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BRITISH EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

BERA BITES

TOPICAL DEBATES
FROM THE BERA BLOG

ISSUE 1
EARLY CHILDHOOD

Edited & introduced
by Gerry Czerniawski
& Rachel Lofthouse

September 2018



Selected articles from
the BERA blog on key
topics in education.

Featuring an introduction
by the editors, and
questions for discussion
on each article.

A teaching and learning
resource for education
students and professionals.

THE BERA BLOG
RESEARCH MATTERS



About BERA

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) is the home of educational research in the United Kingdom. We are a membership association committed to advancing knowledge of education by sustaining a strong and high quality educational research community.

Together with our members, BERA is working to:

- advance research quality
- build research capacity
- foster research engagement.

Since its inception in 1974, BERA has expanded into an internationally renowned association with both UK and non-UK based members. It strives to be inclusive of the diversity of educational research and scholarship, and welcomes members from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, theoretical orientations, methodological approaches, sectoral interests and institutional affiliations. It also encourages the development of productive relationships with other associations within and beyond the UK.

Aspiring to be the home of all educational researchers in the UK, BERA provides opportunities for everyone active in this field to contribute through its portfolio of distinguished publications, its world-class conference and other events, and its active peer community organised around 30 special interest groups. We also recognise excellence in educational research through our range of awards. In addition to our member-focussed activity, we aim to inform the development of policy and practice by promoting the best quality evidence produced by educational research.

THE BERA BLOG

RESEARCH MATTER

About the BERA Blog

The BERA Blog was established to provide research informed content on key educational issues in an accessible manner. Its aim is to produce and promote articles that attract policymakers, parents, teachers, educational leaders, members of school communities, politicians, and anyone who is interested in education today. It also welcomes the submission of research-informed articles from across this community.

The blog is edited by a small team comprising academic representatives chosen by BERA's Academic Publications Committee (APC) and the BERA office. All content is approved for publication by one or more of this team. However, the views of the authors are their own, and the views expressed on the blog (and in this collection) are not the official views of BERA.

The Blog is currently curated by the editorial team of Gerry Czerniawski, Rachel Lofthouse and Alison Fox.

About BERA Bites

The BERA Bites series presents selected articles from the BERA blog on key topics in education, presented in an easily printable and digestible format to serve as teaching and learning resources for students and professionals in education. Each collection features an introduction by editors with expertise in the field, and each article includes questions for discussion, composed by the authors, prompting readers to further explore the ideas and arguments put forward in the original articles.

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Editorial

**Gerry Czerniawski
and Rachel Lofthouse**

The wonderful thing about the BERA Blog is its inclusive and diverse content. We publish research-rich blog posts from a range of authors and on a wide range of themes.

Now and again it is possible to identify ‘collections’: blog posts that share a focus, and as such offer contemporary insights into understandings, trends and dilemmas around a significant aspect of educational policy and practice.

This publication offers one such collection: a series of posts related to early childhood. We hope you find them valuable, and encourage you to share them with colleagues, researchers, students and perhaps (if appropriate) parents. Each author has provided questions to help you reflect on their contribution. We would love to hear how you use these: perhaps in seminars or reading groups; perhaps to help orientate your attention to aspects of the work or its implications that you might otherwise have overlooked.

In very different ways, the first three articles in this collection look at various forms of accountability. **Mary Dyer**, in her article, highlights the frustration that practitioners in the sector feel in relation to current policy, regulation, inspection requirements and bureaucracy. She argues that the next step for the early years workforce is participation in its own expertise and knowledge base, rather than accepting the modelling of it on educational roles, which may only in part fulfil its purpose.

**Alice Bradbury, Siew Lee
and Guy Roberts-Holmes**

highlight their work at one of the BERA symposiums held at the Association’s 2017 annual conference in Brighton. This piece also explores systems of accountability in early years, with a focus on theorising these policy developments as forms of datafication and hyper-governance. Services for young children and their families have held a prominent place on

international policy agendas for decades, and have seen remarkable transformations of the underlying concepts of *what* these services are, *who* they are for, and *what purpose* they serve. Addressing these questions in his article, **Mathias Urban** argues the need for the radical reconceptualisation of early childhood research.

In their research as independent speech and language therapists, **Jo Flanagan and Bibiana Wigley** carried out a project in 60 private, voluntary and independent (PVI) early years education and childcare settings in Derby. Their aim was to raise each manager's knowledge of what speech, language and communication needs look and sound like, and enable them to develop systems to involve all staff within their organisation to support children. Their article highlights some of their main findings.

In 'The language we carry inside', **Rose White and Fran Pafford** ask, 'Why is it that even in schools that explicitly value children's home languages, children may become reluctant to use their language in the classroom?' Their small-scale research project investigated children's

own attitudes to their home languages across two inner-city early years settings.

Elizabeth Wood and Liz Chezworth

discuss their review of research into play and pedagogy. The review highlights a persistent tension – a progressive focus in research, but a potentially regressive framing of play in policy contexts. This tension, the authors argue, is captured by the juxtaposition between, on the one hand, what play is and what play means for *children* and, on the other, what play does, and what play produces, from the perspective of policy.

Also writing about the importance of play, **Evgenia Theodotou** highlights the many ways in which art activities offer opportunities for children's involvement, as well as for free and structured play and improvement in social and cognitive skills. In her article she argues that these activities enable teachers to intervene indirectly to advance children in more challenging activities with educational outcomes without 'over-structuring' them and damaging their enjoyment of education more broadly.

There is also a growing body of research and other empirical

evidence demonstrating that structured and successful music education makes a positive difference to wellbeing *across the lifespan*, for adults as well as children – benefits that are intellectual, emotional, physical and social, as well as musical and cultural. In his article, **Graham Welch** makes a strong argument for ensuring that music has a central place in any educational system that aims to develop the whole person.

In March 2017, the Early Years Workforce Strategy for England was published by the Department for Education.¹ It aims to put in place a number of measures to address some of the difficulties currently facing the early years sector. With the workforce strategy in mind, **Jane Payler and Geraldine Davis** highlight some of the issues raised in ‘Professionalism: Early years as a career’, their chapter of the *BERA-TACTYC Early Childhood Research Review 2003–2017*,² and ask whether

the planned policies can really address the challenges faced. **Ewan Ingleby** problematises the continuing professional development (CPD) needs of early years educators in England. His research gathered the views of participants with experiences of professional development in both private and statutory early years settings in the north of England. His findings highlight the resistance that many have to different forms of CPD, which is in part related to the business-facing agenda that many private settings have, and the low priority afforded to meaningful CPD.

Carolyn Blackburn draws our attention to the fact that one of the most challenging considerations when researching with children is the question of gaining children’s consent to participate in research, and their perspectives on the topic under study. Issues relate to the age at which children can realistically understand what they’re being asked to participate in, as well as consideration of their cognitive and linguistic ability to give consent.

1 Department for Education [DfE] (2017) *Early Years Workforce Strategy*, London. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-workforce-strategy>

2 British Educational Research Association [BERA] and TACTYC: Association for Professional Development in Early Years (2017)

BERA-TACTYC Early Childhood Research Review 2003–2017, London. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/project/bera-tactyc-early-childhood-research-review-2003-2017>

Kelly Brooker writes about using the Tavistock method of observation to support reflective practice. In her article she argues that in the current attainment-driven educational system, with its pervasive emphasis on predetermined outcomes, the Tavistock method enables researchers to gain insight into the internal world and emotional states of young children – which they rightly describe as a privilege.

Tim Taylor introduces readers to some of the ideas underpinning the work of Dorothy Heathcote, who died in October 2011. Her invention of the ‘mantle of the expert’ approach was based on the idea that children learn instinctively through imaginary play, and that play, far from frivolous, is a generator of culture. It provides an imaginary context in which a series of components – an expert team, a client, and a commission – are used to create purposeful and engaging scenarios to facilitate students’ study of the curriculum.

And finally, the encroachment of summative assessment into the reception curriculum is dealt a blisteringly critical evaluation by **Yinka Olusoga** and **Mandy Pierlejewski**. Their sense of angst

is captured in their metaphorical use of the term ‘black hole’ to describe what they see as the ‘destructive emptiness at the heart of our education system: statutory summative assessment’. Reminding us that it ‘does not have to be this way’, the authors draw our attention to the ways in which the early years community in England has displayed solidarity against what they argue is the deprofessionalising nature of Ofsted’s 2017 *Bold beginnings* report on the reception curriculum. A fitting concluding article to a wonderful early years collection.

While you read these blog posts, you might also think about your own professional contexts or research. Perhaps you would like to contribute a post for the BERA Blog or, when you are next at a conference or professional development event, you might come across someone who you could encourage to write for us. See bera.ac.uk/submission-policy for details on how to submit.

1. Professionalism and the early years practitioner

Mary Dyer
University of Huddersfield

9 September 2016

Government-led workforce reforms in the early years sector have led to significant change in the range and level of qualifications available to practitioners, and social and economic policy over the last 15 years has significantly reshaped the role they fulfil.³ Arguably, these changes should have contributed to a raise in status and capital for a workforce that plays such a prominent role in supporting young children and their families.

