

# BERA-TACTYC

## EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH REVIEW 2003-2017

British Educational Research Association Early Childhood  
Special Interest Group and TACTYC: Association for  
Professional Development in Early Years



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## PREFACE

Eva Lloyd

Participating in the 2017 BERA-TACTYC review process alongside over 50 UK academics and leading early years professionals was an instructive and enjoyable experience for me. The opportunity to provide a preface to this important and accessible review report is therefore a real pleasure. Praise and thanks are due to the ten contributing authors, particularly to the three colleagues who were jointly responsible for writing and producing it.

This review provides an update on the 2003 BERA review 'Early Years Research: Pedagogy, Curriculum and Adult Roles, Training and Professionalism,' employing the same five themes and the same primary focus on UK research. However, it also differs from its predecessor in one important respect. The authors adopted a rigorous systematic approach to reviewing the UK early childhood education and care literature since 2003, drawing on methods used by Maria Evangelou and her colleagues in the Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review for the Department for Children Schools and Families (2009). This constitutes a milestone in the development of such professional user reviews in the UK.

Not only were the individual chapters organised around two theme-specific, yet equivalent, research questions, but a transparent search and review strategy was employed, paying attention to the methodological and reporting quality of the included literature. In so doing the authors set a precedent for any future UK reviews of the early childhood academic literature, as well as adding considerable value to the review itself. Additionally, they provided both a challenge and a fresh impetus to researchers to take due notice of these aspects in their publications; such a development is overdue in early childhood research in the UK and beyond.

The key messages from each theme were transparently selected on the basis of the weight of underpinning evidence, which significantly increases their usefulness. Helpfully, the review's age range has been extended to birth to seven years, as compared to the 2003 BERA Review, to focus on research concerning three to five year olds, reflecting today's realities. The findings attest to the fact that in relation to the birth to three age range the review themes attracted less attention from the scholarly community since 2003 than in relation to the more 'traditional' three to five pre-school period.

Within each theme the influence of policy and of government-commissioned research is acknowledged, although the 2003 review's emphasis on practice rather than policy research was maintained. The evidence suggests that UK early childhood policy research per se remains a minority interest among UK researchers. As early childhood policy research can contribute to a more systematic understanding of how the policy environment influences practitioner experiences, its inclusion in any future reviews is worth considering.

Each chapter reflects the review's cross-cutting theme of the shift towards socio-cultural theories that have come to characterise early childhood research since 2003, alongside more recent, and sometimes more esoteric and transient, theoretical influences. This is another significant step forward in a review of a multi-disciplinary research area which has at times appeared rather under-theorized.

This review fully achieves its aim of showing contrasting perspectives and debates on key issues over the period 2003-2017 in a broad and balanced manner and deserves a wide audience.

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## CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION: THE PURPOSE, SCOPE AND PROCESS OF THE BERA-TACTYC EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH REVIEW 2003-2017

Jane Payler and Elizabeth Wood

In 2003, twenty-one members of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Early Years Special Interest Group, led by Carol Aubrey, Angela Anning, Tricia David and Pamela Calder, presented a literature review of some of the international research pertaining to early years, focusing primarily on children age three to six years. The review focused on three main areas: pedagogy; curriculum; and adult roles, professional development, training and the workforce. The 2003 Review stated an emphasis on practice, rather than policy-related research. This 2017 Review builds on the legacy of the 2003 BERA Review through a collaborative venture between BERA and TACTYC: Association for Professional Development in Early Years.

### Collaboration between BERA and TACTYC 2013-2017

In 2013, two early years organisations, TACTYC: Association for Professional Development in Early Years (then chaired by Jane Payler) and the BERA Early Childhood Special Interest Group (then convened by Elizabeth Wood) came together to co-lead a research-focused collaboration to produce policy advice, to revisit and update the 2003 BERA research review and to produce a professional user review.

Phase 1 saw over fifty academics and early years lead professionals working together to produce Early Years Policy Advice and Future Research Agendas for the main political parties in the run-up to the 2015 General Election (BERA and TACTYC 2014). Prompted by presentations from the four UK nations, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, two seminars were held at the universities of Sheffield and Winchester. From these seminars, six groups emerged to lead the policy advice work on the following themes, each of which is available to download as a separate policy advice sheet:

- Theme 1: Professionalism: early years as a career
- Theme 2: Parents and families
- Theme 3: Play and pedagogy
- Theme 4: Learning, development and the curriculum
- Theme 5: Assessment, transitions and school readiness
- Theme 6: Broader policy issues

In Phase 2, we continue with the first five themes for this 2017 Review and to prepare a Professional User Review, both of which are intended to be freely available for download from the BERA and TACTYC websites and will be disseminated widely. The review team of researchers has been working on Phase 2 since July 2015 when we met at University of Winchester to agree the scope and process for the project. Although limited expenses and production costs have been paid by BERA EC SIG and TACTYC, the work has been largely unfunded and the research team members have given freely of their time and expertise. The final themes with contributing authors are:

- Professionalism: early years as a career - Jane Payler and Geraldine Davis
- Parenting and the Family in the 21st Century - Pam Jarvis and Jan Georgeson
- Play and pedagogy - Elizabeth Wood and Liz Chesworth
- Learning, development and curriculum - Janet Rose and Louise Gilbert
- Assessment and School Readiness - Phillip Hood and Helena Mitchell.

Members of the review team all bring established expertise in specific areas and have taken care to guard against bias in their work. We have chosen not to have a separate theme on inclusion, as we consider issues of inclusion to be integral to research and practice in the early years. The topic appears more in some chapters than in others, depending on available research

and the scope of the theme. The aim has been to provide a review that is broad, balanced and shows contrasting perspectives and debates on key issues.

### **Purpose and scope of the 2017 Review**

In this review, we consider research findings from UK research since 2003 pertaining to the identified themes and their policy contexts. The extent of international research into early childhood has grown rapidly since 2003 as early childhood education and care (ECEC) has increasingly become the focus of international policy activity, led by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD e.g. 2012 and 2015) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO e.g. 2006 and 2010) and, more locally, the European Commission (e.g. EC 2011). Thus, given the proliferation of international research on ECEC, it was beyond the scope of the research team to review all international research relating to the guiding themes. Instead, the purpose of this current review is to reflect on the contribution from UK ECEC research over the period and what it reveals about young children, their families, the adults who work with them, the ways in which they work and the contexts within which they are situated.

The age range of the review is birth to seven years. The term early childhood includes children, their families, communities and the adults who work with them in different contexts – centre- or home-based, formal and informal settings. Early childhood incorporates education and care as inseparable aspects of provision. It is intended that the Review will be used to support higher and further education teaching within and beyond the UK, to support reflective practice, to act as a spur to further research in ECEC, and to act as a point of reference for policy advocacy and critique.

### **Research questions**

Following discussions in the 2015 meeting at Winchester, an overarching research question was agreed:

- What does the UK research evidence since 2003 tell us about ECEC in relation to the identified themes?

In addition, we agreed that theme leaders should determine two theme-specific questions to guide each part of the review. Further, it was agreed that we should pay attention throughout to the theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches underpinning the themes, and to the questions that were being used to interrogate evidence in the research reviewed.

### **Review process**

We have drawn on systematic approaches in order to produce a rigorous academic review that reflects current positions in each of the themes. However, we acknowledge the limitations of the review and make no claims that it comprehensively represents all ECEC research in the UK during the period. Nonetheless, we have aimed for rigour and transparency in reviewing research relevant to the themes. At the outset, we agreed a protocol whereby items for inclusion were identified through the use of a systematic search and selection process, using primarily peer-reviewed journal articles and government research, policy and grey literature. Focusing on research that has undergone review processes in academic journals was regarded as more likely to provide items that contributed originality, rigour and significance to the field. Books that reported research projects have been included where they have stated the project, research methodology, methods and findings, and have provided a more extensive report that sits alongside peer-reviewed journal articles.

Search strategies of each theme were recorded. The initial scrutiny of items considered title, date, abstract, country of origin and relevance to the research questions. Selected items were downloaded to the reference manager system, Mendeley. Following initial scrutiny, items were read in full, scrutinised against the following criteria, adapted from the Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review (DCSF, 2009), and decisions recorded in Mendeley:

- Minimises bias
- Has external validity/authenticity
- Conclusions fit data; sufficient evidence in study
- Has been assessed by others (e.g. refereed for journal, peer review, funding body, public domain)

- Generalisations only made where / when appropriate

In each of the five substantive chapters, the authors describe their search strategies and tools, their range of bibliographic sources, their use of the inclusion/exclusion criteria, and how they identified the key themes. They have been explicit about the underlying assumptions and conceptual frameworks, the questions posed and the methods used. In reporting on key themes, the authors present the outcomes and justify any claims that are being made. For example, identifying the sometimes tentative and temporal nature of such claims has been important because there have been many policy changes during this period to ECEC curriculum frameworks, to assessment regimes, and to professional qualifications. Moreover, with international policy discourses influencing each of the four UK jurisdictions, there are similarities and differences in how ECEC policies have been formulated and implemented.

Much of the research in ECEC (with the notable exception of the government-funded Effective Provision for Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education study; Sylva et al., 2011; Melhuish et al., 2013) is relatively small-scale using qualitative or mixed methods approaches, and some relates to specific populations. Although small-scale studies are less likely to be replicable, they do add cumulatively to the field over time. We aim to make clear what are the origins of the research – e.g. funded/non-funded research, government-funded surveys and reports, and interest group surveys funded by early years pressure groups and organisations.

The authors have worked with external reference groups as far as possible (see Appendix i) to provide further expertise, advice and overview. In addition, the review-in-progress has been presented in a keynote symposium at the BERA 2016 conference and, in part, at the European Early Childhood Education Research Association 2016 conference. Both gave the opportunity for scrutiny and feedback from a wider range of colleagues. We are grateful for the feedback from all concerned.

## Researching Early Childhood Education and Care since 2003

Given the political spotlight trained on ECEC since 2003, one clear trend that is evident in this current Review is the increased influence of policy in ECEC provision and practice in the UK; there are established research reviews in the four UK countries that have already influenced government policies. Thus, the influence of policy and of government-commissioned research has taken a much more prominent position in this Review than in its 2003 predecessor and we provide a summary of broad policy issues in chapter 7. We have been mindful of considering both the quality and independence of the research that is influencing policy and practice.

A cross-cutting theme of the Review is the shift towards socio-cultural theories that has been evident during this period, alongside more recent influences from post-structural, post-modern and critical theories, with contrasting ways of influencing, disrupting or changing praxis in ECEC. Research questions, and the methodologies and conceptual frameworks underpinning the ways in which they are addressed, have reflected concerns to interrogate the impact of policies and the results of gaps or discontinuities in policy provision. Thus there is an interesting mix of research that looks at the impact of policy on practice, and the ways in which stakeholders and communities act back on policy through practice.

This Review is intended to provide a snapshot of ECEC research in the UK. The Conclusion highlights some of the common themes across the four UK jurisdictions, the ongoing challenges that confront practitioners, policy makers and researchers, and the intellectual agendas that need further development in future research.

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## CHAPTER 2

# PROFESSIONALISM: EARLY YEARS AS A CAREER

Jane Payler and Geraldine Davis

### 1. Introduction and context

The review sets the literature and research evidence relating to early years as a career in the socio-political and economic context of the UK since 2003. The period reflects a time of unprecedented attention to and investment in the early years workforce driven by desires to ensure ECEC could meet three goals: to increase childcare to enable an expansion of the female workforce; to provide future productive and well-socialised citizens; and to reduce the gap between the 'outcomes' of children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds, usually measured in terms of learning and development assessments (UNESCO 2000 and 2006; Barnett and Masse 2007; Field 2010; Allen 2011; Barnett and Nores 2012; Heckman and Kautz 2012; OECD 2012 and 2015; Waters and Payler 2015). Since 2003, there have been several distinct waves of influence and policy travel in relation to professionalising the early years workforce. These can be summarised as follows:

- From 2003 onwards, findings emerged from the largest UK evaluation of the effect of early years education on children's learning and development achievements (Melhuish et al., 2013; Sylva et al., 2016; Scottish Government, 2014) indicating an association between the quality of the workforce and children's achievements, and echoing similar findings from international studies (NICHD, 2002);
- The Labour government (1997-2010) matched, on the one hand, investment in expanding higher education in undergraduate degree-level training and development of professional standards for the ECEC workforce with, on the other hand, regulated targets for the sector to achieve a better qualified workforce (CWDC, 2012). In parallel,

integrated services for children under five and their families in the shape of children's centres were developed across the country;

- The global economic crisis from 2008, however, led to a shift in attitudes towards public expenditure and a change from a socialist Labour government, in power since 1997, to a new Conservative/Liberal coalition from 2010. Economic retrenchment ensued, targets for qualification increases in the ECEC workforce were dropped in England and structures and provision of integrated services were unpicked. Investment continued nonetheless in training of the early years workforce, albeit with a new direction. In England, the expansion of 'childcare' services through private, voluntary and independent (PVI) providers was further encouraged. The picture was somewhat different in Wales with less reliance on the PVI sector and a stronger focus on a Foundation Phase entitlement curriculum for all children aged from three years up to seven years (2008). There, the Flying Start programme (Department for Training and Education, 2006) provided opportunities for employment in settings across Wales that required certain minimum standards, and included an annual budget for, and entitlement to, professional development.

Within this context, the chapter addresses research and development within the themes of:

- workforce composition and development;
- learning communities;
- nature of professional practice;
- conceptualisations of professionalism.

Research questions specific to the subject of early years professionalism in addition to the overarching question were devised:

What does the research evidence since 2003 tell us about ECEC in relation to Professionalism – Early Years as a career?

- What have been the changes in workforce composition, qualifications and conceptualisations of professionalism since 2003?
- What have been the experiences and impacts of those changes on practitioners and children?

## 2. Methods

Items for inclusion in this chapter were identified through the use of a systematic search and selection process, using primarily peer-reviewed journal articles. Research questions, key search terms and likely databases were devised between the two authors, Payler and Davis, and adapted and agreed following consultation with the reference group (see Appendix i). Given the UK scope of the review, the search strategy focused primarily on the British Education Index (BEI), supplemented with the use of Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), Google Scholar and EBSCO. Boolean searches of the following key terms were carried out in various combinations using limiters of 2003 – 2016, full text and English only: professional\*; profession\*; early childhood; outcomes; quality; workforce\*; qualification\*; vocation\*; development; early years; nursery; preschool. Mining of references from those cited in texts already found led to further articles being included that had not initially been thrown up in the database searches. From initial scrutiny of title, abstracts, country of origin and relevance to the research questions, 145 items were included for further review. Indicative themes and sub-themes were identified from the literature and each item allocated to one or more categories. These thematic categories together with a record of all 132 items were again shared with the reference group for scrutiny and further suggestions, resulting in three additional items being adopted.

Each item was then read in full, further inclusion criteria applied (below) and decisions about selection noted and recorded in Mendeley. In addition to the original inclusion criteria of UK only, published between 2003 -June 2016 and

relevance to research questions, items were scrutinised against the following:

- Minimises bias
- Has external validity/authenticity
- Conclusions fit data; sufficient evidence in study
- Has been assessed by others (e.g. refereed for journal, peer review, funding body, public domain)
- Generalisations only made where / when appropriate

To ensure consistency, the two authors compared their decisions about inclusion after independently reading a number of the same items. A high level of agreement gave confidence in our application of the inclusion criteria. Any uncertainties about items thereafter were discussed and joint decisions reached. We have attempted to be as inclusive as possible to reflect the nature of UK published research. However, within the resources and scope of the review and guided by the inclusion criteria, it has not been possible to include every published item. Where UK data were included in international studies, the UK elements of the reports were included. Using the emerging categories from the research, the findings were synthesised, taking account of the weight and scale of evidence, as far as possible, by noting sample size and methodology, and are presented in the themes and sub-themes. The weight of evidence stems not only from scale in terms of numbers of research participants, but from authenticity, validity and depth arrived at through a constantly-questioning critically-reflective approach. The inclusion criteria were not applicable to theoretical or conceptual articles, but these are included where they met the original search criteria owing to their contribution to the development of the field. In total, after all selection criteria were applied, 106 items (including policy documents) were included in this review.

## 3. Workforce composition and development

Policy initiatives since 2003 have included aims to professionalise the early childhood workforce and improve outcomes for children and families (Every Child Matters, DfES 2003; Early Years Professional Status, HM Govt 2005; Graduate Leader Fund, Mathers et al., 2011; Nutbrown

Review, 2012; Tickell, 2011; Scottish National Review, Scottish Executive, 2006; Scottish Government, 2008; More Great Childcare, DfE, 2013; Welsh Government, 2014). However, these initiatives have not always had time to embed and often lacked integrating strategies. Frequent change has led to poor public understanding of the value and nature of this workforce. More recent policy in England has focussed on regulation, including implementation of the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum and monitoring by Ofsted (DfE, 2014). However, in Wales there has arguably been some coherence in that the regulatory framework for non-maintained sector now involves joint inspections from the Care Council Wales and Estyn, the inspectorate, and in Scotland Local Authority and partnership early childhood services have shared inspections by the Care Inspectorate and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (Wingrave, 2015).

### **3.1 Recruitment / retention**

Secondary analysis of large-scale UK data sets relating to child care provision and usage (Simon et al., 2015) provided important perspectives from both users and providers of childcare. These authors identify a reduction in the total early childhood workforce, a reduction in the number of registered childminders, but difficulty in identifying exactly who the workforce are due to different role definitions and the use of both terms 'education' and 'care' within the same sector. Staff turnover has reduced in the sector, but the number of vacancies increased (Simon et al., 2015), with 24% of day care providers actively seeking staff. Difficulties in recruiting staff are not new (Rolfe, 2005) but appear to be worsening. In a mixed methods study with 120 participants encompassing a survey of training providers, interviews with stakeholders and three case studies, Osgood et al. (2016) note a recent decline in qualification levels and higher staff turnover owing to the 2015 requirement in England for level 3 staff to hold English and maths GCSE (NDNA, 2016, cited in Osgood et al., 2016).

Attracting young people who have wanted to work with children from a young age, as well as those over 30 years of age (Kendall et al., 2012; McGillivray, 2008), the workforce is relatively young in age in comparison to other sectors

(Simon et al., 2015). However experience and maturity is required (Manning-Morton, 2006) to deal with work which is often complex, particularly when working with disadvantaged, at risk, or vulnerable children and families (e.g. Peeters and Sharmahd, 2014).

The workforce remains predominantly female (98% female according to Simon et al., 2015) with no change over the last 10 years (Rolfe, 2005). The need to increase male role models is argued in both literature and policy but has been challenged (Cameron, 2006; Brownhill, 2013, 2015); characteristics of suitable role models are found in both men and women identifying a need to promote the ungendered generic role. Osgood et al. (2006) note that work experience from school serves to promote gendered occupational choices, despite the desire by many school children to experience occupations not traditionally allied to their gender. Mistry and Sood (2015) interviewed a small sample of male leaders and trainees and uncovered a need for stronger mentorship within this female dominated sector to support men into roles.

Criticism is levied for the failure of policy to acknowledge the role of Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) in England compared to primary and secondary school teachers (see 3.2), although in Wales there is no such division. Low pay dominates the sector, with many workers earning only just above the National Minimum Wage (Simon et al., 2015). Low pay and conditions are linked to difficulties in recruitment of a diverse workforce (Rolfe, 2005).

### **3.2 Titles and roles / identity**

Titles and roles across the UK are very varied. Some titles are effective in describing local roles, such as room leader or team leader. Other titles are less clear and lack of agreement about roles devalues the nature of the work; there is a lack of regulation or registration of titles, fragmenting professionalism. Undergraduates may fail to perceive the role as a 'proper job' (Adams, 2008, p204). Lack of attention to recognisable job titles and frequent change disables the workforce from emerging with a unified voice (McGillivray, 2008). The importance of education and teaching within the roles of the workforce has recently been recognised in the job titles of 'Early Years Educator' and 'Early Years Teacher'

(EYT) (DfE, 2015). The holistic, multi professional nature of the role, and work with babies, is not identified in the role of 'teacher' in England, potentially narrowing professional identity. The Early Years Educator role at National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 3 is yet to be tested. On-the-job and college courses have continued, with a recent return to an apprenticeship model in England (Skills for Care and Development, 2016). The role of 'senior practitioner', once an aspiration of Sure Start initiatives and associated with gaining a Foundation Degree (O'Keefe and Tait, 2004), has now virtually disappeared from settings. Lumsden (2014) suggests from a survey (n=1114) that EYPs and EYTs have a specific role to play in safeguarding young children in England based on the fact that they have safeguarding as a specific, stand-alone standard and a broader-based knowledge than many other education/care professionals. In Wales, teachers are required to hold Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and there is no distinction of early years teachers for Foundation Phase. Those leading Foundation Phase classes in schools therefore generally hold QTS. Those leading Foundation Phase classes outside of school in the smaller non-maintained sector in Wales are allocated 10% of a teacher with QTS as an advisor through the local authority.

Roles such as 'childminder' continue to carry mixed messages (Jones and Osgood, 2007) and fail to recognise that childminders are expected to provide a quality educational and care experience and are subject to Ofsted inspection. The number of registered childminders in England reduced by about 1% in the 6 months to August 2014 (Ofsted, 2014), although in Wales numbers remain more constant (Family and Daycare Trust 2015).

### **3.3 Qualification levels and training: impact on children's outcomes and experiences**

The largest longitudinal study in England, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project, followed 3000 children from age 3 in 2003 into primary and secondary school, demonstrating significant findings related to the quality of pre-school provision. Good quality pre-school provision was positively associated with children's attainment and progress throughout primary school (Siraj Blatchford et al., 2008; Sylva et al., 2011), especially important

for boys, for children with special educational needs, and disadvantaged children. Sylva et al. (2011, p109) report the positive effect of a good quality pre-school, and the ability to predict this positive effect with significance, for both cognitive and behavioural outcomes, measured at age 11. Education Scotland's (2012) 'Making a Difference' report, based on evidence from 336 pre-school inspections in Scotland between 2010 and 2012 identifies the value of a well-qualified workforce for children's learning. Melhuish et al. (2013) (longitudinal study involving 683 children in Northern Ireland) identified benefits for children who attended a high quality pre-school as achievement in English and mathematics at age 11. However, Simon et al. (2015) note that those who use formal childcare are more likely to come from higher income families and where both parents are in employment. Informal care is used more by younger mothers who are not in employment. Mathers and Smees' (2014) research based on the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) identified similar quality indicators between government maintained schools for 3-4 year olds across areas of advantage and disadvantage, but lower quality provision in disadvantaged areas in PVI settings. So the question remains as to whether the most disadvantaged children are able to access high quality care. The term quality is itself contested by policy makers and those in practice (see section 5.1 for quality in relation to professional practice). Ofsted currently acts as the arbiter (DfE, 2013), suggesting a more performative notion of quality in England.

An important part of quality of early childhood settings is the qualifications of its staff. Change in qualifications and roles for the early childhood workforce since 2003 has occurred frequently. Expectations for the workforce to be qualified to a minimum National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 3 (or equivalent) were recommended by Nutbrown (2012), but not adopted in policy. Currently at least 50% of an early childhood team are required to be at NVQ level 2 as a minimum (DfE, 2014), meaning up to 50% of staff can be unqualified. However, Simon et al. (2015) identify a 12% increase in staff holding a level 3 qualification since 2005, with 75% of the workforce now holding this as a minimal qualification. Musgrave (2010), though, points out that shortening the level 3 NVQ to a one-

rather than a two-year programme, means that 17-year-olds are now forming this 'qualified' workforce. There is a large disparity between different parts of the sector. Roberts-Holmes (2013) notes 78% of English early years provision is within the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector (e.g. sessional preschools, day nurseries) which, compared to the maintained sector, has a workforce that is less well qualified. This disparity between settings is also identified in Scotland by Siraj and Campbell (2015). Moss (2014, p254) concludes that the workforce largely remains 'poorly educated' and 'poorly paid'. So although the workforce is now better qualified than in 2005, low pay remains a significant issue for the sector. The lowest paid workers are within the private sector.

UK policy has presented new ECEC qualifications and roles as a means to professionalise the workforce. However the workforce may see opportunities for further study as a route out of childcare (Kendall et al., 2012), sharing the general public's view that early childhood practice is not professional. Public perception of the role remains predominantly one of substitute mothering, while policy has often emphasised technical aspects of the role (Moss, 2007).

Gambaro et al. (2015), in their analysis of large data sets in England, found having a graduate within a PVI or maintained setting was associated with greater likelihood of receiving an outstanding Ofsted rating. Disadvantaged children were more likely to access graduates in settings if these settings were run by the local authority rather than as PVIs. Other research has supported the important role of graduate staff in the early childhood workforce, and the number of graduates working in ECEC is growing, although Adams' (2008) small-scale study suggests there is little recognition for graduate status. In Wales, the guidance relating to minimum recognised qualifications for employment in maintained settings has led to the development of early childhood related degrees encompassing practical competencies equivalent to NVQ level 3.

Nationally, there has been a drive to increase the number of graduates in the workforce. Early Years Professional (EYP) Status was introduced in England (2006) aiming to provide strong

practice leadership and improve children's outcomes, building on Every Child Matters (ECM) (DfES, 2003). The drive for graduate status was supported by the Graduate Leader Fund. The Labour government set a target to include an EYP in every children's centre by 2010, and in every full day care setting by 2015 (HM Government, 2005). Research into the impact of EYPS (Hadfield et al., 2012; Davis and Barry, 2013; Roberts-Holmes, 2013; Davis, 2014) demonstrated its positive value to practitioners, improving confidence and leadership ability, and the benefit to children and families against the outcomes identified in ECM. However EYPs were not recruited to work in the maintained sector, where educators were required to have QTS, albeit at the same academic level as EYPS; the status of EYPs was ambiguous and lacked appropriate pay rewards (Roberts-Holmes, 2013). This undermined professionalisation (Miller, 2008). Payler and Locke (2013) explored the views of practitioners (n=35) from 15 settings in one Local Authority who were reluctant to engage with the drive for EYPS; practitioners saw the changes as being imposed and not aligned to the experience and value already within the workforce. There was no provision for existing members of the workforce to have their experience acknowledged within the wider reform agenda (Payler and Locke 2013). This lack of voice from the practitioners in shaping professionalisation has been a recurrent theme in the literature (e.g. Osgood, 2006b; Miller, 2008).

While studies demonstrate the value of the EYP role in relation to children, not all EYPs were able to enact their role effectively. The complexity and diversity of workforce settings require a more joined up and generic policy, rather than reliance on singular roles for changes in practice (Simpson, 2010a; Lloyd and Hallett, 2010; Dunlop, 2015). The replacement of the EYPS with Early Years Teacher (EYT) in 2013 did not address these wider issues, nor the lack of equity across early childhood and primary teachers in terms of conditions of employment. These remain an issue for the early childhood workforce.

Menmuir and Hughes (2004) articulated the importance of academic, professional and vocational elements of early childhood degree programmes, and the opportunity within these to

frame qualifications for a professional workforce in Scotland and close attention is now being paid to the content of these degree programmes through policy (Wingrave, 2015). Menmuir and Hughes (2004) emphasised opportunities to support integration of services for children and families through professionalisation. Limited research has focused on the important role of support workers (e.g. teaching assistants) in early childhood settings, yet they play valuable roles (Barkham, 2008). As part of their larger European cross national survey, Laere et al. (2012) gathered data from England and Wales to explore competency requirements for early childhood practitioners. They suggest that the numbers of assistants in England and Wales has doubled over the last 10 years and that training is available for them. However integration of assistants into a professional workforce remains unclear.

Clear acknowledgement of the value of a well-qualified workforce in making a difference to outcomes for children is not supported by a consistent or systematic framework for qualifications. The nature of the qualifications has changed frequently, and at no time has equivalence across phases with the associated career progression routes and conditions of service been agreed. Additionally, continuing professional development (CPD) is acknowledged as vital for maintaining quality, but provision is fragmented. The nature of the work of the early childhood practitioner is complex. In-service training to support such complex work is required, particularly to support inclusion of disadvantaged, at risk or vulnerable children and families (Peeters and Sharmahd, 2014).

### **3.4 ECEC policy in relation to workforce**

Moss (2014) applauds the aspirational move for ECEC to the education sector in England, but notes (like Laere et al., 2012) that in fact education and care still sit uncomfortably between sectors, rather than having a united and holistic approach, as expected by UNESCO (2010). Moss's critique of policy in England from 1997 to 2014 demonstrates the large number of policy changes that have occurred without full investment.

Wild et al. (2015) used discourse analysis of policy documents to understand policy directions in England and Wales. They note the shift since 2003 to greater focus on education and taking a more technical, structured framework with emphasis on measurement of outcomes, rather than supporting theoretical stances valuing unstructured experiential and play experiences for young children's holistic development. The Nutbrown Review (2012) recommendations aimed to improve quality, particularly through qualifications and parity of these with QTS. The government response confirmed a desire to improve quality, but defined quality in relation to parental choice. Thus views of professionalism are represented in different ways within documents of specific governments, at times overtly separating the early childhood workforce from the teaching workforce.

Similarly, McMillan and McConnell (2015) analysed policy discourse related to Northern Ireland and identified a divide between statutory and voluntary sectors that works against the required collaboration within early childhood. The Learning to Learn policy identifies the need for well-qualified staff, but fails to address a mechanism for this across the statutory and voluntary sectors, thus failing to promote integrated services.

