, he would have had a warmer and closer relationship with his own parents. Then we shortly explain the main views and how these insights may, could or should influence the daily work with young children and their families. This ‘translation’ is done both in general statements (‘every child is unique’) as well as in concrete examples (“Let a child get used to a daycare setting in the presence of the parents”).

What gave the idea to start a series on well-known pedagogues and other ‘thinkers’?

Ellen Rutgeerts: We all know that there are many theories and ideas about education and how to raise children and relate to them. The underlying norms and values change during the course of time. While one generation demanded children to, above all, obey, the next generation would focus on negotiation and dialogue. Or you may read articles on the importance of positive parenting, while at the same time one will be published on why parents should ‘stop this positive parenting’. All in all quite confusing at times.

So we were wondering… If pedagogical visions or frameworks contradict each other, what is their value? Or, if there are so many pedagogical mindsets and ideas, which one(s) do I want to choose? What can I work with, what offers me support?

So we decided that a series on (what we view as) ‘great pedagogical minds’ would be interesting. Both as support for practitioners but also as an invitation for them to reflect on how they shape their work with children, and to (re)define their own pedagogical frame of thought.

Quite the reflection to make, no?

Ellen Rutgeerts: Yes, indeed! During the 2015 KIDDO conference, Angelo Van Gorp, professor of historical pedagogy at the Ghent University, offered some tips for practitioners. Our readers also gave us feedback on the articles and how it made them think more closely about their work and pedagogical vision. Let me give you some of those thoughts…

Using things from the past is not necessarily corny. Many elements of ‘older’ pedagogical theories or learning still linger on in many shapes and forms. This is not bad, on the contrary, it can help practitioners become more aware of the underlying frameworks that colour their work with children. It can help them translate those frameworks to the situation they are in today. Knowing the past however, does not mean you should stick to it, being alert on how you can link older views to today’s reality, to today’s context and your place of work, remains important. Stay attentive to what the children in your centre really need, who they really are. Continuously try to figure out what their parents expect, discuss and talk to them, do activities together to...
get to know them better. Open up your pedagogical vision towards the neighbourhood of your centre, connect and share ideas on educating children in current society.

Another thing is to know that there are no saints or ultimate heroes. However inspiring the theories, how enthusiastic you are about sharing the ideas of one pedagogue in particular, be sure to also allow yourself to let go of it at times. Hanging on to one vision too stringently, or being reluctant to reflect on it, opens the door to narrow-mindedness and losing your open mind. The call is really to get inspired, definitely, but then to move on and shape and model these inspiring thoughts into your own practice. No pedagogical theory or vision should become a bible.

So are these views and visions just a menu to pick from?

Ellen Rutgeerts: In this series, we didn’t aim at knowing who said what exactly. In a way, their theories are also in turn, current day interpretations of them. The main thing is to make those views into a strong match, where all elements fit well into a coherent framework on how you think ‘good practice’ looks like. For example, Gordon, Dolto and Korczak all take children, and how to communicate with them, very seriously, but they all do so in a different way. Freire and Omer developed ideas on authority within a pedagogical relationship but these are far from alike. Rousseau, Malaguzzi and Petersen all advocate a broad and holistic development of children, with close links to their community, but they use different methods to do so. Etcetera etcetera.

The question for our readers is: what do you read into it, what do you take with you in your work, what do you find relevant? If you can build something coherent out of all this, you are designing a valid and strong pedagogical view for your child care centre, whether you can stick the name ‘Pickler’ or ‘Steiner’ to it or not.

We also tried to invite people to work with these views together with their colleagues. Allow for time to reflect on different ideas, on what views would best fit everyone you work with. In everyday practice, changing the way you work with parents, introducing new kinds of interaction with children, new play material and so forth is not always as easy as it may look. This takes time, practice, discussion, falling back before being able to take steps forward. This is quite normal. Creating a common view, and get a shared understanding needs continuous dialogue. Discussing what team members consider important in their work, on all kinds of levels, is never a waste of time, on the contrary! With our series of pedagogues we hope that we gave teams some content that may inspire and support them in this process.

Did you only write about older (and deceased) pedagogues?

Ellen Rutgeerts: No we didn’t! Thinking about education and how to relate to children is not only their prerogative. That’s why we also added others, like Pablo Picasso (“Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up”) or Alfie Kohn (“The way kids learn to make good decisions is by making decisions, not by following directions.”).

We also wrote about current theories or visions. For example Hodgkinson. He and his wife used to be busy career people, working like crazy to afford their London home and a nanny and school for their three children. He decided to take a step back and to question the rat race we all seem to live in. ‘Idleness’ became his motto, also in parenting and his book became a bestseller. This says a lot about the times we live in: it must have been that many of us did recognise a lot in his writings on more relaxed parenting. And he has no official pedagogical background at all. He writes about all the doubts that we can have as parents: when to let go or when to hold on tight? When to stick to some rules and when to go with the flow? And then some other 1000 questions parents struggle with on a daily basis. So does he give clear cut answers to ECEC professionals? No he doesn’t either… But he does send a message: if parents are searching in their ways to raise their children, why not go with them in this search? Why not try to put yourself in their shoes and go look for what could work for them and their children? Try to figure out with the parents, while the oldest was ‘such an easy baby’, what you can do for the second child who is crying so often. Try to get to understand why this boy feels so uncomfortable in the group. What he needs. What he really likes. As a professional, you will most often not figure this all out without engaging with the parents as well. They are not only the first educator (sometimes easier said than implemented) but they know their children best.

You yourself studied pedagogy as well?

Ellen Rutgeerts: Well yes I did… and this is the challenging part of course. I studied pedagogy so I am perfect with children: breastfeeding, the “terrible 2’s”, the Why-questions, learning processes, sex education, giving autonomy in the right mix with care, a sense of belonging and warmth… Yes I know it all, no more questions left! If only that were true… My main approach seems to be more of the trial and error type…
That is another conclusion that comes to mind in this series. Like I said before theories are theories – not practice, and theories and views tend to evolve and change over time. Some pedagogues even started contradicting themselves after a while or they changed parts of their theories anyway. Look at dr. Spock: his first book hardly mentioned fathers; only one page was left for the male parent! The book did become a bestseller but was also criticised heavily in the feminist corner (and sales dropped accordingly). In later editions fathers did get some more attention.

So pedagogical theories may come and go (potty training at 18 months is no longer a must and at this point we shouldn’t let babies sleep on their bellies like we still did just some years ago) but there is always a spark of inspiration, of new perspectives, of support for your own work to be found. But your own context, the centre you work in, the background of the families, the neighbourhood… and the policies as well, will challenge you to re-design the pedagogical views of some of your admired minds.

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