My research demonstrates that practitioners are confident in articulating the values and ethics that underpin their practice; the importance of social and emotional wellbeing to successful learning; the need to respect children as individuals and promote their interests; and the value of collaborative, co-operative and respectful team

working. While this fulfils some of the characteristics identified as determining professionalism (Noordegraaf 2007; Oberhuemer 2005), these practitioners' expressions of their agency are limited. They are frustrated by factors at organisational and sector levels, including policy, regulation, inspection requirements and bureaucracy – and they do not feel able to challenge these. They are reluctant to identify what level of knowledge is required for practising without supervision.

What has led to this lack of confidence and assertion, from practitioners with years of experience in early years practice, as well as undergraduate qualifications?

Arguably, it has arisen because the early years sector can still be characterised as a restrictive work environment (Fuller et al 2007), with a professionalisation agenda which offers the government control and

³ Original blog post: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/professionalism-and-the-early-years-practitioner>

management of practice in what is a largely privately-run sector. That restrictiveness is evidenced by its lack of a sector-wide career progression route, and the limited organisational opportunities for professional education and development for practitioners, which depend on the goodwill and business planning of their employers. These can clearly be seen to restrict individuals' autonomy to decide for themselves what their practice should be and how it might be developed – other than through a change in employer, or the personal funding of qualifications, both of which could be seen as high-risk ventures and are sometimes impossible to achieve.

‘Competence frameworks leave practitioners in danger of being perceived as technicians fulfilling pre-set approved practices, rather than as creative and critical experts.’

The imposition of a professionalisation agenda – described by Wood (2015) as ‘governmentality’, and by Evetts (2003) as a ‘from above’ approach – and its

acceptance by the sector, has also contributed to limitations on the autonomy of the practitioner. Professional status is as much a matter of occupational group autonomy in determining its membership, entry requirements and knowledge base as it is a matter of occupational monopoly of skills and services, offered to users at a premium. It is also a matter of demonstrating that the knowledge base claimed requires a high level of education to understand and apply it. Using competence frameworks (for example, NCTL 2013) to advance practice draws attention away from the value and importance of reflection as a critical thinking tool when evaluating and shaping practice, and focusses it instead on the production of evidence from discrete workplace activities to demonstrate skill. No matter how high the level, this leaves practitioners in danger of being perceived as technicians fulfilling pre-set approved practices, rather than as creative and critical experts (Moss 2006).

Practitioners' limited professional autonomy and agency is also compounded by the lack of a collective voice on matters of practice and pedagogy. The practitioners who participated in

my own research demonstrated a shared understanding of practice and pedagogy, as well as the values and ethics that underpin practice, but did so without any awareness that these ideas were in fact shared.

The next step for the early years workforce, I would argue, is to fulfil practitioners' need to participate in determining their own expertise and knowledge base, rather than accepting the modelling of it on educational roles which may only in part fulfil what they consider their purpose to be. To do so requires greater confidence in reflective evaluation of applying theory to practice, and the organisation of a collective voice on matters of practice and pedagogy. Higher education institutions and other professional educators may want to consider what role they could play in facilitating this.

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Questions for discussion

1. How can personal values and ethical principles be used by a workforce in their claim to professional status?
 2. Discuss the significance of structure (career pathways, nationally recognised roles and job titles, terms and conditions of service, and so on) in supporting the professionalisation of a workforce. Who should take responsibility for developing such structures and why?
 3. How have recent policy developments in early years offered a voice to those working with young children? How does this impact on professional status and identity?
-

2. Hyper-governance and datafication in early years education

Children as ‘abilities-machines’ or ‘like sausages in a factory’

**Alice Bradbury, Siew Lee
and Guy Roberts-Holmes**
UCL Institute of Education

29 August 2017

The growing use of data in education has been both lauded as a revolution and criticised as detrimental to teachers and children.⁴ No wonder, then, that it is increasingly a focus for educational research. Policy developments such as the use of baseline assessment in reception (likely to be re-introduced in 2018) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s new ‘mini-PISA’⁵ for five-year-olds make this research vitally important, as we see significant impacts on teachers and on children as they increasingly become the subject of measurement to ensure they are ‘school ready’ or ‘nursery

ready’. At BERA Conference this year (September 2017), our symposium will explore systems of accountability in the early years, with a focus on theorising these policy developments as forms of datafication and hyper-governance.⁶ Drawing on data from settings for children aged from two to five, we argue that through these processes children become ‘abilities-machines’, to use Foucault’s phrase – or as one teacher commented more prosaically, ‘like sausages in a factory’.

Across three papers, we explore how traditional early years pedagogy is compromised as teachers and early years educators attempt to manage

4 Original blog post: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/hyper-governance-and-datafication-in-early-years-education-children-as-abilities-machines-or-like-sausages-in-a-factory>

5 <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study.htm>

6 This symposium, ‘Governance, Accountability and Data in the Early Years and Primary Education’, was held on 5 September 2017 at the BERA Annual Conference 2017, University of Sussex, Brighton.

the tensions between the production of data for accountability purposes and the care and learning of young children. We examine how 'dataveillance' – that is, the constant surveillance of comparative data – leads to the 'hyper-governance' of teachers and children's subjectivities. Foucault's notion of governmentality and Deleuze's of 'societies of control' are used to theorise the shifting operation of performativity and accountability in early educational settings.

Siew Fung Lee's paper examines the policy of funded nursery places for disadvantaged two-year-olds, which is seen as an 'answer' to the question of how to identify and then engage with 'disadvantaged' families. Here Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' is used to investigate how the government constructs self-governing subjects, and in particular how 'disadvantaged' two-year-olds have come to be significant targets of the state. In the drive to meet government outcomes and measures of 'nursery-readiness', the child as 'abilities-machine' (Foucault 2008) is being created through the very

practices that are assumed to be about play pedagogy in the early years. With the choice of 30 hours' free childcare offered by primary schools and academies, some nurseries are struggling to fill their places for three-to-four-year-old children; thus, rather than asking whether two-year-olds should be in formal provision, the urgent concerns of nurseries shift to financial survival.

Using similar theoretical perspectives, the papers from Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes offer an in-depth exploration of their research on baseline assessment, a government policy in England which attempted to measure children's attainment in the first six weeks of reception, and thus reduce all the complexity, diversity and contradiction of four- and five-year-old children to a single number. This number was to be used to predict children's progress across seven years of schooling. Baseline was abandoned in 2016, but is likely to return in 2018, as proposed in the government's primary assessment consultation.⁷

7 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/primary-assessment-in-england>

Guy Roberts-Holmes' paper considers baseline assessment as an example of neoliberal datafication in the early years, and as an inaccurate, pseudo-scientific and flawed algorithmic fantasy which aimed to hold a primary school to account by recording scores for each child on entry and crudely comparing this number with 'what comes out', in SATs results, seven years later. In particular, he explores the use of three 'approved' private providers for baseline assessment, which blurred the distinctions between not-for-profit social enterprises, digital policy innovation labs, edu-business and the state.

'Within processes of hyper-governance and datafication, the political and ethical purposes of early years education are collapsed into an economistic and business-oriented approach.'

Alice Bradbury's paper considers how the collection and analysis of data shape pedagogy and practice in classrooms of young children, the values and discourses that dominate the setting, and the data-driven subjectivities that result. Drawing on the

growing field of data studies in education (Selwyn 2015), the paper considers how teachers' and children's identities are reshaped in the data-obsessed school, as collectors and providers of data respectively.

Taken together, the papers presented in this symposium ask what is served and produced through constructions such as baseline assessment and funded places for 'disadvantaged' two-year-olds. The term 'milieu', in denoting spaces of uncertainty, allows us to examine government policy as investment in the child-as-human-capital: the child as 'abilities-machine' who produces returns on the government's educational investments. We argue that within processes of hyper-governance and datafication, the political and ethical purposes of early years education become collapsed into an economistic and business-oriented approach, so that complex social problems such as inequality and poverty are purported to be managed through data.

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Further reading

- Bradbury A and Roberts-Holmes G (2017) *The Datafication of Primary and Early Years Education: Playing with Numbers*, Abingdon: Routledge

Questions for discussion

1. What are the effects of seeing and relating to children as 'disadvantaged', and how might perceived differences, if any, shape early years pedagogy for two-year-old children?
2. What are the effects upon early years pedagogy of working in a data-obsessed school?
3. What do you understand by the terms 'datafication', 'dataveillance' and 'hyper-governance', and why do you think these terms are important at this particular time?

3. Cui bono?

The myth of the closing gap and the need for radical reconceptualisation of early childhood research

Mathias Urban

Froebel College, University of Roehampton

13 May 2015

Services for young children and their families have held a prominent place on international policy agendas for decades, and have seen remarkable transformations of the underlying concept of *what* these services are, *who* they are for, and *what purpose* they serve.⁸ In 1992, the Council of the European Communities urged member states of what the following year became the European Union to invest in *childcare* as a matter of urgency (CEC 1992). In 2014, all relevant EU policy documents – including the 2011 ‘council conclusions’ (CEU 2011) and the recent ‘quality framework’ (EC-WGECEC 2014) on the topic – consistently talk of *early childhood education and care*, a development that is mirrored

in many other international and national policy contexts.