Within the literature, there is critique of policy as piecemeal, fragmented and focused on single roles (e.g. EYPS). Policy has aimed at correcting specific deficiencies (Osgood, 2009), such as lack of qualifications, rather than aiming for more strategic change with national impact on outcomes for children. Policy which lacks overall strategy intervenes at a more micro level in pedagogy, leadership and management, and how to work with parents. Research by Hadfield et al. (2012) demonstrates that democracy works effectively within individual settings to support strong outcomes for children and families, but is not supported by policy at the macro level. More overarching strategy is recommended, unifying policy within a single government department, focussed on holistic development of the child (Moss, 2006). This is what was intended in the Welsh Early Years and Childcare Plan (Department for Education and Skills and Department for Communities and Tackling Poverty, 2013), developing alongside an action plan for the Foundation Phase.

## 4. Learning communities

As evidenced below, the focus on professional development in ECEC has shifted since 2003 from upskilling the workforce through higher level qualifications to developing learning communities, and on to supporting the workforce through supervision and mentoring.

As the call for increased professional development and higher qualification levels for practitioners grew from 2003 onwards (e.g. see O’Keefe and Tait, 2004), research began to focus on the ways in which university learning and teaching could be adapted to foster new pedagogies and encompass practitioners’ practical expertise, as well as to help them to increase their skills of academic inquiry and critically question routine ways of practice (Bishop and Lunn, 2005; Bath et al., 2014). The roles of local authorities in England in prompting, brokering and supporting professional development and quality improvements were most evident in the period from 2003 to 2010, initially through Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCP) and later through the Transformation Fund (TF, introduced in 2006) and the Graduate Leader Fund (GLF replaced TF in 2007) (Her Majesty’s Government, 2005). Children’s centres, developed as integrated, multi-agency early years services (DfES, 2003), subsequently became ‘hubs’ for leading professional learning and quality improvement (Cotton, 2013). Such local authority roles have been in decline since 2010 alongside the demise of children’s centres. Some independent nurseries have developed their own in-house learning communities effectively, but this is demanding of nurseries’ resources, can limit awareness of cross-sector issues and reinforce parochialism (Osgood et al., 2016).

What does the research tell us about the development and impact of such learning communities?

### 4.1 ‘Reflective competence’ and collaborative groups

McMillan noted that competing learning theories underlie vocational training (competency model of learning) and graduate training (reflective model) and, based on a mixed methods study of vocational and graduate early years students

in Northern Ireland (questionnaires n=282; interviews n=22), proposed a new model of ‘reflective competence’ (McMillan 2009). This would enable students to develop practical skills while learning to reflect critically on practice and theory, hence avoiding superficial responses and better preparing them for the complexity of education practice that is beyond either traditional teacher training or vocational care models.

Developing and implementing models of professional learning for professional development in early years has been shown to be a demanding process where it moves beyond the delivery or transmission of knowledge in a time-limited manner. It is demanding of tutors and demanding of course participants, but the research shows there to be impact on practitioners’ relationships as tutors and course participants become learners/collaborators together, active in practice improvement, and agentive in their own learning (Bishop and Lunn 2005; Elfer and Dearnley, 2007; Bath et al., 2014). The very nature of the pedagogic approach in developing these learning communities led to repositioning ‘tutors’ and ‘course attendees’ into more collaborative groups. Indeed, in some instances the groups were almost entirely self-run (Cotton, 2013), whereas in others, tutors gradually took on a less directive role as the professional development progressed partly as planned, but also partly in response to critical self and group reflection during the process (Elfer and Dearnley, 2007). Further, the pedagogic approach in developing these learning communities intrinsically led towards models of research that favoured small-scale participative studies, often using a cyclical action-research model; see for example Bath et al.’s study with 43 students and four tutors in action research, the application of a philosophical approach being the ‘intervention’ (Bath et al., 2014) and Bishop and Lunn’s participatory methodology with 192 participants from a local EYDCP (Bishop and Lunn, 2005).

Further evidence of the power of process over content in developing professional learning through learning communities is evidenced in studies of the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL). NPQICL was introduced in 2005 to develop leadership in multi-agency, multi-professional

teams, particularly those in children's centres (National College of School Leadership (NCSL) 2005). The approach adopted for the NPQICL programme at master's level was professional development as collective enquiry (Whalley, 2005, cited in Webster, 2008). Whalley et al. (2008) noted from their study of 788 NPQICL participants that the quality of the learning community was strongly influenced by the quality of the tutor intervention and mediation (Whalley et al., 2008).

Narrative enquiry of participants who had piloted the NPQICL and were preparing for further roll out researched the 'lived experiences' of nine tutors and mentors (Isaac and Trodd, 2008). While the study participants were selected as enthusiasts from the pilot, the results claim to affirm that 'pedagogical isomorphism tends to generate enthusiasm, coherence and meaningful learning for participants' (p. 43). Pedagogical isomorphism is defined as modelling reflection, dialogue, containment and challenge (Isaac and Trodd, 2008). Similar to professional learning communities research by Elfer and Dearnley (2007), Isaac and Todd's findings highlight the importance of professional containment and the role of the tutors in providing a sense of safety and security for participant learners. Co-tutoring in this case was essential as a way of managing and enhancing such work, a finding echoing those of Elfer and Dearnley (2007) and Bath et al. (2014) and in part by Goouch and Powell (2012).

#### **4.2 Supporting practitioner-learners through supervision and mentoring**

The well-being of practitioners is thought to be a contributory factor to the well-being of children in their care. In the case of baby room practitioners, their lack of recognition, professional development opportunities, status and support meant that they had not developed a sense of professional identity as competent and knowledgeable. Goouch and Powell's research (2012) explains a process of professional development that again focused on the power of talk, relationships and environment. The strength of the process lay in facilitating practitioners to move from 'signalling to signifying' (p. 86) through a narrative focused model of professional learning created in an environment of security and trust. One of the outcomes of the project was that the practitioners found their

own voices, greater awareness of the value of their work and reported subsequently greater awareness of the importance of talking with the babies in their care (Goouch and Powell, 2012).

A specific role of mentoring in early years in relation to learning communities has developed, particularly with regard to 'supervision', meaning practitioners having one-to-one support to help them to make sense of and 'contain' the emotional demands of their roles. Supervision was first included in the statutory early years curriculum in 2012 (DfE, 2012), but mentoring as a support has been evident in research for some time. Research by John (2008) focused on the role of mentoring in supporting leaders of children's centres on the NPQICL programme (John, 2008). In reviewing work with the 23 children's centre leaders the author mentored, the research revealed that feelings of being a fraud or imposter were prevalent amongst leaders, as were feelings of lack of line management support and guidance, and lack of direction from local authorities. Mentoring was associated with helping participants to become more effective in delegating, prioritising workload and tackling 'critical incidents'. Methods used involved problem solving and reflective listening (John, 2008). In similar research involving family support workers undergoing group supervision (n = 12) and their managers in children's centres (n = 3), Soni noted: the value of the professional contract between supervisor and supervised; the role of group supervision where there is limited history of supervision; and of sufficient time for professional development generally (Soni, 2013). Group supervision may be a practicable solution, although contexts are vital to success. Participants found group supervision to be largely educative and supportive, particularly in relation to learning from others. Crucially, positive team dynamics and management support were vital to contexts for effective group supervision (Soni, 2013, p158).

#### **4.3 Active learning**

A study by Gilbert et al. (2013) of 50 early childhood studies degree undergraduates pointed to the value of active learning contexts through residential field trips (RFT), in this case to Sweden, in developing professional learning. Analysis of narrative data sets from interviews,



semi-structured questionnaires and reflective assignments suggested that RFT promoted a sense of empowerment in participants, leading to personal and professional learning. Participants reconceptualised their practice to become more child-centred in approach and to make greater use of outdoor play and sustainable resources.

## 5. Nature of professional practice

Since 2003, research in the UK has reflected four shifts in focus relating to the nature of professional practice in ECEC: the nature of professionalism in relation to quality; interprofessional practice and multiagency working; leadership; and re-examining care and education synergies.

### 5.1 Professional practice and quality

Questions have been raised about notions of quality in relation to the nature of professional practice and how best to conceptualise it, measure it and improve it (Moss, 2007; Ho et al. 2010). Vincent and Braun (2011), investigating the vocational training of students in England (42 student and 5 tutor interviews), noted a highly constrained version of professional practice conveyed to students based largely on 'professional' behaviour such as reliability, politeness and punctuality, while knowledge or expertise was rather seen as 'common sense' (Vincent and Braun, 2011). Early childhood studies undergraduates, according to Dyer and Taylor (2012), need to develop greater confidence in evaluating themselves and rely less on extrinsic judgements. Empirical research on early childhood practitioner attitudinal competences and their development across Britain, Hungary and Italy used focus groups (n=35) and an online survey (n=245) (Campbell-Barr, 2017).

Findings from the UK data show that the attitudes most highly rated were those relating to meeting children's individual needs, establishing rapport with families and compassion. However, Campbell-Barr points out that attitudes which cannot be readily measured risk falling outside the prevalent managerial view of quality and so being ignored, potentially causing uncertainty for those who see such aspects of quality provision as most important.

Findings from a sample of 238 settings rated according to three scales at two time-points showed a lack of evidence of impact by graduates on improving provision for birth to three-year-olds, largely because they tended not to be deployed to work with birth to threes (Mathers et al., 2011). This raises questions about the value placed on graduate-led provision for the youngest children and notions of high quality professional practice with such young children. Research also raises questions about whether quality in provision and in professional practice relate equally to all children. Gray (2005), from survey (n=75) and in-depth interviews (n=9), found that while early years managers were very experienced and appeared to be well-qualified, they received little or no training on working with children with visual impairments (Gray 2005). This is reflected, too, in findings from Clough and Nutbrown in a survey of 94 early years educators. They note that few felt appropriately equipped by their training to work with children with learning difficulties (Clough and Nutbrown, 2004).

### 5.2 Interprofessional practice and multiagency working

The complexity and challenge of working in newly integrated services such as children's centres (Bagley et al., 2004) or attempting to work in an interprofessional manner when not aligned to such integrated services, e.g. when in day nurseries or preschools rather than children's centres, has been highlighted by research since early 2000s and continues. Research has shown that conceptions of quality and success in interprofessional practice (IP) and multiagency working (MAW) are influenced by the contexts of settings and organisational climate (Cottle 2011) as well as by government discourse (Cottle and Alexander, 2014). A 'third space' for a newly-formed integrated practice culture is mooted (Messenger 2013). However, Payler and Georgeson reported on research (survey n=52; 5 case studies) showing how historical as well contextual influences shaped the ways in which early years practitioners could participate in IP for the benefit of children. This was partly based on other professions' out-dated awareness of the growing expertise in the early years sector, particularly in those parts that continue to form the bulk of provision: day nurseries and sessional preschools (Payler and Georgeson,

2013a; 2013b). Findings suggested the need to tailor training to individual contexts, arguing for securing space for practitioners to gain experience of interprofessional working through mentored opportunities. What is clearly noted in research findings are the high demands placed on practitioners in participating in IP (Anning, 2005; Payler and Georgeson, 2013b). Anning's evaluations of two contrasting Centres of Excellence, the precursors to children's centres, included interviews with 47 staff and their responses to vignettes of 'controversial issues' practitioners were likely to face, in an attempt to access the values and tacit knowledge underpinning action-in-practice and multiagency working in inner cities (Anning, 2005). Findings indicated that practitioners in multiagency settings were expected to operate at a highly sophisticated level, juggling competing demands of values from their own and others' professions, while also juggling those of host communities (Anning, 2005).

### **5.3 Leadership**

Of note from research is that in many PVI settings, managers felt they had limited training to support the complex roles they faced. Preston (2013) drew on interviews with 29 managers and deputy managers within 15 nurseries in the private sector in England to examine actual experiences of managing. Many had been promoted as young female professionals (nursery nurses), taking on management roles in complex contexts, but did not have the training to support them until recently (Preston, 2013). Mistry and Sood (2012) noted from their research with newly qualified and experienced teachers in reception classes in schools that newer practitioners were better prepared for leadership from their university training in comparison to more experienced practitioners (Mistry and Sood, 2012).

Research shows links between quality of leadership and quality of provision in settings (Muijs et al., 2004; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007; Ang, 2012). A key study on 'Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector' (ELEYS) (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007) as an extension of the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) and Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) projects, provided evidence for the importance

of leadership and the role of leaders from 12 settings. Findings show that effective preschool settings are characterized by strong leadership with low staff turnover, where leaders and practitioners share a vision for practice in relation to pedagogy and curriculum. Ang (2012) studied leadership in children's centres amongst leaders who had participated in the NPQICL (n= 359), using a stratified sampling strategy, questionnaires and telephone interviews. Three key themes emerged: integrated, multi-agency working as a key aspect of leadership; reflective learning and practice as an important leadership approach; status and pay as key external factors influencing leadership (Ang, 2012).

Research by Murray and McDowall Clark has helped to clarify the nature of leadership in early years as being distinct from management, particularly where practitioners were not in traditional 'leader' roles. Murray's small scale humanist research refers to a model of passionate care as the core of professionalism, combining moral and social purpose with professional love of children (Murray, 2013). The impetus to the idea of pedagogic leadership came from the introduction of the Early Years Professional (EYP) in England (Clark and Murray, 2013), a leader of practice without association with an organisational position, akin to leadership of learning in Hallet's research (Hallet, 2013). Clark and Murray reconceptualise leadership in ECEC as a participative pedagogy (Murray and Clark, 2013) and draw attention to the concept of catalytic leadership (McDowall Clark, 2012), similar to Siraj-Blatchford and Manni's notion of leadership from the bottom up (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007). Davis, in a three year study (questionnaires and focus group; 52 respondents), confirmed that the value of EYPS was seen in increasing awareness, confidence and empowerment. It also highlighted difficulties with the fact that EYPS was largely unknown to people outside the sector (Davis, 2014).

### **5.4 Re-examining care and education synergies**

We have already referred to Laere's (2012) research, referring to ways in which 'education' seems to be narrowed to learning and "'care' is subordinate or even 'inferior' to learning" (Laere, 2012, p535), hindering the holistic conceptualisations of education advocated

internationally. However, there has been a focus in research on examining this divide between care and education, recently recreated by policy, and calling for a clear synergy between them; see claims made for a strongly integrated policy for Scotland (Dunlop, 2015). Powell and Gooch's (2012) research with baby room practitioners speaks to this based on practice narratives of 25 caregivers working with babies in day care in England. They referred to the ways in which powerful and multiple voices disempower such caregivers, thus reducing their capacity to meet the babies' best interests. Yet without the opportunity for professional dialogue and critique, building professional knowledge, it can appear that caregivers collude with such narrow conceptualisations of their role. McDowall Clark and Baylis (2012) suggest, however, that engagement in work with babies can in fact assist practitioners to engage in the critical reflection necessary to challenge political prescription with its school-readiness agenda.

What is apparent is that the demands of working in a professional capacity with very young children are emotionally charged (Colley, 2006; Page, 2011; Taggart, 2011) and around which there are tensions (Campbell-Barr et al., 2015). Elfer and Dearnley have called for an ongoing culture of attention to the emotional experiences of nursery staff (Elfer and Dearnley, 2007). Elfer used the concept of 'primary task' to examine the clash between modelling ECEC on family/home or on the planned interactions of school (Elfer, 2007). Findings reveal that there is both alignment and conflict between what practitioners construe as professional and personal tasks, inviting and requiring critical engagement on the part of the sector to address an essential part of professional practice. Taggart has further articulated a rationale for professional training which is ethical as opposed to purely instrumental or rooted in a patriarchal notion of women as natural carers. In particular, compassion as a central feature of professional identity foregrounds ethical dimensions of ECEC professional practice, overcoming tensions between children's rights, care and education. Thus, Taggart calls for advocacy for care as a social principle (Taggart, 2011; 2014).

## 6. Conceptualisations of professionalism

Since 2003, policy and literature have focussed on the importance of a professional workforce contributing to quality ECEC. However, conceptualisations of professionalism are very different in policy and in academic research and commentary. Osgood (2010) evidences a deficit model of professionalization in policy: the workforce lacking qualifications and settings lacking quality. This contrasts with views supporting an experienced, increasingly well-qualified and capable workforce able to work democratically within the sector to improve outcomes for children. As early as 2004, Wood identified the conceptual differences that exist between the policy drivers for professionalising the workforce and curriculum drivers of holistic, flexible, child centred practice. Conflicting views of professionalism for the early childhood workforce are prevalent (Urban, 2008; Lloyd and Hallet, 2010; Moss, 2010).

### 6.1 Policy conceptualisations of professionalism

Policy has placed the early childhood sector firmly into a frame of education, where all provision is now subject to regulation by Ofsted in England. Ho et al. (2010), comparing England to Hong Kong, identify that this is a top-down approach, missing opportunities to engage the workforce in self-assessment and quality improvement. There has been a trend towards 'schoolification' (Laere et al., 2012, p528) but at the same time divisions between school teachers with Qualified Teacher Status and the early childhood workforce have been strengthened rather than reduced (Lloyd and Hallet, 2010). The conceptualisation of professionalism of the early childhood workforce does not match sociological theories of professionalism, although there has certainly been emphasis on professionalisation of the early childhood workforce through qualifications. Prior to EYPS the number of graduates in the workforce in England was small. EYPS led to an increase in this number, but without the rewards of pay, conditions and title usually associated with professional status.

Levels of prescribed curriculum have increased and individual control by teachers reduced (Osgood, 2006a). Policy views professionalism

as technical, following a pre-set curriculum, with settings less focussed on holistic child development and more on school readiness. Focus on the use of tools to measure outcomes has increasingly linked to the notion of professional accountability (Bradbury, 2012; Osgood, 2010). However, only certain elements of practice lend themselves to measurement, which have dominated at the expense of important but less easily measured elements such as care. There has been increased emphasis on 'performativity' of the workforce (Bradbury, 2012; Osgood, 2010), increasing administrative workload (Osgood, 2010). To counter the criticisms of imposed curriculum, there is some evidence that the perceived status of the workforce has improved in England since implementation of the EYFS (Hargreaves and Hopper, 2006), with parents, families and community recognising the educational roles within this sector. Professionalism within policy has also focussed on technical elements such as ratios, rather than on more political and ethical considerations of developing an effective, self-governing profession (Bath, 2013).

### **6.2 Opportunities to professionalise from within the workforce**

The workforce has had little voice in directing the professionalism agenda for ECEC (Brock, 2013), led instead by policymakers. However, practitioners could play an important role in redefining professionalism from within (Chalke, 2013). The introduction of the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage Profile in England in 2008 was the basis of Bradbury's study (2012), using ethnographic interviews to explore professionalism amongst early years teachers in primary schools and raise issues of performativity required by policy, which the practitioners themselves did not value. There has been an increased interest in listening to young children to improve ECEC (Bath, 2013) within an ethic of inclusion and democracy (Moss, 2009), also extended to listening to parents and families (Bath, 2013) and the workforce themselves (Osgood, 2010; Dunlop, 2015).

A number of small scale studies evidence the importance of engaging the workforce in identifying professionalism. Brock's (2013) longitudinal study of professionalism as enacted by practitioners enabled the construction of a

typology of professionalism based on research. Simpson's study identified the importance of agency, and working within a culture of reflexive practice (Simpson, 2010b). Hammond et al. (2015) critically consider the way in which relationships between junior, inexperienced staff and those who mentor them can be developed to value the experience of mentees, rather than simply imposing a set method of practice. Urban (2008) suggested that increasing the qualifications of the EC workforce is based on a model of expert knowledge that does not match the work of ECEC. Instead, there is a need for dialogic processes and co-construction of knowledge.

### **6.3 Programmes of preparation for professional practice**

Criticism of existing programmes preparing for entry into the early childhood workforce is evident in the literature. The importance of time in practice to support the development of professionalism when working with very young children is noted by Manning-Morton (2006) who advocates programmes which include not just content, but also practice based processes for development of the workforce, such as is currently under development in Wales. The Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme is also criticised because it does not provide additional knowledge or content related to the role (e.g. child development) but is focussed on understanding processes and developing skills such as lesson planning (Bradbury, 2012). Programmes have not always reflected the personal circumstances of members of the workforce, who may have their own family responsibilities (Osgood, 2010). In contrast to this, training is valued by the workforce when it enables reflection on and in practice to promote improved outcomes for children and families; the best example of this was EYPS (Hadfield et al., 2012).

## **7. Conclusion**

To conclude, we address our key research question, What does the research evidence since 2003 tell us about ECEC in relation to Professionalism: Early Years as a career?, through the sub-questions in light of the research evidence in the UK since 2003.

*What have been the changes in workforce composition, qualifications and conceptualisations of professionalism since 2003?*

- The ECEC workforce has shifted to one with higher levels of qualification, but this has not been reflected in policies requiring higher levels of qualification nor in status, pay, career pathways or conditions of service.
- The demands on the sector have increased and, while turnover of staff has reduced, challenges remain in recruiting sufficient staff, particularly in recruiting and paying qualified staff.
- The workforce is still largely female, younger than in other sectors and hampered by a lack of coherence in policy relating to qualifications and associated career progression.
- Nonetheless, qualification levels have risen across the sector, although not matched by a comparable rise in salaries.
- Quality narratives run throughout policy and research in relation to professionalism. Though a contested term, the influence of 'quality' is felt in relation to qualifications, roles, the evolving nature of professional practice and leadership.
- Shifts in the conceptualisation of professionalism continue to challenge its formulation in policy and government rhetoric.

*What have been the experiences and impacts of those changes on practitioners and children?*

- Associations have been shown between aspects of quality and children's experiences and outcomes, but to understand the implications of the associations made, it is vital to attend to which aspects of quality are used and how these associations are measured.
- Opportunities for graduates to effectively influence practice in their settings vary. Context matters and a shifting policy context and underinvestment have made it difficult for roles to be improved and embedded.
- Settings employing staff with higher qualification levels tend to be associated

with greater likelihood of achieving a higher inspection rating.

- The complexity of ECEC professional practice has increased and has become more apparent over time, revealing the demands made of practitioners in interprofessional practice, care and education of the youngest children and leadership.
- Models of professional development and learning became characterised by process-oriented effective learning communities, acknowledging the challenges faced by increasingly complex demands on the sector and the need for emotional containment and mentoring over time. The value of mentoring and supervision is evidenced.
- Emphasis in research on the high levels of skill, sophisticated levels of operation and emotional and attitudinal competence demanded of practitioners in early years settings belie policy direction characterised by managerialism, based on rhetoric that suggests a view of the workforce as in deficit.

The professionalization of the workforce and ECEC as a career now face two competing issues. On one hand, research evidence has revealed the demanding nature and complexity of ECEC professional practice and the challenges of educating, training and continuously developing the workforce to work effectively with such complexity. But on the other hand, there are increasing political and economic demands for an 'affordable' childcare sector to provide greater capacity at lower costs. How can such competing drives be resolved to ensure a sustainable and transformative workforce?

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## CHAPTER 3

# PARENTING AND THE FAMILY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Pam Jarvis and Jan Georgeson

### 1. Introduction

This literature review shows how UK research in the areas of parenting and the family has been shaped by the dominant political discourses during the years since the last BERA review. In January 2016, the then British Prime Minister David Cameron used his first television interview of the New Year to speak about the importance of the family in his words, 'the best anti-poverty measure ever invented' (Boffey, 2016, online). The centrality of the family on the national agenda, and Cameron's linkage of it to economic policy, is what would be expected within the contemporary neoliberal political climate. Neoliberalism is a political ideology that presumes the best way forward socially and economically is one of individual choice and a deregulated self-governing economic market, where there are as few constraints upon free trading as possible. This position recognises merit and individual choice as drivers for action and economic gain, but also places blame on 'wrong choices' whilst failing to acknowledge the implications of social conditions (poverty, class, ill health). The New Labour government created many neoliberal policies, but nonetheless attempted to use state investment to level the economic playing field. For the Conservative Cameron administration, acts of intervention by the state were constructed as generally undesirable, but might be tolerated in order to maintain a framework within which the market could operate effectively. This ideology tends to lead to an increase in measurement and comparison establishing principles of competition in whatever remain as public services. This review therefore seeks to answer the questions:

What is the role of the family in the context of neoliberal ideology as played out in the UK? What are the consequences of this for children, parents and practitioners in the mixed economy of early years provision?

### 2. Search strategy

The review of the literature was informed by two searches.

Initial searches on Google Scholar (custom range 2003-2015) on 'what is a family', 'parenting professional', 'good parent', 'parent school relationship' and 'work parenting' yielded 44 relevant references published in peer-reviewed edited books and journals. This included articles both from the UK and from the rest of the world. The total was reduced to 19 on removal of non-UK references, although influential ideas from beyond the UK informed the introduction to the review.

The second part of the review focuses on parenting interventions; a search using Google Scholar on 'early childhood parenting interventions' with a custom range 2003-2015 yielded 19,400 hits. A more focused search using Boolean operators was therefore carried out in Mendeley and in ERIC (Education Resources Information Center). A search in Mendeley on 'parenting AND intervention AND early AND [not]"United States" AND year [2003 TO 2015] AND [UK, England, WALES, NI, Scotland] produced 51 papers. A search using ERIC on 'Parenting + intervention + early childhood education from 2003 to 2015' produced 130 papers. The combined total was reduced to 53 papers once papers relating to interventions outside the UK and duplicates with the previous search were removed. Together the two searches yielded 75 papers and a further 5 references were added to follow up research cited in these papers which had not been revealed by either search. Abstracts of all papers were then read and themes emerging from these abstracts were used to structure the review. Selected papers (reviews; detailed examples of frequently cited interventions) were read in full. Finally one further report was added which was published after the 2015 cut-off date but which comprised

a substantial review within the field of early intervention.

### 3. Parenting in the neoliberal age

This first part of the review deals with research that explores or is shaped by dominant constructions of the 21st century family; how families are typically constructed within contemporary post-industrial societies within the context of neoliberalism, and how they are discussed within the academic and professional literature. Definitions of 21st century parenting roles are not simple or fixed. Faircloth (2013, section 2.5) comments that 'the word parent has shifted from a noun denoting a relationship with a child (something you are) to a verb (something you do)'. Conroy (2010) posits modern neoliberal governments place the emphasis on parents and teachers as key agents of socialisation in maintaining social order, with the responsibility to place trainee citizens on the 'right' path at the very beginning. Governments are deeply concerned that citizens who are offered choices should be persuaded to make the right ones, creating 'an inescapable tension internal to Neo-Liberalism' (Conroy, 2010, p326) leading to an emphasis upon 'intensive parenting' which 'can be viewed as part of the broader neoliberal project' (Shirani et al., 2012, p26).

Such emphasis is, however, on purely functional elements of parenting and, while there is nothing inherently new in state regulation of motherhood: 'historically one of the most regulated but least supported social institutions' (Hey and Bradford 2006, p53), neoliberalism has imposed ever more explicit, exacting standards upon parenting in general and mothering in particular. This can make 'modern motherhood [something that] is 'done' rather than experienced [hence parenting, and mothering in particular becomes]... 'not only a politicised issue but a profoundly moral issue, too' (Hinton, 2013, p73). Researchers have identified the role of mothers as particularly complex, with some aspects of traditional roles carried over into responsibilities expected of fathers as well as mothers. For example Shirani et al. (2012) found that fathers were typically expected to be the financial managers of the family, even if they did not earn all the money. Mothers, by contrast, regardless of paid labour activity, were

seen as having more direct control of the child's day-to-day activities and behaviour.

Many authors have detected an element of 'moral panic' (Cohen, 1972), particularly with respect to highly diverse 'subjectively constructed' 21st century families (Furedi, 2008; McCabe, 2015, online). Vincent et al. (2010) note that politicians have been quick to disseminate such moral panic to legitimate greater state surveillance of the family; for example Alan Johnson MP proposed in 2007: 'traditionally parenting has been a no go area for governments - but now it is an essential area for us to focus on' (Vincent et al., 2010, p124). Similarly Edwards and Gillies (2013, p23) quote Frank Field MP, author of the national review aimed at 'preventing poor children becoming poor adults': 'since 1969 I have witnessed a growing indifference from some parents to meeting the most basic needs of children, particularly younger children' (Field, 2010, p16). Edwards and Gillies (2013) propose that the intensive, 'child-centred' parenting constructed by politicians as a fundamental process that must be present in 21st century families 'was nowhere to be found in accounts from the 1960s' (p29).

A crucial feature of this change is a reframing and centring of childrearing as a job requiring particular know-how and expertise. Policy-makers have sought to establish parenting as a complex skill which must be learnt... the politicisation of parenting. (Edwards and Gillies 2013, p33).

Faircloth et al. (2013, p6) agree that, by the turn of the 20th century, parenting became represented as a set of skills that must be acquired with the target of achieving a set of government-stipulated outcomes: 'the conversion of love from a spontaneous sentiment... to a parental function or skill'. Edwards and Gillies (2013) conclude that contemporary notions of parenting are steeped in neoliberal concepts of choice on the one hand and individual accountability on the other. These demands and tensions have shaped policy, practice and consequently research agendas during the period of the review.

#### 4. Parenting, work and childcare

A fundamental pillar of neoliberalism is that all adult citizens within society must be economically active in order to stimulate the national and international economy to the maximum extent. Where mothers of young children in the mid-20th century were expected to stay at home with their children, the mothers of the early 21st century are expected to engage in economic exchange as others (most typically other women) take care of their children whilst they engage in paid labour, thus creating two workers within the economy. In this way, both children and adults can become units of economic capital.

More women in the workforce boosts GDP, increases income from taxes, and reduces welfare costs... An increasingly competitive, knowledge-based global economy is [also] helping to convince both governments and parents that pre-school education is an investment in future academic success and employment prospects (UNICEF, 2008, p4).

