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CATHY NUTBROWN



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Cathy Nutbrown is a Professor of Education at the University of Sheffield. She began her career as a nursery teacher in the 1980s and has since worked with children, parents, teachers and other early childhood educators, in a range of settings and roles.

One of Cathy's key research areas is early literacy work with parents. This has formed a major part of her research over the past 20 years and collaboration with several children and families' charities has led to successful development of early literacy work with families, including work with imprisoned parents.

Maintaining a focus on early childhood education, and the centrality of children's rights, Cathy's research has sought to highlight the importance of high quality experiences for young children. She chaired a year-long Nutbrown Review – providing independent advice for government on early years and childcare qualifications in 2012. Her work has been recognised by the Economic and Social Research Council, with the prize, in 2013, for Research with Outstanding Impact on Society. In the same year, her commitment to the early years was recognised by the Nursery World Lifetime Achievement Award. In January 2018, Cathy became President of Early Education.

She is Editor in Chief of the *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, and author of over 50 publications on aspects of early childhood education; her ten books include *Threads of Thinking* (2011), *Inclusion in the Early Years* (2013) and *Early Childhood Education: History, Philosophy and Experience* (2014).



PREFACE

Throughout the writing of this book, the international climate has been volatile. The news has been full of political and economic uncertainties, and accounts of war, persecution, suffering, extremism, and in the UK the leaving of the European Union has been the ever-present theme.

Against this international backdrop, some families' lives have been changed forever following the horrors of attacks in Manchester and Borough Market and the Grenfell Tower fire, to name just three closer to home. Yet the education of young children continues; day to day practices continue, and the need persists, to continue to understand all we can about young children's learning and how their world is affected by so many different circumstances and events. So the architecture and furnishings of this book were assembled during a year when the media daily reported difficulty and challenge, and these events have inevitably influenced the way in which I read the many research studies published since the year 2000, and how I have interpreted them. Living through these times inevitably makes us question what is right, what we might do, and how we might respond to the terrors that seem to surround us. Bubbling to the surface throughout this book are the things that I have come to believe *matter*, more and more, and are important research contributions to improving the lives and learning experiences of young children.

Though this book has no explicit political purpose *per se*, its conception and design cannot but reflect something of my own politics (as I set out in Chapter 1); and indeed, I had from the outset of planning a conviction that I could only start with children's rights, and this seems still to be the proper place to start, not least when around the world children's rights are being abused and disregarded. Political sluggishness (if not inertia) is found in many countries in relation to properly understanding and meeting the needs of young children and their families, who are suffering from hunger and famine, from the effects of war, from seriously flawed educational policies and from over assessment. Internationally, we see many instances where young children's rights are still appallingly neglected – en masse and individually. And this is why children's rights research has to be an important and fundamental starting point, and overarching theme of this book.

This book takes an international perspective on the many themes it discusses and as such, does not seek to offer a comprehensive discussion of UK research; however, whilst I was writing this book the *BERA-TACTYC Early Childhood Research Review 2003–2017* (Payler and Wood, 2017) was published, and this provides an excellent position statement on British research, which covers a similar period to this book, on a number of themes, highlighting strengths and areas where work is still needed. Throughout the book, I make reference to this document to identify similarities and differences in the research position in the UK and internationally.

The themes discussed in the chapters of this book have been identified by searches of educational databases and key peer-reviewed early education journals. Priority has been given to papers published, in English, in peer-reviewed journals between 2000 and 2017. These criteria, and the space available, have inevitably limited what could be included, as decisions about the focus and extent of each chapter were made.

The chapters of this book can be read individually, they stand alone. However, the overarching themes of the book remain the collective contribution that as researchers we can make when we seek to address the big issues of children's lives which impact on their learning. The research discussed in these pages highlights the effect of social injustice on children's lives and the importance of tackling and eradicating inequalities if children are to benefit from high quality early childhood education.