Surely the fact that the two components – education and care – are now seen as inseparable is something we should celebrate? Yes, and no, I think. While early childhood practitioners, scholars and activists (including myself) have long argued for the recognition of the educational value of any interaction between children and adults from birth, we should be concerned about the most recent developments. Let us be clear: high-level early childhood policies are rarely about children. In the case of the EU they need to be read in the context of macro-political, socioeconomic strategies. The focus has shifted from the *individual child* (that has to be ‘cared’ for) to a ‘critical period in human life’ (Woodhead 1996) in more general terms. *Early childhood* in itself has become a matter of concern, rather than the provision of *childcare* as

⁸ Original blog post: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/cui-bono-the-myth-of-the-closing-gap-and-the-need-for-radical-reconceptualisation-of-early-childhood-research>

a commodity for working parents. Europe, according to its current strategic framework, faces a complex scenario of structural crises (EC 2010). These include unsustainable levels of inequality and poverty, which threaten the social contract and the viability of the entire project.

Early childhood education and care has been identified as a key policy tool with which to address these existential issues, because of its assumed ability to ‘close the gap’ between children from marginalised and dominant groups in society and to reduce later dropout rates. Here lies the key to the new interest in early childhood *education* – and we have every reason to be worried about it. The underlying concept of education appears to be increasingly utilitarian. It has become a commodity with which to increase a narrowly defined ‘human capital’ in a neoliberal economy, ‘no longer conceived as an integrated strategy to promote freedom, self-enrichment and human development’ (Tan 2014: 492). The (renewed) emphasis on *schoolification* of children’s early years links to another critical issue at the very heart of early childhood practices and policies: the unresolved tension between contradicting meanings

of ‘care’ in educational contexts. Instead of an acknowledgement of the importance of human beings ‘caring’ for each other, individually and collectively, care – in hyphenated early-childhood-education-and-care policies – has become synonymous with the *service* part of the programme. We have hardly begun to grapple with the notion of care as a public good that has to be valued (as opposed to priced) as the foundation of society. Our education system, Kathleen Lynch argues, is an organised ‘culture of carelessness’ (Lynch 2010: 54).

‘Policies aiming at *closing the gap* are grounded in a logic of integration and assimilation into an assumed normality that no longer exists.’

Policies aiming at *closing the gap* are grounded in a logic of integration and assimilation into an assumed normality that no longer exists. They perpetuate an image of *them* and *us*: the *underachieving* and the marginalised as the generalised other. Unfortunately, as I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (Urban 2012), mainstream early childhood research contributes to this notion and, together with policy,

has entered a self-referential cycle of *more-of-the-same* questions leading to *more-of-the-same* solutions. But, as Rosi Braidotti (2002) reminds us, things are more complex. Fragmentation and hyper-diversity have become the new normal of society, and the ‘grounds on which periphery and centre confront each other’ (ibid: 14) are shifting.

Years of mainstream early childhood research has made little difference to the lives of the most marginalised children in Europe (and in the US, for that matter), as documented in recent reports (Lansley and Mack 2015; Sikic-Micanovic et al 2015). There is nothing inevitable about poverty, inequality and exclusion: they are the consequence of human action and political practice. Cui bono? Who benefits from the status quo? This is a key question that I suggest is taken as the starting point of a radical reconceptualisation of the way we conceive research in early childhood.

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Questions for discussion

1. What, from your point of view, is the purpose of early childhood education and care – and what are its underlying values? Who defines these purpose(s) and values? Are all views, hopes, dreams, values and aspirations equally recognised?
2. Who benefits – and who is disadvantaged, marginalised or silenced – by the way early childhood services are organised in the UK? What other ways of organising services can you imagine, and which of these alternative means would achieve more just and equitable outcomes for all children and families?
3. What is the role and agency (both individual and collective) of an early childhood professional (and member of the early childhood profession) in achieving more just and equitable outcomes for all children, and for providing services based on children's rights, social justice and respect for diversity?

4. The potential of inter-professional learning in supporting children with speech, language and communication needs

**Jo Flanagan
and Bibiana Wigley**

Speech and language therapists,
Communication for Education

16 September 2015

You may be aware of two pieces of research recently published about children's speech, language and communication needs.⁹ The National Literacy Trust (as part of the 'Read On. Get On.' campaign¹⁰) commissioned James Law and colleagues from Newcastle University to analyse data from the Millennium Cohort Study to see how many children in England were reaching the expected levels in language at age five. The results were shocking. It showed that early language delay in the preschool years continues on through childhood. The researchers

found that children who are behind at the age of three are likely to remain behind at the ages of five, seven and eleven (Save the Children 2014).

Similarly, research published by Norberry et al in 2015 also found that summer-born children do not have sufficient language skills when starting school. The study found that the youngest children in reception classes struggle to meet the early learning goals of the early years foundation stage curriculum.

A speech, language and communication need (SLCN) is often a hidden problem, because few professionals or parents know what it looks and sounds like. What we do know is that many children are not identified until well into their school years, and do not receive

9 Original blog post: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/the-potential-of-inter-professional-learning-in-supporting-children-with-speech-language-and-communication-needs>

10 <https://literacytrust.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/read-on-get-on/>

the early intervention that is so crucial to enabling them to catch up and prevent later academic, social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

‘Our aim was to raise each manager’s knowledge of what speech, language and communication needs look and sound like, and enable them to develop systems to support the children with all staff within their organisation.’

Recent data produced by the Communication Trust suggests that there has been a 70 per cent increase in the number of children with speech, language and communication needs between 2005 and 2011 (Strand and Lindsay 2012). This exponential rise in the number of children with such needs, and the raising of expected standards for attainment within the school curriculum, are posing difficult questions for speech and language therapy services and teachers. Given current budgetary constraints, health services in England are being prioritised to support children with the most complex needs, while teachers are finding more children with language and

communication needs in their classrooms. The concern is that few early years practitioners or teachers receive pre- or post-qualification training about how best to support these children.

Working as independent speech and language therapists¹¹ we recently carried out a project in 60 private, voluntary and independent (PVI) early years education and childcare settings in Derby. Principles of school improvement were utilised for culture and ethos change within these settings. To gain impact, it was imperative to work jointly with the managers of each setting (the equivalent to a headteacher in a school) rather than only working with the practitioners who work with children at the ‘chalk face’. Our aim was to raise each manager’s knowledge of what speech, language and communication needs look and sound like, and enable them to develop systems to support the children with all staff within their organisation. This work took place through a process of self-evaluation, centralised training, mentoring at site visits and development of bespoke action plans for each setting. The most

¹¹ At Clarity, <http://www.claritytec.co.uk/>.

common areas that managers chose to develop were the following.

1. Developing staff roles and responsibilities with regard to speech, language and communication.
2. Observing and developing staff interaction strategies.
3. Developing assessment, planning, moderation and tracking systems for speech, language and communication.
4. Developing the physical environment both indoors and outdoors so that it is more 'communication friendly'.
5. Creating continuing professional development opportunities, so that staff can develop knowledge and skills about how best to support children's speech, language and communication.
6. Developing methods of support to enable parents to create opportunities for talking with their children at home.

Some training of practitioners took place during this project, utilising accredited level 1 and 3 speech, language and communication training courses.

We found that practitioners were most likely to embed and use newly learned skills through a process of coaching, professional discussion and reflection. The most successful method of doing this was using video coaching, whereby the member of staff would film a five-minute session based on a written plan that they had devised from an element of the course. We then used that video as the basis of an inter-professional discussion with them. This coaching tool was developed with Rachel Lofthouse from the school of education at Newcastle University,¹² and was based on research related to the use of video in coaching by secondary teachers, and also the practices developed for video interaction guidance (VIG).¹³ If you would like to know more about it, we will be presenting a paper based on our shared learning outcomes at the BERA Annual Conference 2015 (Lofthouse et al 2015).

12 Since the original publication of this blog, Professor Rachel Lofthouse (co-editor of this collection) has taken up a post at Leeds Beckett University.

13 See <https://www.videointeractionguidance.net/>

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Questions for discussion

1. What do you think would be the professional development benefits for early years educators receiving video coaching with speech and language therapists?
2. What would be the benefits for the children?
3. What are the consequences if children's unaddressed speech and language difficulties persist beyond early years?

5. The language we carry inside

Rose White and Fran Paffard
University of East London Friday

18 December 2015

'Everything can change, but not the language that we carry inside us, like a world more exclusive and final than one's mother's womb.'

Italo Calvino

Why is it that even in schools that explicitly value children's home languages, children may become reluctant to use their language in the classroom?¹⁴ The received wisdom is that children benefit educationally and emotionally from being able to access their home language in school (Cummins 1983), and yet practice in schools is disparate and the benefits not universally acknowledged (Nieto 2010; Hélot and Ó Laoire 2011). Our small-scale research project investigates children's own attitudes to their home languages across two

inner-city early years settings. Each setting has high numbers of English as an additional language (EAL) children and a positive approach to bilingualism, but each has quite different demographics. The nursery school has a very mixed intake, with Turkish and Polish predominant but other eastern European and African languages represented. The reception class has a large majority of Bangladeshi-origin children, with some Somali speakers and very few monolingual English speakers. Children and staff participated in both semi-structured and unstructured interviews that were audio- or video-recorded.

