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# Taking children seriously: An alternative agenda for research?

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## Abstract

Recent developments in early childhood research in the UK suggest there is a good deal of current knowledge as to ‘what works’ in early education, including what helps to narrow the gap between more and less advantaged pupils. A broad consensus now exists in many parts of the English-speaking world as to the forms of provision, including curriculum and pedagogy, environment and ethos, which are most likely to support children’s well-being and their development. This consensus is described as evidence-based because the findings from very large studies have informed policy and practice, and have been widely disseminated. This article summarizes some aspects of the current consensus – on learning through play, respecting diversity, listening to children – and asks some critical questions about the implementation of these principles in practice. Through examining some small examples of interactions in day care and classrooms, it asks whether current confidence about the nature of good practice has prevented researchers from asking difficult questions and challenging orthodoxies. It suggests some topics which might inform the agenda of future research, ensuring that rather than resting on their laurels, researchers attempt to listen carefully to children and families and take both them and their culture seriously.

## Keywords

cultural diversity; listening to children; pedagogy of play; parent partnership

## Introduction

This article originated in a seminar focused on ‘meeting the diverse needs and expectations’ of children and families from different cultural backgrounds, while developing agendas for early childhood research in the UK. In order to consider the extent to which research agendas are responsive to issues of diversity, the article first offers a broad overview of the current, research-informed, consensus on good practice in early childhood education, and then points to some aspects of this practice which might be challenged in future research.

Critiques of the assumed consensus on early childhood provision have come from many directions (see for instance, Dahlberg et al., 2007; Penn, 2005) and include profound questioning of the ‘what works’ approach to practice, as well as suggesting that, in general, research has been looking for ‘answers’ to the wrong questions. This article’s questions are of a simpler kind, however: it asks whether widely approved current practices in early childhood provision match up to their own

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guiding principles – such as listening to children and following their interests; respecting cultural diversity; and developing partnerships with parents. These three concerns are understood in what follows as different dimensions of a single approach: taking children seriously. This approach – or rather, the question: *are we taking children seriously?* is used as a provocation to examine selected vignettes from research data. In reflecting on each of these examples, the article identifies questions for a research agenda which prioritises listening to the voices of all stakeholders.

The article begins by outlining some key principles underpinning current approaches to early childhood provision, as well as indicating, briefly, the sources of the data which will be used to reflect on these principles. Its guiding presumption is that if educators and researchers claim to take children seriously, they must ensure that they pay proper attention not only to individual children, and to children as a social group, but also to the cultural contexts that shape their identities and their understanding, and the cultural knowledge and skills that they bring with them into their early educational settings.

### **Setting the scene: Respect for diversity and respect for children**

Respect for diversity in early education is an issue of global concern (Vandenbroeck, 2009b), and in the UK was a key strand in the recent Labour government's project of reducing social disadvantage and social exclusion. Over recent decades it has generated a large body of national and international research. In the UK, research has offered both qualitative accounts of the disparities experienced by children from different home backgrounds on entry to education (Brooker, 2002; Gregory and Biarnès, 1994; Tizard et al., 1988), and statistical analyses of the longer-term effects of home background on children's outcomes (Feinstein, 2003; Gillborn and Mirza, 2000). Such studies have helped to raise awareness of both macro-level and micro-level explanations for the persistence of social inequality, and of the unwitting contribution of educational institutions to the reproduction of inequality in successive generations.

As explanations of this kind have become more familiar, researchers as well as educators in many societies have attempted to develop more inclusive curricula, and to devise pedagogical practices which may enable all children to succeed. To some extent these efforts appear to have borne fruit. Inspired by models such as the *Te Whāriki* curriculum (MoE, 1996), new curricula such as the English *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS; DCFS, 2008) explicitly promote diversity, and partnership with parents, as underpinning themes. At an international level, Vandenbroeck (2009a) reflects that the goal of 'respect for diversity' seems far closer than it did in earlier decades: 'Much remains to be done, but the way forward now seems clearer, as an apparent consensus grows on what is to be done' (2009a: 166). This consensus however, as he recognises (Vandenbroeck et al., 2009), contains within it enormous tensions concerning the conflicting values, beliefs and goals for children which are often held by parents and professionals.

