

# Embracing Tensions in Early Childhood Education Settings

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Ashleigh Davies

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**T**ension, the feeling of uncertainty, anxiety, stiffness, a sense of having fallen into the unknown. Regardless of our context, we will encounter tensions on any given day. Tensions arise when we climb a tree and then look to see how far from the ground we are, when we are faced with difficult questions about life and death, or when we're asked to acknowledge the colonial impact on our pedagogical practices. Tensions can sometimes be ignored or avoided, but then we limit ourselves to staying only with what we already know, blocking ourselves from the opportunity to grow and hindering the children's chances to grow and develop. Instead of diverting our attention and moving away from the tensions, we can embrace the tension and discover new encounters, changed ways of thinking, and perspectives not considered. Tensions ask for our attention, a state of "at-tension" (a term I first heard from Dr. Sylvia Kind) where we allow ourselves the opportunity to remain, feel, and be with that tension. It's within those moments of being at-tension that new knowledge is formed. Without being in a place of at-tension, change cannot occur, nor can growth. Embracing tensions is the idea of working with, not against, them when they arise and looking toward how tensions can become a meaningful part of our day-to-day settings rather than something to avoid or simplify.

## Role of the Educator

When working in any capacity with children, we will encounter a variety of tensions. These tensions can range from slight discomforts to social topics that are beyond our work with children. When responding to tensions, we need to consider what we are responding to, why we are responding, what reaction may occur from our response, and who our response will impact. First, we have to consider our own biases. Every person has biases. We form ideas and understandings of the world around us based on our experiences, and those experiences can create biases in how we perceive information or people. Our perspectives are not the only ones, though, and in responding to tensions, we need to consider a variety of discourses, recognizing that there is no one way to view or feel about a topic or situation. Reflecting on our own discourses may allow us to better recognize other ways of thinking and ensure we are not simply reflecting on our own thoughts and opinions when responding to tensions.

In one of my classes, I encountered a group of four-year-olds arguing over the concept of death and what happens when you die. One child brought up heaven, another brought up burials, and another exclaimed that when you die, you're put into a jar that stays in the living room (cremation). They turned to the adults in the room seeking support

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or validation so that we could tell the other children that their understanding was "the truth." Before responding, we had to consider the many layers that conversations of death hold. When responding to any tensions, we need to reflect on all the layers of what we are responding to. In this case, topics of death often relate back to culture and religion, two topics which hold a high amount of power for people and, in turn, raise many tensions. This is why we must also consider who our responses will impact and how. For example, any conversation that dives into religion has the possibility of upsetting a family. Their child may now ask questions such as why their friend hadn't heard about heaven or why this was the first time they had heard about it. Families can not be left out of our consideration when responding to tensions. They

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should be given a space to respond as well and be informed of the topics being discussed, especially when it may bring up tension-filled conversations at home. Alongside the families also consider the context within your space, consider what the children themselves are going through, and the impact the conversation could hold. For instance, if the topic of death came up and a child had recently had a death in the family and was visibly upset by the conversation, this would likely change how or if we choose to embrace the conversation within that moment. When embracing tensions, as educators, we are asked to engage in a lot of reflection to best support the children.

### **Consideration of the Child**

As educators we may often find ourselves confronted with particular topics that lead us to question if the topic is age-appropriate for our early years audience. Not every tension will be appropriate to address, but we need to be mindful that we are not removing the possibility of tension-filled dialogue from our classrooms with the assumption of “not appropriate” topics. We often hear that children are innocent and that we need to not “ruin” their innocence with topics meant for older audiences, but what does childhood innocence mean and who does it apply to? The idea of childhood innocence often assumes children have not been exposed to a variety of topics (death, racism, sexism) or that they are cognitively unable to comprehend the information. Our own biases may influence what we assume children are too young to know or have discussions about. For instance, often, it’s heard that children do not see colour and that

conversations on race are not meant for younger children. However, this disregards that many children from a young age already feel negative connotations toward their own or others’ skin or have experienced a world that treats them differently due to the colour of their skin or culture. When we disregard the presence of tensions on the basis of preserving childhood innocence, we privilege the innocence of some children over others’ realities. Often, when we aim to preserve childhood innocence, we remove opportunities for growth and rid ourselves of representation in classroom materials as we shy away from things that could spark tensions. In turn, we may indirectly send a message that one child is lesser than another as their reality is deemed “inappropriate.” Children are current members of society, and if we view them as competent and capable beings, we need to allow opportunities to engage with tensions in meaningful ways. We need to not decide for them what topics are acceptable for discussion; instead we need to create spaces that encourage critical thinking and dialogue.

### **Embracing Within Settings**

What can we do to work toward embracing tensions in our practices? We can create spaces that allow for the engaging of radical dialogues with the recognition that the tensions of dialogue hold value. Evoking conversation and dialogue that address tensions and move beyond the scope of knowing only dominant discourses and to consider outside oneself. Tension and conflict will occur when people come together in a space where we engage in radical dialogues without simply the goal of quickly solving a problem by

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removing tensions. Through the act of pedagogical documentation, we could invite voices and input from the families, children, community, and educators in a democratic participation sense. Not responding to the tensions as merely a teaching moment, but for the tensions to live within the space and nourish moments of rich dialogue and exchanges of ideas. We should not just invite the voices as a secondary thought but as voices to actively listen to and respond to.

Whether we embrace or ignore them, tensions will not disappear from our practices. It will not always be easy work, and we will make mistakes when engaging, but we’ll also grow and develop. It’s not only the children who benefit from this embrace; we, as educators, also continuously grow through tensions.

*Ashleigh Davies has worked as an ECE for over a decade, having recently completed her bachelors of ECCE and currently is the assistant manager of the North Shore CRR and North Shore municipal child care consultant. She can be found online as Pedagogyandchill and around Canada presenting workshops on a variety of topics.*