Many of our findings confirm the existing research, as in the following examples.

- Embarrassment: certain children became giggly and shy when asked about their language, and one girl explained gravely that she wouldn't speak Sylheti 'or they might laugh' (see Mellen Day 2002).

14 This blog summarises presentations made by the authors at the 24th European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) conference in Crete, Greece, 7-10 September 2014, and the 6th Teacher Education Advancement Network (TEAN) Conference in Birmingham, UK on 13-14 May 2015. Original blog post: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/the-language-we-carry-inside>

- Children's views about their home language evolve over time (Caldas 2008). Experienced staff reported the rejection of home language as, for many children, 'a phase they go through', and suggested that given positive messages on home language children would eventually regain pride in their bilingualism.
- Children have their own views about the right place to speak their home language (Gibbons 2002). Children varied in their opinions on where and with whom to use their language. Layers of use were identified: children who never used their home language even when encouraged; children who would use their home language only with their friends; and children who would happily use their home language in all contexts and with staff.
- Children may use their language as a tool to empower themselves (Martin 2003). Some of the children used their home language as a private communication tool – a way of keeping a distance between their world and that of the school. Some very deliberately teased us – giving

us wrong words and laughing together when we asked about their language.

- School policy and practice do not always 'sync' – we found that even in these explicitly positive schools, staff knew that ambivalent attitudes towards home language use were present in the school. The current emphasis on assessment of progress by assessing English only created a tension between beliefs that children should maintain their home language and the pressure in school to show achievement.

'Our findings suggest that engagement with parents and communities is more crucial in maintaining children's home languages in school than is currently recognised.'

There were, however, two unexpected findings in our research that we tentatively offer as worthy of further research. The first is that our own preconceptions on the importance of the school message were challenged by our finding that the attitude of the parents seemed a far more significant factor in children's

ease and confidence than the attitude of the staff. The second was that there were noticeable differences between the attitudes of different cultural and linguistic groups. An example would be that the Turkish-speaking children used their language everywhere, the Polish speakers used their home languages among friends, and Twi speakers spoke only English. While there are complexities here that cannot be unpicked in so small a project, our findings strongly suggest that engagement with parents and communities is more crucial than is currently recognised in maintaining children's home languages in school.

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Questions for discussion

1. Can you think of a time when you felt uncomfortable using your first language, or felt awkward about your accent?
2. What were the circumstances, the context or the people you were with that made you feel like that?
3. What could you do to make children feel comfortable about using their range of languages? How can monolingual practitioners support multilingual children?

6. Play and pedagogy

Elizabeth Wood and Liz Chesworth
University of Sheffield

15 June 2017

Carrying out the research for the section on play and pedagogy (Wood and Chesworth 2017) in BERA and TACTYC's (2017) *Early childhood research review 2003–2017* was a pleasure.¹⁵ This was because the field of play scholarship is extensive, international, multi-disciplinary and progressive in providing different ways of understanding play from a range of perspectives. Although the focus has been on UK research, and on early childhood education and care, many of the themes identified in the review are reflected in international research. But inevitably, the review has thrown up some challenging issues about what is happening to play for children in education contexts. The review highlights a persistent tension – a progressive focus in research, but a potentially regressive framing of play

in policy contexts. This is captured by the juxtaposition between, on the one hand, what play is and what play means for children, and on the other hand what play does, and what play produces, from the perspective of policy.

Taking this juxtaposition into account means that we can also identify longstanding tensions in what practice-focussed research is revealing. A consistent concern across all five themes of the review (BERA and TACTYC 2017) is that practitioners are being pulled in different directions as they navigate policy, practice, and their own beliefs and aspirations. The research indicates that, despite powerful claims for its importance in all areas of children's learning and development, play in early childhood education is particularly vulnerable to being marginalised or sidelined. For example, in England the school readiness discourse takes priority

¹⁵ Original blog post: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/play-and-pedagogy>

during the reception year, and privileges formal approaches. The apparent certainties of adult-led activities may be favoured over the uncertainties and complexities of where play leads children. In terms of learning and development, play may not readily produce the outcomes that are identified in policy frameworks, within the timeframes that delineate children's access to and opportunities for freely chosen play.

The appearance of 'educational play' or 'eduplay' is an imperfect policy response to the dilemmas of play and pedagogy. Misunderstandings and misconceptions about play in early years foundation stage policy continue to abound, as exemplified in the recent Ofsted report, *Teaching and play in the early years – a balancing act?* (2015; see also BERA and TACTYC 2017). The over-simplified recommendations in this report belie the complexity of research on play, and the guidance that research offers for supporting children's learning across all curriculum areas. Furthermore, a great deal of research that focusses on children's perspectives

and experiences reveals the complex intersections between agency and power relationships, peer affiliations, inclusion and exclusion, and how children bring diverse funds of knowledge to their freely chosen play. These perspectives also offer practitioners alternative views of their pedagogical roles, which see them as inherently social, relational and democratic.

'Our review of play and pedagogy identifies seven areas that offer potential for further research on play in early childhood education and care.'

Our review of play and pedagogy identifies seven areas that offer potential for further research on play in early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Wood and Chesworth 2017). There are, of course, many more, and it is likely that play will continue to be the focus for research and ongoing debates among students, practitioners and scholars. The research continues current debates, and reflects tensions and challenges that will engage

early childhood communities for many years to come. We look forward to engaging in these debates when we launch the review at the 2017 BERA Conference.

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Wood E and Chesworth L (2017) 'Chapter 4: Play and pedagogy', in BERA and TACTYC (2017): 49-60

Questions for discussion

1. What are the main theories about play that inform early childhood education policy in your country/region?
2. How is play valued in relation to the juxtaposition between what play means for children, and what play is expected to produce (educational outcomes)?
3. Drawing on your own knowledge and experiences, what are the main dilemmas about play that you have encountered in your research and/or practice?

7. The arts: An interesting approach in early years settings

Evgenia Theodotou
University of East London

23 October 2015

Early years settings have a very strong influence on children's future cognitive and social performance.¹⁶ Interactions and activities in this area hold an important role in children's development, as they can influence their approach to learning. Art activities offer opportunities for children's involvement, as well as free and structured play and improvement in social and cognitive skills. They are the basic form of children's free play, and at the same time teachers can intervene indirectly to advance them in more challenging activities with educational outcomes without 'over-structuring' children and damaging their enjoyment.

Young children engage naturally and spend a large part of their time in art activities, like drama and drawing, during their free

play. Drama play is among the most favoured activities of young children in a free-time period (Hanley et al 2009), and it is an activity with more emphasis on personal amusement than on structure (Fleming 2008).

It has to be acknowledged that the arts are not a teaching method for early years education, as their purpose is to communicate ideas and not to educate. However, research shows that the arts have major and significant advantages over other teaching methods and techniques as they are a major form of children's free play activities (Theodotou 2015; Gerry et al 2012; Bolduc 2009). Thus, they represent motivating and interesting activities for young children and contribute to deep learning experiences. This bolsters the argument that amusement constitutes an important factor in the learning procedure, and offers valuable assets in education.

16 Original blog post: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/the-arts-an-interesting-approach-in-the-early-years-settings>

‘There is a need for young children to have opportunities to express themselves without being afraid of making mistakes or feeling that they will be judged.’

Proceeding with this argument, art activities are also a medium that allows young students to practice their communication skills, as they can interact creatively with their peers. According to Dewey (1934: 254) ‘art breaks through barriers that divide human beings, which are impermeable in ordinary association’. In other words, the arts liberate students from social constraints and enable them to communicate freely in ways that are beyond their everyday practice. Children, through art activities, are able to justify their ideas and clearly express the situations they have experienced. Especially through drawing, they can exchange ideas and discuss their arts outcome. This stimulates them to talk, articulate their thoughts and practice their communication skills. These arguments are important in the early years context, where there is a need for young children to have opportunities to express themselves without being afraid of making mistakes or feeling that they will be judged.

It has to be acknowledged that the arts are not always a simple and straightforward activity. Being a major form of free play, children may engage in art activities without concentrating on their educational goals – especially in the early years context, in which play holds a vital role in children’s lives. It is true that the arts do not have a clear pedagogical focus as do the traditional methods of teaching. However, this drawback can be easily avoided with the appropriate indirect adult guidance. Early childhood teachers can provide this guidance, by concentrating on the educational objectives of art activities and attempting to combine their learning outcomes with children’s play.

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Questions for discussion

1. What are the advantages of the arts over other teaching methods/techniques?
2. Why the arts are so successful in early childhood education?
3. What are their possible disadvantages or issues to consider?
4. Why and how do the arts contribute to people's communication?