As the impact of structural and cultural inequalities on children and families is more widely understood, new agendas and new disciplinary perspectives have continued to evolve. One of these is the broader issue of how 'children' as a social group, and young children in particular, are conceptualized in modern societies, and how these conceptions shape the institutional arrangements made for them (Alderson, 2008; Mayall, 2002). Despite an intense focus on the early years over the last decade in all parts of the UK, very little research has explored how social constructions of childhood and of young children shape everyday practice. The 'consensus' discussed here may also conceal fundamental differences between the experiences which adults – researchers or policy-makers – prioritize for children, and the experiences which children would choose for themselves, if they had the power. For this reason too, this article suggests that researchers should adopt a critical stance in developing their agenda.

## A note on the data

The five small vignettes discussed below do not represent a consistent body of research. Four were selected as examples of everyday experiences in English settings and the remaining, European, example is from a published source. All derive from small-scale qualitative studies.

Examples 1 and 2 are taken from observations written during studies of the care offered to children under three in London children's centres. Both studies involved interviews with parents and practitioners as well as observations of around 12 children in each setting. They are not intended as generalizable examples but as illustrations of how 'taking children seriously' may look when the children are infants.

Examples 4 and 5 are taken from a year-long ethnographic study of an English reception class (children aged four to five years), in which the experiences of children and parents from two distinct cultural groups (English and Bangladeshi) were compared. They summarize the interpretation of data which have been discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Brooker, 2002, 2003).

Example 3 is taken from a study, conducted in Belgium, which explored the views of the migrant or 'nomadic' mothers of small children in day care (Vandenbroeck et al., 2009).

## The current consensus: 'What works' in early childhood education and care?

The cumulative knowledge from a half-century of significant early childhood research in the UK (such as Bruner, 1980; Newson and Newson, 1968; Sylva et al., 1980; Tizard et al., 1988; Wells, 1985) has provided a firm foundation for the intense research activity of the last decade. The most influential recent study, the longitudinal Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al., 2004), explored and consolidated the knowledge base of earlier decades, providing a new foundation on which future research could build.

This study and its more qualitative companion, the Research Into Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), offered both extensive and intensive evidence of the impact of pedagogical approaches and practices on young children's development, and influenced the policy-making and curricula of UK countries at the same time as shaping the knowledge and ideas of practitioners. As a consequence of the unprecedentedly wide dissemination of these findings through professional training and development, it was possible for many more practitioners to acquire the research-based knowledge of earlier decades as well as that of the most recent inquiries. Practitioners in every part of the mixed childcare economy of the UK became conversant with recommendations on observing and scaffolding children's learning, using questioning to extend children's thinking, and so on. Most teachers became aware that a balance between child-initiated and adult-initiated activities, and between individual and group work, was viewed as optimal (Sylva et al., 2004), and all were familiar with the mantra of 'learning through play' which became the bedrock of the English EYFS as well as of the other national guidelines.

The new early childhood curricula of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were similarly 'research-informed' (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2007; Stephen, 2010; Walsh et al., 2010) claiming to be 'play-based' and 'child-centred' while offering a structured progression through levels of knowledge and skills commensurate with children's growing capacities from birth through to the age of five, six or seven. Practitioners as well as policy-makers can now describe with some confidence 'what works' with children in this age group: a sophisticated blend of supported play and instruction based on children's observed interests, and on partnership with parents and respectful acknowledgement of home cultures (DCFS, 2008). So where does early childhood research go

next? And how far, if at all, do these principles support the ‘needs and expectations’ of children, including minority children, and their families?