Brooker (2010, p182) makes the point that 'centre-based childcare for children under 3 is a relatively new phenomenon in the UK'. She proposes that, while this is a re-conceptualisation of care, it retains notions of bonding and attachment, which build aims and objectives around the principle of 'reciprocal attentive care' (p183). This concept is highly related to the intensive parenting concept explored above; however the duty now passes outside the family so that care can be provided by professionals.

The literature also suggests that the construction of 'skilled parenting' - that children will do better if they are passed to experts as soon as possible, who have the training to do the job better than 'amateur' parents - raises multiple issues for mothers in particular, and especially for mothers from the lower echelons of the socio-economic structure. Empirical research indicates that it is these families, and the mothers in particular, who are most disempowered by neoliberal societal constructions. Vincent et al. (2010) interviewed 70 mothers who lived on two council estates in inner London. They found that these women struggled to work long hours for low pay and to simultaneously engage in the intensive parenting

stipulated by government initiatives. This situation did not give mothers the psychological space to reconcile the requirement to be a good mother with the requirement to be a good worker: 'the impossible tensions that these discourses articulate for working class mothers... an unstable mix of support, exhortation and the threat of punitive action' (Vincent et al., 2010, p124).

Correspondingly, Vincent et al. (2010) found that the mothers in their sample who were on benefits rather than in paid work felt criticised by the state for 'sponging', while those in work felt criticised as bad mothers due to the lack of time to spend with their children. The meagre level of their wages and, in general, long inflexible hours of work meant that they did not feel that their children reaped any benefits from their paid work. In this sense then, low paid occupations do not benefit children in the way that paid work is experienced by middle-class dual-career families. However this was not transparent to Vincent et al.'s participants: 'the women did not take any of this lightly and were left to deal with the ambivalences and sense of guilt that are generated by contradictory discourses and the "perfection codes" upon which such discourses and policy trade' (Vincent et al., 2010, p135). This female double bind thus sits at the core of the neoliberal parenting issue; the evidence strongly suggests that paid labour is simply added to female parenting responsibilities and superhuman excellence is then expected in both roles within 'a society in which social esteem is solely registered in terms of paid employment' (Conroy, 2010, p62).

Hey and Bradford (2006) also describe this double bind in detail in their study of two focus groups and eight telephone interviews undertaken as part of an evaluation of a local Sure Start programme. The aims of the Sure Start programme have changed several times since its inception and its benefits (in terms of improved child outcomes) have proved difficult to research (Melhuish, 2007; NESS, 2012). The views of the parents in Hey and Bradford's study demonstrate, however, Sure Start's endorsement of traditional models of intensive mothering alongside its celebration of women who have moved out of the home and from state benefit into paid work, leading to 'the mundane



struggles of white working class women to make ends meet materially, symbolically and psychologically' (Hey and Bradford, 2006, p62). Hey and Bradford (2006, p64) conclude with the comment that Sure Start was 'reclassifying working class femininity' due to a failure to 'recognise the complexities and contradiction of values' in working class family lives (p62).

Both working class and middle class parents in Brooker's (2010) study reported feeling patronised and talked 'at' by setting staff. Brooker suggests that the practitioner-parent relationship was given far less thought than the practitioner-child relationship in both settings that she researched, suggesting that there was 'a rather generalised view of parents' (especially mothers') expectations' (p192). She refers to the practitioner-parent relationship in general as 'provisional and tentative' (p195) in which neither effectively tried to 'grasp the identity of the other', with much of this emanating from 'the anxieties and tensions felt by many working mothers' (p194).

### 5. The paradox of parental involvement for working parents

The importance of parental involvement in children's learning was well established at the time of the last review (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003), but more recent research studies have found that it does not always sit easily with the service provision focus of the middle class parent. Brooker (2010) found quite problematic, multi-faceted differences arising between parents and practitioners. In general, she found that middle-class parents viewed the setting as a service provider rather than an intensive parenting 'partner' and thus became consequently irritated by what they perceived as a lack of understanding of parents' busy working lives. In contrast, working-class parents suspected the setting staff of finding their mothering skills lacking and consequently checking up on them.

This analysis can also be extended to the ways in which setting practitioners work with parents, and to the role of practitioners within settings to educate parents to aid the development of 'parenting skills' (see below; Parenting as intervention) or become better informed about the curriculum. The nature of this process disempowers working class families in particular,

who become enmeshed in a construction of their lives that is 'based upon a cultural deficit model [with the purpose of]... impos[ing] middle class values' (Sime and Sheridan, 2014, p329). Lucas (2011) agrees that the influence of wider systems upon families is ignored, and proposes that this is because the focus on parental behaviour is 'the hegemony of current policy discourse' (p189). Under this discourse the parent is seen as both problem and solution, 'a return to pathologising the poor' (Lucas, 2011; p191) and indeed to 'biologising parenting' by promoting 'the idea that parenting is the main factor in child development' (Lowe et al., 2015).

Sime and Sheridan (2014) carried out a study focusing on working class parents' relationships with their child's early years setting in Scotland. They found parental involvement to be 'a catch-all term' (p328), based upon a cultural deficit model, with the inherent danger that attempts would be made 'to impose middle-class values including active consumerism in education' (p329). They did find in general that parents were grateful for the provision for their children, and voiced hopes that the children would eventually do better than them, adopting 'an instrumental view of education as a way out' (p334), a point that might be further analysed from a Foucauldian perspective to suggest that the parents had been conditioned through intervention to judge their own lives and communities as 'other'. Brooker (2014) also refers to this possibility in her avocation that parents and practitioners make more explicit efforts to recognise each other's identities.

### 6. Parenting as intervention

The idea that parental behaviour can influence development (both positively and negatively) has a long history in psychological literature, particularly the body of research showing the importance of attachment and adult-child interaction during the early years (Rees, 2005; Barlow, 2015; Malmberg et al., 2016). Reviews of parenting interventions report 'a range of effective programmes, differing by approach and rationale' (Asmussen et al., 2016, p11) and distinguish between universal programmes and those targeted at particular groups or aimed at parents or children with particular characteristics:

- **Universal:** available to all families; activities may take place alongside or as part of other universal services, including health visiting, schools or children's centres.
- **Targeted-selective:** services that target or 'select' families with characteristics (e.g. economic hardship, single parenthood, young parents and/or ethnic minorities) that place them at greater risk of experiencing problems.
- **Targeted-indicated:** refers to a smaller percentage of the population of families with a child or parents with a pre-identified issue or diagnosed problem focussed on the child or parent with particular characteristics requiring more intensive support)
- **Specialist:** refers to interventions developed for high-need families, where there is an ongoing problem (e.g. illness; special needs) or serious child protection concerns.

(From Asmussen et al., 2016, p22)

On closer analysis, it can be difficult to maintain these distinctions, but they offer useful categories to summarise research into parent interventions in the period covered by the review.

### **6.1 Parent interventions as 'universal'**

If the quality of parenting is associated with relative progress through the life course, this offers a strong argument for the importance of supporting favourable parenting environments for all children in society; indeed in January 2016, David Cameron as Prime Minister vowed to make parenting classes the norm for all parents, regardless of income or class (Boffey, 2016). The offer of training for all or any parents is consistent with the concept of parenting as a skill to be exercised to enable each child to fulfil his/her potential and to ensure that no child is left behind in any or all aspects of development due to parental ignorance, incompetence or neglect. Such an offer, while carrying a preventative element, is not overtly targeted at any particular group, which helps to avoid the stigma of parenting interventions as remediation

(and also overcoming the possibility of wealthy but incompetent parents missing out on support which could make them better parents). Woolfson et al. (2010) found that parents who attended parenting groups in Scotland had 'gained valuable new insights into their children's behaviour, changing how they thought about their role as parents and their behavioural and developmental expectations of their children' (Woolfson et al., 2010, p3). Research exploring parents' attitudes to parenting support does not suggest, however, that offers will always be well received; Broadhurst found that 'outside (professional) help was very much a residual option, only to be considered on the basis of "no-one to turn to"' (Broadhurst, 2007) and that the normal choice would be to seek advice and support from family and friends. Leese (2013) found that sensitivity by support workers in their everyday interactions with vulnerable parents influenced whether the parents might accept help or not. Waterston et al. (2009) reported on the effectiveness of a low cost non-stigmatizing intervention for all parents, namely a monthly parenting newsletter. This was sent directly home during child's first year and appeared 'to help parents to understand their infant better and feel less hassled' (Waterston et al., 2009, p247).

Before Cameron's 2016 speech, the Coalition government had commissioned trials in an earlier attempt to 'normalise' the idea of parenting classes, but these did not attract parents in hoped for numbers (Lindsay et al., 2014). Parenting programmes aim to support parents by offering useful guidance and support to make better choices than they might have done if they just did 'what comes naturally' or imitate what they observe around them. Lucas (2011, p187) argues that 'off the peg' parenting programmes typically follow middle-class concepts of good parenting with the idea that 'if parents follow generalised good parenting rules they will influence the child's development and behaviour in positive ways'. Sometimes interventions can appear to be valorising common sense techniques such as time out (Everett et al., 2010) or endorsing practices which were once commonplace in communities, such as singing rhymes and traditional songs, to improve adult-child interaction (Evangelou et al., 2007).

Other programmes are described as 'evidence-based', although this can have two different meanings: based on principles derived from research findings in different disciplines, or claims for effectiveness investigated through research studies. Many tend to be based on normative psychological theories such as attachment, social learning theory and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. Popular programmes such as Incredible Years (Webster Stratton, 1982) have existed as both universal and targeted initiatives depending upon available funding streams; universal versions of these programmes offer evidence-based parenting skills to support all parents to develop their children's social and emotional development, while targeted programmes have been delivered for specialists working with children with specific difficulties (see following sections).

Arranging parenting sessions open to all in local children's centres might appear to constitute a universal offer, but this can mask some ambiguity over notions of universality (as opposed to targeting) of parenting interventions, which has become more apparent with the focusing of initiatives on particular areas, alongside the changing function of Sure Start Children's Centres (Lewis 2011). Morrison et al. (2014) recently reviewed parenting interventions and, while close examination of the review's summaries shows that many interventions were open to all within those localities (or had been targeted at groups in a non-stigmatising way for example invitations to first time mothers, pregnant women or fathers), the majority had been targeted at particular localities where there were indications of socio-economic deprivation and disadvantage.

## **6.2 'Targeted selective' parenting interventions**

The motivation for the funding of targeted parenting interventions has been informed by research findings about the progress of children from different strata of society (e.g. findings from the Millennium Cohort Study: Feinstein, 2003, 2006; Kelly et al., 2011) and in particular, the finding that children with low scores at 22 months from low income households tended to stay low, whereas children with low scores from more wealthy/better educated families tended to make more progress (Feinstein,

2003). Taken together with findings from reviews of intervention studies (e.g. Geddes et al., 2010), this supports the argument that not only can children's achievement in key areas of development be changed, but that there is something in the environment surrounding children from families with higher socioeconomic status (SES) that influences this change in a positive direction - and that one possible aspect of the high-income context could be parenting. It is, however, difficult to find research studies which can methodologically support the argument that poor parenting per se limits children's development; parenting is often lifted from the mass of possible factors associated with low SES (such as poor housing, high levels of poverty etc.) as one thing which might be amenable to (relatively inexpensive) interventions.

The New Labour government's agenda (1997-2010) to reduce social exclusion led to an increase in parenting interventions aimed at reducing social inequalities. Smith (2006) identified two types of intervention: small scale 'home-grown' interventions, usually low-budget and developed to meet local needs, few of which had been evaluated, and 'imported' intervention programmes, developed in the US, Canada and Australia, again few of which had been systematically evaluated on UK populations. Morrison et al. (2014) therefore, in their systematic review of parenting interventions aimed at reducing social inequalities, focused their search on Europe, where the socioeconomic context is different but inequalities still remain and indeed are increasing (Morrison et al., 2014, p3). Application of stringent search criteria yielded 23 studies, all but one of which took place in the UK. Their review therefore provides a valuable indication of outcomes related to reducing social inequalities of well-known programmes such as Sure Start (NESS, 2012; Geddes, 2010; see also Clarke, 2006; Hall et al., 2015) and Incredible Years (Panjwani, 2014; but see also Bywater et al., 2011; Gridley et al., 2015; Braiden and Marshall, 2014), and well as locally focused interventions, for example to improve safety conditions (Carman et al., 2006).

Churchill and Clarke (2009), in their study of parenting education in England that principally focused upon the vehicle of Sure Start, highlight some of the consequences of adopting

interventions rooted in the school readiness philosophy of the US-based Head Start and High Scope. They comment that both are based upon neoliberal ideology and:

A particular understanding of the role of parents in shaping children's behaviour and development, relative to other influences, and a belief that the provision of information and specific skills training can transform parents' practice so that they conform to current norms and values (Churchill and Clarke, 2009, p43).

Churchill and Clarke found that the parenting programmes offered were also typically of US origin (e.g., Triple P, Incredible Years) and that such programmes had a core of inculcating authoritative parenting styles, with little attention paid to the impact of conflicts that arise in individual families due to wider issues such as parental discord and work-family conflicts: 'relatively little policy attention has been given to creating the conditions for consistent parenting' (p146). They also raise the pressures inherent in poverty: 'limited economic human and social capital can in turn limit parental choices' (p46); that there are formidable 'obstacles to social inclusion' (p56) and considerable social injustice occurs when this is ignored. It can be further argued that such a range of issues would be impossible to address within a short, inexpensive 'off the peg' programme. Churchill and Clarke (2009) found that measurement of programme effects is also difficult in evaluations, for example because there may be differences between the opinions of parents and children with respect to their evaluation of the impact of a particular programme. Additionally, short-term programmes are logically likely to have only superficial, short-term effects, which may be difficult to capture in evaluation. Churchill and Clarke (2009, p51) conclude that parenting programmes currently in wide usage focus principally upon transforming parental behaviour to middle class norms with no intention or initiative to do anything about families' wider environments and that those creating such programmes would be advised to more effectively 'think society'.

Geddes et al. (2010), in their review of international research evidence assessing the

effectiveness of early childhood interventions aimed at promoting cognitive and social development, note that

Most early childhood interventions are designed to have a protective influence against various stressors that children are exposed to. The idea is to partially compensate for risk factors, such as low socioeconomic circumstances, and the effect they have on children's overall development (Geddes et al., 2010, p9).

To inform the national evaluation of the Early Learning Partnership Project, the research team reviewed literature on the 'risk and prevention paradigm' and parents' role in their children's development (Evangelou et al., 2008). They identify three pathways along which early intervention programmes might influence child outcomes:

- cognitive and motivational advantage, focused on the child's early development and future school achievements
- children's persistence in learning and perceived competence
- family support in terms of parents' capacity to support their children's learning and development.

The project report also outlines research on interventions to support families where children might be at risk of learning delay, either because of special educational needs or aspects of their home learning environment, or in some cases, both (Evanagelou et al., 2008; Goff et al., 2012). As well as highlighting aspects of interventions that address the needs of these families, the report also emphasises the importance of developing practitioners' understandings of how to involve parents in their children's learning.

Hutchings et al. (2009, 2013) have explored this further by comparing characteristics of parents recruited to parenting interventions targeted at geographical area alone versus individual families targeted by known risk factors. They report that families recruited from areas with higher levels of socio-economic deprivation, mental health problems and parenting stress nonetheless had lower levels of child risk factors than families recruited through individual screening

processes, which leads them to suggest that 'screening measures would identify children at greatest risk of poor outcomes and whose families might benefit from additional targeted services' (Hutchings et al. 2013); however this risks attaching a stigma to an invitation to such a programme - a very difficult balance.

### **6.3 'Targeted-indicated' and 'Specialist' Parenting Interventions**

Specialist programmes and interventions have also been the subject of research studies investigating support for parents to promote the development of children with particular characteristics that might impede their development. Rix and colleagues have explored parental perception of interventions to support parents of children with Down syndrome, (Paige-Smith and Rix, 2005; Rix et al., 2006; 2008); Green et al. (2015) assessed the effect of a parent-mediated intervention for infants at high risk of autism with some 'encouraging' results; Allely et al. (2014) investigated the impact on children's verbal IQ of a parenting programme, Mellow Parenting, which aims to help parents make changes in their relationships including increasing positive parent-child interaction, and Roy and Chiat (2013) explored the distinction between poor language due to disadvantage and intrinsic language disorder, alongside the implications for intervention to promote language skills in children in socially disadvantaged communities. Clear links have been established between low SES, special educational needs/disability, and poor health (Emerson and Brigham, 2015). However, the most frequent 'specialist' characteristic featuring in the literature search was children's behaviour. Asmussen et al., summarising their review of evidence and costs of early intervention programmes available to UK commissioners, found that 'programmes which focus on children's behavioural development tend to have better evidence of effectiveness than those focused on attachment or cognitive development' (Asmussen et al., 2016, p11). The ubiquity of interventions focussed on behavioural development should be considered alongside media interest in 'bad' families and celebrity 'taming' of children's inappropriate behaviour as entertainment (Gillies, 2011, section 9:2).

Interventions have also been targeted at parents

who fall into particular categories or into certain situations that might increase their risk of making 'wrong' choices in parenting, for example parents who are socially isolated (Butcher and Gersch, 2014), teenage mothers (Rudoe, 2014), mothers known to be engaged in drug abuse (Chandler et al., 2013), fathers finding it difficult to get involved in their children's development (Chawla-Duggan, 2006), or parents with mental health difficulties. Vostanis et al. (2006) carried out a national population study to examine the relationship between parental psychopathology and parenting strategies with child psychiatric disorders. They found that 'negative parenting attitudes, involving physical and non-physical punishment, were associated with both parental and child mental health problems, and were mediated by other family and socioeconomic factors' (Vostanis et al., 2006, p13). In particular they found that there was a strong tendency for the children whose parents used rewards but avoided punishment not to display psychiatric disorders. Baradon et al. (2008) report on *New Beginnings*, an early intervention model developed at the Anna Freud Centre for mothers in prison, which led to 'a significant increase in the mothers' ability to think about their own internal states and those of their babies after the course' (Baradon et al., 2008 p253-254). Some mothers were enabled to give a 'more complex, multi-dimensional depiction of themselves and their babies in relation to each other' (Baradon et al., 2008, p254) and had also moved towards understanding the baby as a person with a separate, and therefore different, mind. Both studies have implications for planning interventions to avoid escalation of negative consequences.

Davis, arguing for the Family Partnership Model, outlines processes needed to build trust and empathy when working with parent groups characterised by high refusal rates, high dropout rates and low adherence to advice (Davis, 2009). There is, however, a tension between promoting programmes as addressing particular parental characteristics so that those most in need receive appropriate support, and the risk of damaging the frail self-esteem of parents in difficult circumstance and/or experiencing mental health difficulties. The fear of 'being judged' is yet again raised in Woodcock's (2003) study of constructions used by social workers working

with children and families in crisis. She found that the core construction with which social workers evaluated the parents with whom they worked was 'the facilitation of child development' (p90) and that this was judged on the parent's (most usually the mother's) capacity, on the basis of social worker observation, to be sensitive and responsive to the child. Simply loving the child was not enough in this construction; parents must acquire and display the skills required to promote their children's development.

As with other interventions, research effort in this area has been fuelled by neoliberal reliance on measurement for comparison of interventions that do not have immediate economic benefit, and leads to calls for the use of 'evidence-based practice' and ways to demonstrate that targeted funds are well spent (e.g., Allen, 2011; DfE, 2015a). Davis (2009), reviewing the effectiveness of interventions aimed at families to promote children's wellbeing, notes the difficulty of garnering strong evidence to endorse widespread use as 'research suggests the overriding significance of non-specific programme factors, such as the helper-client relationship' (p63). Drawing on a long history of research into the Family Partnership Model for interventions (which later informed Early Support; see Davis and Meltzer, 2007) and before going on to describe a European project employing a Family Partnership Model, Davis (2009) points to the importance of considering the processes involved in how to work with families and adapt programmes to their needs, rather than just outlining the content of practitioner-led sessions (p65). Rix and Paige-Smith (2006), in their study based on interviews with parents of children with Down syndrome, also emphasise the importance of considering parental agency in the context of support and advice for parents of children with special educational needs/disabilities. They reflect on the extent to which the receiving of advice and support can diminish parents' capacity to make choices about what is best for their child based on their own rich knowledge accrued within the family context.

Several studies cite the UNICEF report, *An Overview of Child Well Being in Rich Countries* (2007), in which England came bottom out of 21 nations and more recent reports

documenting growing concerns for children's mental health. Barlow et al. (2015) reviewed studies that have evaluated the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving attachment and attachment-related outcomes on a universal or targeted basis, to update the evidence base for the UK's national Healthy Child Programme targeting children aged 0–5 years. They conclude that parenting programmes, for example those involving the use of video feedback and mentalisation, are amongst the methods that can offer opportunities to improve attachment security, reducing insecure and disorganised attachment for vulnerable parents and children. However, Barlow et al. point out that this is specialized work for those already qualified in this area, although some interventions can be carried out by practitioners such as Health Visitors after extra training and provided with good supporting resources (Barlow et al. 2015).

Barlow et al.'s (2015) findings were part of a larger piece of work reviewing earlier systematic reviews published from 2008 to mid-2014 to provide evidence about 'what works' to support commissioning (Axford et al., 2015). The wider review picks up 'significant new data ... published since the most recent systematic review: obesity prevention for 0-3 year-olds; attachment; parenting support; and speech, language and communication' (Axford et al., 2015, p7). These were also the most prominent four areas, along with support for behaviour management, which emerged in our search of the literature. More recently, Asmussen et al. (2016) rated evidence and costs of early intervention programmes available to UK commissioners using their own robust criteria and found strongest evidence overall for 'programmes that target based on early signals of risk in child development (targeted-indicated)' (Asmussen et al., 2016, p11).

Studies in recent years have sought to address growing concerns about parents' understanding of children's diet, level of physical activity and the effects on health. For example, Bentley et al. (2012) investigated parents' views about physical activity (PA) to inform future parenting interventions to increase child PA. They suggest that 'improving parents' knowledge of the PA recommendations for children, and increasing their awareness of the benefits of PA beyond

weight status may be an important first step for a parenting PA intervention' (Bentley et al., 2012, p7). Wiles et al. (2009) focus on the relationship between a 'junk food' diet and later behavioural problems, concluding that children who ate a high level of 'junk food' in early childhood were more likely to be in the top third for hyperactivity at age 7. The authors point out, however, that this 'may reflect a long-term nutritional imbalance, or differences in parenting style' (Wiles et al., 2009, p498) so further research is needed to inform possible interventions. Blissett (2011) reviewed evidence on links between parenting style and children's consumption of fruit and vegetables and concluded that an authoritative parenting style, 'typified by emotional warmth but high expectations for children's dietary adequacy and behaviour, accompanied by specific feeding practices such as modelling consumption' (p826) is linked with eating more fruit and vegetables in the childhood years. Chadwick et al. (2010) report on the potential of a wide-ranging community-based healthy-lifestyle programme to combine prevention and treatment; Bryant et al. (2013) note, however, that there is a 'disappointing lack of evidence to guide development of culturally-appropriate, obesity prevention programmes' (p. 120) and have embarked on a longitudinal cohort study of ethnically diverse mothers in Bradford, who are collecting data about their child's environment over time. The researchers aim to use these data to help with 'the development of a feasible culturally-specific intervention to prevent childhood obesity' (p. 133). However, it will be important to include in future analysis consideration of whether fruit and vegetable eating is part of a wider picture, in which parents who are 'managing' in every sense (emotionally and financially) are more likely to give children a more wholesome diet, while those 'on the edge' might be more likely to serve more take-away or convenience food. Unless this broader sociocultural perspective is taken, the validity of all these studies can be questioned.

Studies examining the effectiveness of programmes to address 'conduct problems' were often underpinned by a medical model of understanding children's behaviour, seeing the problem as something within the child which can be treated by application of appropriate

parenting. For example The Incredible Years programme is often reported as treatment for children with an identified condition. A group of researchers at Bangor University have explored the effectiveness of Incredible Years BASIC parenting programme as an intervention in Sure Start services targeted at children at risk of developing conduct disorder, using a randomised controlled trial (Hutchins et al., 2007). They found that the programme was successful as a preventative measure for pre-school children displaying early signs of ADHD and early onset conduct problems in Sure Start areas in North and Mid-Wales and North West England. Sessions for parents were delivered by trained leaders and improvements in the child's symptoms were maintained over time for at least 12 months (Jones et al., 2008; Bywater et al., 2009). This conclusion, that faithful adherence to a programme can have long-term benefits, has influenced policy in both England and Wales; the Welsh Assembly government funded training in The Incredible Years programme and it was included as one of three evidence-based programmes in parental intervention Pathfinder trials in England (Lindsay et al., 2013; Cullen et al., 2013). Scott et al. (2010) describe an intervention combining the Incredible Years programme and with a programme to encourage parents to read with their children that efficiently addressed several factors predicting poor outcomes for children: ineffective parenting, conduct problems, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms, and low reading ability.

Other studies, also focussed on within child problems, nonetheless adopt a more social, interactional or ecological model to explain the origin of inappropriate behaviour, by including the context in which these behaviours occur. Koerting et al. (2013) reviewed qualitative studies to identify the factors that might influence whether parents engage with formal parenting programmes and identified a large number of barriers and supporting factors for parents seeking help for their child with behavioural problems. Rather than faithful following of particular programmes, Koerting et al. recommend flexibility and individual tailoring of support by highly skilled, trained and knowledgeable therapists (see also Smith et al., 2015). Rix et al. (2008), reporting parents'

reflections upon learning activities with their child with Down syndrome, echo the need for individual tailoring in early intervention programmes that enables greater emphasis on learning that springs from the child's interests. Lovering et al. (2006) also argue for the importance of intervention within the community, in their report of Scallywags, an early intervention programme for young children (aged 3-7) with behavioural, emotional and social problems that successfully integrated work in the home and school with a parenting curriculum and direct work with children.

## 7. Conclusions

To return to our research questions, much of the research covered in this review has attested to changes in the role of family; parents are expected to assume greater responsibility to mould children to become the consumer-workers that neoliberalism constructs as effective citizens within a market-driven economy. The focus on parenting as a necessary skill, with the parent seen as both problem and solution, has been accompanied by the increase in professional status of the early years practitioners, and this has led to changes in the relationships between parents and practitioners. The ideal of parent and practitioner working as partners to support children's progress towards externally defined goals has been shown to be problematic and shaped by context and individual circumstances. Furthermore, the positioning of children as 'projects for the future', to be worked on by parent and practitioner, also detracts from understanding them as individuals with a childhood in the present in which they have a growing, emergent capacity to shape their own destinies.

The research reviewed in this chapter also points to methodological issues with the evaluation of parenting programmes. Although large-scale reviews such as Asmussen et al. (2016) report greatest effectiveness from strongly framed programmes targeted at particular groups, such findings should be treated with caution. Large-scale programmes are likely to lend themselves to forms of measurement and reporting that are most compatible with analysis of effectiveness. Small scale and/or locally-adapted projects are not always able to stretch the budget to carrying out the sort

of evaluations that provide data of sufficient quality to demonstrate effectiveness. There is however some research into parenting support that rejects the 'one size fits all' approach to parenting shaped by neoliberal ideology, and reports findings supporting the need for flexibility. The development of research approaches that are both sufficiently sensitive and robust to evaluate the effectiveness of small, customisable programmes is much needed, if we are to capture the subtleties of locally attuned interventions that work for particular families in particular circumstances. Improved access to funding the evaluation of such programmes is also needed, and could open the door to policies that recognise people as human beings rather than as economic units within a market-driven society (Jarvis, Newman and Swiniarski, 2014) who need space for 'being' rather than endlessly 'doing' (Smith, 2010). The requirement to decouple reporting of results of family support programmes from political 'spin' and Payment by Results has recently been clearly demonstrated by reporting of the Conservative-led coalition government's 'troubled families' programme, into which they invested £400,000,000. In June 2015, a government press release had claimed a 99% success rate for the programme, based on local-authority reported data (DfE, 2015b). However, in December 2016, an independent evaluation of this project found that the initiative had had no significant impact upon the lives of socio-economically deprived children or their families (DFE, 2016).

There were perhaps some encouraging signs in her first statement that Theresa May as incoming Prime Minister might be sensitive to social injustice and the difficulties currently experienced by many 'just about managing' families:

You can just about manage but you worry about the cost of living and getting your kids into a good school. If you're one of those families, if you're just managing, I want to address you directly. I know you're working around the clock, I know you're doing your best, and I know that sometimes life can be a struggle...We will do everything we can to give you more control over your lives. (Rt Hon Theresa May, 2016)



Theresa May appears, however, still to be addressing those families who are making the right choices within the neoliberal perspective.

New technology is leading to increasing opportunities for parents to access information about 'good choices' in food, education, leisure, children's behaviour, preparation for work. However, not all parents are in a position to access new technology, nor are they in a position to devote sufficient mental or physical energy to making choices. Further research will be needed to make sense of the increasing complexity of parents' decision-making in the context of a broadening view of what constitutes a family. Unless neoliberalism is replaced by a very different political philosophy from those that have dominated policy creation between 2003 and 2016, it seems likely that parenting policies will continue to be shaped by a perspective that there is a 'right' way to parent and that this knowledge is encapsulated within white, middle-class market-driven ideologies.

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# CHAPTER 4

## PLAY AND PEDAGOGY

Elizabeth Wood and Liz Chesworth

### 1. Introduction

Since the 2003 BERA review, research on play has developed in the UK and internationally. As described in Chapter 1, the four UK policy frameworks for ECE all value indoor and outdoor play, and active learning, as integral characteristics of provision (Ellis and Martlew, 2010; Hunter and Walsh, 2014; Dunlop, 2015; Wood, 2015; Stephen, Waters, 2016). The benefits of play for learning and development must be demonstrated in practice, particularly in contributing to curriculum goals, learning outcomes and national standards. As a result, 'educational play' remains a dominant theme, based on the concept of mixed or integrated pedagogical approaches that incorporate adult-led and children's freely chosen activities and play. In addition, research from children's perspectives foregrounds their meanings, and the complex social and cultural purposes that play serves.