8. Making a difference through music

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11 May 2015

Where music-making takes place, it often co-exists in a world that is characterised by poverty, disease, and child mortality (cf. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; UN Human Development Index).¹⁷ Human development factors are deteriorating in many countries (being related to increased malnutrition and increased poverty globally). Childcare and education are reported to be highly variable in quality, often separated and not mutually supportive (UNESCO 2010). Of an estimated 101 million children not in school, more than half are girls (UNICEF 2011). However, we know that the economic health of a nation is closely linked to the education of the female population, including mothers. We also know that '[g]ood nutrition, effective healthcare and access to good preschool facilities can mitigate social disadvantage and lead to improved learning achievement. Yet early childhood provision continues to be marked

by neglect' (UNESCO 2010: 5). Furthermore, 'Literacy remains among the most neglected of all education goals, with about 759 million adults lacking literacy skills today. Two-thirds are women' (ibid: 1). UN and European Commission statutory bodies also recognise that educational policies (among others) need to address the 'cultural distance' that gender, social and ethnic factors can create between schooling and marginalised people.

Yet, within this challenging global context, it is possible for us to effect change for the better. In particular, there is a growing body of research and other empirical evidence that structured and successful music education makes a positive difference to wellbeing *across the lifespan*, for adults as well as children – benefits that are intellectual, emotional, physical and social, as well as musical and cultural. Such evidence is found in the growing wealth of literature from the neurosciences, social sciences (psychology, sociology and education)

17 Original blog post: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/making-a-difference-through-music>

and medicine. These positive examples of the wider impact of engaging in music arise from studies that cross national and international boundaries, including research from Chile, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Israel, Éire, Afghanistan, Australia, South Africa, Portugal, the US, Finland, Northern Ireland, England, Kenya, Taiwan, Germany and Italy.

‘There is a growing body of evidence that structured and successful music education makes a positive difference to wellbeing across the lifespan, for adults as well as children.’

There is evidence, for example, that music education can support and nurture auditory function, phonological development and literacy (see for example Moreno and Bidelman 2014; Overy 2006; Putkinen et al 2015; Strait and Kraus 2011; Welch et al 2012). With very young children, new Australian longitudinal data suggest that rich and shared early musical experiences in the home can help overcome social disadvantage by promoting children’s vocabulary, numeracy, attentional and emotional regulation, and prosocial skills (Williams et al 2015). Furthermore,

such findings are in line with UK longitudinal data demonstrating that academic progress up to the first years of secondary school that ‘defies the odds of disadvantage’ is stimulated in homes in which parenting is a process of ‘active cultivation’ that facilitates and nurtures children’s cognitive and social skills, allowing children to benefit from what the educational system has to offer (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2011). At the opposite end of the age-range, other studies have reported on the social, emotional and cognitive benefits of participation in community musical activities among older people (Clift et al 2011; Creech et al 2014; Davidson and Fedele 2011).

Collectively, such studies reflect a growing recognition among scientists that musical behaviour is central to our humanity, to what it means to be human. Music is multiply sited in the brain and, according to archaeologists, predates language. We are musical by design. Therefore, we should seek to ensure that music has a central place in any educational system that aims to develop the whole person. It is not merely an option for policymakers (neither in preschool, compulsory schooling, further and higher

education, nor in community education) if we really want to use research to address key human global challenges.

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Questions for discussion

1. Why might the arts in general, and music in particular, have an important role to play in education from a holistic perspective?
2. Why should education be concerned with the quality of parental involvement in their children's learning and development?

9. Early years as a career?

Policy, practice and professionalism,
2003–2017

Jane Payler and Geraldine Davis

15 June 2017

Open University and Anglia Ruskin University

In March 2017, the long-awaited Early years workforce strategy for England was published by the Department for Education (DfE 2017).¹⁸ It aims to put in place a number of measures to address some of the difficulties currently facing the early years sector. But does the document really make the most of learning from the past, take account of all available research findings, and plan strategically for the future of the workforce? With the Workforce strategy in mind, we highlight some of the issues raised in our ‘Professionalism: Early years as a career’ chapter of the *BERA-TACTYC Early Childhood Research Review 2003–2017* (2017) and ask whether the planned policies can really address the challenges faced.

Since 2003 there has been unprecedented change in UK early childhood policy,

18 Original blog post: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/early-years-as-a-career-policy-practice-and-professionalism-2003-2017>

impacting significantly on practice and the ways in which early childhood practitioners see their roles. Our review explores changes in workforce composition, qualifications and conceptualisations of professionalism, as well as experiences these changes and their impacts on practitioners and children. Policy changes since 2003, although substantial, have not always been coherent. The drive to improve outcomes for children by upskilling the early childhood workforce is to be applauded. But the changes have been numerous, and they have not been given time to embed before further changes are imposed. The drive for a particular view of professionalisation has not enabled practitioners to voice their aspirations or concerns, or to influence the direction of travel.

Better qualified practitioners make a positive difference to outcomes for children – especially boys, children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with additional needs. The reality, though, is a reduction in the overall workforce, with a large number of unfilled vacancies. While there has been an increase in the proportion of the workforce qualified to NVQ level 3 or above, and an increase in the number of graduates in the profession, practitioners in the private, voluntary and independent sectors (the largest part of provision) remain less well-qualified than those in the maintained sector. This means that the most disadvantaged children are less likely to access settings with the best-qualified staff. Despite improvements in qualifications, the workforce remains poorly paid, career progression routes are unclear, and graduates within the sector lack parity with teachers in schools. The DfE's Workforce strategy plans a feasibility study in 2018 to increase the graduate workforce in disadvantaged areas, and aims to consult on allowing those with Early Years Professional status and Early Years Teacher status to lead nursery and reception classes in maintained schools. Yet,

such proposed changes further attempt to patch together a system of qualifications and statuses which were inadequately conceptualised from the outset, failing to fully grasp the Nutbrown (2012) recommendations, and which will not address the longstanding issues of parity, status, salaries and career progression.

'The need for integrated policies to enable holistic early childhood provision between education, social care and health sectors remains.'

The need for integrated policies to enable holistic early childhood provision between education, social care and health sectors remains. Considerable challenges for interagency and interprofessional working are evident in the research, although progress was found to be underway. Demands for effective interprofessional practice are on the increase, given the expansion of funded places for 'disadvantaged' two-year-olds. Yet the champions of interagency provision – children's centres – have been closing, reducing services or combining into limited 'hubs' since 2010, meaning that

integrated working is more difficult to develop and sustain.

Effective pedagogic and practice leadership influence outcomes for children, and such effective leadership is evident in many studies – suggesting that the early childhood profession is capable of developing itself. Effective professional development, through reflective practice, mentoring and supervision, and through the development of collaborative activity both within the workplace and into the wider community, has been evident from many studies. Qualifications providing opportunities for practitioners to develop across academic and practice roles, and for theory and practice to be shared across higher education and practice settings, are fruitful. However, policy has imposed qualifications and a quality structure, often performative in nature, that does not always make the most of the attributes of the workforce. Emphasis in research findings on the high levels of skill, sophisticated levels of operation and emotional and attitudinal competence demanded of practitioners belie the policy direction characterised by

managerialism, based on rhetoric that suggests a deficient workforce.

Continuing professional development and career pathways need to reflect and support the reality of the complexity of practice. Yet local authorities have had to reduce their role in overseeing and providing continuing professional development (CPD) as budgets have been cut, leaving settings to find their own ways around the expensive and unsystematic range of professional development on offer. The workforce strategy acknowledges that ‘many local authorities have stopped offering free CPD to early years settings. Local authorities have either reduced their offer to cover mandatory training only or have retained a wider range of training for which they apply a charge’, and that employers are concerned about cost and access to good CPD (DfE 2017). The strategy’s response is to encourage visits to settings, and to promise an online portal bringing together CPD and online training modules, with specific training provided through voluntary and community sector grants. Sadly, this does not appear to

offer the systematic, sustainable and transformative plan that is needed for professional learning and development.

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Questions for discussion

1. Consult the two sets of teaching standards: Qualified Teacher status and Early Years Teacher status. Reflect on and discuss the pedagogic requirements for nursery and reception class children, typically 2-5 years of age. What might be the arguments for and against allowing those with Early Years Teacher status to lead nursery and reception classes in maintained schools?
2. To what extent and in what ways are interprofessional practice and interagency working of particular importance in the care and education of young children?
3. How well is the early childhood workforce prepared for such ways of working?
4. How far do the organisational and funding systems involved in the care and education of young children facilitate interprofessional and interagency working?

10. Problematizing the continuing professional development needs of early years educators in England

Ewan Ingleby
Teesside University

15 January 2016

Aileen Kennedy's (2005) 'most read' article was used as a starting point for a current research project that explores the continuing professional development (CPD) experiences of a sample of early years educators in the north of England.¹⁹ I presented the emerging research findings at the International Professional Development Association (IPDA) conference on 27 November 2015 at Aston University, Birmingham, UK.