### *Taking listening seriously*

The commitment to ‘listen to children’ about the services provided for them is another staple component of good early years’ practice, including research practice (Alderson, 2008; Clark et al., 2005). It draws on a growing awareness of the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and on a number of important messages from the sociology of childhood: that children should be recognized as a minority social group whose rights may need careful safeguarding (James et al., 1998; Mayall, 2002), and that children are active social agents who contribute to the construction of the settings they attend (Alderson, 2008; Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998). As these ideas have infiltrated mainstream thinking, policy-makers have tried to consult children as part of their planning and evaluation, while researchers increasingly seek to elicit children’s views, on the grounds that they are stakeholders in the services provided.

One of the challenges from this field has been to problematize the act of ‘listening’ which can all too easily be thought of as a simple behaviour – to argue that listening, like seeing, is mediated by the mind and frames of reference of the listener. Lived experience and professional training encourage adults to believe that they know what is in young children’s best interests. Hence they assume responsibility for taking decisions on all matters of importance, often relegating their ‘listening’ to trivial matters: inviting children to choose what colour paint to use, or when to eat their snack. As a result, listening may not support children’s genuine participation.

Listening which is tokenistic may further reinforce the power and status differences between the listener and the listened-to. ‘Listening to children’ can be perceived as a somewhat benevolent gesture: *letting children have their say* despite their assumed immaturity and ignorance, rather than *letting children speak* – because it is their right; because they are competent members of their social group, and because they contribute in important ways to their immediate environment (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998). Hanne Warming (2005) for instance points out that listening to children’s voices may mean simply ‘hearing and interpreting what you hear’, or it may mean ‘making a common cause with the children’ (2005: 53). In other words, practitioners and researchers may simply be interested in hearing children’s views, or they may determine to take these views seriously to the extent of allowing them to influence their provision.

Listening in the way that Warming describes – *making common cause with the children* – can only occur when adults genuinely recognize children’s low social status, and view children as full citizens who have rights within their local setting, and are capable of holding well-formed opinions. It means that they must be prepared to revise their own views, and review their own practice, in the light of what children say. Fundamentally, it means believing that children are entitled to the same respect for their views as are adults. This belief can be observed in respectful engagements with children of all ages, including babies, where the act of ‘listening’ consists of interpreting children’s intentions, inferring their wishes, and attending to all their efforts to communicate (Alderson, 2008).

Here are two examples of interactions with infants which show adults ‘listening’, or not, to young children. Both children are white and male: their needs and rights do not reside in a ‘minority’ status in the traditional sense, but in their status as members of a group whose wishes are easily ignored.

*Example 1:* the nursery practitioner sees a seven-month-old baby with a seriously runny nose; she approaches with a tissue, comes face to face with the baby to attract his attention and explains with

accompanying gestures and apologetic expression what is about to happen; she thanks the child if he co-operates in having his nose wiped (and later apologizes to a child who resists), quietly explaining what she is doing and why; when asked why she is explaining with such care to a pre-verbal child she answers, 'You're not just saying it for them, you're saying it for all the children to hear, then they can all help each other to understand.'

This practitioner describes her philosophy in working with under-threes as 'following the child'; this could be another way to describe 'listening'.

*Example 2:* a child aged nine months, on his first day of attending a nursery, is put into a high chair beside a large table; his key worker brings two trays of finger paint to the table, takes each of the child's hands in turn and forces it down into the paint and then onto a piece of paper to make handprints; she writes the child's name on the paper, turns to her colleagues and announces 'Jonny's done his first finger painting – his dad will be pleased', before departing on other errands. The child remains in his high chair for another 20 minutes, ignored by staff but repeatedly staring at his hands uneasily, and attempting to wipe the increasingly sticky paint off on to his jumper.

Practitioners with pre-verbal children sometimes fail to 'listen' to them unless their voices are loud or demanding. Despite careful planning and dedicated timetabling, they can on occasion appear oblivious to the expressed wishes of the children they care for, to whom however they are deeply attached.