### 2. Methods

Items for inclusion in this chapter were identified through a systematic search and selection process, using primarily peer-reviewed journal articles of studies conducted in the UK. Research questions, key search terms and likely databases were agreed with the reference group. The search strategy focused primarily on the British Education Index (BEI), supplemented with the use of Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), Google Scholar and EBSCO. Boolean searches of the following key terms were carried out in various combinations using limiters of 2003 – 2016, full text and English only: outdoor play; digital play; play and early childhood education, pedagogy, curriculum, learning and development. The original search brought up 384 items across international contexts. The initial scrutiny focused on the title, abstracts, country of origin and relevance to the research questions. This resulted in 97 items being included for further review. The inclusion criteria

were not applicable to theoretical or conceptual articles, small-scale exploratory studies, or edited books. This is not to deny their importance within the field, but they did not consistently meet the agreed criteria. Those books that focus on reporting substantial research have been included, because they provide a full account of research projects that may also be reported in peer-reviewed journal articles. The final 40 articles and books report empirical research in the UK.

Play is often studied alongside other aspects of provision and practice, such as practitioners' beliefs, pedagogy and curriculum, digital literacy. Recommendations about play also emerge from studies that focus on broad themes such as pre-school effectiveness and transitions. These studies were added to the review because they represent complex intersections between play and other aspects of ECE provision. Although it was difficult to allocate specific studies to categories in a consistent and coherent way, eight indicative themes were identified from the literature. Where play is the main focus, the research is typically small-scale, predominantly qualitative and often using ethnographic or case study methods. Small-scale research may not meet scientific criteria for validity and generalizability, but this does not preclude concerns with authenticity, trustworthiness and credibility. Such research contributes incrementally to the field through the development of theory, methods and recommendations for policy and practice.

The questions used to interrogate the research are as follows:

- What are the main changes in research on play that have taken place in the UK since the 2003 review?
- How has research on play been influenced by policy frameworks?
- What does the research evidence reveal

- about play and ECE practice?
- What theoretical frameworks are being used to understand play and its links to learning, development, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and transitions?
- What methodological frameworks and methods are being used in research on play?

Each item was read in full, further inclusion criteria applied (below) and decisions about selection noted. In addition to the original inclusion criteria, items were scrutinised against the following:

- Minimises bias
- Has external validity/authenticity
- Conclusions fit data; sufficient evidence in study
- Has been assessed by others (e.g. refereed for journal, peer review, funding body, public domain)
- Generalisations made where /when appropriate.

### 3. Findings

Using the emerging themes from the research, the findings were synthesised, taking into account the weight and scale of evidence by noting sample size, methodology and theoretical framing, and making thematic connections across the four UK contexts. From this analysis, the eight themes represent new perspectives and ongoing dilemmas. The conclusion brings together the main responses to the questions used to interrogate the data.

#### 3.1. Play, Learning and Development

The research evidence linking play with all areas of children's learning and development is established internationally, and is typically used as the justification for play-based curriculum and pedagogical approaches (Wood, 2015). The enduring paradox of play is that children are expected (and encouraged) to play in order to explore materials and their properties in their own ways. At the same time, play provokes new pathways by facilitating progression or transitions from emergent and informal ways of knowing to more scientific or formal concepts, and to maturity and competence across domains of learning. Research evidence

refines these two positions, but at the same time foregrounds the discontinuities between the existential qualities of play (play for its own sake), and the educational qualities of play (play for instrumental purposes such as achieving curriculum goals).

The findings from the Effective Provision for Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) research and related projects have influenced policy frameworks and guidance documents, reflecting the status and reach of this government-funded longitudinal study ([www.gov.uk/government/collections/eppse-3-to-14-years](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/eppse-3-to-14-years)). The findings have been used selectively to produce and reinforce policy discourses, as evidenced in the pedagogical formulation of play in ECE frameworks. Because the findings have informed economic justifications for investment in ECE, the educational benefits of play have been foregrounded in relation to outcomes, standards, quality and effectiveness. Children's spontaneous play activities are promoted alongside adult-structured play as the foundations for the forms of knowledge that are valued in the curriculum and in society. However, this assumed progression does not consistently occur in the linear steps described in ECE curriculum frameworks. Despite strong developmental justifications for play, what remains less clear is how children move from playful/emergent ways of knowing to the more formal and abstract concepts in the areas of learning in ECE curricula, and the subject areas in Primary curricula. Many of these challenges and tensions are evident in the following themes.

#### 3.2. Play, Literacy and Communication

The research evidence linking play with literacy and language draws on socio-cultural and social semiotic theories. Recent research on children's social and communicative practices in play emphasises multimodality: communication happens through verbal and non-verbal modes such as body language, gestures, movement, eye contact, facial expressions, the creative arts, and digital representations. Play enables communication through symbolisation and representation via drawings, models, constructions, paintings, and artefacts. Boyle and Charles (2010) report a case study of one child based on socio-dramatic play interventions as a connection between play and literacy,

specifically the development of writing. Informed by Vygotskian concepts, the findings indicate the complexity of the structural and developmental processes needed to become a writer, the balance of affective and cognitive support during the interventions, as well as the mix of pedagogical strategies. Boyle and Charles argue that, taken together, play provides the contexts in which children can move (in Vygotskian terms) from the playful, early steps of mark making to the abstractions of written composition. However, an emergent approach to literacy incorporates meaningful interactions with adults and with environmental tools and resources. Children communicate in multi-modal ways, which may be an alternative, or a support to spoken language.

Many researchers have highlighted problems with viewing young children's communication purely through the lens of child development theory, particularly those that focus on 'ages and stages'. Flewitt (2005) and Wood and Hall (2011) indicate ways of interpreting children's play and communicative practices that foreground children's agency, their complex ways of engaging with their social and material worlds, and connections between home and ECE settings. Young (2005) explores the importance of playful interactions for young children's learning in the creative arts as multi-modal and cross-modal, and argues for the centrality of 'art-full' play that incorporates emotions and embodiment. Where policies focus on literacy as reading and writing, this may not be consistent with the emergent and multi-modal practices that are reported in research, with the result that these practices may be under-valued, along with the playful contexts in which they are used.

### **3.3. Play and Mathematics**

Similar issues are evident in play and mathematics. Carruthers and Worthington (2006) document children's engagement with mathematical concepts through their play and freely chosen activities, using observations, conversations with children and adults, and analysis of children's drawings and mark-making activities. Children communicate their understanding in multi-modal ways, and pretend play reveals the cultural foundations of early mathematical knowledge in ways that connect home and pre-school experiences (Worthington

and van Oers, 2016). However, freely-chosen activities may not be noticed or extended by practitioners. Aubrey and Durmaz (2012) examined the relationships between policy and practice in the early childhood mathematics curriculum for children in Reception class (England). The case study design included elite interviews with policy makers, a postal survey of Reception class practitioners, and detailed investigation of three school sites over one year (observations of classroom interactions and teacher interviews). The extent to which child-initiated and free play activities extended children's learning was not consistent, and adult-directed and intensive group work was not accurately matched to the learners (too much and too little challenge was recorded). As with Play, Literacy and Communication, this evidence indicates the challenges of integrating play into the curriculum through a range of pedagogical approaches.

### **3.4. Information and Communication**

#### ***Technologies and Digital play***

A significant change from the 2003 review is the focus on children's digital play and their engagement with ICT resources in home and education settings. Children are becoming digital experts as they move between different modes, interact playfully with resources (digital and traditional), and engage in multi-modal ways of learning, often with the support of peers and adults. Three themes are evident in recent research: children's use of digital media and their digital play, teachers' knowledge and understanding of ICT and digital play in the curriculum, and home-school practices (Aubrey and Dahl, 2008).

Marsh (2010; 2011; 2012) studied children's digital play in online and virtual worlds, and documented how they integrate popular culture into digital and traditional forms of play, including texts, images and artefacts. In spite of children's creative engagement in digital play, there are ongoing concerns about the amount of time spent on technological devices, congruency between children's practices in their home and education settings, and adults' (including parents') approval of the content of children's digital play (Plowman et al., 2010).

Howard, Miles and Rees-Davies (2012) conducted a study of teachers' views on children's use of ICT within a play-based curriculum in the Early Years Foundation Phase (EYFP) in Wales (age 3-7), in 12 study sites, focusing on computers. Most teachers reported feeling well prepared to deliver ICT, and identified three types of computer use consistent with the EYFP: continuous, enhanced and focused provision. Continuous provision involved minimal adult presence, where children were free to choose whether to participate and what activity they would complete. Focused provision involved the direct teaching of specific skills, or subject knowledge, or to achieve a particular outcome. Enhanced provision was a mix of the continuous and focused, with some degree of choice for the child. Video recordings of children's computer-based activities indicated that the teachers were effectively managing their interactions with children, and supporting the learning process whilst facilitating autonomy, choice and control. Children also saw computer activities as more like play because of their levels of engagement and the perceived playfulness of their activities. Howard et al. conclude that this blend of provision is an effective means of integrating computer use within a play-based curriculum, and avoids the dichotomy between play and work.

Morgan and Kennewell (2006) carried out research on the views of students in an initial teacher education programme in Wales, with an initial survey of 77 students, and detailed case studies of six students across two age ranges – Early Years (3-7) and Upper Primary (7-11). They focused on the use of play as a mode for learning, and the development of students' capability in ICT, using an intervention programme for developing techniques in a novel technology. In the six case studies, the students reported positive views about the importance of play, but negative views about the constraints they faced in schools (time, limited number of computers, focus on testing, logistics of managing access to equipment, and lack of students' and/or children's confidence with the technology). Tensions were identified between using ICT to enhance learning in a curriculum subject, and developing children's ICT capability. Because none of the students was exposed to

a play-based model of developing ICT in their school-based training, there was a discrepancy between the Wales Foundation Phase and Primary curriculum policies, and the practices they observed.

### **3.5. Agency, diversities and identities**

The claims that are made for the efficacy of play are most visible in research that focuses on children's freely-chosen activities, revealing the complexity of their social and cultural practices (Broadhead, 2004; Broadhead and Burt, 2012), and concerns with agency, identities, motivations, resistance, resilience, well-being and ethical relationships. Diversities are implicated in this theme, with a dominant focus on gender, including children's choice of toys and their role in the production of social identities (Francis, 2010) and children's emerging understanding of gender roles and positions in role play (Wood and Cook, 2009).

Jarvis (2007) conducted an ethnographic study of children's outdoor play activities (age 4.5-6.5 years) focusing on early football play amongst a group of boys. Despite the 'rough and tumble' appearance of their play, the analyses revealed subtle cultural cues and practices that shaped and sustained the play. This included peer support, social relationships, rule negotiation, collaborative and symbolic interactions, mediation of rules and 'fair play', and the development of motor skills. The interviews with adults revealed negative perceptions of this form of play, based on perceived dangers, accidents and injuries, and damage to children's clothing. Jarvis argues that the complexity of the play was invisible to the adults because they did not look beneath these preconceptions.

Wood (2014) explored the themes of resistance, agency and power in a small-scale study of children's free choice and free play activities. Using ethnographic methods in a Foundation Stage setting with 10 children age 4-5 years, Wood combined socio-cultural and post-structural concepts to problematize children's agency, interests and self-interests. The research revealed how children's choices are situated within shifting power structures, identities and relationships, involving conflict, negotiation, resistance and subversion. These

play skills are central to building momentum, sustaining narratives, dealing with disruption, and managing the internal order of play. Chesworth (2016) utilised the concept of funds of knowledge to explore how children's interests arise in classroom and home contexts, including the influence of popular culture. Funds of knowledge are interpreted as both sources and areas of knowledge that inform children's interests. This conceptualisation pays attention to how children use their interests to stimulate play, to transform objects and materials, and to demonstrate elements of exclusion and inclusion. Chesworth argues that utilising a funds of knowledge approach to understanding how children's play choices are informed by their interests has the potential to strengthen curriculum and pedagogical decisions. This conceptualisation is consistent with research on play and metacognition.

### **3.6. Play and metacognition**

The interest in play and metacognition centres on the contexts that play provides for symbolic and multi-modal communicative practices, self-regulation, problem-solving and creativity. In a study of self-regulation and metacognition in young children's play, Robson (2010) used qualitative methods of videotaping episodes of play and audiotaping discussions of the children's post-hoc Reflective Dialogues. The findings indicate that the success of play activities (especially role play and pretence) relies on children's abilities to share their knowledge and thinking in order to plan, manage and sustain the play, and, over time, to develop the complexity and challenge that is documented in ethnographic research (Broadhead, 2004; Chesworth, 2016). However, thinking is not always 'visible' through verbal utterances or interactions, because of the embodied and multimodal characteristics of children's communication. As Robson (2010, p237) argues, the opportunity for children to engage in reflective dialogues makes visible what is implicit, or understood by the players. These findings are consistent with research underpinning the Cambridge Independent Learning Framework (Whitebread, 2010; Whitebread and O'Sullivan, 2012), which found that metacognitive knowledge, metacognitive regulation, and social and emotional regulation are all characteristics of learning. Social pretend play in particular places

greater demands on children to co-ordinate their roles, to jointly plan and maintain their play with their co-players and to develop complexity. Knowing what you know, and being able to communicate this in peer contexts is fundamental to social pretend play.

The foregoing themes incorporate research that provides positive endorsements for the benefits of play, but at the same time, documents the challenges that young children encounter. Play as the natural activity of childhood is revealed to be socially and culturally complex, which requires children to learn repertoires of skills in order to participate successfully. This means that the claimed benefits for play may not be uniformly accessible to all children partly because of the challenges they encounter and the demands that play makes of them. In addition, research indicates that the conditions in education settings for learning through play are problematic, with a consistent theme of policy-practice tensions.

### **3.7. Outdoor Play**

Several studies have examined the opportunities for play that are afforded by outdoor spaces. Recent research highlights three connected themes relating to outdoor play: a focus upon natural and unstructured environments, the provision of flexible resources, and the ways in which such environments and resources support peer-peer and adult-peer interactions.

Waters and Maynard (2010) studied child-initiated interactions with adults in a natural outdoor environment. Their research in a primary school in Wales identified young children's interests in unstructured, flexible outdoor spaces and materials. Waters and Bateman (2015) also argue that interactional features of learning and teaching moments in outdoor environments (between peers, and between peers and adults) are critical to children's learning, particularly those that incorporate aligned intersubjectivity and extended interactions. Such environments offer a potential stimulus for interactions between teachers and pupils that are based upon children's ideas and questions rather than adults' intentions. This finding is supported by Waller's (2007) study of play in a wild natural environment in which outdoor play was found to afford opportunities for children to reveal

their own agendas and interests in dialogue with adults. With a focus upon peer-peer engagements, Waite, Rogers and Evans (2013) report a study of micro-level social interactions in the outdoor learning spaces attached to eight Foundation and Y1 classes. The authors report that outdoor play was associated with lower levels of adult regulation compared to indoor spaces, and that greater freedom enabled different ways for children to engage with each other and to share in playful experiences. Analysis of children's interactions indicated that children drew upon mutual interests to develop shared play scenarios within outdoor spaces. However, the reduction in adult regulation was also associated with instances in which children used their freedom to exert power over their peers. The study concludes that pedagogical interventions should seek to facilitate more inclusive play cultures through sensitive interactions that blend rather than impose new ways of thinking.

Whilst these studies indicate some ways in which outdoor spaces offer potential for children to achieve greater autonomy in play, there is evidence to suggest that in practice this is limited by structural, organisational and attitudinal factors (Maynard and Waters, 2007; Waller, 2014). The findings regarding the quality of adult-child interactions is a consistent theme through many of the studies reported here, and is central to understanding play, pedagogy and curriculum.

### **3.8. Play, Pedagogy and Curriculum: policy-practice tensions**

This section addresses the problems of integrating play into the ECE curriculum, and the challenges this creates for practitioners. Rogers and Evans (2007; 2008) report a small-scale ethnographic study of children's perspectives of role play in Reception classes in England, and contrasted teachers' provision for role play and children's responses. Where possible, children exercised their choice and agency as forms of resistance to the provision. The findings reiterate the common theme that some pedagogical practices prevent children from realizing the benefits of play. This study found that although the Early Years Foundation Stage endorses play-based approaches, pedagogical practices were not consistent

with policy recommendations, and Reception classes remained ill-equipped to make the recommended changes. Some pedagogical practices continued to militate against play, such as lack of time and space, and interruptions to play.

A consistent theme in practitioner-focused research is the transition between pre-school and compulsory education, at whatever age that takes place. Research on the transition from the EYFS to Key Stage 1 in England exemplifies the problems of sustaining play-based approaches. Fisher (2011; 2015) carried out a small-scale action research study with 20 teachers in one Local Authority in England, with the aim of exploring discontinuities in pedagogy, and addressing how teachers might move from formal and teacher-led activities towards responding to the needs and interests of children. This research focused on the transition from Reception (age 4-5) to Year 1 of the National Curriculum (age 5-6). The methods included teacher logs and project meetings, with three teachers being filmed at the beginning, middle and end of the project. The data analysis indicated that play was nested within pedagogical and curriculum processes, and was considered to be an activity 'without adult outcomes'. The teachers aimed to work in flexible ways, specifically valuing child-initiated learning (which usually involved play), as well as adult-led learning. The constraints of working in these ways were identified as other peoples' expectations, curriculum goals and targets, and achieving the learning outcomes at the end of Year 1. Fisher cautions against linking play with immediate benefits that can be expressed as outcomes or standards, and emphasises the support that teachers need in order to move towards flexible pedagogical approaches in which they sustain effective interactions across adult-led and child-initiated activities.

Hunter and Walsh (2014) provide empirical evidence of why play remains seductive in theory, but problematic in practice, focusing on the implementation of play-based curriculum and pedagogies in the Northern Ireland Foundation Stage for children age 4-6. They documented practitioners' ongoing uncertainties about their role and frequency of their interactions with children; higher levels of challenge and

extension were not consistent. Building on earlier work (Walsh et al., 2011) they propose that 'playful structure' promotes playful teaching and learning and ensures that effective learning takes place. Play and playfulness become characteristics of child-adult interactions, thus enabling unexpected turns and directions, and addressing the tensions between child-initiated and adult-initiated activities. Similar claims are made by McInnes et al. (2013), who propose that play may be beneficial when it is considered as an approach to a task, based on a definition of play from a child's perspective and incorporating elements of playfulness and choice. Mutual understanding and shared control between adults influence whether or not children perceive a task as play/playful.

Practitioners are striving to achieve a balance or mix between adult-led and child-initiated activities, particularly as children make the transition from pre-school into compulsory school, at whatever age this takes place (5, 6, or 7 years). However, the paradoxical situation is that although the four UK policy frameworks all incorporate play, many of the constraining factors that impact the achievement of these aspirations are derived from those same macro-level agendas. Policy frameworks reinforce these paradoxes: practitioners struggle to reconcile their beliefs and aspirations about play, with systems of accountability. Roberts-Holmes (2012) reports interviews with eight primary and four nursery head teachers as part of a larger study funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (Research Report DfE RR029) that focused on the perspectives of 190 practitioners in England regarding the implementation of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Although the head teachers were broadly supportive of the EYFS principles, they reported a number of challenges regarding their implementation, which included employing teachers who were adequately trained in play-based pedagogies, sustaining adult:child ratios to facilitate play, and aiming to sustain play-based approaches from the EYFS into Key Stage 1.

These studies highlight the ongoing challenges of integrating play into ECE curricula across the four UK jurisdictions, a theme that has remained consistent since the 2003 BERA review. Not surprisingly, more critical engagement with the nature of play, child-initiated activity, play-based

interests and playful pedagogies remains an ongoing theme.

#### 4. Conclusion

This review has identified progress and tensions regarding the place of play within ECE, and reflects continuity and change when compared with the 2003 BERA review. Many studies focus on the immediate purposes of play for children, notably their meanings, intentions, choices and social relationships. There has been increased attention to play in outdoor spaces, and to digital play, reflecting concerns about children's health and well-being. The dominant focus is on play in children up to the age of five/six, with studies of play in older children tailing off. Although the qualities of play, such as exploration, creativity, meta-cognition, problem-solving, and socialization, remain intrinsically important for children's learning, tangible curriculum outcomes are the focus of research on educational play. Policy frameworks have provided contextual influences for research on play from contrasting perspectives. Play is positioned within discourses of quality and effectiveness, where it has become a methodology, based on an onto-epistemological foregrounding of its educational and teleological purposes.

Play has arguably been a victim of its own success: powerful narratives from developmental psychology have proved to be highly persuasive in UK and international ECE policies. The concept of mixed or integrated pedagogical approaches provides a pragmatic response to the enduring problems that 'educational play' poses for practitioners, and simultaneously allows children to engage in play on their own terms. Paradoxically, even though versions of educational play have been embedded in the four UK frameworks (Wood, 2015), much of the research reviewed in this chapter indicates that play continues to hold a tenuous position in practice. So how might this be explained? First, the commitment to play remains constant, but the everyday realities of implementing 'educational play' alongside free play, remain problematic. The structured and linear nature of ECE policy frameworks is at odds with freely-chosen, child-initiated play, which is flexible and spontaneous. Second, play undoubtedly provides creative opportunities

for children to engage in multi-modal ways with the (subject) areas of learning, based on playful and emergent approaches. Such engagement is relevant in identifying the steps or transitions from children's informal and emergent concepts towards more formal and scientific concepts. However, it is not simply a matter of reconciling these two approaches. The evidence on play and learning indicates that complex and fine-grained processes occur in play activities, which have implications for many areas of learning. However, play as a source of curriculum remains contentious because practitioners do not consistently understand learning through play, or how to plan curriculum content in response to children's interests and enquiries.

Third, it is important to question when play is not play, and when play is not appropriate as a mode of learning. Adult-led activities can be playful and engaging, even when they are informed by pre-defined intentions. Intentional teaching does not mean regression to didactic modes, but can enable children to make the steps or transitions to formal learning. The pedagogical implications from the studies reviewed here indicate that practitioners need detailed knowledge and understanding of children's learning through play to inform curriculum and pedagogical decision-making. Thus the decision is not merely whether or not to intervene (or interfere) in children's play, but what pedagogical strategies are appropriate within adult-led and child-initiated approaches, the quality of those interactions, how practitioners help children to sustain children's choices within some degrees of freedom, and how they build on children's interests and funds of knowledge to support progression.

The problems identified in play research have intensified as policy frameworks give mixed messages about the kinds of approaches that are most likely to produce the desired outcomes and standards. Sustaining these pedagogical approaches into compulsory education remains a challenge, even within the Wales Foundation Phase, which promotes play from age 3-7. However, the inadequate conceptualisation of progression in play might explain why the hoped-for impact of the EYFP has not been consistently successful. Furthermore, practitioners do not perceive all forms of play as

beneficial, and this may limit their provision for play, especially in ECE settings. These limitations may serve to constrain the potential of play for children to set their own goals, solve problems and exercise creativity and imagination.

Theoretically, the shift towards socio-cultural theories has been consolidated, with the caveat that these theories are being used from contrasting disciplinary perspectives to conceptualise different aspects of children's learning. Developmental stages and norms remain influential in policy documents, which continue to reflect Piagetian influences, indicating a dislocation between policy and research. In much contemporary research, normative developmental lenses are considered to be insufficient for understanding social and cultural diversities, because they provide limited ways of understanding children's capabilities and identities. Diverse perspectives from feminist, post-structural, queer and post-colonial theories are adding to the critique of both the instrumental and idealised versions of play, and challenging the hegemony of developmental psychology in ECE. However, their influence on policy and practice is not yet evident.

Methodologically, there is a bias towards interpretivist and qualitative research, which reflects the complexity of researching play in dynamic and varied settings. The use of ethnographic methods reveals patterns and themes that only become evident through sustained observation (including videotaped evidence) and critical reflection. Such detailed analyses provide complex understandings of play. Many of the studies reported here demonstrate that appropriate research methods are ethical and respectful to young people, according to their capabilities and choices. Although small-scale studies cannot be generalised, they illuminate the complexity of play. Research that draws on children's perspectives shows that this complexity encompasses their motivations, choices and activities, the implications of those choices, the development of friendships and peer relationships, and the construction of identities. Children's agency as players, across traditional and digital modes, is foregrounded, with evidence of resistance and disruption to the order that is often imposed on play in



ECE settings. The balance of power within pedagogical constructions of 'playful learning' or 'learning through play' remains open to contestation. Research that foregrounds the existential qualities of play (play for its own sake) provides contrasting narratives to 'educational play', whilst paying attention to children's funds of knowledge, working theories, and enquiry-based interests.

Although this review focuses on the UK, the themes resonate with much international research, not least because the instrumental use of educational play is now a global phenomenon. The research evidence paints a complex picture of irreconcilable tensions, pragmatic accommodations, and a continuing endeavor to understand the complexities of what existential and educational forms of play mean to children.

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## CHAPTER 5

# LEARNING, DEVELOPMENT AND CURRICULUM

Janet Rose and Louise Gilbert (See Appendix i for working group)

### 1. Introduction

This chapter addresses research developments within the theme of 'Learning, Development and Curriculum'. The review builds on the 2003 BERA SIG Review, and the Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review that was funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families to provide an evidence base to inform the revision of the Early Years Foundation Stage in England (DCSF, 2009). This chapter focuses on the domains or areas of development apparent within the four UK frameworks: the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England, the Northern Ireland Pre-School and Foundation Stage Curriculum (PFSC), the Scotland Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) and the Wales Foundation Phase (FP). Although each of these frameworks draws on contrasting discourses, nonetheless all four are organised into 'subject' areas or domains. For example, the EYFS includes the areas of development and learning 'Communication and Language' and 'Literacy', whilst the CfE uses a single, broader term of 'Languages'. The PFSC incorporates 'Language and Literacy' as a subject area (their pre-school education curriculum refers to 'Language Development'), and the FP extends this domain to include 'Language, Literacy and Communication skills'. The findings from the review therefore reflect the common domains.

Most of the UK statutory early years frameworks pertain to children aged 3 years plus (except for England's EYFS which covers birth to 5), but all accommodate birth to 3 either via separate curriculum guidance documents, or by statements that consider the early years to encompass birth to 5 or to age 7. This review has considered research related to learning and development from birth to 5 years because most young children in the UK start school around age 5.

In common with the 2003 BERA review and 2009 DCSF review, the working group resisted linear, reductionist interpretations of learning and development. We recognised the holistic and interconnected nature of learning and development, the dynamic contexts in which these processes are situated, and the complex relationships between these processes and curriculum development in ECE. A human development model – the biopsychosocial model – was adopted to frame the review, a term and method drawn from the medical sciences (Engel, 1977). As our knowledge of the physiological, psychological, sociological and neurobiological components of childhood develops, traditional boundaries between different disciplines are breaking down. It is now accepted that we adopt a consilience approach to understanding human development (Sroufe and Siegel, 2011), a position that this section adopts to account for inter-disciplinary ways of understanding children and childhoods. Genes and experiences are indivisible, interrelated and interdependent, with each affecting and enabling the expression and growth of the other in order to create the psychological mind and subsequent behaviour (McCrary et al., 2010). From an ecological systems perspective, Bronfenbrenner's (2005) model of human development emphasises the multi-layered relationships and influences on young children's learning and development, and the ways in which these are mediated by the bi-directional relationships that children encounter. The child is an active participant (Fleer, 2005), who operates within complex systems of interactions between the child, the surrounding environments, the available resources and cultural contexts (DCSF, 2009).

Debates regarding the notion of 'development' and 'learning' were also addressed by incorporating both terms within literature searches, but it was broadly understood that 'development' referred largely to maturational progression in early childhood and 'learning'

referred largely to progression resulting from environmental influences. The review also focused on neurotypical development and therefore does not accommodate atypical development.

## 2. Methods

Two broad research questions guided the Learning, Development and Curriculum review:

1. What has emerged from research relating to learning and development in the early years (birth-5 years)?
2. What are the implications of this research for the early years curriculum?

Items for inclusion in this chapter were identified through a systematic search and selection process, using primarily peer-reviewed journal articles and any notable reports or reviews. Research questions, key search terms and likely databases were agreed with the working group. The search focused on UK-based authors but it is acknowledged that Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review (DCSF, 2009) incorporated international research. UK-based authors who collaborated with international partners were also included.

Boolean searches of the following key terms were carried out in various combinations using limiters of 2003 – 2015, paying attention to texts published since 2009; learning, holistic development, social development, social learning, emotional development, emotional learning, personal development; language development, language learning; physical development; mathematical development, mathematical learning, literacy development, literacy learning; numeracy development, numeracy learning; understanding the world, outdoor learning; brain development. Each of these terms was prefaced by 'early years' and 'early childhood' to limit the search to the relevant age range of birth-5 years. In addition, it was agreed to search for articles related to digital technology in the early years given its currency and its rapid progression, accessibility and likely impact on young children. The term 'digital technology' or 'ICT' was used with the preface of 'early years' or 'early childhood'. The databases explored centred largely on the

British Education Index and ERIC, but Google Scholar and Researchgate were also searched for pertinent articles.

The team focused on papers that yielded new insights into learning and development that appeared to have implications for the curriculum, taking account of potential overlaps with the sections on play, pedagogy and school readiness. A related item for discussion amongst the group was whether or not to focus the search on not just domains of learning and development, but its processes, such as the characteristics of effective learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage. A search was undertaken on the item 'characteristics of effective learning' but yielded few papers specifically focused on this topic, with the exception of Stewart and Moylett (2011).