Kennedy (2005) outlines a range of professional development models that are experienced by educators. The 'nine models' of CPD range from 'training courses' providing 'instruction to novices' through to 'coaching/mentoring' and 'action research' resulting in

'transformative education'. An interesting issue in Kennedy's work is that concept of 'transformative education' (ibid): any of the nine training models can be 'transformative' if the professional experiences of the educators are changed in significant ways. In my research presentation I explored the conceptualisation of transformative education within early years provision in England in 2015. Urban (2009) outlined at a previous IPDA conference that early years educators in England are perceived as 'solvers of all sorts of problems'. The problem with interpreting CPD in this way is that the educators become immersed within a 'game of representation' (Rowbottom and Aiston 2006: 143). They are expected to go to 'infinity and beyond' and become 'super teachers'. Schwandt (2004) argues convincingly that working with children and

¹⁹ Original blog post: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/problematizing-the-cpd-continuing-professional-development-needs-of-early-years-educators-in-england>

families is more about 'the messiness of human life'; it is less about 'solving problems'. In England, however, going 'to infinity and beyond' appears as a key theme within the framing of CPD (Ingleby 2015).

'In viewing the curriculum as a series of "texts", pedagogical "events" and subjective "practices", it becomes possible to understand why the research participants interpret CPD in their "own way".'

My research reported at the conference is based on an inductive, qualitative paradigm. The respondents were selected through dimensional sampling in order to gather the views of participants with experiences of professional development in both private and statutory early years settings in the north of England. Ten interviews were completed through 2015, and 10 more are due through 2016. Nvivo 10 software is being used to code the research transcripts in order to embellish my thematic analysis. The respondents' reflections reveal two key emerging themes.

1. The 'business facing' agenda within the private settings (the need to make money and the

consequence of getting as many 'customers' as possible) can lead to CPD becoming a 'low priority'.

2. There is also 'resistance' from the participants to the concept of CPD. It is regarded as a 'nuisance' as it is 'not paid'. One of the research participants asked to be 'left alone to teach the children' as opposed to being sent on 'training courses'.

The emerging findings have been analysed according to an epistemological framework that interprets theories of literacy as social practice (Barton 2007). The 'texts' informing CPD include policy documents in England such as the early years foundation stage. This 'text' produces what Barton (2007) refers to as 'events' ('activities where literacy has a role' [Tummons 2014: 35]) and 'practices' ('ways that people use language in all sorts of social contexts' [Tummons 2014: 36]). In viewing the curriculum as a series of 'texts', pedagogical 'events' and subjective 'practices', it becomes possible to understand why the research participants interpret CPD in their 'own way'. The 'texts' (or policy documents) provide an

initial framework for CPD. The 'events' (for example, training courses, coaching, mentoring) are guided by these policy documents. The personal interpretations of these CPD events can in turn be viewed as subjective 'practices'.

Many thanks to the helpful comments received thus far from academics who attended the IPDA conference of 2015.

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Questions for discussion

1. How does this blog reflection make you think differently about academic writing?
2. Why do the 'end products' of research tend to be valued more than the actual 'processes' of research?

11. Researching with young and developmentally young children

Ethical considerations, dilemmas and compromises

Carolyn Blackburn
Birmingham City University

22 June 2015

One of the most challenging considerations when researching with children is the question of gaining children's consent to participate in research, and their perspectives on the topic under study.²⁰

Issues relate to the age at which children can realistically understand what they're being asked to participate in, as well as consideration of their cognitive and linguistic ability to give consent.

Within the UK, the term 'child' means anyone below the age of 18 years. The 1948 United Nations *Convention on Human Rights* and the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child* granted rights to children between the ages of birth to 18 to have their wishes known, listened to and respected.

²⁰ Original blog post: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/researching-with-young-and-developmentally-young-children-ethical-considerations-dilemmas-and-compromises>

The dilemma for researchers is that the perceived ability of a child to give consent will depend not just on an individual child's chronological age, but also on their level of understanding, particularly if they are experiencing a developmental delay. Requiring high levels of understanding for a valid consent, however, could operate to preclude research with very young children unless an adult has consented on their behalf (Mason 2004).

Researchers need to develop ways of engaging children in a wide range of different circumstances, in order to obtain high-quality information; however, they must also ensure that children's rights are safeguarded (ibid). Young children are surrounded by adults who have a legal responsibility to act as 'gatekeepers', safeguarding them from outside influences, and arguably guarding their

free choice of whether or not to participate in research (ibid). Children of all ages are subject to the control of those who have parental responsibility for their welfare and safeguarding.

Alderson (2004) acknowledged that consent is a key issue in research with children – one that raises hard, often unresolved, questions. There is no simple answer to the question of when children are old enough to give consent. Much depends on their prior experiences within the social, cultural and historical contexts in which they grow and develop. This poses an ethical dilemma for researchers, which requires reflection. Denzin reminds us that our primary obligation as researchers is ‘always to the people we study, not to our project or to a larger discipline. The lives and stories that we hear and study are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared them with us’ (Denzin 1989: 83).

‘Young children can be quite demonstrative in expressing their views, even if they do not verbally reject a researcher’s presence or questions.’

Young children can be quite demonstrative in expressing their views, even if they do not verbally reject a researcher’s presence or questions. They can, for example, move away from a person they do not wish to be near (Aubrey et al 2000), refuse to answer questions, change the topic of conversation or, in extreme cases, be physically aggressive if they feel particularly unhappy about situations. Flewitt (2005) found that children as young as three were ‘competent and confident enough to grant or withdraw consent – with some being more outspoken and enquiring than their parents’.

The decision to adopt an ongoing process of assent whereby the child’s acceptance of the researcher within the setting can be taken as assent to participate in the research is sometimes considered appropriate where children have severe cognitive impairments. However, assent is not a term that sits comfortably with all researchers, some of whom argue that it may be used where children are simply too afraid, confused or ignored to refuse. This indirect approach for assent/dissent has, however, been successfully used within

studies involving children with developmental delays and/or disorders (Blackburn 2014; Brooks 2010), and this may be, for now, the compromise that I will live with.

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Questions for discussion

1. How do we ensure that we include children and young people in research in ways that are participatory and respectful?
2. Can we be sure that we have successfully obtained consent, and who can we involve in the decision and discussions about this?
3. Who are the stakeholders and gatekeepers for the children and young people that you would like to work with?

12. Observing to understand

Using the Tavistock method of observation to support reflective practice

Kelly Brooker
Barnet Early Years Alliance

19 July 2017

The Tavistock method of infant observation has developed and grown since its original use as a tool to train psychotherapists at the Tavistock clinic.²¹ It is now widely used across many professions, and increasingly seen as an effective method for researching young children's development. Before undertaking the Tavistock method of observation I was confident that, as an early years teacher, I had been observing children closely for many years, and in truth I did not expect to be surprised by what I learned. However, the experience of using the Tavistock model was both unexpectedly and intensely moving – resulting quite dramatically in what Miller (2011: 239) so aptly refers to as 'a disturbance in the mind'.

21 Original blog post: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/observing-to-understand-using-the-tavistock-method-of-observation-to-support-reflective-practice>

What is the Tavistock observation method?

The role of the observer is to immerse themselves in the interactions that take place between the infant and others present. The observer is to remain non-interventionist and as unobtrusive as possible – thus, in theory, experiencing everyday interactions. Rustin (2009: 30) defines the intention as 'being present in the moment as fully as possible, open to perceiving as much as possible'. A clear characteristic of the observation method is that no notes, photos or videos are taken by the observer, but instead a report or transcript of the observation is written up as soon as possible afterwards for discussion. The transcript aims to encapsulate not only what was seen but, significantly, what was felt by the observer: the emotions, thoughts and feelings that were evoked. This is a central aspect

of the method which, rather than relying on external indicators, seeks to understand internal emotional states.

Leaders of early learning at BEYA: Action research

At Barnet Early Years Alliance (BEYA), we collaborate with schools and early years settings to engage in action research to inform practice. We carried out a series of Tavistock observations within our settings to consider the usefulness of the approach, and its possible adaptation for wider use across early years practice.



Initial challenges

An initial common concern is the lack of any note-taking or use of video. Practitioners are unconvinced that they will remember enough detail without the luxury of notes to refer to, or a rewind button. However, after just one observation we recognised the depth of observation that the method afforded. As is stated by Jackson (2008):

'The camera might offer an "objective" record of what is taking place, but the observer's psychic lens with all its unconscious processing of the experience reveals the developing world of the infant with an emotional truth, the nature of which cannot be rivalled.'

Jackson 2008:123

Another concern and potential challenge is the time needed to carry out an observation. A Tavistock observation involves observing a child for at least 30 minutes. Practitioners questioned the feasibility of doing so without interruption or affecting behaviour.

What we found out

The experience of carrying out these observations was impactful for every practitioner, in both shared and different ways. They led to a greater insight into individual children, as well as deep consideration of our environment and practice as experienced by the children. We felt as though we had walked in the shoes of the child, seen the world through their eyes. After an observation of a child described as having 'challenging behaviour', a reception teacher said, 'We saw a child who was lonely, desperate to be liked, desperate

to have friends, desperate for attention but unable and unsure how to achieve this'. Another class teacher described how her new insight into a child led to a dialogue with his parent, who consequently shared significant family background, thus developing closer partnership and support. Other practitioners introduced simple yet essential improvements, such as more softness in the baby room.