### *Listening to parents?*

It is also important to remember that the expectations and preferences small children bring to nursery are cultural as well as individual, derived from the experience that their family has provided (where the provision described in the second nursery as 'messy play' may not be approved). Sensitive and appropriate caregiving requires practitioners to listen carefully – with their minds as well as their senses engaged – not only to children's communications, but also to those of their parents. Vandenbroeck et al.'s (2009) analysis of the responses of migrant mothers to European professional caregiving shows the complexity of this issue, and the need to listen, negotiate and even change professional practice in response to parents' views. The speaker in the following example is a Lebanese woman who wished to have her child potty-trained at eight months, as she would have done herself, but who encountered some resistance from the nursery practitioners for whom this practice was anathema:

*Example 3:* In the day care centre they are against it, because she's very young and . . . they don't train the babies until they are two. Sometimes in the day care centre when she wakes up, they put her on the potty, but it's always too late. Because the moment the child has to wake up, you have to take him, take his diaper and put it on the potty, you see. But in the day care centre for example a child . . . many children would wake up at the same time, so you have to deal with one child at the time . . .

So most of the time it's too late, but they try to . . . I think even though they don't agree with me, but they do it. And I think it's amazing you know, because for them, . . . , when you put a child of two years on a potty, there's not a lot of responsibility . . . But with my daughter, she's very young so someone has to keep an eye on her. And it is not really logic when you have 21 children. You see, so I think it's amazing even if they don't do it every day. The fact that they do it from time to time. I think it's amazing, yeah.

Other recent theorizing in this field includes discussions by Dahlberg and Moss (2005) of ethical practice and of ‘the ethics of an encounter’. Their perspective warns of the danger of treating others as if they are like ourselves, or in the case of young children, trying to make others into people like ourselves: the practitioner in Example 2, when interviewed, conceded that there are children who don’t like ‘messy play’, and families who disapprove of it, but when asked how she might improve the nursery’s practice, suggested ‘more messy play’. The practitioners in Example 3 have acknowledged a mother’s right to secure appropriate care for her baby, even if this is uncomfortable or inconvenient for staff. In doing so they are taking both children and their families seriously. But there is very little research to show how widespread such behaviour is.

Equally importantly: what evidence base currently exists about the views of children and parents on those consensual aspects of practice referred to above – play, pedagogy, curriculum? If in fact there is rather little, perhaps it is time to add such questions to the research agenda.

## Challenging the consensus

### *Learning through play*

The principle of young children’s ‘need’ and ‘right’ to play has been strongly defended in Western and English-speaking societies, and is informed by decades of research. The ‘nursery tradition’ or ‘play pedagogy’ identified by authors such as Anning (1997) masks the apparently seamless marriage of two quite disparate perspectives, that of 18th-century Romantics, who celebrated play as the natural activity of childhood, and that of 20th-century developmentalists (Sylva et al., 1976) who identified that play was also, by a happy chance, the most ‘effective’ way for children to learn. The principle of ‘learning through play’ is now enshrined in the curriculum guidance of all parts of the UK, although research has critiqued both the efficacy of many forms of traditional nursery play (Smith, 1994, 2006) and the justifications for viewing play as a universal pedagogic practice (Cannella and Viruru, 1997).

Statutory advice on play reflects the contradictions hinted at above: on the one hand, there is an affirmation of play as the expression of children’s natural inclinations; on the other, there is the view, supported by research, that play is the means to achieve curricular learning outcomes. Neither of these approaches really considers the question of what children want from play, or of what their conscious or unconscious agenda is in playing. A cynic might describe current curriculum and pedagogic guidance as an instruction to adults to replace children’s own play agenda with adult-designed learning intentions, in contradiction of the psychologists’ definitions of play as *spontaneous; not goal-directed; without external rules*; and so on (Smith, 2006).