After all selection criteria were applied, 287 papers were reviewed and 79 items were included in this review. The findings have been grouped largely in accordance with the domains or areas of curriculum commonly utilised in the four UK frameworks. Some additional themes were identified that do not explicitly link to traditional curricular domains but the working group considered their significance as additional themes was justified because the articles being generated on the topics were sufficiently numerous or were deemed sufficiently significant to merit their own theme. We incorporated Goswami's (2015) review of neuroscience research and located these findings in pertinent sections within the various curricular domain themes. Despite the convenience of a domain-specific thematic structure to this review, the themes rest on the premise that young children's learning and development is complex, dynamic, multi-faceted and integrated, and socially mediated. Therefore these characteristics should be understood within different social-cultural contexts.

## 3. Theme 1 Personal, Social and Emotional Development

Given the broad spectrum of PSE, articles pertinent to this theme were amongst the most prolific and covered well-researched topics as well as some emerging areas.

### ***The importance of relationships and the social context for learning***

A sense of self is established through socially mediated interactions with others (adults,

siblings, peers) and with their culture. The importance of the social world and adults' roles has been reiterated by the discovery of 'mirror neurons' (DCSF, 2009). These specialised neural cells appear to facilitate the capacity of infants to recognise similarity between their own actions and the actions of others. Goswami (2015) also refers to the potential significance of the mirror neuron system for understanding children's capacity for imitation, language and socio-moral cognition.

Although the significance of warm, positive relationships is well-established, 'contingent' responses, with the adult responding appropriately to the child's initiation, have also been identified as important (DCSF, 2009), and resonate with the well-established work on attunement within attachment relationships. Goswami (2015) also emphasises the importance of social relationships and cultural contexts. Consequently, the quality of the learning environments created by families, schools and the wider culture is critical for children's development. Even basic perceptual learning mechanisms require social interaction to be effective. This may limit the potential applicability of educational approaches such as e-learning in the early years (see also Theme 8).

The theory of attachment is recognised as a 'grand theory' and neuroscientific evidence appears to bear this out (DCSF, 2009). However, in relation to children's character development, Arthur et al. (2014) claim that aspects of children's development are interconnected and to further understand this, they suggest that children's moral development should be considered in light of more than a single grand theory that focuses on a cognitive perspective. These themes intersect with the concept of 'professional love' and 'care' (see Chapter 2 on Professionalism).

### **Social and emotional competence**

Research on the development of social and emotional competence incorporates how young children develop emotional self-regulation and its contribution to pro-social behaviours, including the development of social cognition and theory of mind. Previous research on children's social competence has tended to focus on facial expressions of emotions rather

than understanding the process of non-linguistic vocal emotions. Chronaki et al. (2015) found that the development of vocal emotions takes longer to develop and suggest this has implications for helping young children to understand vocal emotions. Arnold (2009a; 2009b) argues that practitioners should be aware of the links between cognitive behaviour and emotions, showing that children's repeated actions, or schemas, can be signposts to their current emotional needs and a 'window' into their emotional lives and issues. Drawing on theoretical models developed by Freud and Winnicott, Arnold illustrates how children use repeated actions to make sense of their emotions and/or emotionally-impactful experiences. Elfer and Dearnley (2007) highlight the importance of practitioners being self-aware of their personal experiences and well-being when supporting children's PSED. Practitioners should be taught to be aware of their own feelings and how these are evoked when supporting children, suggesting that opportunities, time and space are needed for practitioners to process these feelings. By understanding their emotional responses staff can then start to understand how children feel in difficult situations, for example during transitions.

### **Moral development**

Hartas (2012) draws upon findings from the Millennium Cohort Study and concludes that children's behaviour is not fixed in the early years, thus challenging Kohlberg's linear progression theory of moral development, which does not necessarily account for children's capabilities, such as language, and wider social contexts. A review of research on moral development is also included in Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review (DCSF, 2009).

### **Self-regulation**

The importance of self-regulation, specifically that children's self-regulation requires the development of effortful control, which facilitates the internalisation of social rules (DCSF, 2009). There is mixed evidence about the irreversible impacts on a child's ability to manage and respond to stress, and thus self-regulate, when they have experienced disadvantage (DCSF, 2009). Sammons et al. (2013) report that there is

still uncertainty about whether effective schools can mitigate the impact of early disadvantage and children's capacity to self-regulate. For example, they found that experiencing multiple disadvantages before age 5 strongly impaired children's later self-regulation. Research by Evans et al. (2010) focused on the impact of residential crowding on parental responsiveness and the effects on young children's development. The findings indicated that, in addition to other outcomes, sub-optimal living conditions may adversely affect socioemotional development due to the detrimental impact on child-adult interaction with implications for young children's capacity to self-regulate.

In relation to the cognitive implications of self-regulation, Pino Pasternak and Whitebread (2010) conducted a systematic literature review on empirical studies investigating relationships between parental behaviours and children's self-regulated learning. Analysis of the findings led to a theoretical model identifying three parenting dimensions (challenge, autonomy and contingency) and six parenting behaviours (metacognitive talk; active participation; understanding of control; shifts in responsibility; emotional responsiveness and contingent instructional scaffolds) that were contrastingly related to metacognitive and motivational aspects of self-regulated learning. Some useful pointers for further research are identified.

### **Health promotion**

Mooney et al. (2008) have drawn attention to the need to develop health-promotion work in early years settings. Their study revealed that there is considerable enthusiasm for health promotion work, and interest in developing stronger partnerships between health and early years professionals and parents (see also Chapter 3: Parenting and the Family in the 21st Century). They note the paucity of research on health promotion within early years settings. Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review (DSCF, 2009) highlights the importance of physical and nutritional health, drawing attention to research which shows that eating habits developed in the early years can lead to later weight problems, and how an inactive lifestyle can develop as early as age 3.

### **Behaviour**

Adding to the literature on young children's behaviour, MacLure et al. (2012) use post-structural theories to consider how children acquire a reputation as being a "problem" in school. The study explores the problematic behaviour of Reception children and how it emerges within, and is shaped by classroom culture. The discussion included an exploration of prevailing discourses and practices within early years curricular policy and pedagogy, as well as the links between behaviour, learning and emotions. Rose et al. (2015) contribute to this debate by proposing that behavioural management systems should focus on the feelings that underlie behaviour through the promotion of emotion coaching as a behavioural strategy. Although their study extended to all age groups, it incorporated work in children's centres with younger children.

### **Spiritual development**

Goodliff's (2013) work has drawn attention to understanding children's spirituality, where research is scarce. The ethnographic study highlights that children's spirituality is multi-dimensional and how children express spirituality through their daily imaginative play spaces. She suggests children's spirituality should be recognised and understood in education because it helps children to express their thinking, to negotiate identities and make meaning. Adams et al. (2015) draw similar attention to the scarcity of studies focused on the nature of spirituality and how it is enacted/ applied in practice, noting that children's spiritual development is the least understood compared to other aspects of development. They argue for more research on spirituality to inform policy and practice.

## **4. Theme 2 Communication, Language and Literacy**

The Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review (DSCF) incorporate an extensive review on communication, language and literacy that emphasizes the importance of responsive early interactions for laying foundations for later literacy. The significance of narrative in its many forms in supporting learning and development was also identified, drawing on Vygotskian theories. They note that narrative enables children to create meaningful personal



and social worlds, but also serves as a 'tool for thinking'. This section reiterates and updates their findings in relation to UK research.

### **The importance and nature of dialogic encounters**

There is broad agreement that children need to experience language and engage in reciprocal conversations. Conversation is a prime context for the development of children's language and thinking, and dialogic encounters may either serve to confirm a child's understanding or feelings, while the other elaborates and extends that understanding (DCSF, 2009). Debates regarding the most effective ways for adults to support learning and development continue to be contentious. For example, encouraging children to form their own narratives is preferable to passively accepting those of adults, and playful conversational encounters support metacognitive development (Whitebread et al., 2007; Whitebread and O'Sullivan, 2012). Likewise, in enhancing children's thinking, it is more important to aim at depth and not breadth (see also Theme 9).

Bilton (2012) conducted a study that explored the nature of dialogue between adults and children and found that adults spoke more than children during a fixed playtime period. Therefore, practitioners need to be more aware of how they can engage children in conversations. This is important because children with well-developed expressive and oral vocabularies are unlikely to experience difficulty in learning to read (DCSF, 2009). The role of 'private speech' has also been highlighted with its links to metacommunication, metacognition and self-regulation. A study of children's social pretend play demonstrated how children continually set themselves challenges in defining and managing the play and use speech to guide their thoughts and behaviour (Whitebread and O'Sullivan, 2012).

### **Developing literacy**

The debate continues as to whether children should receive a systematic phonics programme and the evidence regarding different intervention programmes is mixed (DCSF, 2009). Ferguson et al. (2011) conducted a study with five and six year old children from a disadvantaged

community and found that significant improvements were made as a result of the intervention in children's word reading, spelling and reading comprehension. However, Clark (2013; 2014) offers an evidenced-based critique of synthetic phonics and calls for more research to be focused on eliciting young children's views of the phonics tests and how young children's experiences of, and attitudes towards, literacy are affected. With regard to the phonics debate it is clear that whilst children's phonological skills are important in learning to read, vocabulary should receive the same attention (DCSF, 2009). Phonological skills at age 5 are better predictors of reading at age 7 than at age 11, whilst vocabulary at age 5 is a better predictor of the more complex tasks of reading at age 11 (DCSF, 2009). Play is important in promoting children's literacy, with Boyle and Charles (2010) elaborating that socio-dramatic play is beneficial in supporting children's development as writers (see also Chapter 4: Play and Pedagogy). Children require sustained recursive opportunities to engage with writing experiences rather than a whole class structure. Guilfoyle and Mistry (2013) also highlight the importance of role play for improving the use of English for EAL learners. Each of the four UK policy frameworks includes anti-racist, multicultural and inclusive philosophies. However, the inclusion of EAL children in mainstream classrooms is not always consistent with those philosophies. EAL children do not receive support in understanding socio-cultural practices embedded in everyday life and they are often left to negotiate and understand unspoken social rules (Safford and Costley, 2008; Safford and Drury, 2013). Drury (2013) focuses on the silent period used by young bilingual children and notes the importance of their linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge, and the implications for school readiness (see Chapter 6: Assessment and School Readiness).

Traditionally, early writing research has focused on the processes of children's writing whereas contemporary evidence shows that children learn about written language through active engagement in their social and cultural worlds (Bradford and Wyse, 2013; Daniels, 2014). Daniels' research with 4 and 5 year old children (2015) draws attention to their desire to express cultural agency via the space and materials they

utilise to make meaning, and how early literacy is a collaborative and collective act intricately linked to children's cultural experiences and identities. Similarly, Wolfe and Flewitt (2010) argue that literacy is a social practice; they investigated how children use multiple communicative modes as they experience literacy in different media. They highlight how new technologies have introduced new dimensions to young children's literacy learning, the implications of which are not yet fully recognised in curricular policy or practice (see also Theme 8). A study by Boyle and Charles (2011) also showed how collaborative writing and approaches to literacy are not a panacea to writing progress but are effective ways of helping children make progress in story writing. Collaborative writing is enacted by practitioners who value social (peer) interactions to assist children's communication and understanding. When children write together they tend to write with more enthusiasm and purpose.

### ***Bilingual learners and the importance of culture***

Although we have not reviewed the research on bilingual learners or children with additional languages, socio-cultural contexts in supporting language development are significant: studies have shown how exposure to a variety of languages created different phonological systems (DCSF, 2009). These systems first discriminate the sounds of each language which then lead to children expressing themselves in that language. This is an emerging and important area of research largely because, in the UK today, there are over 1 million children with English as an additional language who speak in excess of 360 languages between them (Arnot et al., 2014).

Bligh and Drury (2015) make some significant points about the 'silent period' and how practitioners should view this as an initial and normal stage in the acquisition of English as an additional language. Indeed, being able to negotiate personal levels of silent participation is an important form of self-assertion for emerging bilingual children (Drury, 2007). Drury offers a good discussion on the various factors that affect the silent period in different children. In common with monolingual speech development, private speech seems to follow a similar

developmental pattern for bilingual children, suggesting it is relative to mental age; there is greater use of task-relevant private speech for more difficult tasks; and a contingency between competency and gradual sub-vocalization and increasing internalization. Robertson et al. (2014) and Drury (2013) have also identified the benefits of multilingual practitioners working with and alongside children, their parents and teachers to increase knowledge and understanding. Supportive and ongoing contact with children's families, homes and communities to promote greater synchronicity between a child's familiar home and community learning environment and school settings is also advocated in the literature. Mueller Gathercole et al. (2010) looked at bilingual advantage for executive function tasks in children of varying levels of language dominance, and examined the contributions of general cognitive knowledge, linguistic abilities and language use on performance. They noted that performance correlated with general cognitive abilities, vocabulary levels, and at the older age, a balanced use of the two languages. Mueller Gathercole et al. (2015) subsequently identified that any language development in bilingual children is contingent on both the exposure to the language in the home and socio-economic factors, but also did not evidence any performance advantage exclusively linked to bilingualism. This suggests a need for much closer scrutiny of research to reflect the complexity of the term 'bilingual' and better exploration of what type of bilingual child might demonstrate the reported effects, under what conditions, and why.

### **5. Theme 3 Mathematics**

The Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review (DCSF, 2009) reviewed the literature related to problem-solving, reasoning and numeracy and noted, for example, the importance of providing opportunities for problem-solving within social contexts as a primary medium for mathematical learning. Mathematical language, multi-modal forms of representation, and play were also identified as significant in supporting conceptual development (see Chapter 4 Play and Pedagogy).

### **An emphasis on number**

Research has privileged 'number' over other mathematical concepts with a paucity of research carried out about mathematical concepts such as children's shape, space and measures (DCSF, 2009). This review has confirmed this finding. For example, when the terms 'shape', 'space' and 'measures' were used as search terms in the British Education Index (BEI) database, no results were found between 2004-2015. If children do not have appropriate conceptual development of number and number operations, their engagement with formal mathematics may be delayed (DCSF, 2009). Gifford (2014) cites research which suggests that children's understanding of each number being 'one more than the one before and one less than the one after' does not develop until around the age of six, supporting the notion that, in this context, engagement with formal mathematics is best delayed with children who have yet to reach this significant milestone. Gifford supports this and argues that the research highlights that this milestone is one that may not be understood by most five-year-old children, even at a basic level and with numbers to 10, with implications for the early years curriculum.

### **Mathematical graphics**

Carruthers and Worthington's (2005) taxonomy of mathematical graphics has contributed significantly to raising the profile of early years mathematical development. Their analysis of children's mathematical graphics builds on the work of Hughes and identifies five common forms of graphics - dynamic, pictographic, iconic, written and symbolic - and five dimensions - early play with objects and exploration marks, early written numerals, numerals as labels, representation of quantities and counting early operations. In another paper (Carruthers and Worthington, 2004), they analyse how numeracy develops, particularly in relation to children's thinking, from counting, to separating sets, to exploring symbols and the representation of operations. They identify the wide variety of mathematical graphics utilised by children. Carruthers and Worthington argue that teachers must allow and actively support opportunities for children to freely explore how they represent their mathematical understanding. They consider that bi-numeracy allows children to

relate to symbols and algorithms at a deeper level and develops their mathematical thinking.

### **Maths and culture**

Worthington and van Oers's (2016) study into the relationship between children's pretend play and the emergence of cultural mathematical understandings and communications showed how, as with literacy development, children draw extensively on their personal cultural knowledge in pretend play, exploring and elaborating their mathematical knowledge within the context of their unstructured pretence and imagination. This research concurs with Dunphy (2006) regarding the development of young children's number sense through participation in sociocultural activity, in which play, multi-modal engagement and reciprocal relationships are embedded (See also Chapter 4 Play and Pedagogy). The importance of cultural context and mathematical understanding is highlighted by Gifford (2014) who suggests that generalising results of children across countries is potentially problematic and that the effects on the nature and rate of mathematical development may be context dependent on, for example, parental expectations and culture that values mathematical success. She cautions against making assumptions within international developmental comparisons and performance measures.

## **6. Theme 4 Expressive Arts and Design**

This theme was addressed in the Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review (DCSF, 2009) in the form of 'creative development', focused on the development of imagination, particularly via pretend play which emerges around the age of two. Imagination is a key vehicle for transmitting human understanding and culture. This section identifies some additional research related to the expressive arts and design.

### **Arts-based learning**

Nutbrown (2013) calls for a more robust and articulated conceptualization of arts-based learning in the early years curriculum, particularly given that young children's engagement with the world is primarily sensory and aesthetic. The paper reports on an arts-based learning project with young children in preschool settings

and concludes that children are able to learn in ways that are naturally suited to their human condition and therefore better equipped to take part in cultural and artistic elements of life. Some potential synergistic features have been identified between science, creativity and teaching and learning in the early years: play and exploration, motivation and affect, dialogue and collaboration, problem-solving and agency, questioning and curiosity, reflection and reasoning, and teacher scaffolding and involvement. These were found to exist in teaching practices in nine European countries (Cremin et al., 2015).

### **Possibility thinking and creativity**

Chappell et al. (2008) conducted a qualitative study of 4 to 7 year olds exploring the characteristics of 'Possibility Thinking' as central to creativity in young children's learning, and considered question-posing and question-responding as the driving features of 'Possibility Thinking'. Their research offers insights into how children respond to creative tasks and activities, and the role that question-posing and question-responding play in creative learning. Academics from the same project explored the pedagogical role in promoting possibility thinking in the early years (Cremin et al., 2006), whilst Craft et al. (2012) proposed that a key component of creating an enabling environment for possibility thinking is identified as a necessity for exploratory, combinatory play opportunities. Craft et al. (2012) also explore how creativity manifests itself in child-initiated play.

### **Drawing**

Research about how children's drawings develop is well documented. Anning and Ring (2007) showed how children generate meaning through their drawings and the pedagogical role within this. The role of drawing in contributing to the thinking process is also highlighted. Coates and Coates (2006) have extended the research that focuses on the social context of drawing, particularly the utterances and talk that occur whilst children are drawing. The end product of the drawing is often privileged by adults, but does not communicate the kinds of social interactions, introspection and debate that may be fundamental for children within the process

of drawing. Coates and Coates consider that much can be learned about children's interests, enthusiasms and culture from observing drawing activities and listening to accompanying narratives (Coates and Coates, 2006).

Worthington's (2009) qualitative research of nursery settings in England and the Netherlands illustrated the representational value afforded to graphics, and the processes that enable children to create, adapt, share signs and modify over time. Spontaneous, child-initiated drawings and visual representations were examined to assess use of graphical signs in play which revealed the significance of playfulness in supporting children's imagination to freely explore and express graphical signs to communicate meaning. The importance of having a workforce that understands the place of graphicacy, along with the process and products of effective play, is highlighted. In a related study, Worthington and van Oers (2015) explore children's meaning-making in pretend play and the emergence of graphical signs and texts. Using a social-semiotic, multimodal approach, this ethnographic research confirmed the importance of providing effective play opportunities for graphic development and identified children's usage of code-switching in graphical texts, allowing them to choose what they consider to be the most appropriate symbol for their immediate purpose. The use of different modalities and materials reflected the extent of children's growing competencies and understanding of various artifacts and graphical signs, foundational to support their emerging symbolic languages such as writing and mathematics. Attention is drawn to the enabling provision provided by qualified practitioners who facilitate rich dialogues, numerous displays and an abundance of graphical resources, and who value, encourage and support all aspects of play and graphicacy.

### **Musicality**

Musicality and music are considered to be important for interaction and communication. Babies appear to be predisposed to respond to music, and musicality is cross-culturally and intuitively supported by caregivers. Misgivings are expressed in several studies about a tightly-framed musical curriculum, such as an exclusive focus on group music-making and

performance, and the need to view music as a creative, open-ended process, rather than a re-creative practice. Niland's (2015) ethnographic study reinforces the argument that singing in the early years contributes to children developing a sense of belonging and identity. Young's (2005) research with arts practitioners and children under three years old also supports this position, arguing that adults can play with children in 'art-full' ways, that draw on multi-modal and multimedia approaches. Zachariou and Whitebread's (2015) study investigated possible correlations between musical play and self-regulation. Although the study focused on six year olds, the findings suggested that engaging in musical play facilitated self-regulatory behaviours to materialise. The authors contend that an understanding of the connection between musical play and self-regulation could feed into both the theory that underpins the relationship between play and self-regulation, but, additionally, present-day music education practice.

### **Performing arts and creativity**

An interesting study which considered the impact of a performing arts programme on children under 4 years, appears to endorse Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) assertion that creativity happens in the interaction between individual thought and sociocultural context (Martlew and Grogan, 2013). Martlew and Grogan (2013) argue that creativity is the primary drive through which children make sense of their experiences, through shared experiences and purposes with other minds. The influence of adults' own experiences of theatre affected children's interaction with the performance. Martlew and Grogan (2013) conclude that creativity can be extended by the provision of resources that encourage exploration and encourage flexibility in children's thoughts in the use of resources. They identify three factors for developing young children's creativity: a stimulating environment, breadth of learning, and the role of resources.

## **7. Theme 5 Physical development**

The research evidence on physical development in DCSF (2009) remains relevant, specifically their summary of progression in young children and the processes involved, including the role

of play in promoting motor and related physical development.

### **Neurodevelopmental research**

Some interesting research is emerging from several sources which indicates a neurodevelopmental basis for a range of difficulties linked to physical development, which may include learning difficulties. This research focuses on how the persistence of primary reflexes appears to have implications for later skills, such as coordination and balance and possibly cognitive learning. Although the work of Goddard Blythe (2005) focuses on children aged between seven and nine years, it is of relevance given its focus on retained reflexes in young children. She notes that for many years the medical view argued that retained primitive reflexes were a form of disease and would not respond to interventions. However, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests atypical primitive reflexes occur across the general population and respond to interventions. She highlights that developmental immaturity and neurological dysfunction are associated with children who are underachieving. Her study showed that children who participate in specific physical movement activities designed to redress retained reflexes show improvements in neurological dysfunction, balance and coordination. She argues for early interventions that focus on developing and improving balance and coordination, particularly when such neurological dysfunction may be contributing to underachievement. Brown (2010) appears to support this research reporting how persistent primary reflexes can adversely affect motor and cognitive development. Her intervention study on 4 and 5 year old children showed how the practice of particular movements can improve their fine motor skills of by inhibiting persistent primary reflexes, which may have implications for academic learning.

McPhillips et al. (2000) echoed the claims being made in relation to educational progress. Their work has noted that children who experience difficulties with reading also have difficulties with balance and motor control. Like Goddard Blythe and Brown, their study highlights that the educational functioning of children may be linked with an interference of some kind from the early primary reflex system. Movement programmes

that consist of ten-minute exercises per day, over a period of one year, were effective in alleviating the reading difficulties that some children experience. They argue for a new approach to be considered when assessing children's reading difficulties, which includes an assessment of neurological functioning.

### ***Movement play and physical literacy***

It is widely agreed that physical play is important for promoting discovery of movement abilities; allowing for exploration of the movement environment; offering practice time to enhance fundamental motor skills and strengthen the cardio-vascular system and the muscles. Archer and Siraj (2015) explored movement-play quality in early childhood settings and its implications for learning, highlighting the importance of promoting physical literacy. They note how the role of movement in early childhood has been overlooked by policy makers, particularly in assessing the physical development of children with special needs. They consider that if very young children's balance, posture and co-ordination are securely developed, they are better equipped to cope with the demands of school and note the research that suggests how exercise can alter brain functioning underlying cognition and behaviour. They have developed a useful movement-play scale modelled on the ECERS-E. Their study showed children engaged in more adventurous play outdoors post-implementation of a movement-play programme.

## **8. Theme 6 Outdoor Learning**

Research linked to outdoor learning identifies a range of benefits from outdoor experiences on children's learning and development, including motor and related physical development, and for encouraging children to explore, experiment, move and be active. The acquisition of movement skills is essential for children's learning, whilst lack of confidence and competence in performing these skills can also have detrimental effects on children's social and emotional well-being (DCSF, 2009).

### ***Health, well-being and resilience benefits***

Outdoor learning has received attention from a range of fields and organisations beyond early

childhood education and care, with implications for early years provision. A report in the Lancet suggested that exposure to the natural world can help recovery rates from illness, improve happiness, reduce anger, improve the power of concentration and lower blood pressure (Mitchell and Popham, 2008). An executive government report (APPG, 2015) endorses outdoor play as important for all-round development of children and raises concerns about children's mental and physical well-being if such experiences are lacking. Public Health England also indicates the role of outdoor experiences in developing children's strong health and well-being (Lavis and Robson, 2015). However, there is concern that practitioners may not be aware of the theory behind practice in the early years (Stephen, 2012) and may not be able to explain their aims for outdoor education, nor provide the right facilities to promote development (Bilton 2014a; 2014b). This evidence suggests that staff need to elucidate the purposes of education in outdoor environments and ensure they provide facilities to promote those purposes and aims.

### ***Forest schools and risk taking***

Forest Schools create opportunities for supporting all areas of learning and development, including positive opportunities for risk-taking (DCSF, 2009). Waters and Begley (2007) compared and contrasted the opportunities for, and benefits of, risky play in a school-based play space (school playground) and a Forest school environment. They suggest that the permissive approach to play afforded by the Forest School environment encourages children to engage in risky play, whereas the regulatory approach taken in school-based play spaces leads to compliance by some and reprimanding of others. They caution against providing Forest School areas on or adjacent to school sites, because the regulatory approach within schools may pervade and erode the benefits of Forest school. They also contrast the attitudes of staff in Norway towards risky play with those of staff in England, suggesting that adults place limitations on children's play based on their own perceptions of risk. Research by Canning (2010) found that the outdoor environment and den-making are effective in developing children's imagination and capability thinking: this recommended the 'what if' and/or 'what might be' type questions, rather than a 'what is' type

question, promoted in the work on possibility thinking (see Theme 4).

### 9. Theme 7 Scientific enquiry and understanding the world

Rather than using the traditional subject term 'science', most of the UK early years frameworks incorporate scientific enquiry within a broader conceptual term of 'understanding the world', except for the Scottish CfE which refers to 'Sciences'. We have chosen the term 'scientific enquiry' to lead this theme given the relative paucity of early years research in the UK that refers to scientific enquiry. Studies related to cognitive development and the ways in which young children develop knowledge and understanding about the world are included, as well as reviews of neuroscience research, given that such research endeavours to understand how children make sense of the world. The Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review (DCSF, 2009) provided a comprehensive review of these processes, such as endorsing the constructivist analysis of learning that underpins current early years practice, and emphasising the importance of supporting the processes, not merely the products of learning. This section reiterates aspects of that review along with some updated insights.

#### **Neuroscientific evidence of young children's learning**

Findings from neuroscience research pertinent to England's EYFS are relatively sparse (DCSF, 2009) and this review found little research generated by UK authors. Goswami's (2015) review of research on cognitive development for the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, which drew on neuroscientific evidence, shows that statistical learning, imitation, learning by analogy and causal learning form the foundations of cognitive development. From birth, children possess and demonstrate all the main types of learning (statistical learning, learning by imitation, learning by analogy and causal learning). This includes learning the relationships between the sounds that underpin language acquisition, and the visual features that specify natural categories or concepts.

Whilst neuroscience appears to endorse schema theory in the sense that the brain seeks patterns, contemporary research indicates that learning

is not linear as implied by Piaget, but proceeds in a web of multiple strands (or 'overlapping waves') with different children following different pathways. Goswami (2015) highlights how recent neuroscience research shows that learning depends on the development of multi-sensory networks of neurons distributed across the entire brain. The young child's brain has basically the same structures as the adult brain, and these structures carry out the same functions via the same mechanisms. For example, a concept in science may depend on neurons being simultaneously active in visual, spatial, memory, deductive and kinaesthetic regions, in both brain hemispheres. However, once neural structures have been created, they are not easily altered. Some neuroscientific research suggests how children's brains generate rules based on small datasets, and that such rules may subsequently be resistant to change (DCSF, 2009).

Goswami's (2015) review also suggests that there is no central executive controlling and orchestrating what is known, but many 'parallel coalitions' of neural networks that have different levels of coordination and different time scales of creation. These processes contribute to what makes each person unique. Connectionist models suggest that complex cognition can be created without symbolic thought. However, internal and symbolic cognitions are vital for healthy cognitive development. Internalised speech, imagination and play are crucial for these processes to take place. Piaget's view that interaction with the world plays a critical role in developing a knowledge base is supported. The basis of cognition is therefore in sensory-motor activities. However, sensory-motor representations are not replaced by symbolic ones and do not seem to exist as separate stages as implied by Piaget's theory, but are increased and grown through actions, language interactions, pretend play and teaching experiences. Thus, children think and reason largely in the same ways as adults, but they lack experience (i.e. neural connections), and are still developing the ability to think about their own thinking and learning (metacognition) and to regulate their own behaviour and interactions. From a neuroscientific perspective, learning is thus largely a matter of 'neural enrichment' (Goswami, 2015). The implications of this research are that children need diverse,

multi-sensory experiences to help them develop self-reflective and self-regulatory skills.