'Tavistock method enables the potential and privilege of gaining insight into of the internal world and emotional states of young children.'

Our initial concerns about the time to observe and our influence on behaviour continue to challenge, and we are still forming our ideas on how we will take this method forward next year. Significantly, we learned that sensitivity about how and with whom the observations are shared needs careful consideration. One nursery manager found the staff in the baby room took her comments about a child's emotional wellbeing as a personal criticism about their practice. The importance of training and a seminar group is essential.

In our current attainment-driven educational system, with its pervasive emphasis on pre-determined outcomes, the Tavistock method enables the potential and privilege of gaining insight into of the internal world and emotional states of young children. We have become ardent advocates.

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Questions for discussion

1. Why is observation so critical when working with young children?
2. How can observation support reflective practice?
3. What is your view on current attainment- and outcome-led assessments in early years education?

13. Dorothy Heathcote's 'Mantle of the Expert' approach to learning

Tim Taylor

2 August 2016

Dorothy Heathcote died in October 2011 at the age of 85.²² Although an academic for most of her life, first at Durham and then at Newcastle, Heathcote continued to teach in classrooms almost up until the year she died. For her, teaching was an art, practised in the 'service of a process of change' in which classrooms are 'laboratories... contributing to the welfare of the local community and the environment'. She hated the idea that schooling denied children social status, requiring them 'to feel useless, to exist in a limbo of learning which relied solely on the de-functioning maxim that "one day, you'll be good enough to really do it" but never today'. She made it her life's mission to challenge this false-premise (see Bolton 2003), and to create other ways of working with children – ways that drew on their imagination, respected their ideas, and worked in

collaboration with them (Heathcote 2002).

Drama was her medium for teaching and learning (see Wagner, 1999), and by the 1970s – thanks in part to a programme made by the BBC²³ – she was an internationally renowned teacher, with educators from all over the world flocking to watch her lessons and attend her courses. However, despite this fame, Heathcote became increasingly frustrated by the lack of impact her methods were having on the education system as a whole, and on classroom teachers outside the realm of the drama studio. Her answer was to create an approach that would guide teachers into using the elements of her method without them having to be experts in the use of drama. Her new approach involved creating an imaginary context (invented by the teacher) using a series of

22 Original blog post: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/dorothy-heathcotes-mantle-of-the-expert-approach-to-learning>

23 'Three Looms Waiting', Omnibus, Smedley R (dir), British Broadcasting Corporation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5jBNIEQrZs>

components – an expert team, a client, and a commission – to create purposeful and engaging scenarios for students to study the curriculum. She called her new approach ‘Mantle of the Expert’ (see Taylor, 2016).

‘Mantle of the Expert was based on the idea that children learn instinctively through imaginary play, and that play is a generator of culture.’

Mantle of the Expert was based on the idea that children learn instinctively through imaginary play, and that play, far from frivolous, is a generator of culture (Huizinga 1949). Importantly, although play often matters to those involved, it carries no genuine penalty in the world of reality. It is a ‘safe space’ in which children can explore ideas, events, people, and narratives without ever having to be in any danger or having to cope with real consequences.

For Heathcote, this was the ‘miracle’ of drama, because it created what she called ‘now time’ – that is, a dramatic switch in time and place that enables children to step into a narrative and participate as if

it were happening to them as characters. In this way, much of the content of their learning becomes something they interact with and contribute to. Thus, students studying Henry VIII can step into an imaginary context as a team of advisers working with Cromwell on the dissolution of the monasteries, and write letters to the King explaining their progress and the problems they have encountered in dealing with the abbots. Exciting things can happen – problems arise, as do betrayal, deceit, anger, political unrest – and the students have to deal with it all from *inside* the story.

Of course, the story can stop at any time, allowing participants the opportunity to discuss events, negotiate possible alternatives, and take different routes. Real time and fictional time are two separate paths (Hall 1976), and while real time continues unabated, fictional time can be paused, rewound, and replayed by those involved – giving them the chance to explore alternatives, make mistakes, and put things right.

Behind many of Heathcote’s ideas were deep concepts about learning, culture, and identity. She saw, as Huizinga (1949) argued,

that play is a generator of culture that allows the exploration of ways of being within a safe space. She applied Erving Goffman's (1974) concept of 'framing' into something that allows students to investigate events and people from multiple points of view. She drew on the work of Edward T Hall, seeing culture as something constructed through the bonds formed between human beings with shared experiences (see Hall, 1976). And she understood, intuitively, that stories are somehow 'psychologically privileged' (see Willingham, 2010) and a fundamental (and ancient) medium for learning and making meaning (see Egan 1986).

Her invention of the Mantle of the Expert gives us a practical and coherent strategy for incorporating these ideas and bringing them alive in exciting and meaningful ways for students. In classrooms using the approach, stories are not just things in books, but events children can step into, interact with, and create.

It's a great way to teach and a great way to learn.

Tim Taylor's book, A Beginner's Guide to Mantle of the Expert, was published in July 2016.

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Questions for discussion

1. Dorothy Heathcote described many children's experience of school as being like a 'waiting room', where what they were doing might be important one day, but never today. To what extent can we plan our lessons to deal with this demotivating perception?
2. Finding a balance between the demands of the system and the needs of the students is the great challenge facing all teachers working in mainstream education. How can we incorporate the interests of the students, while still preparing them for the inevitability of SATs?

14. Bold beginnings or black holes?

The encroachment of summative assessment into the reception curriculum

**Yinka Olusoga and
Mandy Pierlejewski**
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Wednesday 28 February 2018

Black holes themselves are invisible against the backdrop of space. We only become aware of their presence as they begin to drag in objects around them, warping the very fabric of the universe. Though this is a truly terrifying process to comprehend and to witness, black holes do not do this out of malice. Black holes are not sentient. They have no malignant purpose. They just 'are'. We notice them only via their inexorable, destructive progress as they eat up the light and substance around them.

Increasingly, black holes appear to be a sadly apt metaphor for the overlooked but destructive emptiness at the heart of our education system: statutory summative assessment.

Assessment in the neoliberal education system is the black hole hiding in plain sight

– particularly summative assessment, linked to notions of accountability. It is overlooked in the popular media, and the underpinning assumptions that justify it go unquestioned. Assessment just *is*. Instead, what scant popular attention there is remains fixed on the visible features of our system: the curriculum, pedagogy, teacher supply. Each is, of course, worthy of study, debate and exploration. However, each is under the implacable influence of the black hole of summative assessment. What began as a slight pull towards teaching to the test has become an inescapable, magnetic drawing-in of the delivered curriculum to serve, and to be seen to serve, the requirements of it.

The most recent object to be pulled into the black hole is the reception curriculum. This can

be seen in a report published in late November last year: *Bold beginnings: The Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools* (Ofsted 2017). A Foucauldian discourse analysis of this report reveals a discourse of children as a homogenised group: children are all the same, no matter how old; they can all make the same progress on the same steady, upward trajectory (ibid: 13). Like products on a factory production line, they are measurable at the beginning of the process of primary education, and again at the end.

The need for summative assessment for accountability purposes demands that children are seen as empty vessels that can be filled with knowledge: knowledge which is quantifiable and fixed. A chaotic, meaning-making, active child will not do. This kind of child does not fit the model as it cannot be measured and converted into data. Play is sucked into the black hole too. It is distorted into something only useful for teaching PSE (ibid: 4). Its power to transform children, to stimulate deep, meaningful and long-lasting learning is removed (Brock et al 2014). Learning through play does not fit the model as it cannot

be quantified and measured. It has too many outcomes which are slow to emerge and is therefore not useful for data collection. The emphasis is on increasing speed, on maximum efficiency, and on the need for data demands direct teaching rather than play (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017).

‘Assessment – particularly summative assessment – is the black hole hiding in plain sight in the neoliberal education system, drawing all aspects of the curriculum towards serving its requirements.’

But it does not have to be this way, because statutory assessment is not an act of nature, it is a reversible, political decision. Recent changes to assessment policy in New Zealand demonstrate the power of educators to influence policy. Rejecting the false idea that children’s academic progression is linear and predictable, the government recognised that setting rigid national standards that focus on a core curriculum had negative impacts on the quality and breadth of children’s educational experiences as it placed emphasis on preparing children to demonstrate

achievement of those national standards in decontextualised assessments. The current New Zealand Labour-led government is axeing the national standards and their resulting league tables. The focus will be on reporting to parents and on formative assessment (Ministry of Education 2017).

Here in England, statutory summative assessment seems like a black hole, drawing everything around it into its inky darkness. However, the difference is that it *can* change. The early years community in England has reacted powerfully, drawing themselves together and displaying solidarity. Their personal affront at the deprofessionalising nature of the report has fuelled the response. They can see the black hole for what it is, and know that it can change.