Taking seriously, through research, children’s own perspectives on play would require researchers to observe their play, not just with a checklist of developmental or cognitive targets, but with the aim of understanding what their own most serious purposes are. Some studies (Brooker, 2006; Corsaro, 1985; Hedges, 2010; Löfdahl, 2006) suggest that much of young children’s play activity is directed towards constructing, maintaining and re-constructing their identities in relation to their peers. Activities undertaken in the company of peers are the means of establishing oneself as bigger or smaller, older or younger, stronger or weaker; of trying out gender roles, and establishing one’s own ranking in peer and friendship groups. Despite the seminal work of Corsaro (1985) it is quite unusual for ‘play research’ to prioritize these areas. Yet if educators and researchers ignore children’s own play agendas, and focus on their own, they will be unable to support the important meanings play holds for children.



## Diversity and play

Early childhood education has traditionally affirmed the importance of respecting diverse cultural beliefs (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000), but practitioners may not always acknowledge the cultural dimensions of play. Play has its roots in peer, class and ethnic cultures, all of which may have very different underlying rules and goals from those in practitioners' minds (Göncü et al., 2006). In consequence, the consensual principle of 'learning through play' may sit uncomfortably alongside cultural beliefs about the nature of children's learning and may contribute to parents' (as well as children's) discomfort on starting school (Brooker, 2003; Gregory and Biarnès, 1994). So the commitment to promote young children's learning by means of the 'potentially instructive' play activities identified by research in this field, which is self-evident to most practitioners, may be far from evident to parents. Listening to both children's and parents' views on this matter is another relatively untouched research area.

*Example 4:* The working-class four-year-olds who were interviewed during their reception year at All Saints' primary (Brooker, 2002, 2003) divided into two groups in their responses to the question 'Why do you think children go to school?'

The English-heritage children affirmed in their first term that 'you come to school to play', but by the following April added that 'you come to school because you have to learn things'. The Bangladeshi children in their first term insisted (contrary to the evidence of the classroom environment) that 'you come to school to study' but by April had changed their minds and said 'you come to school to play'. All the children's responses initially reflected those expressed in interview by their parents. But the English children, over time, appeared to acquire the underlying message of the classroom culture ('you will learn by playing'), while the Bangladeshi children had instead acquired only the overt message, 'you are here to play [not to work]', and were much slower to tune in to the pedagogic practice of the school.

For Bourdieu, Bangladeshi children's successful re-formulation, over time, of their family beliefs into a version of an English early years' orthodoxy might be described as an act of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), the term used for 'the power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force' (1977: 4). A pedagogy of play could be said to offer an excellent smokescreen for the exercise of power over families as well as children; at the very least it makes it possible for practitioners, *knowing what families want*, to ignore their wishes because they themselves *know what is best* for children.

## Understanding culture

Understandings of multiculturalism in recent years, within education and in society at large, have informed current curricula, so that it is generally a statutory requirement for all children to be offered the experience of 'belonging' in their educational setting (DCSF, 2008), and for all to see their culture reflected in the curriculum and in classroom resources (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000). Curriculum guidance, and improved professional development, have eliminated some of the unintended racism described in earlier classroom research (Biggs and Edwards, 1992; Huss-Keeler, 1997).

The most helpful way to understand how children's home cultures shape their development may be Michael Cole's description of culture as 'an environment for growing up in' which has been



fashioned by humans (1998: 15). Since all families have implicit or explicit goals for their children's outcomes, the environments they fashion for this purpose, even unconsciously, embody and reflect these goals. Within some cultures this is an environment which prioritises play, rather than work, as the means by which children learn; one which values deference and compliance, rather than assertiveness and challenge; independence rather than interdependence. These cultural values are more profound and more durable than the outward symbols by which we identify them: the 'cultural' artefacts and practices of communities are only the outward symbols of the belief systems which run *invisibly* through family life, and which contain the families' concerns for children's future outcomes as well as for their present well-being. It is these underlying goals and values, rather than the superficial expression of them, which matter to families and which 'count' when children bring them to school. In Bourdieu's terminology (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), they are 'embodied' in the young child as part of the *habitus*, a concept which has proved its usefulness as a descriptive tool in research (Brooker, 2002; Comber, 2000; Connolly et al., 2009) but is now rarely employed. Perhaps the future research agenda should focus on these values.

