**Title**: From Reflection to Agency: Applying the PERMAH Framework to Deepen Educators' Pedagogical Responsiveness

**Authors**: Natasha Tania Stansilas, Cecilia Wong

**Summary**

Supporting children's agency requires more than educators' understanding of child-centred practices. It also requires educators to recognise how their emotions, beliefs, expectations and everyday pedagogical decisions shape children's opportunities to participate, make choices and influence their learning.

While research has emphasised the importance of children's participation and voice (Lundy, 2007), an important question remains; How do educators develop the capacity to translate these principles into responsive classroom practice?

Drawing on reflective practice (Schön, 1983) and positive psychology (Seligman, 2011), this study examined how structured reflection guided by the PERMAH framework could support educators' professional transformation and pedagogical responsiveness.

The study involved twelve lead educators from NTUC First Campus in Singapore, with eleven completing four structured reflective cycles. PERMAH, comprising Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment and Health, served as a reflective scaffold through which educators examined their experiences, emotions, assumptions and interactions with children. Reflective accounts, together with midpoint and final focus-group discussions, were analysed thematically and longitudinally to understand how educators' perspectives and practices evolved over time.

Four interconnected dimensions of transformation emerged: awareness, interpretation, pedagogical decision-making and perceived child agency. Importantly, the findings revealed that educator transformation was neither uniform nor linear. Instead, it unfolded through repeated cycles of noticing, questioning, experimenting and revisiting practice.

**Key Findings**

**1. Awareness: Recognising the Adult Behind the Practice**

Educators became increasingly aware of how their emotions, expectations and habitual responses influenced their interactions with children.

Through reflection, they began recognising moments when frustration, stress or the pressure to complete activities affected their responsiveness. This awareness encouraged educators to pause, regulate their reactions and approach interactions more intentionally.

The findings suggest that pedagogical responsiveness begins not only with understanding children, but also with educators understanding themselves.

**2. Interpretation: Seeing Children's Behaviour Differently**

As educators developed greater self-awareness, they began reconsidering how they interpreted children's behaviours, capabilities and participation.

Rather than viewing unexpected responses or deviations from planned activities primarily as disruptions, educators increasingly considered what these behaviours might communicate about children's interests, needs and perspectives.

This shift was significant because it influenced how educators understood child agency; not simply as children making choices, but as their capacity to express perspectives and influence learning experiences through everyday interactions.

**3. Pedagogical Decision-Making: Turning Reflection Into Responsive Practice**

Changes in educators' interpretations were accompanied by adjustments in their pedagogical decisions.

These changes were often small but meaningful. Educators became more intentional about observing and listening, knowing when to guide and when to step back. They increasingly shifted from directing or correcting children towards scaffolding their thinking and encouraging child-led dialogue.

Educators also reconsidered how they organised learning experiences, adapting time, space, materials and expectations in response to children's emerging interests and readiness.

Rather than introducing entirely new teaching approaches, transformation was frequently evident in the everyday decisions educators made about when and how to respond to children.

**4. Perceived Child Agency: Creating Greater Space for Participation**

As educators became more responsive, they reported noticing broader expressions of children's agency, including increased initiative, decision-making, communication and participation.

Importantly, these findings reflect educators' perceptions rather than independently measured changes in children's agency.

Nevertheless, the accounts suggest that when educators reconsider their assumptions and adapt their interactions, they may create more meaningful opportunities for children to express their perspectives and influence their learning experiences.

**Transformation Was Not a Linear Journey**

The analysis revealed that educators did not necessarily arrive at greater responsiveness through the same pathway.

For one educator, transformation began with recognising how emotional reactions influenced interactions with children. For another, it began with questioning whether successful teaching should be defined by completing planned activities or responding to children's emerging needs.

Although both educators described becoming more responsive, their pathways involved different starting points, tensions and moments of reconsideration. Familiar practices also resurfaced when educators encountered everyday classroom pressures.

These findings reinforce the understanding of reflection as an ongoing professional process rather than a sequence of completed stages (Schön, 1983).

**Recommendations**

1. **For Educators:** Embed regular, purposeful reflection into everyday practice. Beyond evaluating whether learning objectives were achieved, educators should consider how their emotions, assumptions and pedagogical decisions influenced children's opportunities to participate. Short, structured reflective prompts can support this process without creating unnecessary additional workload.
2. **For Leaders and Professional Learning Teams:** Create supportive environments where educators can openly examine pedagogical dilemmas, share experiences and experiment with alternative approaches. Professional learning should extend beyond introducing teaching strategies to helping educators understand the thinking and assumptions that guide their decisions. Sustained reflection, peer dialogue and opportunities to revisit practice are particularly important.
3. **For Researchers:** Further studies could examine educator transformation across different preschool contexts and over longer periods. Incorporating classroom observations and children's perspectives would also strengthen understanding of how changes in educator responsiveness relate to children's actual experiences of agency.

**Conclusion**

This study highlights the potential of structured PERMAH-guided reflection to deepen educators' awareness, challenge established assumptions and support more responsive pedagogical decision-making.

Crucially, educator transformation did not unfold as a straightforward progression from knowledge to improved practice. It involved repeatedly noticing tensions, reconsidering perspectives, experimenting with different responses and adapting to the realities of teaching.

The findings suggest that supporting child agency requires attention not only to what educators do, but also to how they understand themselves, interpret children and make decisions in everyday interactions.

Ultimately, transforming child agency begins with adult agency; the educator's capacity to reflect, make intentional choices and reshape their practice in ways that create greater opportunities for children to participate, contribute and influence their learning.

To find out more, you may email us.

**References**:

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Lundy, L. (2007). “Voice” is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. British Educational Research Journal, 33(6), 927–942. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033

Schön, D. A. (1983). The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action. Basic Books.

Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being. Free Press.