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Cathy Nutbrown, Sheffield

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1

RESEARCH THREADS: WEAVING UNDERSTANDINGS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FROM THE 20TH CENTURY

In this first chapter I want to trace some of the threads of research interests which have run through my career and to share some thoughts about how they have been woven together – in a variety of ways. Unlike the rest of the book, this chapter is somewhat autobiographical and brings into the picture the foci that have had an important impact on me. Looking back over several decades of research in the late 20th, and the early 21st century, I have chosen eight ‘threads’ which have influenced me, as a nursery teacher, as a mother and as an academic in higher education, and together they form a sort of platform for the rest of the book. These threads are:

- young children’s learning
- parents’ roles
- children’s rights
- assessment
- early literacy
- inclusion
- the arts
- history.

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The discoveries of research in each of these areas opened new windows of thinking for me, and stimulated much of my own work. Some threads are stronger than others, and each has its imperfections, but they each illustrate important factors in early childhood education (ECE) policy, practice and research. These research themes form important starting points for some of the research discussed in later chapters in the book.

YOUNG CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Young children are imaginative and capable learners; curricula should match their developmental needs and their patterns of learning.

I want to illustrate this with two of my own accounts that reflect young children's thinking.

‘ A three year old sits on the edge of a river bank. Her toes just touching the gently flowing water. She watches the insects skimming the surface, stares intently at a tiny fish which swims near to her feet. For some twenty minutes this little girl observes patiently. No one knows what she is thinking, but there is no doubt that her diligent study of the environment around her is something which takes up the whole of her being. No one tells her to study the water and the wildlife around her, no one asks her to sit still, to be quiet and to watch. Her interest is fuelled by a natural and instinctive curiosity about the world around her. (Nutbrown, 2011: 3).

John was walking to school with his father. ‘If there's woodwork today ... if there's the woodwork things ... if there is I'm gonna, I'm gonna do my plane. I'm gonna finish the nailing and put on the wings – then I think I can paint it.’

John's father asked, ‘Have you got much to do to it?’

John replied, ‘Could be a morning's work there.’

At four years old John was able to think about what he had done yesterday and plan what he wanted to do in his early years centre that morning. It depended, he knew, on what provision was available that day – on whether the adults made the woodworking bench and tools available as they had done the day before. John's plan was to follow through on something he began the day before, he had plans for how to complete his model plane and was thinking about how long it might take him. He was being consistent, planning his progress through a self-chosen task. What he needed was the right provision – the available equipment and space to enable him to see his plans through. (Nutbrown, 2011: 28)

As a nursery teacher in Sheffield in the mid-1980s, I was privileged to work with two women who are responsible for my discovery of this very first thread, and for it being

woven into my own learning and research. Ann Hedley was an amazing and inspiring head teacher of a small nursery-infant school, and Ann Sharp was the forward-looking General Adviser for Early Childhood Education in the local authority in Sheffield. They both introduced me to the work of Chris Athey (2007) and so I was able to set up a nursery environment which was effectively a workshop – full of opportunities for children to do, and explore and create. They asked questions and tested out their theories. And it is such a privilege to be with young children learning; as Einstein said: ‘Teaching should be such that what is offered is perceived as a valuable gift and not as a hard duty’ (Stachel, 1987: 17).

And so, this first research thread is about children as capable and tenacious learners who play with, and puzzle over, the stuff of the world. Searching for children’s schematic patterns of learning and creating curricula to support their forms of thought took me on a research journey – where, for a year in the nursery, I worked with note books by my side – watching the children, thinking about how to extend their learning and writing many accounts of their learning. At a time in the UK when there was no state prescribed curriculum for children under five, play was central to the work and so, for that year, I worked with three- and four-year-old builders, architects, authors, pilots, bus drivers, mothers, cooks, artists and the occasional superman. The ideas that relate to this particular thread of research are picked up again in other chapters, including those that consider play, participation, curricula and pedagogy.

PARENTS’ ROLES IN THEIR CHILDREN’S LEARNING

For all our efforts and professionalism, it is parents and families that are the primary and major educators.