### *Perfecting pedagogy: How do children learn?*

One of the most prominent research issues in recent years has concerned the types of early childhood pedagogy found to be 'effective' or 'appropriate' (Anning, 1998). In most cases the nature of the pedagogy has been hard to separate from the content of the curriculum (as in the case of High/Scope: Schweinhart et al., 1993), so that theories of pedagogic practice have drawn on many different curricula (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). By identifying something like an optimal 'balance' of adult-initiated and child-initiated activities, the EPPE and REPEY studies (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Sylva et al., 2004) have helped to move the debate about effectiveness beyond the artificial dichotomies of 'formal /informal' or 'exploration/instruction' which had tended to polarize earlier discussions.

As with other constructs, however, the prevailing consensus has been shaped by the limits of researchers' own cultural perspectives. In the UK, the 'normal' range of pedagogical practices is located in a narrow part of a much wider possible continuum, where it is the relative percentages of adult-initiated and child-initiated activity which are debated. The limits to this field become apparent when educators from other countries point out that these curricula downplay the areas of learning that *they* take most seriously – such as developing peer relationships, or grasping the fundamentals of democracy and citizenship (Löfdahl, 2006; Wagner and Einarsdottir, 2006). This view of 'effectiveness', therefore, refers only to effectiveness in achieving particular goals, which may not be shared by all stakeholders. The adoption of a research-informed pedagogy may allow the goals which matter to children and families to be ignored or marginalized.

While building pedagogic practice on research evidence makes good sense, it is clear that rejecting (as a matter of policy) the traditional pedagogic practices of families (which might include copying and memorizing, rote learning and recitation) means rejecting the forms of teaching which many parents prefer, and many children have experienced in their homes. So, this particular link between research and practice prompts further questions for a research agenda:

- If researchers took children and families seriously, wouldn't they inquire more carefully into the ways that learning is offered in the home?
- How can researchers reconcile their own professional expertise and knowledge base with that which informs children's own cultural capital, and the 'funds of knowledge' which they and their parents take pride in?

Children's funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) include not only the cultural expertise they have acquired in their home community, but also their understanding of how learning comes about. Children, like those in Example 4, who start school with the 'wrong' beliefs about the learning process may need help in acquiring what Bernstein (1990) calls the recognition and realisation rules: rules that enable you to be the right kind of learner in the setting, or in Bourdieu's (1986) terms, equip you with the cultural capital of a particular field of practice. Recent research has paid little attention to this issue, and children's own perspectives are rarely sought. It is another area where 'listening to children' is not widely practised.

### *Taking participation seriously*

Another approach to questions of pedagogy is Rogoff's (1990) account of the learning process as the transformation of participation in cultural activities, by means of 'guided' participation supported by peers and adults. This definition links with an earlier question: what culture is constructed within preschool settings, and what activities does this culture promote? In making 'environments for growing up in' (Cole, 1998: 15) which construct pre-school children as immature people whose principal role is to play, within a specialized environment – small furniture, cuddly toys, colourful replicas of real-world artefacts, plastic scissors that don't actually cut – have educators created environments that are alien to the world children experience in their homes and neighbourhoods? A further example draws on the early home experiences of English and Bangladeshi children in the All Saints' study (Brooker, 2002).

*Example 5:* In interviews with parents all the English children were described as 'helping' in the home, and many were described as 'washing up'. But observations in the homes showed that they were not actually allowed to handle knives and plates while washing up, and their parents often washed the same dishes again afterwards, so their 'helping' appeared to be a form of pretend play, or simple indulgence. The Bangladeshi children from the same class were described by their parents in interviews as 'not helping' – 'they are too young to help' – but observations in their homes showed them using sharp knives while preparing food alongside their parents, as well as comforting babies and helping to dress younger siblings.