### **Metacognition and executive function**

Whilst acknowledging the distributed nature of neural development, Harvard's Centre on the Developing Child has generated several evidence-based papers that call attention to the development of executive function skills, which emphasise the importance of self-regulation, working memory, behavioural inhibition and mental flexibility – some attributes of which are recognisable within UK early years frameworks such as the EYFS characteristics of effective learning. Executive function and self-regulatory skills are important integrated mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully (CDC, 2011). It is suggested that the brain's capacity to organise this skill set to filter distractions, prioritize tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses, lies at the heart of all learning. The paucity of research on executive function in early years by UK researchers suggests potential growth for exploration in this area. An article by Bryce et al. (2014) explored the relationships among executive functions, metacognitive skills and educational achievement and highlighted the importance of executive function and metacognitive skills for educational achievement. Although focused on children aged 5-7 years, this research provides a promising theoretical model for considering the relationships between these facets of the learning process. The research suggests that executive functions could be 'necessary but not sufficient' antecedents to metacognitive skills.

Whitebread et al. (2007) found extensive evidence of metacognitive behaviours in children aged 3-5 years that occurred most frequently during learning activities that were initiated by the children, involved them in working in pairs or small groups, unsupervised by adults, and that involved extensive collaboration and talk (i.e. learning contexts that might be characterized as peer-assisted learning). Relative to working individually or in groups with adult support, children in this age range working in unsupervised small groups showed more evidence of metacognitive monitoring and control. Whitebread et al. (2005) also carried out a mixed method research project in Foundation

Stage settings that explored the development of 'metacognitive' abilities and dispositions to inform conceptualisations of what it means to become a self-regulated, independent learner. The authors noted that more teacher-directed approaches within primary education had not helped to foster independent learning, despite children's autonomy being widely accepted as an important aim within educational policy.

Robson (2010) explored metacognition and self-regulation in young children. Videography was used to explore dialogues between children and practitioners, which revealed evidence of metacognitive and self-regulatory behaviour which may be affected by different social contexts. Elsewhere, Robson (2015) analysed observations of self-regulation and metacognition in children aged 4-5 years in a Reception class. The data indicated that the presence and absence of adults was facilitative. However, children were often appreciably more likely to show signs of self-regulation and metacognition when adults were absent. Concomitantly, the findings showed that adults played a vital role in facilitating children's procedural knowledge when involved in these learning scenarios. Robson argues that deeper enquiry into ways that adults can become involved in young children's activity is warranted, especially relating to the development and presentation of young children's metacognition and self-regulation.

### **10. Theme 8 Learning and Development in a Digital world**

This theme was identified due to the growing significance of digital technology in the 21st century and its implications for early learning and development. This is a growth area for research, particularly given that all babies now being born will be digital natives rather than digital immigrants. The Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review acknowledged the need to locate children's learning and development within the digital era but note some of the controversies surrounding the use of technology in early learning, and some of the conflicting evidence of its benefits and possible drawbacks (DCSF, 2009). Some additional evidence is outlined in this section.



## **Digital literacy**

Palaiologou's (2014) study into the use of digital technology by children under five at home revealed that use of the technology is widespread, and noted other research which showed that most three and four year old children were able to demonstrate 'digital literacy'. All the children involved in the research across four countries had access to television, a computer and the internet, and children often made the shift from television-based activity to computer and internet activity at around three to four years of age. Parental attitudes highlighted concerns with the lack of information as to how technology could be used to support children's development and learning. Furthermore, parents felt that there was a 'generational digital gap' where the use of digital technology at home was not reflected in early years environments or pedagogy. Palaiologou argues there is a need for the early years sector to use digital technology in ways that encourage the sharing of ideas, and create learning environments that more genuinely reflect children's home experiences.

Similar to Palaiologou's study, Plowman et al. (2012) revealed that children encountered a wide range of digital devices from an early age in the home and that their use was culturally situated, with parental attitudes a key factor in terms of children's access and autonomy of use. The study argues that the use of technology can promote learning in four areas: operational skills, extending knowledge and understanding of the world, developing learning dispositions by building self-esteem and an understanding of the role of technology in everyday life. Plowman et al. suggest that practitioners should move beyond an approach to learning that only recognises operational skills and recognise that other areas of learning are supported by technology.

## **Integration into the curriculum**

Howard et al. (2012) highlighted previous research which argued that teachers found it challenging to integrate ICT into a play-based curriculum, viewing it as a largely adult-directed activity. However, their study of teachers' use of ICT in early years classroom practice found that not only did teachers feel well-prepared to deliver ICT in the Foundation Phase in Wales, but

that this was typically delivered in three different ways: continuous, enhanced and focused provision. The children's engagement with the activities was found to be moderate to high during group activities and lower for whole class activity. The children rated the computer use as very playful irrespective of whether an adult was present. The study suggests that a blend of continuous, enhanced and focused provision is effective in maintaining a play-based curriculum when using technology.

Eagle (2012) has also focused on the adult-child interactions which arise when engaging together with specific devices that are designed to support children's learning. The study argues that the interactions promoted by the 'learning aids' were largely driven by the adult's assumptions of the uses of the device, which have been devised by the manufacturer. Therefore the modes of interaction were instructional, and a child's meaning-making was deemed superfluous to the task. Eagle argues that learning aid designers should focus on how to develop devices which support genuine interactions, including sharing creative ideas and valuing all voices, rather than the one-size-fits-all assumptions of normative, instructional learning.

A case study by Roberts-Holmes (2014) considered the pedagogical role in relation to the use of ICT and the need to engage with the prevalent digital cultural habitus within children's homes. It focuses on children's and teachers' interactions with a digital media package noting increases in children's self-esteem and use of language, with the levels of success and control experienced improving the children's dispositions toward learning. He identifies the role of an ICT consultant in supporting staff who were 'digital immigrants', facilitating their capacity to scaffold children's learning when using digital devices. Roberts-Holmes makes an important point that digital technology is ubiquitous and may operate as a cultural tool for learning but that pedagogical approaches need to be more carefully considered within the enabling environment.

Aubrey and Dahl's (2014) review of the use of ICT in the Early Years Foundation Stage found that whilst parents and practitioners were broadly positive about the use of technology with young

children, there were significant differences in the use and access to ICT between home and school settings. The study concluded that understanding of the role that ICT plays in young children's lives is limited, and the opportunities for the home and setting to work together to promote ICT use are underdeveloped. Aubrey and Dahl suggest the need for an ICT champion in every setting, to lead and develop policy and practice.

### **Using technology**

Price et al. (2015) compared the mark-making of 2-3 year olds using traditional paint and paper and iPad touch-screen technology. The study made links to previous work on the role of mark-making in developing fine motor skills and early literacy development through the use of symbolic representation. The data suggest that the use of iPads led to increased amounts of mark-making and an extension of the range of mark-making touch types employed. However, the use of paint and paper provided children with opportunities for greater sensory engagement with the materials, experiencing the properties of materials and colour and enabling a wider use of different parts of the hand. Price et al. suggest that touch screen technologies should be used to complement other activities without reducing the importance of 3D sensory experiences. This seems to be a common conclusion in studies regarding technology usage in the early years curriculum.

### **11. Theme 9 Curricular tensions**

A separate section on curricular tensions was deemed to merit its own theme as the review revealed several articles that identified particular issues related to learning, development and the curriculum, notably the continuing debate regarding a formal curriculum, with didactic pedagogical approaches, and a more play-based, child-initiated curriculum. In addition, there are related dilemmas about the role of adults in supporting children's learning and development (See also Chapter 2 and Chapter 4).

#### **'Schoolification' of the curriculum**

The tensions between child-initiated pedagogy and the demands of a formal curriculum are apparent in Roberts-Holmes's (2012) exploration of nursery and primary

head teachers' perspectives on the English Early Years Foundation Stage a year after its implementation. The research suggests that head teachers welcomed the EYFS overall but the power struggle between policy and the ideology of an early years pedagogy was evident. The participants considered that the EYFS should be extended to the age of 7, reflecting the Welsh Foundation Phase. The importance of quality and well-qualified practitioners was also identified.

Aubrey and Durmaz (2012) explore issues regarding formal instruction, focusing on the relationship between policy and practice in the early childhood mathematics curriculum for English Reception age children, including teachers' views and understanding, and how children respond to the maths curriculum. Using a case study design, they describe how international comparison studies create pressures for higher standards and how this creates tensions between a play-based pedagogy and a standards agenda, particularly in light of the values and understanding practitioners bring to practice. The curricular tensions of the Reception class have also been identified by a recent doctoral study by Carruthers (2015), which highlighted the significant difference in the teaching of mathematics between nursery school and reception. It noted that, as children enter school in England in the last year of the Foundation Stage, political and organisational pressures take over, generating uneasy pedagogies. Reception teachers find it difficult to encourage children's own enquiries and mathematical play is misunderstood. Her study discusses important aspects of potential pedagogies that enable children's own mathematics to thrive.

These findings are consistent with the wider findings from a study by Rose and Rogers (2012) of newly qualified early years teachers in different parts of England who face dissonance between their play-based pedagogical principles and the reality of the 'high stakes' performativity culture and curriculum in schools. Brogaard Clausen (2015) also notes the schoolification and school readiness agenda of early years provision in a comparative study of Danish and English curricular policies, with a particular focus on language assessment. A small study by

Roberts-Holmes (2012) identifies similar tensions. His research focused on the experiences of nursery and primary head teachers of the revised EYFS in England. The findings suggest that the EYFS validated the existing child-led early years approach adopted by most schools. However, Roberts-Holmes notes the pedagogic tension between the child-led play based EYFS approach and the knowledge-led National Curriculum. Inconsistency in quality was also noted in the study between the PVI (private, voluntary and independent) sector and maintained sector staff. Hargreaves et al. (2014) carried out research on the development of children's personal and social and cognitive and thinking skills in the early years curriculum. The study investigated the extent to which Froebelian ideals, such as the notion that children's knowledge should grow from within rather than from outside the child, might be met within the demands of contemporary early childhood education and care, and how practitioners find a space for children's own ideas and thinking with implications for the adult role.

### **The role of the adult**

Some of the issues regarding the role of adults (parents, caregivers and practitioners) have already been identified within several other themes. Key areas of debate include the role of adults in children's play; the significance of reciprocal communication and interactions from birth onwards, based on multi-modal communication (Payler, 2007); the nature of professionalism in ECEC, and the range of pedagogical roles and strategies that practitioners use to support children's learning and development. These debates are also evident in Chapters 2-6.

### **Normative assumptions and cultural diversity**

Ang (2010) reminds us of the complexities in addressing issues of cultural diversity within the early years curriculum. An issue of continued contention is how children's cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds challenge the assumptions of normality and universality that are typically produced within policy rhetoric and curricular guidelines for group provision.

## **12. Conclusion**

This review of UK-based research in relation to learning and development suggests the

following further research is needed in relation to the early years curriculum. This chapter has identified some important developments in our understanding of young children's learning and development with implications for the curriculum. For the most part, traditional insights have been restated, such as the significance of active engagement with the sociocultural context and how nurturing and contingent relationships mediate much of young children's learning. Young children need diverse, multi-sensory experiences to help them develop self-reflective and self-regulatory skills to foster their own learning. The importance and nature of dialogic encounters continue to receive attention and well-rehearsed debates regarding literacy development remain unresolved beyond a reiteration of how literacy and numeracy are collaborative and collective acts facilitated through cultural experiences and identities.

The importance of perceiving children's growth and progress through a holistic lens is reiterated, but there is new emphasis on even broader considerations and some challenges to meta-theories which are restricted to cognitive perspectives. New ways of understanding developmental delay are being pursued through research that focuses on neurophysiological development, and the importance of outdoor learning, physical play and movement is being given greater priority. More attention is also being given to previously under-researched developmental dimensions, such as children's spirituality, musicality and arts-based learning. Young children's utilisation of resources, and the wide variety of multi-modal representations of children's thinking and understanding, have also been explored more widely, including the impact of technology on children's learning and development in a rapidly advancing digital age. The growing evidence emerging from the neurosciences is contesting some aspects of Piagetian stage theories with an increasing recognition that development proceeds in a web of multiple strands via parallel coalitions of multi-sensory neural networks. Young children do not appear to think in qualitatively different ways from adults, they merely lack experience. An enduring emphasis on the role of play is a golden thread that runs through much of the literature related to learning and development and the early years curriculum continues to be hindered by controversy related to its increasing formalisation and the role of the adult within it.

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# CHAPTER 6

## ASSESSMENT AND SCHOOL READINESS

Philip Hood and Helena Mitchell

### 1. Introduction

This chapter addresses research and development within the sub-themes of:

- The formal/summative assessment of the ECEC phase in the UK
- Formative assessment practice of the ECEC phase in the UK
- The concept of school readiness.

In addition to the overarching question, research questions specific to early years assessment and readiness were devised:

*What does the research evidence since 2003 tell us about ECEC in relation to assessment and school readiness?*

- What have been the main changes in the practice of assessment?
- What have been the experiences and impacts of those changes on practitioners and children?
- What have been the policy definitions of school readiness?
- What have been the academic positions on school readiness?

### 2. Methods

Items for inclusion in this chapter were identified through the use of a systematic search and selection process, using primarily peer-reviewed journal articles. Research questions, key search terms and likely databases were agreed between the two reviewers. Given the UK scope of the review, the search strategy focused primarily on the British Education Index (EBSCO), supplemented with the use of Google Scholar and the University of Nottingham's NUsearch facility. Boolean searches of the following key terms were carried out in various combinations using limiters of 2003 – 2015, full text and English only: assessment and early childhood education; assessment EYFS; assessment early

years. (The terms used for 'readiness' and the processes for that search are contained in a later section.) When the material for assessment was reviewed further items were removed as not being UK specific. Finally a search was made of six journals: Journal of Early Childhood Research; European Early Childhood Research Journal; Early Childhood Research Quarterly; Early Years; International Journal of Early Years Education; Early Child Development and Care. Further library stock and online book supplier searches for book-based material revealed several UK-linked sources which were not underpinned by research, but practitioner guidance material which might draw on the article stock.

Each item was then read in full, further inclusion criteria applied (below) and decisions about selection noted. In addition to the above criteria, items were scrutinised against the following:

- Minimises bias
- Has external validity/authenticity
- Conclusions fit data; sufficient evidence in study
- Has been assessed by others (e.g. refereed for journal, peer review, funding body, public domain)
- Generalisations only made where / when appropriate

In total, after all selection criteria were applied, 43 items were included in this review of assessment (with a further 72 for readiness).

### 3. Formal and summative assessment of ECEC in the UK

#### 3.0 Introduction

Assessment can be seen as a broad-based theme (to include all aspects of children's development and attainment) or with a more narrow focus, linked only to institutional assessment during the EYFS phase. One major policy source from 2011, Early Intervention: the next steps (Allen 2011 p. xix) includes as its fifteenth recommendation:

'I recommend that all children should have regular assessment of their development from birth up to and including 5, focusing on social and emotional development, so that they can be put on the path to 'school readiness' which many – not least from low-income households – would benefit from.'

The theme of what is being assessed will run through this review. Despite the focus on cognitive assessment (half of the goals recognized as part of the Good Level of Development in the EYFS) there is general agreement that although a concrete readiness measure does not exist (see next section) achieving the literacy/mathematics goals depends on socio-emotional and physical development being in place. But this does not always translate into the assessment measures that receive the most focus. Some researchers have examined tests which might predict later attainment or the attainment of specific groups and which therefore constitute summative diagnostic assessment at three or four years old. Mengoni and Oates (2015) recommended a qualitative journal as an assessment tool for parents with children with special needs. Simpson and Everatt (2005) considered a screening test for dyslexia but found that only parts of it were potentially reliable at prediction of difficulties at age six or seven. Martin et al. (2003) considered testing children with autism but concluded that more reliable measures needed to be assembled. Letts et al. (2014) examined developmental language scales, and were cautiously positive about the potential benefits. The issues associated with the age range under discussion here is that they are less consistent in behaviours and the exhibition of knowledge. Taylor et al. (2015) highlighted this concern when discussing the problems associated with drawing conclusions about cohorts from assessment measures. This group evaluated the Foundation Phase in Wales using the Millennium Cohort Study. They reported somewhat negative findings about both attainment and wellbeing of children who took part in the Foundation Phase and robustly presented those findings. Nevertheless, they expressed the various limitations of their (or any comparable) study as a proviso.

Assessment systems always have a washback influence on curriculum and pedagogy (Black and Wiliam 1998; Harlen and Deakin Crick, 2002). Additionally, Basford and Bath (2014, p121) comment on the role of control through the policy vision for assessment:

'...assessment expectations in ECE have been a key policy lever for successive UK governments to bring people, organisations and objectives into alignment.'

They also (Basford and Bath, 2014, p129) address the dilemma faced by ECE professionals hoping they will take a route which:

'...allows them to perform the technical duties to satisfy the gatekeepers of regulation whilst also satisfying their own moral and ethical duties to encourage children and their families to participate in learning which is representative of their social, cultural and historical heritage.'

Roberts-Holmes (2015) points out that this is not an easy task for ECEC professionals. Rogers and Rose (2007, p59), writing about the different school starting points for seasonal born reception children, underpin the need to provide an appropriate, less formal curriculum and assess the outcomes, rather than focus too much on when they begin school:

'Indeed, inappropriate provision may be detrimental to children regardless of their starting age and children who start formal schooling at a later age seem to outperform those who start earlier.'

As in other phases, institutional ECEC assessment is formative and summative. There has been a summative assessment point in the early years phase in England since 2003, with varying numbers and formats of early learning goals (QCA/DfEE 2000; QCA 2008; DfE 2013) being used as the basis for teacher assessment (see section below). Formative assessment in ECEC has focused on 'observations of children to stimulate children's thinking' (Basford and Bath, 2014, p120), a practice which helps the educator to plan the next steps in the curriculum. Dunphy (2010, p42) using earlier work from Gipps

(1994) and Torrance (2001), states “When the educator makes judgements about promoting children’s learning based on the information gleaned through observation and interaction with them, then the assessment is considered to be formative, i.e., it promotes learning”. In the context of ECEC principles and curriculum structures, formative assessment enables the educator to promote each child’s learning with a curriculum designed to take individual needs into account.

There is potential conflict insofar as the UK Early Years sector has traditionally favoured formative rather than summative assessment (Nutbrown, 2006), and has fought to sustain a view of the individual child which positively values the knowledge, skills and attributes that can be identified through observation, rather than itemising, negatively, those skills and areas of knowledge which a child has not yet achieved. (Brooker et al., 2010). This was reflected in earlier government policy which states that:

‘Practitioners should discuss their learning with the children, giving feedback when appropriate without interrupting their play and identifying next steps with them.’ (QCA 2005, p 6)

In a review article on formative assessment, Dunphy (2010) explored different types of formative assessment as well as noting the challenges the process created. The review emphasized the importance of seeing the children as collaborators, with agency and in seeing the whole child and all aspects of their learning. Dunphy advocated using narrative approaches to give a fully contextualised account since ‘the character and complexity of early learning necessitates the employment of methods that will allow for the development of suitably rich accounts of children’s early learning’ (Dunphy, 2010, p52).

A consultative review on the EYFS managed by TACTYC in 2011 (<http://tactyc.org.uk/pdfs/Report-EYFSreview.pdf> p39) produced this summary of views from the sector on assessment:

‘The evidence explored in this chapter shows that there is strong support for formative assessment. It is considered an

important part of daily practice, enabling practitioners to identify children’s needs and support their progress. There is more of a debate about summative assessment, especially its use at transition points to help practitioners plan for children’s progress.’

Blandford and Knowles (2012, p495-6) maintain that formative assessment is key to developing independence and self-competence in children and benefits teachers’ practice:

‘The effective integration of AfL into teaching and learning, to improve children’s achievement and support them in their development as independent learners, affirms the need for teacher reflection, both individually and as a group, both of which encourage critical thought.’

Jones (2007, p577) emphasizes the ‘how’ of formative assessment: ‘Within the classroom, both assessment of and through talk is vital. Assessing talk provides immediacy of access into the child’s mind and a unique window into the learning process.’ Similarly, Riley and Burrell (2007, p193) in their reporting of assessment of children’s talk through oral storytelling make a case for a broad-based, classroom-friendly and manageable approach to assessment in EYFS, stating that it should:

- ‘be child centred;
- take place in a meaningful context;
- place importance on both process and product;
- be useful to teachers;
- be grounded in research;
- be unobtrusive .’

Nutbrown and Carter (2009, p120) maintain: ‘It is only when educators seek to understand the meanings behind what they have seen that the real worth of observational practices are realised’.

These perspectives contrast with the implications of the rationale announced by the Department for Education in England for the reception baseline test, aimed at potential test providers:

'The purpose of the reception baseline is to support the accountability framework and help assess school effectiveness by providing a score for each child at the start of reception which reflects their attainment against a pre-determined content domain and which will be used as the basis for an accountability measure of the relative progress of a cohort of children through primary school' (DfE 2014, p1).

In this way, it is the summative assessment, including the current Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), described by Bradbury (2011, p660), drawing upon Ball's (2003, p217) work, as the 'technology of performativity', which is often seen as the major driving force in policy. The legal requirement is for the teacher to make summative assessments for 17 early learning goals, and to judge each child as being at one of three levels: 'emerging' 'expected' or 'exceeding'. This policy requirement makes different demands on practitioners from formative approaches to assessment. Furthermore, the ways in which those summative judgements are used to measure and compare schools and teachers through published league tables highlights the performative elements of assessment.

The comparisons between the two forms of assessment highlight the changes in how assessment is understood and carried out, and the purposes for which the data are used. Although this review focuses on practice in England, the research has both a U.K. and an international perspective. Approaches to Early Years assessment in England contrast with those in other countries, such as New Zealand and the Reggio pre-schools in Northern Italy. These 'demonstrate models of assessment and recording which frame assessment as an iterative approach to the documentation of children's learning' (Basford and Bath (2014, p121).

The principal questions addressed in this section of the review are as follows:

- What changes have been made in the practice of assessment between 2003 and 2016?
- How has research addressed the experiences and impact of those changes on practitioners and children?

The next sections examine the policy changes in summative assessment practice, the challenges presented by assessment processes, and the implications for practice.

### **3.1 Summative assessment in EYFS: how have policy pressures influenced practitioners?**

The introduction of the Desirable Learning Outcomes (SCAA, 1996) predates the timeframe of this review, but marks a starting point for significant changes to ECEC in England in terms of provision, the curriculum, assessment practices, and professional training and qualifications. The statutory National Curriculum has also influenced developments in ECEC, specifically the assessment focus on the so-called 'core subjects' as opposed to the 'prime areas of learning', and the 'schoolification' process described by Moss (2012, p365). At the same time, significant gaps in attainment have been revealed between children from different social and economic backgrounds, as well as those that result from cognitive or developmental differences. Thus the pre-school phase has been seen increasingly as a lever to address social inequalities and improve children's life chances (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004).

More recently, official government documentation has shown a slightly narrowing but still substantial (over 30%) gap between the 20% lowest attaining and the rest of the pupils in the 'Good Level of Development' results from 2013-15 (DfE, 2015). Figures relating to 2014 also showed a 19% gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children in their GLD attainment. However, reflecting on a possible reason for this, that is the narrow approach to the skills and content that are being assessed, Roberts-Holmes (2015, p303) states:

'.....such an early emphasis upon very particular cognitive achievement and outcomes is inappropriate for young children who have insufficiently developed social and emotional skills.'

These concerns are echoed in other studies. In research on the assessment of children's understanding of number, Dunphy (2006, p73) stated: 'The findings presented here demonstrate that the assessment of young children's number sense needs to be wide-ranging and it must explore affective

issues in addition to cognitive ones. Rothermel (2004) used commercial baseline testing, and established that home-educated children outperformed school educated children at five years old and postulated that this was caused by the closer personal attention they received. Campbell-Barr, Lavelle and Wickett (2012, p870), focused on the ways in which children's centres are evaluated through their statistical outcomes data, and advocated a more qualitative approach to the assessment of young children, on the grounds that:

'The focus on a narrow range of prescriptive outcomes has already been demonstrated to limit our understandings of children, but it is the consequences that this has for how children identify with the learning environments that is important.'

Daniels (2013, p312) goes further and writes about skills beyond the Development Matters guidance (2012)

'There is no doubt that the skills and dispositions described in the Early Years Foundation Stage guidance are well founded and useful for learning. To only recognise, value and promote those outlined in the documentation however, may be to deny those which individual children hold that are useful to them as learners.'

Cottle and Alexander (2012) argue that the New Labour governments which were in power between 1997-2010 invested heavily in early years provision as a way of tackling poverty. Political assumptions that there was an underlying vision of 'quality provision', with an agreed and explicit model, underpinned an emphasis on age-related developmental phases. Such a model, as Cottle and Alexander point out, creates tensions in the 'principled practice of working with children' (Cottle and Alexander 2012, p.637), as other possibilities of understanding children's development were marginalized.

The development of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS) introduced in September 2000 for children aged 3-5 years

(QCA/DfEE, 2000), and the Birth to Three Matters (Sure Start, 2005) focused on providing guidance for all educators and professionals working with young children to deliver high quality provision. Practitioners generally responded positively to these frameworks. Indeed, research carried out by the Department for Children, Schools and Families on practitioners' views of the curriculum reinforced this view (Brooker et al., 2010), despite some underlying concerns about the model that had been adopted. The Early Learning Goals were not prescriptive and the variability of children's development and experiences was noted:

'By the end of the foundation stage, some children will have exceeded the goals. Other children will be working towards some or all of the goals – particularly younger children, those children who have not had high-quality early years experience, those with special educational needs and those learning English as an additional language.'  
(QCA/DfEE 2000, p26)

Bringing together the CGFS and Birth to Three Matters resulted in the new Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) which became statutory in September 2008 (DCSF, 2008a). Under four thematic headings, the Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments, and Development and Learning, this was a play-based and child-led curriculum but with an emphasis on assessment and learning. The curriculum continued with the Early Learning Goals (around 70 goals across seven areas of learning) which were to be achieved by the end of the Reception year (DCSF, 2008b). Formative assessment was still intended to be an integral part of the EYFS, and to feed into the EYFS Profile, which consisted of nine scale points across thirteen different strands based on the AoL (DCSF, 2008c). The nine scale points together represented the ELGs where 1-3 were baseline, 4-8 could be achieved in any order and 9 signified the child was exceeding the ELG. A child receiving 78 or more points from these measures had reached a Good Level of Development (i.e. average 6 per strand). Bradbury (2014b) presents a sample analysis of data across the thirteen areas and how the GLD (78+ points) could be reached. She quotes from

a practitioner she interviewed:

'Jim concludes that the EYFS Profile asks the wrong questions; it does not allow for the complexity of the situation, the ambiguities of children's 'progress', or the extent of the teacher's knowledge about the child. For him, the final numbers produced are an insufficient representation of a child and their attainment.' (Bradbury, 2014b, p332).

This complex process and system of recording and interpretation by practitioners, is echoed in the summary comment in the TACTYC review (2011, p39):

'There have also been more general criticisms of the assessment requirements, with concerns from certain parts of the sector that assessment is too burdensome and gets in the way of practitioners' ability to work closely with children.'

A further revision of the EYFS was published by the Coalition government in April 2012, based on the recommendations of Dame Claire Tickell's (2011) review, *The Early Years: Foundations for Life, Health and Learning*. The Foundation Stage goals were subsequently reduced from 69 to 17, and these were to be used for the statutory assessment. The requirements by this point show a significant shift in the policy discourse, and consolidate the influence of neoliberal policy agendas:

'The primary purpose of the EYFS Profile is to provide a reliable, valid and accurate assessment of individual children at the end of the EYFS. .... In addition, the Department considers that a secondary purpose of the assessment is to provide an accurate national data set relating to levels of child development at the end of the EYFS which can be used to monitor changes in levels of children's development and their readiness for the next phase of their education both nationally and locally.' (DfE 2013, p7).

Thus in ten years, the early years phase has moved towards an emphasis on summative assessment, with the information being used for

league tables which are published nationally. This shift reflects neoliberal influences in education, specifically the moves towards performativity and accountability via assessment technologies. The introduction of the new format Good level of Development (GLD) was summarized as:

'In the new EYFSP, children will be defined as having reached a GLD at the end of the EYFS if they achieve at least the expected level in the early learning goals in the prime areas of learning (personal, social and emotional development; physical development; and communication and language) and in the specific areas of mathematics and literacy.' (Cotzia et al., 2013, p7)

This means that the seven areas of learning were now effectively divided into those which were more or less important (as opposed to prime and specific), where the 'less important' areas include all of the science, humanities, ICT, RE, arts, design and music curriculum. An assessment anomaly also appears: taking the points scores (1-3) for emerging, expected and exceeding, a child needs 24 points (expected in all 12 selected ELGs) to reach the GLD, but a child with 34 points may not be classified at that level if one of the twelve is at emerging while eleven are exceeding.

Children and practitioners can be seen to act in specific ways in assessment contexts, and these actions can produce inequalities resulting from the system and teacher intentionality. The framing of assessment in the EYFS leaves little space for engagement with key questions about how educators perceive the children they are assessing, and what sort of learner is characterized by the EYFS. Bradbury suggests that the idealized child of the EYFS profile is the child who demonstrates 'individuality, rationality and self-regulation' (2014a: 350). Children who are independent and confident may be more likely to be judged as 'successful', which Bradbury describes as 'authentic'. 'More significantly in terms of equality, this prescribed, idealised notion of what is a 'good learner' could be operated to exclude some children from positions of educational success' (2014a, p350). 'Furthermore, Profile results may be as much a product of inequalities in the system



as a representation of them' (Bradbury, 2014a, p353). Bradbury's arguments (2011, 2014a, 2014b) reflect the concerns expressed by Moss and Dahlberg (2008) regarding the elusive characteristics of quality in ECEC, and the means of control that are used in neoliberal policy ideologies.