It was whilst working as a nursery teacher that I learned – really learned – about the importance of working closely with young children’s parents: the people who put them to bed at night, brought them to school each day, fed them, clothed them, the people who really knew them and loved them in ways that teachers could never hope to match.

Sharing professional knowledge with parents, about child development, and how even very ordinary everyday experiences could be turned into valuable and essential learning opportunities for young children, brought dividends to the children’s experience. And there’s nothing very new about this idea. In 1885, Charlotte Mason was asked by her vicar to make a donation towards St Mark’s Anglican Church in Manningham, Bradford. She did not offer money but suggested that she might give a series of lectures for parents on the education of young children, later published as

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Home Education (Mason, 2008). She pioneered the training of teachers of young children, had strong and innovative views about pedagogy, and of the role of mothers in their children's learning. Charlotte Mason remains for many a pioneer of home education, particularly in the USA.

The nursery where I worked in the early 1980s, was rarely without parents in it and I recall an occasion where a father used our woodwork bench to repair some furniture; a mother borrowed our sewing machine to hem some curtains; and through these and many other small events the children saw the nursery staff and their parents cooperating together and sharing their learning and working space. The nursery for much of the time was one large workshop, with different zones of activity and play. The roles of parents are visited in this book with a reprise of some recent research in chapters on parents, early literacy, languages and digital technologies.

It wasn't always easy work in that little school; this was a poor community where families experienced struggle and difficulty and poverty and desperation: when a baby died tragically, many of the staff tried to support the family. Each day brought its challenges, but at the heart of it was Ann Hedley who brought calm and love to us all. It was in this place that as a young teacher I really learned something about what poverty was, and how circumstances of little money, poor housing, inferior educational opportunity and lack of support, all disadvantage families and limit choices. It was in these circumstances of extreme disadvantage that I came to know that all parents wanted the best for their children, and would do what they could, when they could, to help make that happen. The shocking issues of poverty today are considered in Chapter 6, which reflects on the impact of poverty on children's early education.

During the 1980s, and in no small way due to the work of Ann Sharp, innovative work with parents was well established in Sheffield, including the Manor Home Teaching Project, the Mosborough Townships Under Fives Service, home visiting by most nursery teachers in 62 nursery classes around the city, a Bilingual Home Teaching Project in five Sheffield communities, and several parental learning and involvement initiatives (including a course for parents at the local Teachers' Centre). Recent research into some of these themes is considered in chapters focusing on research with parents (Chapter 7), inclusion and diversity (Chapter 8), multi-professional and inter-disciplinary working (Chapter 9), early literacy (Chapter 14), and languages (Chapter 15). For my part, the Sheffield Early Literacy Development Project (Hannon et al., 1990) was the biggest event in my own early professional learning: it began one rainy February day in 1989 when Ann Sharp introduced me to Peter Hannon, who was about to embark on a pilot study involving work with parents to promote their children's early literacy. Together with Jo Weinberger we worked with families in one school in Sheffield, trying out different ways of sharing our ideas of early literacy development. This second thread, of home visiting, sharing professional knowledge with parents, and working from the premise that parents really are their child's first and most enduring teachers was to take me further into the world of

research, into working with families around early learning, and to mark the beginning of my academic career at the University of Sheffield.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Understanding that even the youngest children are equal in personhood to adults has profound implications for how we treat and teach them.

In 1996 – after some eight years of relentless policy initiatives and at the point of widely felt policy overload – I was beginning to feel that education was becoming something that was done *to* children rather than practised *for* or *with* children. It was work with Professor Tricia David and involvement in OMEP – the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education – that were responsible for this third ‘thread’ of research, for I came to realise the vital need to acknowledge and promote children’s rights in the early years. In 1996 it is no exaggeration to say that I was startled at the scant attention paid to these issues, and to how little early childhood educators knew about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and of the part early education should play in realising those rights. I am still dismayed at the way young children’s rights are often denied them – and this is no less true in education. For me, children’s rights are not solely the responsibility of government but of every adult citizen.

