

The Rise of the Pinterest Perfect Nursery

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Pablo Picasso is reputed to have said that "taste is the enemy of creativeness", every day pictures are shared across all forms of social media of beautiful nurseries, all shared in the 'best possible taste'. Why are they shared? A mixture of genuine sharing of best practise and personal validation I would imagine. However, I am worried that our pursuit for beauty and perfection in the classroom is at the detriment to the learning opportunities that our children can encounter. In a world where we are constantly bombarded with unobtainable picture perfect lifestyles, it is concerning that we are allowing it to infringe into our classrooms. For example, on a forum today a practitioner declared that she only uses water beads outside because she finds the mess intolerable, another forum contributor asked about the best way to have dressing up in the classroom, i.e. should it be on hangers, should it be in a hamper etc. However, some of the responses surprised me, the solution was to do away with dressing up altogether because it makes a mess on the floor, as the children don't bother to pick up the clothes after they have been wearing them. Now apart from the obvious life lesson being missed here, the aversion to mess in the classroom is worrying, and it got me thinking, does it apply anywhere else? Do you premix the powder paint? Do you pour out the juice? Do you tidy up before snack? Is mess really in bad taste?

As practitioners we always raise an eyebrow at 'those' parents, who send their children to nursery in their best clothes. Isn't this the same as striving for minimising mess in the classroom? Are we not just dressing our classrooms in their Sunday best? We aim to provide learning environments which stimulate learning and self discovery, the irony is that perfection is the antithesis of innovation.

From a practical point of view it takes an awful lot of time and effort to maintain perfection and ultimately it isn't sustainable. The American feminist Naomi Wolf wrote about the controlled, successful working mums and how we neglect to think about their secret underlife, poisoning their freedom, generating stress and fear of loss of control because they are so concerned with presenting this image of perfection. If you have spent a long time designing and creating an area of the classroom, it is human nature to try and keep it as nice as possible and that may mean restricting its use or not using it to its full potential. A colleague was telling me that he had just spent £20,000 on a beautiful, new bespoke kitchen. As soon as the workman had finished he had picked up a knife and scored a long line across his shiny, new, stainless steel sink. He said it meant that he could relax now.

Personally I am a very messy person. When I worked as a research scientist my desk was always cluttered, at home my idea of being house proud is meeting guests in coffee shops rather than having to tidy up my home to invite them in. Visiting a tidy home makes me uncomfortable, I am immediately worried that I will spill my drink or break a plate. Think of Elizabeth in 'Keeping up appearances' when she has to visit Hyacinth and immediately becomes a nervous wreck. Could we be stressing out our nursery children? Are they worried about getting into trouble for making a mess in their beautiful role play areas? Can they relax in their perfect play environments?

The perfect nursery images we see on social media, exemplify good taste. In some cases this is written into the rules of the setting e.g. the stipulation of border width for wall displays, the use of colour behind and to the left of a piece of work, choosing colours to enhance and complement the children's work. Making everything uniform - Is this really quality assuring teaching and learning? We shouldn't mistake good taste for best practice. Bad taste certainly hasn't held back the likes of Baz Luhrmann, who actively pursues it in the gaudy costumes of his multi-award winning film and musical 'Strictly Ballroom'. Who determines what is in good taste anyway?

I did my first degree in Swansea, a place described by Dylan Thomas as a "dirty, lovely, town". The Swansean's are so proud of this quote that they have engraved it into the pavement outside of the train station. I think that we should strive to embrace this sentiment in the classroom. The world doesn't run on straight lines so I will finish with a quote from the Scottish-American naturalist and preservationist John Muir who said "Of all the paths you take in life, make sure a few of them are dirt".