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Questions for discussion

1. How does statutory summative assessment impact on children's experience and notions of who they are?
2. How does statutory summative assessment impact on *teachers'* experience and notions of who they are?
3. Datafication (the move towards an education system that is driven by assessment data) can seem like a black hole: something that we have no control over. How can we, as educators, take back control of assessment data so that it works to enhance the educational experience of children?

About the authors

1. Mary Dyer is a senior lecturer in early years in the School of Education and Professional Development at the University of Huddersfield, and a fellow of the Higher Education Academy, with a BA (Hons) in linguistics and psychology and an MA in educational studies. She began her career teaching GCSE and A-level English language and psychology in further education. She then specialised in teaching social sciences and social policy on vocational courses in childcare, and health and social care, at levels 2, 3 and 4. During this time she worked with local employers to establish three NVQ assessment centres in childcare, play work and health and social care. She has also worked with the Open College Network (Yorkshire and Humber) as a moderator and staff development tutor, training and supporting assessors and moderators in adult education. Before joining the University of Huddersfield, she worked most recently with the local authority in Barnsley as a development officer, then project co-ordinator piloting the funding for nursery places for two-year-olds,

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of children who are late talking and find it difficult to learn. In their new roles they have developed an evidence-based model of support that enables the workforce in nurseries and primary schools to maximise the skills of all children who experience communication difficulties.

5. Rose White and Fran Paffard are senior lecturers on the primary PGCE at the University of East London. They have research interests in bilingualism, culture and identity in the early years. Rose and Fran have both worked as primary and early years teachers, and as early years and English as an additional language (EAL) advisory teachers in inner-city London.

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7. Evgenia Theodotou is a senior lecturer in early childhood studies and the programme leader for the BA (Hons) early childhood with psychology at the University of East London. She holds a first-class diploma as an infant and child care assistant, a first-class BA in early childhood education and care, an MA in education and a MSc with distinction in e-learning. She is a PhD candidate in the research area of 'Literacy skills in the early years settings'. She has more than 10 years of professional experience in early years settings, and more than five years in higher education

in early childhood studies. Her research activity is focussed on creativity, arts and literacy. She has participated in several research projects and published her research at international conferences, and in journals, edited books and monographs. She has been a member of several scientific review committees, and organises several special sessions at international conferences.

8. Graham Frederick Welch has held the UCL Institute of Education established chair of music education since 2001. He is elected chair of the Society for Education, Music and Psychology Research (SEMPRE), was the first UK president of the International Society for Music Education (ISME, 2008–2014), has held visiting professorships within the UK and overseas, and is a former member of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Review College for Music (2007–2015). He has authored more than 350 publications.

9. Jane Payler is professor of education (early years) at the Open University Faculty of Education and Language Studies. From 2012 until November 2015, Jane was chair of TACTYC: Association for Professional

Development in Early Years, and vice-chair between 2011 and 2012. She has been an elected member of the TACTYC executive since 2005, and has contributed widely to TACTYC's development. Her previous academic posts include faculty head of research and knowledge exchange for the Faculty of Education, Health and Social Care at the University of Winchester, and education research fellow at the University of Southampton's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning: Interprofessional Learning across the Public Sector.

Geraldine Davis is principal lecturer in education at Anglia Ruskin University's department of education. She has expertise in working collaboratively through research projects to support the professional development of teachers, early childhood practitioners and university lecturers. She led Anglia Ruskin University's doctorate in education for five years from 2011 to 2016, and the MA in early years professional practice from 2010 to 2015. She has been an external examiner for doctoral theses at the Open University, Keele University, University of Plymouth, Middlesex University, University of East London, Brunel

University, University of South Wales, University of East Anglia, University of Essex and London South Bank University. Geraldine won the University Research Excellence award for doctoral supervision in 2015.

10. Dr Ewan Ingleby has been the chair and co-convenor of the Education Work Based Learning Research Unit since 2013. Ewan was appointed as co-leader of Teesside University's 'learning for the 21st century' research challenge in 2017, in order to develop research in education across the University. Ewan is particularly interested in using frameworks and concepts that derive from philosophy and ethnography (for example, new literacy studies). Ewan is an elected member of the international committee of the International Professional Development Association (IPDA), and he has worked on funded research by the Higher Education Academy and Innovate UK. Ewan has published research articles in peer-reviewed education journals including *Studies in Higher Education* and *Teaching in Higher Education*, and has participated in national and international education conferences. Ewan is a member of the editorial

board for *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, and that of *Practice: Contemporary Issues in Practitioner Development*. Ewan has also published a number of books on education. His last PhD in education completed applied visual methods in exploring the perceptions of new vocational degrees in higher education.

11. Carolyn Blackburn is a senior research fellow in the School of Education and Social Work, Birmingham City University. Carolyn is vice chair of the European Association on Early Childhood Intervention, a Churchill Early Years Prevention and Intervention Fellow, a fellow of the Higher Education Academy, an editorial board member of *Infants and Young Children* and a Disability Forum Council member of the Royal Society of Medicine.

12. Kelly Brooker is the deputy head of Barnet Early Years Alliance, a federation of three nursery schools in London. Kelly completed her master's in early childhood education at Roehampton University, and is currently engaging in research with schools and early years settings across Barnet and neighbouring London boroughs. In addition to ongoing research

using the Tavistock method of observation, recent areas of interest include children's drawings, video reflection and pedagogical documentation. Kelly can be contacted at kbrooker@beya.org.uk.

13. Tim Taylor is a freelance teacher with over 20 years' experience working in the classroom. He is a visiting lecturer at Newcastle University, and runs training courses in the Mantle of the Expert both nationally and internationally. Tim is the web manager and blogger for mantleoftheexpert.com and imaginative-inquiry.co.uk. He writes for several education magazines, and is a contributor to the *Guardian's* Teacher Network. His book, *A Beginner's Guide to Mantle of the Expert*, was published in July 2016. For more information visit <http://www.beginnersguidetomantleoftheexpert.co.uk>.

14. Mandy Pierlejewski is a senior lecturer in early childhood education and course leader of the BA in Primary Education (early years 3-7) QTS degree at Leeds Beckett University. Before entering higher education, Mandy was a primary school

teacher and early years leader, as well as an advanced skills teacher specialising in early years. Prior to joining Leeds Beckett University in 2016, Mandy was a university tutor for Teach First at the University of Manchester, and Teach First national subject lead for child development. Mandy's particular research interest is the datafication of early years education. Her work examines the impact of datafication on children with English as an additional language. Her email address is M.J.Pierlejewski@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and she tweets as [@MPierlejewski](https://twitter.com/MPierlejewski).

Yinka Olusoga is a senior lecturer in early childhood education and course leader of the PGCE Primary (3–7) course at Leeds Beckett University. She began her career in education as a primary teacher, specialising in early years and in personal and social education, before moving into initial teacher education. Yinka has particular interests in professional understandings of child-initiated play and playful pedagogies. Her doctoral work focusses on the historical and current role of discourse in the social construction of childhood and of schooling. Her work examines themes of

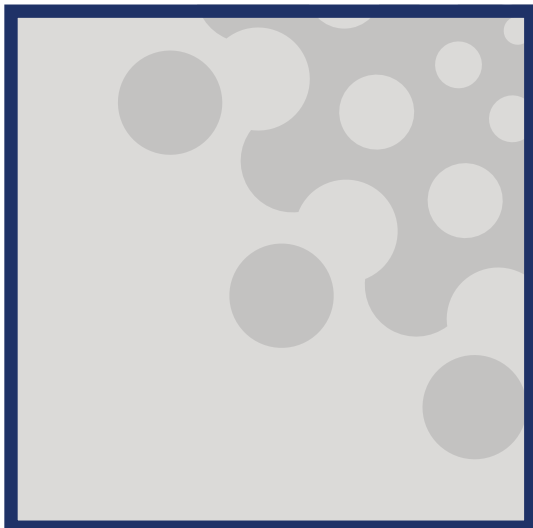
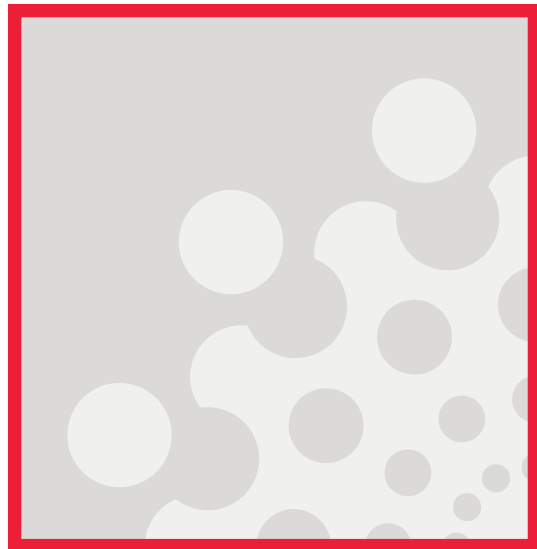
power and resistance, and of social class, gender, race, and their intersections. Her email address is Y.Olusoga@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and she tweets [@YinkaOlusoga](https://twitter.com/YinkaOlusoga). Her publications include the co-edited book *Perspectives on Play: Learning for Life*, the third edition of which will be published in 2018.

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