Policy in the UK in the early 2000s has addressed issues of rights. *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003), *A Ten Year Childcare Strategy* (DfES, 2004) and even the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2017) can be seen, in some ways, to support the development of the key rights of young children: *prevention* of harm; *provision* of education and services; *protection* from abuse and exploitation; and *participation* in decisions that affect them. But is this enough? Can we honestly say that the basic rights of any human to be protected, consulted and to ‘belong’ is enough? For me, children’s rights have to be central to early education where they learn in environments fit for the purpose, in the company of respectful educators who know they are working with capable young learners, and whilst children’s rights research is the specific focus of Chapter 2, this is an overarching theme throughout the book, and rights issues are to be found in many of the chapters such as play (Chapter 4), poverty (Chapter 6), professionalism (Chapter 10), ethics of working and researching with young children (Chapter 12), languages (Chapter 15), and assessment (Chapter 17). Babies need to be securely attached to their key practitioners and toddlers need opportunities to learn in the company of older children (Page, 2016).

One of the most moving sights that I saw when working with artists and early years settings in Doncaster, England (Nutbrown and Jones, 2006) was a four-year-old boy in a day care setting, lovingly and patiently stroking the back of a 15-month-old toddler who was watching their game. Gently and intuitively, this four-year-old provided just that extra something: the necessary reassurance that it was OK to be part of this noisy game.

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Rights include the right to belong, to behave as young and contributing citizens in a community of young learners, and rights for the youngest of children to the most experienced and well-educated educators. The youngest children have a right to learn in the company of highly educated adults, and that is why it is a rich privilege to work in higher education and see women and men progress from undergraduate through to Masters and Doctoral degrees, with the focus of their studies on young children, their lives and their learning. Fundamental to ensuring children's rights in early education is the cognate principle that those who work with them have, themselves, opportunities to learn and think and question. *Well educated educators is a matter of 'right' for children* (see Chapter 11).

And so this 'thread' has woven its way through all my research and teaching and is a fundamental basis from which other research threads have been spun.

ASSESSMENT

Our systems of assessment are traditionally and credentially based on what children *cannot* do rather than on a celebration of their achievement.

In 1996 policy changes in early childhood education were not quite 'two-a-penny' but at least one every six months, and one policy which worried many was the imposition of state testing of four-year-olds. But what happened seven years later sent warning shots across the bows of all who believed that play should be at the core of early childhood education. In 1996, the government published *Nursery Education: Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on Entering Compulsory Education* (Oh what a title!), and this marked a distinct policy shift, stressing outcomes *above* process and *experience*. It was clear that the centrality of play in the early years had been systematically dismantled.

Children's progress will be at different rates and individual achievement will vary. However, all children should be able to follow a curriculum which enables them to make maximum progress towards the outcomes. Children's whose achievements exceed the desirable outcomes should be provided with opportunities which extend their knowledge, understanding and skills. ... Other children will require continued support for achieving all or some of the outcomes after entering compulsory education. (SCAA, 1996: 1)

This heralded Baseline Assessment, which sought to reduce the rich learning in early childhood settings to a series of ticks in boxes on assessment sheets. For it was then becoming clear in this altered policy environment that the prevailing view in government was that outcomes could only be determined by measurement. So in 1997 we saw the first government imposed assessment of four-year-old children, as they entered school. And the battle about assessing young children has raged ever since.

Baseline Assessment has two purposes: to provide information to help teachers plan effectively to meet children's individual learning needs; to measure children's attainment, using one or more numerical outcomes which can be used in later value-added analyses of children's progress ...

All children aged 4 or 5, admitted to a primary school ... should be assessed. Assessment will be a requirement regardless of whether children attend full- or part-time, or whether they enter reception class or Year 1 ...

