

EDUCATION



As a child, my school experience was pretty rubbish. I found school difficult and struggled to fit in. Until Ms. Austin came along. It was a sweet year 4 teacher who showed me kindness. She praised my creativity, said I was a great impressionist, and that one day, I would make a fantastic artist. She encouraged my writing through poetry and songs. She gave me confidence in the classroom by giving me a job as the art coordinator. I took pride in this role, giving me great power and confidence in the class. This initiative then had a ripple effect on all other areas of my learning. It made me feel seen and appreciated in the classroom. By the end of the year, I had become excellent in maths and had slowly started to catch up with writing. Ms Austin changed my life.

I have always had a playful spirit, so naturally, I worked with children from a very young age. At 15, I started working in a play centre. I loved it so much that as soon as I was done with exams, I left school and studied Childcare, qualifying as a Nursery Nurse. I loved making the children laugh and smile. By recognising their superpowers, I built their self-esteem, which, in my eyes, is one of the most crucial parts of early childhood development. The foundation stage was fantastic back in the noughties. It was imaginative, creative, play-based and promoted outdoor learning. (Not even a mention of phonics.) I got to see how important this was in child development, that art and self-expression were great for seeing a child's inner world. This approach made space for child-led experiences guided by their heart.

A few years later, I knew I wanted to travel the world and study, so I changed to a nannying job, as this allowed me to study part-time and travel for a few months a year. Nannying was great as I got to develop a real bond with the children and witness the stages of development from birth to 7 years. Here, I developed my knowledge in honouring the whole child, especially their emotional being. Acknowledging that every part of their life influences who they are daily. What happens to them emotionally affects how they interact, play and grow that day. It gave me a much deeper understanding of their behavioural patterns and how to hold space for this consciously as an adult. My role was not to control but to support and guide them whilst modelling regulated emotional reactions.

After 6 years of nannying and completing my degree part-time, I decided to dive into being a Primary School Teacher. I thought I would be that really fun teacher who could change the world, change the system, teach what I wanted, and follow the child's interests. Little did I know there were many hoops teachers had to jump through along with mountains of rules and regulation. If I'm honest, most teachers go into this field with good intentions but quickly get bogged down with all the ridiculous admin and protocols that there is such limited time for caring for the children.

However, I did get to train in an alternative school, which I flourished in. The curriculum was flexible, and we could bring our own style and teaching methods into the classroom. Here, I learnt from some inspiring teachers and got to see how outdoor learning had a big influence on a child's connection to self and nature. I realised that creativity is so much more than art, and in fact, it is all about building opportunities for creative thinking. These strategies have stuck with me for my teaching career.

Once qualified, I jumped into the state system for 3 years. I worked in a school in North London. It was a challenging experience, and I was faced with supporting children from all different backgrounds with a range of behavioural needs. I realised there needed to be more balance in the

curriculum, more time and space for their emotions, art, and creativity in their daytime schedules. It got me thinking, how had we got it so wrong? That we emphasise it in the Foundation stage, yet as soon as they turn 5, it's all maths, English and facts. I could see that children were finding it stressful and unable to cope with the intensity of the day. It no longer felt aligned with my teaching values, so I searched for a different pedagogy that recognises the whole being.

In India, I found the Yogi Art Centre, an alternative learning centre for children based on yogic values. They were in search of a qualified teacher who could help them bridge the gap between mindfulness, play and learning. Working at this school was an incredible experience and opened my eyes to a whole new way of teaching. A space where children would be encouraged to make choices in their learning and spent time exploring nature. We gave space for meditation and yoga to balance their being. For the first two years, I worked there as a teacher, and then I became one of the co-directors of the school.

During my time here, I further researched and developed my understanding of alternative teaching models and created a curriculum for the school to follow. I was able to use steiner and waldorf models of Head, Heart, Hands approach and further developed this into my own teaching model that acknowledged and supported all learners in the classroom. Making sure that every learning opportunity gave space for intellectual learning (head), connected creative learning(heart) and practical learning (hands).

It was a beautiful experience to see how, together in a community with parents, children and teachers, we could create a balanced learning environment where children thrived. Not only did we look after the children, but we also made a supportive well-being space for parents and teachers. I studied yoga, meditation and breathwork in India and led regular sessions to support our teachers' mental health.

After years of experience in Primary and alternative education, I have realised we miss the very essence of bringing balance into the children's day: a balance of child-led and adult-led activities, outdoor and indoor learning, spirit and earth practices, and imaginative and intellectual learning activities. We need to ensure the harmony of both Yin and Yang in every classroom. This also applies to teachers and school staff.

Over the last few years, I bounced between state and supporting placements globally. This year, I had the opportunity to live in a community in Guatemala and support them in setting up a little classroom for the children. These children were wild and free and had grown up living, learning, and playing with the land. I had preempted that getting them into a classroom would be a challenge, but I was wrong. They loved it. They were ready for the challenges because they had been given so much freedom and played up until they were 5. It was a concentful learning space that the children enjoyed coming too

My knowledge and experience have led me to create a pedagogy that can be tailored to each class or community. Every community is different, so one model cannot fit all. My fundamental values are the heart that infuses my practice, but they are adaptable to meet the needs of different projects.

Head, Heart, Hands is crucial in creating a learning environment that honours all types of learners. **Responsibility** is key for children to feel connected, respected, and appreciated as equal members of a space. **Creativity** allows openness for anything to be expressed, forming new ideas and solutions to evolve in the classroom. **Earth-based learning** encourages children to connect to the natural world around them through permaculture principles and promotes a deeper understanding of themselves.