Parents' perceptions explain these apparently contradictory findings. Children are not viewed as 'helping' adults if it is their normal role as a member of the family and community to take part in activities: an individual only 'helps' other family members by assisting in *their* tasks, not by participating in *shared* tasks for which they have responsibility. Similarly, if a preschool child's task is simply to play, then 'playing at helping' is encouraged. The outcome of these contrasting experiences of 'cultural activities', however, was that some children were understood as contributing to the household management, while others were not expected to. Both groups of children were acquiring the knowledge, skills and expectations of their home culture through participation, but the cultures whose activities were being mediated were as different as the cultural tools through which the mediation took effect.

### *Following children's interests*

A final commonplace of early childhood discourses which merits attention is the support for 'building on children's interests'. This principle, which appears to align with a view of learning which is based on play, respectful of home cultures and effective in bringing about the desirable outcomes of preschool, is widely viewed as meeting the needs of children. But it also seems to imply that the

nature of these interests can be readily identified, generally through observation. Generically, young children are seen to be interested in the activities they are offered in a play-based curriculum, so that such a curriculum may be said to 'take children seriously'. This fundamental principle may however be less simple than it seems. It deserves examination because it assumes that some objects or activities are of intrinsic interest to children, and that adults making provision for early education are supplying those very things – the contents of the 'environment for growing up in' typically provided by early childhood settings.

Reference to individual children's interests, the basis of much nursery planning, recalls Bruner's thoughtful observation that 'We get interested in what we get good at. In general it is difficult to sustain interest in an activity unless one achieves some degree of competence' (1966: 118). The starting point for both the interest and the competence, in both home and school settings, may be an adult's decision to 'interest' children in some topic of their own choosing, and support them in acquiring the knowledge and skills to master it. Few children's interests arise from innate tendencies; most are introduced by adults, although different children will pursue them more or less enthusiastically. Children, like adults, have the capacity to be interested in anything at all, as Bruner's own curricular and pedagogical projects demonstrated, and the interests that are identified as those of children are frequently the outcomes of home, peer or media cultures. As Wood (2009) has pointed out, young children are intensely interested in the world of adults and their activities, liking to handle adult objects of power such as car keys, remote controls and mobile phones (rather than plastic toys), to eavesdrop on adult conversations, and to mimic adult behaviours.

It is not hard to envisage how research might explore what children are interested in, beginning by collaborating closely with families, and continuing by offering children in settings the widest range of 'real-world' experiences rather than a diet of activities dependent on specially produced learning materials with their inbuilt curriculum of colours, shapes and snap-together logic. The work of Hedges (2010), for instance, demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between the activities children engage in because they are there in the environment (sand, water, dough) and those which carry significance for them for reasons to do with their lives 'outside'. The reminder that, despite the increase in whole-day care, children's lives are still lived in a real world shared with family and community members, prompts other questions about their interests. Vandenberg (2009b) points out that policy-makers and educators rarely ask what a child is experiencing (or learning) when they are *not* attending a setting, as if this is less important than what is experienced within the setting. Further research might seek to learn what *interests* children as they participate in their home and community environments, and might modify current perspectives on the institutional arrangements that educators make for young children.

## Conclusion

Despite current requirements, in all parts of the UK, to work in partnership with parents, to build a curriculum on children's interests, to provide for learning through playful activities, and to demonstrate respect for diversity, there is a risk that the widely accepted and research-based consensus on effectiveness in early education and care may be seen to have provided all the answers that educators, providers and policy-makers need. In these circumstances it is very easy for genuine 'listening' (to both children and parents) to stop, and for children's and parents' participation in decision-making to be marginalized.

These reflections on some taken-for-granted principles of good practice have returned very frequently to ideas of culture, the underpinning theme of the seminar series which prompted them.

This should be no surprise since, by the time educators first encounter children professionally, their interests and dispositions have already been shaped by the 'environment for growing up in' they have experienced. This environment is itself shaped by the habitus of the family, and its position in the local and national community, and by the values and priorities of parents. Children's culture defines their world, as Trevarthen (1998) has demonstrated, and researchers and practitioners who seek to listen to children and families need to 'take culture seriously'. A research agenda for early childhood which forgets this will fall far short of its capabilities.

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