To develop the concerns with equality, one common means of assessment is the use of observation and recording through talk for both formative and summative purposes. This can be a disadvantage for those children who are less likely to be judged 'authentic', for whatever reasons. For example, those children who are bilingual may be disadvantaged in this context (Safford and Drury, 2013). These authors have explored this issue in depth but this also stands as a case for any group of children who might be similarly disadvantaged by a particular approach to assessment. Children who have a first language other than English, approximately eleven per cent of the primary school population (and a higher percentage in most large cities in England) will not necessarily demonstrate their knowledge and understanding through their use of English. 'From the age of five, bilingual children in England are assessed by the same statutory school tests and standards as English mother tongue children. They cannot be exempted from these tests unless they are new arrivals and have very little exposure to English' (Safford and Drury, 2013, p73). For bilingual pupils, their demonstrated language competence in English may contribute to perceived underperformance. Safford and Drury's (2013) case studies highlight discrepancies in the ways in which bilingual children's behaviour and competence vary between home and school. The concept of authenticity is relevant here. What are the expectations of the educator when working with a bilingual child? The use of talk is fundamental as an assessment tool in early years settings, and can produce rich evidence of the child's thought and learning. But it may be that assessment is carried out through primarily monolingual modes, with less attention to children's multi-modal communication. Safford and Drury (2013) also point out that most studies of bilingual children are small scale and ethnographic, and that more ethnographic studies are needed which look at the child's life and language across home and school.

In their study of practitioners' experiences of the EYFS, Brooker et al. (2010) report the challenge of creating a system which achieves continuity for children in the practice of assessment. With a wide and diverse workforce, and a similarly varied range of provision, attempting to ensure that there is continuity and equity was always going to be difficult. 'The effects of assessment are felt to change from positive to negative, and from formative to summative, as children move closer to year one, and are assessed against criteria associated with the school curriculum.' (Brooker et al., 2010, p3). The issues highlighted in this review about how practitioners assess young children, and on what basis, are influenced by a policy agenda that focuses increasingly on readiness for school, which is the focus of the following section.

## 4. Readiness for School

### 4.0 Introduction

At a time when the term was comparatively little used in the UK, Snow (2006) wrote a review of previous literature from the USA and attempted to synthesise different aspects of the concept of readiness. His conclusion (Snow, 2006, p30) was that readiness needs to be seen within an ecological system and that this requires

'the research community to move beyond tests of efficacy and effectiveness of programs for young children to address the more complex questions about the effectiveness of different types of programs, with differing degrees of intensity and of differing duration, delivered in different contexts by adults with differing characteristics, for students with different characteristics'

This section addresses firstly the gradual development of the discussion on school readiness by the UK government as enacted in England through the documentation of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Secondly, the UK-based research literature will be used to identify key themes and debates. This review questions the validity of a definition of readiness which puts an onus on parents, providers and ultimately children to be ready in certain ways at a certain point in time, particularly in view of the concerns

raised above about equity and equality.

#### **4.1 Policy documents on 'Readiness for School'**

Because it marks the start of ECEC policy frameworks, the 2000 DfEE/QCA publication 'Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS)' was analysed for references to 'ready' and 'readiness'. The word 'ready' in the sense covered by this review was used only once, and 'readiness' did not appear at all. The context of this reference (2000 DfEE/QCA, p23) is interesting as it concerns the sensitivity with which practitioners need to judge

'when [children] are ready to be taught skills such as using scissors and staplers safely'.

A linear view of skills development, and associated implications for teaching, remains present in the subsequent EYFS Framework of 2008 and its companion Practice Guidance (PG). There are no references to ready/ness in the Framework and only five in the PG document which was the predecessor to Development Matters (DM), 2012. The five uses of 'ready' emphasise variations in readiness that are related to age and developmental factors. For example (DCSF 2008b p53)

'When children are ready (usually by the age of five) provide systematic regular phonics sessions.'

Three of the five references address literacy, while there is one each about physical development and language and communication. The one use of the term readiness refers to children's readiness to engage in conversation. The structure of the Practice Guidance / Development Matters is a checklist of developmental steps which children can/ do/should exhibit. This marks a move in the direction of, but not yet overt engagement with, the concepts behind readiness as children being ready per se in a particular way at a particular time. The assessment profile in use then (see earlier sections on assessment in this chapter) had nine points per early learning goal in each area of learning but of these numbers 4-8 were in no particular order and the ninth was only seen as indicating competence which exceeded

expectations. In other words school readiness was still not a concept considered to be in need of definition or even discussion in policy documents.

In 2011 a report for the government was produced by Graham Allen MP. This contained a recommendation about the purpose of the birth-5 foundation stage and definition of 'school ready' as follows:

'I recommend that the United Kingdom should adopt the concept of the foundation years from 0 to 5 (including pregnancy), and give it at least the same status and recognition as primary or secondary stages. Its prime objective should be to produce high levels of 'school readiness' for all children regardless of family income .' (Allen 2011, p. xviii)

'School ready – having the social and emotional foundation skills to progress in speech, perception, ability to understand numbers and quantities, motor skills, attitude to work, concentration, memory and social conduct; having the ability to engage positively and without aggression with other children and the ability to respond appropriately to requests from teachers.' (Allen 2011, p9)

Although this did not immediately influence the content of government policy documentation, there was a change in tone. By 2012 the updated EYFS Framework still has just seven occurrences of the two key terms (five of 'ready', two of 'readiness') but the document is now more prescriptive (see the usage of the modal 'must'), for example (DfE 2012, p4)

'This section defines what providers must do, working in partnership with parents and/or carers, to promote the learning and development of all children in their care, and to ensure they are ready for school.'

And from the same paragraph (DfE 2012, p4):

'Early years providers must guide the development of children's capabilities

with a view to ensuring that children in their care complete the EYFS ready to benefit fully from the opportunities ahead of them.'

There is still an acknowledgement (DfE 2012, p6) of the fact that some may not be ready:

'As children grow older, and as their development allows, it is expected that the balance will gradually shift towards more activities led by adults, to help children prepare for more formal learning, ready for Year 1.'

There are altogether six references to Year 1 and it is here that the concept of 'readiness' begins to be expressed. On page 2 the purpose of the EYFS is defined as:

'The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sets the standards that all early years providers must meet to ensure that children learn and develop well and are kept healthy and safe. It promotes teaching and learning to ensure children's 'school readiness' and gives children the broad range of knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life.'

The EYFS Profile is characterised as providing (DfE 2012, p14):

'..... a well-rounded picture of a child's knowledge, understanding and abilities, their progress against expected levels, and their readiness for Year 1.'

We should note that from 2013 the EYFS Profile took on a new form where children were assessed as emerging, expected or exceeding against seventeen early learning goals of which twelve counted to create a measure named 'The Good Level of Development'. The twelve were the eight from the three prime areas and the four from Literacy and Mathematics, which effectively moved those two specific areas of learning to prime status. To gain a GLD, which is the closest we have officially to a measure of school readiness in the sense of readiness for Year 1, a child needs a minimum of 24 points, i.e. at least expected level in each of the twelve

ELGs. To support teachers gathering evidence the DfE produced a set of exemplar materials for the expected level in the EYFS profile as a series of documents entitled Early Years Outcomes (DfE 2013b).

The Framework had only minor amendments in the two years following; in its tone and approach to the concept of readiness the Framework thus became consistent during the period of the Coalition government (2010-2015).

As the non-statutory Practice Guidance accompanied the Framework of 2008, so Development Matters was the equivalent in 2012. Because of its link to the EYFS Profile documentation (in which the different iterations between 2008-2015 have very few examples of the readiness terminology), practitioners have used Development Matters extensively as a guiding source of descriptors for steps towards the Early Learning Goals (ELGs). Development Matters contained only two occurrences of the term ready: one of these (Early Education 2012, on both p29 and p31), in reading:

'When children are ready (usually, but not always, by the age of five) provide regular systematic synthetic phonics sessions'

had actually become more tentative than in 2008.

Despite the consistent pattern emerging in the DfE EYFS documentation with few overt references to readiness, a sea change occurred with the publication in 2014 of the first Ofsted Annual Report on Early Years (Ofsted 2014a) (referring to the years 2012-13) and its companion publication: Are You Ready? (Ofsted 2014b). Although the first contains only a few references to being ready, the second addressed the theme as its core purpose and the concept of readiness itself (as opposed to simply using the adjective ready) throughout the documents. The Annual Review (Ofsted 2014a) in its fourth paragraph (p8) clarifies the way in which OFSTED sees the issue (original emphasis):

'Children are disadvantaged if they are not ready to learn when they start school, but at present **neither parents, nor providers, nor anyone in government is**

clear enough about which children are going to be ready for school and which children are not. This is because, even though children are regularly assessed in their early years, this is not done in a standardised way and the assessment data are not collected, published or made clear enough to parents.'

This statement signals a level of frustration that providers are apparently not sharing the moral high-ground taken by the Coalition Government and also by Ofsted that eliminating the effects of disadvantage is the major priority. The phrase 'ready to learn' is not problematised here (see Lindfors 1999; Bingham and Whitebread, 2012; Moss, 2012) nor elsewhere in the document and there is a level of blame attributed to providers, which is not counter-pointed by a solution beyond that of another assessment point (the Baseline Test). Ofsted maintains that schools are not reliable in their 'on-entry' assessments and that a Baseline Test would need to be a national externally assessed framework. Through this discussion it appears that 'ready for school' is in fact now seen as ready for Reception (not Year 1 as was referred to in the 2012 documents). This uncertainty or confusion exists throughout these two documents about when is the start of school, for example, (Ofsted, 2014a, p15):

'A baseline assessment that could underpin 'value added' would need to be detailed to be robust. It is therefore unlikely to address the concern raised by many schools that some children are arriving in Reception not ready for school.'

On the same page there appears a checklist originating with a report by Frank Field MP (Field, 2010) containing ten skills children need to start school securely and close by there is a stated need for parents to have access to advice if they are told their two-year-old child will not be ready for school as a result of the health (now combined education and health) check at 24 months. This implies a view of readiness that fixes the concept even earlier. Cowley (2014) addresses the current issue of the growing number of two-year-olds going to school and the appropriateness of that move for some children. In the companion Are You Ready? (Ofsted

2014b) there are nine uses of the word 'ready' but twenty eight of the term 'readiness' (textual uses only, i.e. not in headings). Thus the shift from talking occasionally in documentation about whether children are ready for, mainly, literacy to a positionality which emphasises the absolute importance of the concept of school readiness is stark. At the beginning of the document (Ofsted 2014b, p4) it makes the connection between social disadvantage and attainment:

'There are strong associations between a child's social background and their readiness for school as measured by their scores on entry into Year 1. Too many children, especially those that are poor, lack a firm grounding in the key skills of communication, language, literacy and mathematics.'

Thus the separation of these documents from the EYFS Framework and Development Matters is clear that the Prime Areas of Learning have a reduced status as 'key skills', are redefined to exclude social and physical development, and to include the two specific areas. Yet it acknowledged that part of the reason why there is no agreed view of readiness across schools is because the Prime Areas tend to be used to reference it and the document then supplies as an uncritical example of current practice (Ofsted 2014b, p7) a primary headteacher's detailed view of readiness which is clearly formed around those Prime Areas. But in spite of any confusion, the document also overtly makes the development of school readiness a major requirement for early years' providers:

'The term is used as an indicator of the effectiveness of children's centres' (Ofsted 2014b p7)

That this appears in Ofsted publications rather than in those from the DfE is not significant, as it would be naïve to disassociate the two when a Reception baseline test was being introduced at the same time. Clearly, from its title, this document engages overtly with the theme and contains a whole section (Ofsted 2014b, p6-8) entitled 'Ready For School', subtitled: 'Children's readiness for school'. This section admits there is no national definition and so, as mentioned above, explores different providers'

understanding of readiness but concludes with the paragraph:

'In summary, we found various responses to the definition of school readiness and whether the term refers to readiness to start school on entry to Year 1 or at the start of entry into Reception. Where providers had developed close partnerships they were more likely to have developed a localised mutual understanding of what was expected in terms of children's readiness as they transferred. **Defining what school readiness means is an essential factor in ensuring that children can be well prepared for starting school.**' (Ofsted 2014b, p8, our emphasis)

Ofsted published a further annual report in 2015 and this contained five references to readiness. The first of these (Ofsted 2015, p21) is clear as to its steer:

'However, if there is to be a step change in reducing the gap between the more disadvantaged and their peers, improving individual providers of early education will not be enough. Improving readiness for school will require a combination of system leadership, more focused challenge from Ofsted and greater leadership from primary schools.'

The role of Children's Centres at their best is praised but that part of the sector is also strongly criticised (Ofsted 2015, p22):

'However, the performance of children's centres does not suggest that, overall, they are well placed to improve readiness for school.'

Schools are also criticised and a section entitled 'Schools must do more to support transition' (Ofsted 2015, p26) is the assertion:

'It is within the gift of motivated school leaders to work collaboratively with other early education providers to improve children's readiness for school.'

Thus we see that in terms of government policy the terminology around readiness is currently well-established and it is a major pressure point for all providers of early years services. That there is a disjuncture between these recent documents, especially in terms of their blame culture, and research literature on the same topic is a concerning aspect of current attitudes to education in the UK. The view of government can still best be summed up as in The Times Higher Education Supplement (13/06/2013) when it commented, referring to the then Minister of Education:

'Earlier this year in an article for the Mail on Sunday, [Michael] Gove warned that "the new Enemies of Promise are a set of politically motivated individuals who have been actively trying to prevent millions of our poorest children getting the education they need".'

If we look elsewhere within the UK we see that as early as 2004 in Scotland this issue was being noted as problematic. Brown (2004 p9) has argued:

'There may appear to be a common culture of practice in pre-school provision that is shared among practitioners (teachers and nursery nurses), managers, policy-makers and those who inspect provision. .... Our studies for the Scottish Executive, however, have suggested that there are multiple cultures at work that reflect different conceptualisations of childhood and how children learn. We have argued that if innovation for improvement is to be effective, it has to be rooted in the playroom and in the ways in which the insiders make sense of what they do, and these do not necessarily reflect the conceptual frameworks used by outsiders.'

The next section reviews the range of research findings about readiness within the same period.

## **4.2 Research and 'Readiness for School'**

### **4.2.1 Introduction**

From different database searches different patterns emerged. The need to add 'UK' to

the search-string 'readiness for school' or simply 'ready for school' was apparent after a basic search on the University of Nottingham's NUsearch. A total of over 18000 returns came for the string without UK and just 110 returns when UK was added. The sources revealed in this search included twenty different research databases with the top seven being:

Scopus (Elsevier) (67)  
ERIC (U.S. Dept. of Education) (57)  
MEDLINE/PubMed (NLM) (30)  
Social Sciences Citation Index (Web of Science) (27)  
Science Citation Index Expanded (Web of Science) (19)  
Taylor and Francis Online-Journals (16)  
Informa Healthcare Journals (12)

A British Education Index search on 'readiness for school UK or United Kingdom' returned 92 sources which added just three to the initial stock.

When reviewed for theme match, UK base and date parameters, many were excluded as not fitting all three of these and a total of 37 remained. This was felt to be a poor return and so a different approach targeting early years journals was made. As a result of a search on the term 'readiness for school UK' in six specialist journals a further 35 potential articles was added to the collection, making a total of 72 for inclusion. The journals were: Journal of Early Childhood Research; European Early Childhood Research Journal; Early Childhood Research Quarterly; Early Years; International Journal of Early Years Education; Early Child Development and Care.

#### **4.2.2 Readiness and Quality: two parallel agendas**

The academic research takes different standpoints about concepts related to readiness even if for the most part it does not use the terminology directly. Two relevant international reports are Starting Strong II and III (OECD 2006, 2012)

'France and the English speaking world have adopted a "readiness for school" approach, which although defined broadly focuses in practice on cognitive

development in the early years, and the acquisition of a range of knowledge, skills and dispositions. A disadvantage inherent in this approach is the use of programmes and approaches that are poorly suited to the psychology and natural learning strategies of young children.'  
(OECD Executive Summary 2006, p13)

Specifically for the UK context, the 2012 TACTYC document (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012) extensively interrogates the literature of developmental psychology and education over nearly two hundred pages, including twenty eight pages of references. This review chapter locates the TACTYC review as central and concurs with the last paragraph (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012, p164-5):

'Regardless of the age for school entry, children will vary considerably in their social, emotional, and intellectual skills upon arrival. Conceptual and pragmatic changes need to be made therefore to the 'offer' from schools. In particular, pedagogies need to be designed to complement the natural learning capacities of young children in order that they can fulfil their developmental potential. We would, therefore wish to suggest that a much greater service would be provided to children if the focus was more on making schools ready for children, than on making children ready for school.'

Research within the focus period gives attention to how the concept of 'quality' is defined in early childhood education from contrasting perspectives. This contested term lies behind the policy-focused readiness agenda in that something is seen to have quality if it creates 'ready' children. In its Executive Summary of Starting Strong III (2012) the OECD acknowledges the importance of quality measures but comments on the different ways these are seen in different countries. Sheridan (2007) and Sylva et al. (2006) believe quality can be classified and measured, but this contrasts with the critical perspectives of Dahlberg and Moss (2005), Moss, Dahlberg and Pence, (2006), Moss, (2012; 2014) and Ang (2014). Their work challenges the term

because of its complexity and ideological use by policy makers. In their view the 'quality' agenda demands not just certain outcomes, but also a certain kind of pedagogy and a level of engagement and behaviour which means that teachers in EYFS effectively construct the 'good learner' as a standard for all children (Bradbury, 2012). In response to government policy and the EYFS Profile, which has a third of its significant early learning goals in the Literacy/Mathematics areas (see section above), readiness means primarily behavioural and cognitive competences. Contrasting discourses focus on the rights of the child for preschool experiences to be informed by identified needs, and to be developmentally and culturally appropriate. This leads to the claim that the school needs to be ready for the child (Rogers and Rose, 2007; Whitebread and Bingham, 2012), and that readiness can be understood in different ways. Social disadvantage is acknowledged as a crucial factor in early childhood education but critics of policy-centred perspectives take a global view about what education should be like for young children, informed by European models and alternative theories about learning, pedagogy and curriculum. O'Connor and Angus (2014) use the Steiner-Waldorf philosophy to model the issues in readiness for Ireland for example. Moss (2008, 2012) frequently uses examples from Sweden and summarises this as:

'Rather than 'delivering' predetermined 'outcomes', ECEC services and schools can also be understood as collaborative workshops or laboratories, places for experimentation ..... outcomes certainly, but not necessarily predetermined or predictable.' (Moss, 2008 p231)

Cottle and Alexander (2012, p637) echo these debates:

"Quality' has attained a generic, 'common-sense' status and as such is promoted through national goals, standards, targets and various quality assurance procedures in what Tanner et al. (2006, p. 6) refer to as an 'official' definition of quality predicated on it being an 'objective reality that can be defined, measured, evaluated and assured".

They too noted a difference between practitioners in children's centres and schools with, for example many more instances of sustained shared thinking in the centres. This verified Alexander's previous findings (2010) where she noted a contrast between the practices of children's centre staff and teachers in schools; the former hoped for readiness (Alexander, 2010, p113) 'for life not just for school and KS1' while practitioners in school settings

'are influenced more by official standards and the opinions of their colleagues in other parts of the school than by more context-specific criteria for evaluating quality of provision and success in their work with children' (Alexander, 2010, p116).

Similarly Faulkner and Coates (2013, p259) summarised the proceedings of the Warwick Institute of Education Seminar (2012) "The Changing Face of Early Childhood Policy and Practice in England over the Past Twenty Years:" that:

'the political, social and economic constructs of early childhood and the purpose of education held by politicians of different parties, appear to have more influence on service provision than the views of children and families who use the services.'

Clearly there are tensions in how readiness is constructed in the EYFS, the more nuanced arguments for how this impacts on children and their families, and the critical perspectives that understand readiness in the context of culture and diversities (Ang, 2014).

#### 4.2.3 Countering disadvantage: Linking readiness to quality screening and monitoring

The pragmatic view is that children do need to make the transition to compulsory education at age 5+, and that the focus should be on making transition a positive experience. These claims underpin those who take a strong position about social disadvantage. Thus, some writers link the concept of readiness with interventions or standard tests and tend to accept that it is desirable for children to be ready for school, especially if they belong to a group where there

is a proven gap in attainment. For example, Whiteley et al. (2005) reported on a screening process at the beginning of the Nursery / F1 year which led to long-term interventions on children's perceived 'weak' areas. They claimed a good level of success by the time children were re-screened and justified the process on the grounds of ameliorating disadvantage:

'Early intervention is often the most effective and long-lasting. Thus, identifying difficulties early in a child's education may facilitate breaking the cycle.' (Whiteley et al. 2005 p155).

As part of the EPPE Project, Sylva et al. (2006) used a revised environmental rating scale originally developed in the USA (ECERS-R) in a new UK-related extended version (ECERS-E) to 'capture quality' of pre-school settings. Their interest was in how process quality linked to outcomes, effectively clarifying that the latter needed to be served by the former, and attempting to establish conditions that might generate smooth transition into compulsory education. Other factors such as home learning environments and parents' demographic information were also examined. Although the nature of the pre-school setting and the effects on later attainment are the focus of the article they also acknowledge that there are many different views of quality, and that they have used just one:

'The analyses presented here refer to quality mainly in relation to its effectiveness in enhancing children's development. However, quality should not be assessed solely on the basis of effectiveness or at the expense of other aspects of quality, namely acceptability, efficiency, access, equity and relevance' (Sylva et al. 2006 89).

There is a contribution to government policy on readiness from the EPPE research. For example, selected findings are referenced in 'Early Education and Childcare' (DfE, 2014), which while not using the term ready or readiness nevertheless speaks of raising quality through inspection and regulation, by increasing the evidence base on pedagogy, teaching and curriculum and using Ofsted as the arbiter of

quality. The EPPE longitudinal report based on settings in England (Sammons et al., 2008; Sylva et al., 2013) and the parallel report for Northern Ireland (Melhuish et al., 2013) both attested the value of high quality pre-school education as evidenced by the rating scales used to measure children's progression, and to compare the characteristics of settings. These findings lend credence to the policy-centred definition of readiness as children being made ready through intentional teaching towards defined curriculum outcomes. However, there remain debates about the transition from 'informal' to 'formal' schooling, with Fisher (2015), for example, documenting the practices of teachers who strive to extend integrated pedagogical approaches from the EYFS to Year 1.

In addition to global constructions of readiness, this term is also understood in different areas of learning. Evangelou et al. (2007) report the findings from the PEEP project. They focus on reading readiness by which they mean that children should be able to read by the end of Reception year,

'thus allowing each child to maximise their potential within an education system that requires, and often assumes, a certain level of literacy skill' (Evangelou et al., p585).

Hansen and Hawkes (2009) reported on whether formal childcare (from 9 months) or grandparent care affected children's readiness judged by the Bracken School Readiness Test (1998) which was administered at age 3. The test centres on literacy and numeracy areas of knowledge, such as letters, numbers, shapes, colours, size and comparisons. The concept of readiness is accepted (via the standard measure) and the article focuses on whether these identified groups and their sub-groups (e.g. parental SES) benefit from the types of childcare explored.

In 2012 The Sutton Trust held a summit on social mobility, which used vocabulary tests (the nature of these is not specified) to establish that there was a '...19 month gap in school readiness between the most and least advantaged children' (Mathers et al., 2014, p3). These authors suggested in this report on provision for children under 3 years that the gap could be closed



if provision put in place was of good quality. They produce a number of recommendations, principally supporting the EYFS framework in its structure of prime and specific areas of learning and also its non-statutory documentation to support practitioners, and they comment

‘Using Early Years Outcomes in place of Development Matters may encourage a focus on assessing the children themselves rather than on the role of the adult in supporting their development. We therefore recommend that the original version of Development Matters continue to be promoted as useful practice guidance to support all aspects of children’s development’ (Mathers et al., 2014, p39).

This recommendation appears to align readiness with teacher activity and individual attention rather than to a set of external measures, and contrasts with the 2012 Summit report and its own 2014 report introduction which both take the ‘gap’ in ‘readiness’ as established without actually providing either a definition of the term or any information about the measures used to define the scale of the gap.

Most recently Hughes et al. (2015) have established and trialled a measure (the BESSI) which aims to give more reliable data on school readiness, a term which they concede is not well defined and which different stakeholders understand differently. Their measure encompasses both cognitive and social dimensions as well as daily living skills. Their conclusion is that the measure has construct validity but will need further development to make it appropriate for all groups of children.

#### 4.2.4 The views of parents, teachers and children

Brooker (2003) discusses the different ways different communities of parents prepare their children for school, highlighting the different cultural capital that children possess, and the cultural dissonance they may experience on transition to school (see also Drury, 2013). Brooker advocates that schools should try to present their informal curriculum in visible ways so that it gains in status with parents who may believe school needs to be entirely formal.

Similarly, Brown (2004) reported EYFS teachers in Scotland focusing on individuals:

‘Practitioners did not talk about learning outcomes achieved nor curricular areas. When they talked about children’s progress, they stressed the importance of responding to the individual child’s repertoire, rather than monitoring the outcomes in terms of specific objectives’ Brown (2004, p10).

In contrast, Cassidy (2005), also referring to a Scottish setting about teachers’ views on how transition into school should be organised, reported that the teachers found the process difficult and did not hold consistent views. Cassidy attributes this to the account of the policy towards Nursery and P1 (equivalent to the Reception year in England):

‘Pressures of accountability, a pedagogy that emphasises an approach towards whole-group teaching and criteria of ‘targets’ and achievement characterise the environment children enter as they start school’ (Cassidy, 2005, p151).

Teachers, parents and children were involved in surveys about transition from EYFS to Year 1 in Fisher’s (2009) research. Teachers from both EYFS and Y1 overwhelmingly expressed doubts about the degree of contrast, with broad agreement about supporting more continuity of pedagogy into Y1. Parents, also from both year groups, responded and were more divided between those who worried about the change and those who thought change was overdue. Children’s views (all from EYFS), while generally positive, also contained terms of anxiety or regret about leaving the secure Reception base. The article uses the word ‘ready’ principally in quotations from parents and the term ‘readiness’ does not appear at all, which echoes the policy documentation of pre-2012 when the term was not used so overtly. Roberts-Holmes (2012) found that headteachers and teachers strongly supported the four underpinning principles of the EYFS and generally considered it was also appropriate for use in Year 1. Cottle and Alexander (2014) use Whalley’s (2011, p201) term ‘cultural brokers and mediators’ to highlight the need for practitioners to interpret for

parents the specialised understanding of how children learn and develop 'particularly within the framework of contradictory policy discourses' (Cottle and Alexander, 2014, p654).

The research literature demonstrates the complexity of the readiness agenda, for example the need to look at different groups of children and what provision for intervention activity they might need, not just to become 'ready' at a certain point but to address the developmental contexts they are experiencing. These reports tend to focus on a longer-term developmental agenda based on children's needs rather than meeting specific outcomes. The following studies exemplify these issues. Currently there is a policy focus on the education of two-year-old children. In their evaluation of four settings piloting provision for this age group, Phair and Davis (2015) emphasise that readiness is associated with emotional stability, which they link to the use of a key person. In Ireland, Farrelly and Hennessy (2014) reported on transitions for younger children within an early childhood setting and noted a gender difference, with boys less secure than girls and a parent construction of children's identity as shifting from that of expert to novice after such transitions.

Cortazzi and Jin (2007) address the context of pupils with EAL who need greater structure and time to be able to engage in narrative activities parallel to English L1 speakers; this can be seen as an important factor of both language and literacy development. Drury (2013) writes specifically of the silent period used by young bilinguals and notes how important their linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge are to a real understanding of the terms of their readiness. McAllister and Gray (2007) comment on the increased need for motor skills development amongst blind and visually impaired children. This is partly due to their need to be more skilled in gross and fine motor skills to support the effects of their impairment, and to the fact that they may be underdeveloped in those skills as a result of a lack of confidence to engage physically. Rogers and Rose (2007) are concerned with summer-born children and comment on the practice in other countries in Europe of deciding on school starting points by developmental level rather than age alone (see Chapters 5 and 6 for related themes). Crozier and Davies (2007, p311) highlight

the position of children from the South Asian community, and more specifically their parents, who do not take the steps to engineer readiness that are characteristic of middle class white British parents:

'The majority of the Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents in our study believe that the schools will simply provide the best they can. The middle-class (and mainly white) parents ... recognise and understand that they need to compete for scarce resources and develop competitive strategies to maximise their children's opportunities.'

Kiernan and Mensah (2011), along with Hartas (2011a), found that children in poverty achieved less highly on measures such as the EYFS Profile Good Level of Development scale. Both studies found that the quality of parenting and the presence of forms of home learning were only partly responsible for raising attainment and that more research needs to be done to address what appear as in-built disadvantages. This would suggest that achieving equal readiness for all, even if that quality is definable, may still be unconnected to curriculum specifications and interventions driven towards them. Simpson (2013) added to this that the remedy for poverty was a performative one, raising children's attainment, whereas some practitioners saw practical measures such as feeding hungry children as being the first level of intervention, and that the ELGs seemed developmentally inappropriate in such contexts.

In a rural Irish context where children often start formal schooling at four years old because of limited pre-school availability, McGettigan and Gray (2012) surveyed parents and children and linked perceptions of school readiness to social confidence and to attendance at pre-school and a problematic infant pedagogy, with a large minority of parents considering their child was not ready when s/he began attending. The writers highlighted that socio-economic factors need to be taken into account.

Maynard, Waters and Clement (2013) focused on the Wales Foundation Phase (age three to seven), and conducted a qualitative research inquiry on a sample of 48 teacher-selected underachieving children (socially, emotionally

or in terms of their literacy/numeracy attainment). The intervention consisted of a programme of more child-initiated outdoor activity over time. Teachers reported that there was an enhancement in the children's area of underachievement in 28 cases, with a further 17 having a less noticeable improvement, and only 3 for whom the intervention made no difference. The authors noted that teachers commented that children behaved differently indoors and outside and that having different demands had an effect on the children's confidence and behaviour.

#### 4.2.5 Readiness and curriculum content and pedagogy

Payler's (2007) in-depth exploration of pedagogy in pre-school and Reception classes demonstrates perhaps that readiness can be the result of, rather than the focus of good practice. She demonstrates the value of a more personalised, interactive, collaborative and dialogic approach in building agency and confidence alongside competence in a range of skills including language. It is incidental, almost insignificant in the context of the whole focus of the article that one of the focus children is described by a parent as a result of long-term exposure to the prevalent pedagogy as being 'ready for school' (Payler, 2007, p245). Robson (2010) while not overtly addressing readiness reports a study of children's self-regulation and metacognition and found that four-year-olds were capable of demonstrating both skills if the activities, and the roles practitioners took on to interact with them, were well constructed. Bingham and Whitebread (2012) refer to self-regulation sixty-two times during their review and define it as:

'the basis for the development of a wide range of skills and dispositions which are very strongly associated with children becoming successful learners, and socially adept and successful adults' (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012, p56).

Hartas (2011b) also identifies the management of emotion and behaviour and self-regulation as important components of readiness (which she links to success in literacy and numeracy) but highlights the need for practitioners to look at the context-specificity of individuals to achieve this. Campbell-Barr, Lavelle and Wickett (2012)

advocate greater amounts of qualitative research to identify how and what children learn best in early childhood. Focusing on children's centres they highlighted pressure felt by the practitioners to focus on a restricted range of skills and knowledge and the danger of a government policy, announced at the time they were writing, that centres might be funded by outcomes results. Writing about the effects on agency of transition from Reception to Year 1 Huf (2013) points out that children gain if they transfer as a class as they are enabled by a group confidence to reinterpret the demands of the new teacher and new pedagogy for themselves, and are able counter some of the more negative perceptions, for example of no longer being able to choose focus and activities at times of the day.

## 5 Conclusions

From this review it is clear that there is a continuing conflict of interests between government policy, the findings from research, and alternative constructions of readiness and quality (e.g. Moss, 2015; Robertson, 2015). Using critical discourse analysis Wild et al. (2015) reveal the different uses of terminology in a research report, The Nutbrown Review (DfE, 2012) and a policy document which implemented its recommendations, More Great Childcare (DfE, 2013c). For example, they contrast the conceptualisations about what constitutes quality learning and development in these two documents:

'Nutbrown (DfE 2012) suggests that quality learning nurtures children and facilitates the development of 'independent and enquiring minds', whereas [More great Childcare] (2013) suggests that quality learning is a social investment which facilitates specific learning outcomes that are the 'foundation for their future success at school' (Wild et al., 2015, p241).

The dualism is also played out amongst practitioners. Roberts-Holmes (2015, p313) sums this up as:

'Within an increasingly constrained context, there was evidence that some of the early years teachers questioned, challenged and resisted the

performativity culture and retained, where they could, their child-centred focus. However, the intensification of early years governance has resulted in the 'datafication' of early years teachers and children in which the public and constant hierarchical ranking, ordering and classification of children, teachers and schools constrained such democratic pedagogical spaces, visions and possibilities.'

This effect centres on an agenda of requiring practitioners to make children ready to learn in certain ways, to learn certain subject matter, and to leave little space for the views of parents or children. In contrast, it is useful to return to Bingham and Whitebread's (2012, p6) assertion (original emphases):

'All children, at all ages, are 'ready to learn' and have been doing so since birth. Recent research using new techniques in cognitive neuroscience and developmental psychology has established that many of our cognitive processes are there and fully functioning at birth, or mature very quickly during the first 4-5 years of life. So, the significant question is not whether a child is ready to learn but what a child is ready to learn and how adults can best support the processes of learning.'

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## CHAPTER 7

# BROAD POLICY ISSUES

Elizabeth Wood

The 2017 Review has not taken policy as one of the themes, because the influence of policy is threaded through all of the chapters. The period 2003-17 has been marked by many significant policy developments in ECEC, with corresponding ideological shifts as UK governments have succumbed to the need for policies to show rapid impact across different areas such as improving children's outcomes, well-being and life chances; raising educational standards and quality; ensuring school readiness and supporting parenting skills. The influence of neoliberal ideologies is also evident in each of the chapters, with a clear imperative that tangible social and economic returns on investment must be realised in these areas, and that optimal behaviours as perceived by policy makers should be adopted (for example, by practitioners and parents) to achieve the benefits that policy frameworks bestow. Policy drivers in each of the four UK jurisdictions emanate from a range of sources across national and international contexts. Supra-national organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO provide international comparative data about ECEC, which advocates the immediate benefits for children, and the long-term benefits to society. As a result, ECEC is enmeshed in international discourses about quality, effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, standards and accountability (Ang, 2014), often from a 'human capital' perspective. The claimed benefits of ECEC must be demonstrated as measurable outcomes. What has changed significantly since 2003 is the power effects of policy, and how this infuses education via macro-level socio-political, and economic contexts, and how that power then infuses micro-level practices and relationships.

The impact of government policies in all four UK jurisdictions has been a mixed blessing. The increased attention to ECEC since the 2003 review has been welcome, not least because this has provided the levers for expansion of the sector, for funding and investment, and for

attention to access, quality, equity and equality. Each of the four UK ECEC frameworks upholds fundamental principles that inform provision and practice: the role of play in learning and development; the importance of mixed or integrated pedagogical approaches; the quality of relationships and interactions between adults, children and their families; using pedagogical documentation as formative and informative assessment. However, these principles become vulnerable when exposed to policy technologies that incorporate performativity, assessment, inspection regimes, comparative benchmarking and monitoring of outcomes, school readiness, quality and effectiveness. For example, in terms of cultural and linguistic diversity, the UK frameworks all acknowledge that children learn in different ways, and that development is not linear or evenly paced. However, in the Early Years Foundation Stage (England) linguistic diversity is recognized, but the emphasis is on ensuring that 'children have sufficient opportunities to learn and reach a good standard in English language...ensuring that children are ready to benefit from the opportunities available to them when they begin Year 1' (Department for Education, 2012, p6). Thus, young children's capabilities are assessed in English at a very early age, regardless of whether or not it is their home language or their degree of their familiarity with it. In each of the four UK frameworks, the assumption is that transition from pre-school to compulsory education, and readiness for school, is largely a matter of progressively introducing more formal, teacher-directed activities and reducing play, or providing little planned play other than choosing time. In contrast, as shown in Chapter 6, readiness is understood in more complex ways in research, with different pathways and networks being influenced by children's home and cultural repertoires. These two examples indicate a consistent thread through this Review, of discontinuities between what policies aim to achieve within short time-frames, what the research evidence shows,

and how practitioners work to address these complexities.

The four UK policy frameworks have been selective in their uptake of particular discourses, with underpinning assumptions about what is 'good' or 'effective' for children and their families. Assumptions about 'what works' rely on scientific claims to truth. The synthesis of neuroscience, economics, and neoliberal forms of government and governance, has been used to construct a political rationality in ECEC that extends across settings and homes, and across practitioners, children and families. This synthesis reflects discourses of 'normalisation', with the result that attention to issues of diversities, inclusion and exclusion may not be foregrounded consistently in practice.

The complexity that is revealed in much of the research reported in this Review is not reflected in policy frameworks. Indeed, that is not their aim. Rather policies aim to serve as a means for aligning organisational structures and regulatory frameworks, with desired purposes and outcomes, via key participants, organisations and stakeholders. But policy is enacted in complex situations. Moreover, the principles and characteristics of effective practice that are stated in policy frameworks may be interpreted differently in pre-school and school settings. Therefore the policy-practice dialectic will always reveal messiness and inconsistency, subject to the beliefs and values of practitioners, parental choices, and the capacity of ECEC leaders to effect change and innovation.

ECEC policies have changed and evolved over time, which shows responsiveness to international and local influences, but at the same time, has brought change overload into the sector. Change overload infects the whole education sector, but has been particularly evident in ECEC. This is because governments have attempted to regulate different types of providers in the private, voluntary and independent sectors, and to standardise provision through professional standards, assessment regimes and curriculum frameworks within budgetary limits. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the downturn in public sector funding impacted on ECEC in negative ways. Increasingly effectiveness within policy discourses

is not about improving children's life chances through attention to social justice, equality and equity, but about economic effectiveness. The gains that were made in extending provision (for example via Sure Start and Children's Centres) have been lost or compromised; professional qualifications have been downgraded, and ECEC practitioners remain undervalued and underpaid within the sector. Consistency in quality remains elusive, despite broad agreement in research about the qualities and characteristics of supportive interactions, respectful relationships, providing stimulating physical and material environments, creating opportunities for challenging play, and ensuring equitable provision.

This review has revealed some tensions and contradictions in what policies state, and how those policies become real and everyday practices. For example, the developing child becomes the child who must be 'school ready' by a specific age and stage, and must be economically productive at a later age and stage. Practitioners must meet the child's needs and interests, but also provide the knowledge and understanding that is valued in the policy frameworks. Curriculum is conceived as goals or outcomes that must be delivered, and assessment regimes must provide summative evidence of the child's performance, which is used as a proxy for judging the practitioner's performance. The research reviewed here indicates that these contrasting positions are difficult to reconcile, with the result that practitioners may be pulled between established ECEC principles and values, and powerful policy technologies.

There are clear contrasts between the complexity of the lives of children and families, the variability of early learning and development, and the discourses that underpin national ECEC policies. Ang (2014) rightly questions whether early childhood education is a nexus for enriching children's lives and experiences, or simply preparing children for schooling. Similarly the work of Lloyd (2008; 2014) problematizes policy rhetoric, positive intentions, and the longer-term sustainability of different initiatives and interventions in the face of these kinds of tensions and contradictions.

A pessimistic view is that policy discourses subjectively position practitioners and teachers as compliant technicians; children as possessors of social/human capital – where they may be in credit or in deficit; and families as needing/deserving (or possibly not deserving) targeted interventions to ensure their compliance. There is a danger that ECEC represents a set of problems and crises that need to be overcome by different interventions. ECEC is used for preventative, reparative and restorative purposes, in ways that are linked to outcomes measures, whilst fundamental structural inequalities remain. This represents a sense of children and families being 'done to', and of being colonized by dominant discourses, to produce the 'tamed citizen'. In contrast, a more optimistic and ethical view is that ECEC policy frameworks are open and flexible, allowing for different voices and perspectives to inform provision and practice. Partnership models, community engagement, the rights and voices of children and families, are all evident in research, alongside professional agency and collaborations that work at local levels, and in responsive ways. However, there is much scope for research on policy, particularly its power effects, the extent to which different voices and perspectives are represented, and the ways in which ECEC communities contest policy and its effects.

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## CHAPTER 8

# CONCLUSION: KEY MESSAGES AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Elizabeth Wood, Jane Payler and Jan Georgeson

Within the resources and scope of the review, it has not been possible to include every published item or to cover themes in depth. However, we can draw together some key themes across the four UK jurisdictions that resonate more widely in international research. In terms of patterns, the concept of consilience is useful (see Chapter 5). Much of the research reported here is small-scale, draws on multi-disciplinary perspectives and incorporates a range of methodological approaches. Theoretical influences on research include the established socio-cultural, sociological, psychological domains, with critical theory, post-modern and post-human theories adding new perspectives that disrupt and challenge some aspects of the traditional domains. There has been a distinct shift away from a focus on individualised psychological within-child conceptualisations, towards socio-cultural conceptualisations and back again to the individual child in material contexts. Concerns with children's rights, agency, self-determination and voices are strongly represented, and reflect difference and diversities in children's lives. These concerns also align with ethical commitments to conducting research that is relational, participatory and co-produced. These trends simultaneously mirror and counter contemporary political ideologies.

Developmental psychology and, increasingly, neuroscience continue to have the scientific appeal that is valued by policy makers, especially where these are aligned with large-scale studies, randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and longitudinal studies that focus on effectiveness measures. The Department for Education (2014) has identified its own research priorities and questions, and has expressed one of its aims to 'promote the importance of robust quantitative evidence, in combination with other methods, to increase understanding of 'what works' in education and children's services (2014, p3). However, there is not always a smooth relationship between government-funded

research and how the findings are used. Questions might be raised as to what works when and for whom. Short term returns might threaten longer term gains and policies may affect different sections of society in different ways. The government-funded Effective Provision for Pre-school Education (EPPE) study (1997-2003) was subsequently extended into Primary, Secondary and post-compulsory education (EPPSE), to identify the characteristics of effective pre-school provision, and its longer-term effects. These studies have added significantly to international evidence bases in different countries about the long-term benefits of ECEC. The EPPSE research team has been strong in its advocacy of quality, with the clear messages that poor quality provision may have negative effects, and that high quality cannot be achieved without substantial investment. However, successive governments have cherry-picked key findings and implications from this research, which indicates the somewhat problematic relationship between research, policy and practice.

Although there are examples of mixed methods quantitative and qualitative studies in the 2017 Review, the majority of research is small scale and interpretivist, using qualitative methods. So what does this dominance of qualitative research indicate, if anything, and does it matter, given the expressed DfE (2014) need for 'robust, quantitative evidence'? The scale of the research reported here might reflect the priorities of funding bodies and organisations, or a lack of available funding to conduct large/medium-scale or longitudinal/cross-sectional research. Qualitative studies attempt to uncover and problematise the complexity of situated, cultural, historical, discursive, material and rhetorical influences on ECEC. In contrast, quantitative research typically takes a positivist orientation in which these complexities are not addressed. But the focus on qualitative research may also indicate a lack of expertise in quantitative/ mixed

methods in the ECEC research community. If such a gap exists, it may need to be addressed in research methods training, because mixed method and interdisciplinary approaches may offer new ways to conceptualise intransigent and complex issues, and may have greater chances of attracting funding, particularly where funding providers are concerned with public engagement and impact.

Small-scale research does have benefits because researchers can portray variability and variations, and illuminate difference and diversities. Ethnographic approaches to research are valuable for revealing these characteristics, and providing explanations from the perspectives of the participants. Visual research methods offer scope for multi-modal engagement with the voices and perspectives of participants, and digital technologies are being used successfully for those purposes. Such approaches are more inclusive than those that rely on talk, and incorporate ethical and respectful ways of engaging with children, families and communities to represent diversities. However, qualitative methods are time-consuming and, therefore, costly to funding providers.

The role of culture and context has assumed stronger influence in many of the research studies reported here, informed by qualitative methods that require contextualization and interpretation rather than measures, scales and taxonomies. Many of the studies reviewed indicate the non-linearity of children's development, with overlaps across areas of learning (also reflected in overlaps across the chapters). Steps and stages have given way to the concepts of waves and connections; funds and repertoires of knowledge; webs of meaning and understanding; integration of areas of learning and experience, and emergence. These concepts provoke challenges for researchers to portray these complexities, and for practitioners to resist policy agendas of standardization and normalization. ECEC pedagogy has been the focus of research, but with less attention to theorising curriculum, and the sources of knowledge in different curriculum models (Wood and Hedges, 2016). Although the shift from Piagetian to socio-cultural theories is evident in UK (and international) ECEC policies, their influence may be countered by the linear and

hierarchical nature of curriculum frameworks. 'Ages and stages' theories remain influential in how curriculum frameworks are constructed, and how progression in learning and development are understood. This means that ECEC policies become the site through which curriculum content, coherence and control are established, often with an instrumental agenda.

As Professor Eva Lloyd indicates in her Preface, more engagement with critical policy analysis is needed in ECEC research. We endorse this view, especially in the current political climate, where recent Secretaries of State for Education consider it appropriate to downgrade the expert knowledge of academics. This Review shows the importance of using structured approaches to identifying and reviewing the evidence, and the methods used; stating the positionality of the researchers and acknowledging any bias, and being circumspect about the claims that are made. The alternative is to tolerate bias, and abandon criticality. The analysis in Chapter 6 of how 'readiness' has come to dominate the policy agenda in England provides useful insights into how policies are formulated (ideologically and technically), what influences are brought to bear, what research evidence is used, and how that evidence is used (often in selective ways). This analysis exemplifies the concerns raised by Lloyd (2014) that aspirations towards co-production of early years policies has been eroded, with the resulting loss of different voices and perspectives.

In a similar vein, a recent Ofsted report was commissioned by Her Majesty's Chief inspector of Schools, to address the 'recurring myth' that teaching and play are separate, disconnected endeavours in the early years. The 'evidence' to support this claim is drawn from a selection of the 'most successful early years providers' (where most successful is determined by Ofsted inspection outcomes). This report is almost entirely self-referential in that it draws on Ofsted inspection evidence and annual reports, narrative and videotaped exemplification of 'good practice' on the Ofsted website, Early Years Foundation Stage reports and guidance documents, and government annual statistics. There is one reference to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, one reference to the government-funded Effective

Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) Project, and one to a report from the National Foundation for Educational Research on parental engagement and narrowing the attainment gap. This report exemplifies the claim made by Wood (2015) that play has been captured within policy discourses, with an emphasis on planned and purposeful play. This policy-compliant view of play is teleological and instrumental, and does not capture some of the problematic issues that are evident in this Review. Nor does Ofsted have to take into account complex methodological and ethical concerns about reliability and validity, trustworthiness, credibility, generalizability, transparency and positionality. Their claims to truth are not subject to critical reflexivity, nor are those claims tempered by the use of contrasting or countervailing perspectives and evidence. All of us who are engaged in research in the ECEC community are subject to the checks and balances that we have described in this Review. Our work is scrutinized by funding providers and by colleagues who contribute to peer-review processes in academic and professional journals. Further scrutiny is required by the Research Excellence Framework to evaluate the quality of our research – its originality, significance and rigour.

### Key messages from each theme

Here we summarise the key findings from the research reviewed in each of the themes.

#### **Professionalism**

Workforce composition, qualifications and conceptualisations of professionalism since 2003

- ECEC workforce has shifted to one with higher levels of qualification, but this has not been reflected in policies requiring higher levels of qualification nor in status, pay, career pathways or conditions of service.
- Demands on the sector have increased and, while turnover of staff has reduced, challenges remain in recruiting sufficient staff, particularly in recruiting and paying qualified staff.
- Workforce is still largely female, younger than in other sectors and hampered by a lack of coherence in policy relating to

qualifications and associated career progression.

- Nonetheless, qualification levels have risen across the sector, although not matched by a comparable rise in salaries.
- Quality narratives run throughout policy and research in relation to professionalism. Though a contested term, the influence of 'quality' is felt in relation to qualifications, roles, the evolving nature of professional practice and leadership.
- Shifts in the conceptualisation of professionalism continue to challenge its formulation in policy and government rhetoric.

#### **Experiences and impacts of above on practitioners and children**

- Associations have been shown between aspects of quality and children's experiences and outcomes, but to understand the implications of the associations made, it is vital to attend to which aspects of quality are used and how these associations are measured.
- Opportunities for graduates to effectively influence practice in their settings vary. Context matters and a shifting policy context and underinvestment have made it difficult for roles to be improved and embedded.
- Settings employing staff with higher qualification levels tend to be associated with greater likelihood of achieving a higher inspection rating.
- Complexity of ECEC professional practice has increased and has become more apparent over time, revealing the demands made on practitioners in the areas of interprofessional practice, care and education of the youngest children, and leadership.
- Models of professional development and learning became characterised by process-oriented effective learning communities, acknowledging the challenges faced by increasingly complex demands on the sector and the need for emotional containment and mentoring over time. The value of mentoring and supervision is evidenced.
- The concept of 'professional love' requires further investigation.

- Research reveals the high levels of skill, sophisticated levels of operation and emotional and attitudinal competence demanded of practitioners in early years settings, in contrast to policy direction characterised by managerialism, based on rhetoric that suggests a view of the workforce as deficient.

### **Parenting and the Family in the 21st Century**

- Parenting has been construed as a skilled role and has become a site for individual accountability in the neoliberal context of 'freedom of choice', where making the 'correct' choices is paramount.
- Working class parents, particularly mothers, are in a double bind of being expected to work long hours away from family for low wages, while being expected to invest time and expertise into parenting well.
- Relationships between ECEC staff and parents rarely adequately address the inherent tensions in their identities, particularly for working class parents whose parenting can be construed as deficient.
- Universal parenting programmes have lower than desired take-up rates and tend to be modelled on middle-class parenting values, 'common-sense' or traditional parenting activities. Some apparently universal schemes are actually targeted through the locality in which they are offered.
- Programmes aimed at reducing social inequalities such as Sure Start and Incredible Years show outcomes related to reducing social inequalities. Yet few policies address the conditions that make consistent parenting more likely at the societal level.
- Targeted parenting interventions are most frequently centred on children's behavioural development, which tend to have better evidence of effectiveness than those focused on attachment or cognitive development.
- Negative parenting strategies involving punishment are more likely to be associated with parental and child mental health problems.

- Non-specific programme factors, such as relationships between helper and client, can make it difficult to garner strong evidence to support the widespread use of interventions.
- The strongest evidence overall is for programmes targeting early risk in child development.
- Measurable effects of intervention programmes are most likely to be seen in large-scale, strongly framed programmes. Yet, while smaller flexible and tailored programmes are unlikely to meet evaluation criteria so well, they may in fact produce better local outcomes.

### **Play and pedagogy**

- Play is a golden thread that runs through much of the literature related to learning and development. The early years curriculum continues to be hindered by controversies related to increasing formalisation of content delivery and the didactic role of adults. Further research is needed to show how practitioners in the four UK contexts are responding to these challenges.
- The tensions between adult-led and child-initiated play remain evident, with policy emphases on educational play tending to privilege 'teaching through play'.
- Children's multi-modal communicative practices in play reveal the complexity of their thinking, understanding and relationships. Content knowledge is evident in children's play, but practitioners do not consistently recognise or build on this in their teaching.
- The links between play, learning and development are not consistently established across the different areas of the curriculum. Further research is needed on the funds of knowledge that children bring to their play, and how these can be developed within education settings.
- Children's interests are evident in play, which has the potential to strengthen curriculum and pedagogical decisions.

- Progression in play is not understood or represented in policy frameworks, especially beyond the age of five.
- Children's agency is central to how they organise and develop their play with peers and materials.
- Research on early learning and development should accommodate the interplay between local and global influences in a context of changing views of early childhood, early learning and early years pedagogy.

### **Learning, development and curriculum**

- UK early years specialists should consider the growing evidence from the neurosciences regarding early brain development and its impact on learning, particularly in relation to executive function, self-regulation and metacognition.
- New understanding about the neurophysiology of social and emotional development and its impact on learning requires further exploration, as does the importance of articulating both practitioners' and children's underlying emotions and their impact on behaviour, learning and practice.
- More attention is needed on broader elements of mathematical learning beyond numeracy, as well as a greater emphasis on scientific enquiry.
- More research is needed on the importance of physical literacy, movement play and the potential neuro-developmental impact on all areas of learning.
- Health promotion is an under-researched area and merits further attention in relation to in early years settings.
- Arts-based learning also merits further exploration.
- More research is needed to address the conflicting evidence on the benefits and drawbacks of digital technology in children's learning and development.
- Debates about whether curriculum and practice should be driven by policy and political agendas rather than by developmentally and culturally appropriate evidence-based practice need to be resolved, in order to address continuing conflicts between pedagogical principles and the demands of performativity.
- Conflicting evidence regarding adults' roles in learning and development needs comprehensive review.

### **Assessment and school readiness**

- Research has suggested various diagnostic assessments that might predict later attainment and has been cautiously positive about potential benefits, but drawing conclusions about cohorts from assessment measures remains difficult;
- Assessment systems always have a washback influence on curriculum and pedagogy;
- Assessment that is formative, individual and based on rich, situated accounts of children's learning and agency are most valued, although such assessment runs counter to government directives in England for score-based baseline assessment;
- Policy-driven focus, particularly in England, on assessment of 'core subjects' shows substantial gaps in attainment between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children at ages 4-5 years. However, the narrowing of the focus and format of assessment and its use for performance monitoring define a particular and limited version of a 'successful learner', effectively marginalising some children such as bilingual learners;
- 'School readiness' as a concept did not really appear in English government rhetoric until 2011 and then began to show increasing influence in policy-related documents between 2012 and 2014. The Scottish Executive recognised the different conceptualisations and complexity around school readiness as early as 2004;
- Conceptualisations of quality and school readiness are both closely aligned and contested, and are frequently left inadequately defined;
- Contradictory policy discourses about the nature of children's learning and thus about their 'readiness' can make it

- difficult for parents to understand their children's progress;
- Research points to gender differences, age-in-cohort differences and to differences in the experiences and needs of bilingual learners and disabled children in relation to both 'readiness' and transitions. Pedagogic strategies that are dialogic and personalised and thus supportive of children's agency and self-regulation are associated with children's developing confidence and competence.

## POSTSCRIPT

There are significant gaps in research in ECEC. Firstly, this Review shows that where diversities are incorporated, there tends to be a focus on social class, inequalities, gender and, to some extent, the inclusion/exclusion of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (although this theme is not fully represented in the 2017 Review), and related issues for families. There is less focus in the UK on issues of race and ethnicity. Secondly, there is little research on the impact on practice of regulatory bodies, such as Ofsted, and relatively little policy research. Critical, post-modern and post-human perspectives are showing promise here, with attention to the power effects of policy on children, families and communities. Thirdly, there are few large-scale and longitudinal studies, probably because these are costly to fund, but also because they are most likely to come from international or at least EU studies. If such studies are UK-funded, they tend to follow particular policy drivers (for example 'what works', effective interventions) with an underlying economic effectiveness imperative. Finally, there is a need for interdisciplinary research to shed light on multi-faceted and complex issues, and for co-produced research that draws on a wide range of methods to engage children, families, communities and professionals.

Researchers are engaging critically with difference and diversities, complexity and challenge, as counterpoints to standardisation, homogenization and normalization. However, key questions remain about whose voices are heard from research, and how research can be used to influence or change policy and practice. The voices of members of the ECEC professional community are important, in practitioner research, in independent academic research, and in critical analyses of policies and their effects. Fortunately, this 2017 BERA TACTYC Review shows that research in ECEC is thriving: many of the research themes in the UK connect with international research, and there is much scope for international collaborations and comparative research. The ethical nature of our research connects to wider socio-political concerns with equity, equality and diversities in society. ECEC research must continue to reflect changes in society, to engage with different communities, and to have sustained impact to those who matter most – children, their families and practitioners.

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## **APPENDIX i: REFERENCE GROUPS**

We are very grateful to our external reference groups for their support and scrutiny in reviewing search terms and commenting on search strategies and drafts.

### **Professionalism: early years as a career**

Sarah Cousins, University of Warwick;  
Nikki Fairchild, University of Chichester;  
Valerie Huggins, Plymouth Institute of Education;  
Sue Rogers, UCL Institute of Education;  
Jane Waters, University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

### **Parenting and the Family in C21**

Mandy Andrews, Plymouth Institute of Education  
Verity Campbell-Barr, Plymouth Institute of Education  
Carolyn Blackburn, Senior Research Fellow, Birmingham City University,  
Anita Soni, University of Birmingham.

### **Play and pedagogy**

Elizabeth Wood and Liz Chesworth (no external group)

### **Learning, Development and Curriculum**

Working Group: Helen Bilton, Alyson Lewis, Nancy Stewart, Laura Tallant with support from Viki Bennett, Deborah Buck, Joe Brown, Lynn Cole, Rebecca Digby, Mandy Donaldson, Luke Jeffery, Anne Purdon, and Felicia Wood  
Reference Group: Sue Rogers

### **Assessment and school readiness**

Philip Hood and Helena Mitchell (no external group)

## TACTYC

TACTYC was founded in 1978 by a group of early years teacher trainers who recognised how isolated they were feeling in their work and how supportive and developmental it could be to come together with others in a similar position on a regular basis.

Today, TACTYC has broadened its base to welcome people from a wide range of early years backgrounds; early years researchers, education consultants and professionals working with children and families in day-care, education, health, play work and social service contexts. TACTYC also warmly welcomes students from across these areas.

TACTYC promotes the highest quality professional development for all early years practitioners in order to enhance the educational well-being of the youngest children.

### Our activities include:

- **Advocacy and lobbying** – providing a voice for all those engaged with the professional development of practitioners through responding to early years policy initiatives and contributing to the debate on the education and training of the UK early years workforce;
- **Informing** – developing the knowledge-base of all those concerned with early years education and care by disseminating research findings through our international Early Years Journal, annual conference, website and occasional publications;
- **Supporting** – encouraging informed and constructive discussion and debate and supporting practitioner reflection, the use of evidence-based practice and practitioner-research through, for example, our Newsletter and Website.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SIG

The mission of the British Educational Research Association Early Childhood Education and Care Special Interest Group is to promote and disseminate high quality theoretical and empirical research on teaching and learning, development and well being, in national and international contexts, in order to enhance the lives of all young children, their families and communities, as well as their educators. The SIG brings together all those seeking to generate substantive, methodological and ethical knowledge that will have an impact on the early childhood policy to professional practice context. It aims to:

- construct and interpret relevant theoretical frameworks;
- analyse critically the foundational disciplines as well as inter-disciplinary links that underpin the early childhood field;
- interrogate the boundaries between education and care;
- contribute to debate about on-going changes in the political, social, cultural and moral landscape that impact upon professional practice in the field;
- encourage and provide mentor support for peers as well as new researchers in the field;
- consider the practical applications and implications of research that will contribute to professional training and practice in the service of young children and their families;
- inform key stakeholders of the expanding knowledge base;
- forge strong links between existing early childhood research groups, both nationally and internationally.



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