All schemes must include assessments of children's speaking and listening, reading and writing (these are aspects of language and literacy specified in the Desirable Outcomes), mathematics, and personal and social development. (SCAA, 1997: 2–8)

This was a flawed policy from the start, and was finally abandoned in 2002, though not before a huge amount of time, energy and money was wasted. Baseline Assessment put many reception teachers at the time in a position where their required practice ran counter to their better professional judgement in testing and reporting on their young pupils' performances in those tests. Little did we know, when Baseline Assessment was withdrawn in 2002, that there would be an attempt to resurrect this misguided policy in 2015 – with similar flaws and controversies and (again) an attempt to make one instrument provide information for teaching and learning *and* hold schools accountable for the achievement of the children that attend. I was prompted, in 2016, to write:

Teachers in reception classes do not need a commercial assessment instrument to assess the learning of the children they work with. The 'broader assessments of children's development' that the government acknowledges teachers undertake are part of the business of daily teaching and learning in early childhood education. It's what teachers do – not with tests or a commercial package – but based on their own sound knowledge of high quality early years teaching. (Nutbrown, 2016)

The Better Without Baseline campaign (www.betterwithoutbaseline.org.uk) argued strongly and eloquently against this costly policy. Sadly, though there has been a pause, the policy drive towards Baseline Assessment is not over: a new consultation took place in March 2017, and the outcome now favours assessment at four years old. Unfortunately, despite practice and research attesting to the position that one-off assessments tell teachers nothing that they don't already know through their ongoing learning and teaching encounters with them, national policy insists on wasting teachers' time and ever-shrinking financial resources on ticking boxes to find out what is in young children's heads.

Baseline assessment created – I think for the first time – *failing* four-year-olds. To reiterate what seems obvious to me: assessment should show what children know and can do rather than what they can't yet do. And this minimalist approach to assessing young children's learning was an affront. Early education should be an orienteering

expedition, not a route march, and assessment should be like conversations at different checkpoints along an interesting and personal journey with others to share the pleasure.

I suggest that there are three kinds of assessment: assessment for teaching and learning, assessment for management and accountability, and assessment for research. We need to be careful that the right tools are used for each and that the most important of these – assessment for teaching and learning – pays due respect to the riches of young minds. How can educators ensure that the efforts of *all* children are recognised? Children need adults who understand their learning and are insightful enough to try, respectfully, to show recognition of children's efforts and achievements, and to celebrate the success that children themselves identify. These themes are further considered in Chapter 17.

Recognition means acknowledgment of children's chosen goals and of their achievements as well as their needs, and a readiness to admit to their humanity, their tenacity, their rights, their language, their culture, their learning and their love.

EARLY 'EMERGENT' LITERACY

Children 'read' their environment from their first moments; literacy should be no less natural – no less pleasurable.

Beginning in 1995, the Raising Early Achievement in Literacy (REAL) Project was a major study initiated by the School of Education at the University of Sheffield, and a significant development for the city of Sheffield. A long-term study which at one point involved over 50 schools and centres, the REAL Project aimed to develop meaningful ways of working with parents to promote the literacy development of their preschool children (and particularly those likely to have difficulties in the early years of school) and to improve their literacy development at school entry and afterwards.

Peter Hannon's direction of the project and partnership with schools, the university and the local authorities brought together hundreds of people all intent, in their different ways, on radically developing the systematic means to support families' participation in their children's early literacy development. We identified a broad conceptual framework which helped us to summarise parents' key roles in early literacy: providing *Opportunities*, showing *Recognition* of literacy achievements, *Interaction* around literacy events, and being *Models* of adult users of print. When the project ended 18 months later, parents told us that they truly valued being part of the work (Nutbrown et al., 2005).

Many people are part of this thread. The REAL Project involved hundreds of people: some 300 families, over 50 schools, over 100 teachers and nursery nurses, and countless other professionals (policy-makers, academics, secretaries,) who helped us at different points during the life of the Project. Some of the people who were key to this 'thread' were the project teachers: week after week for 18 months they visited parents

and their children in their own homes, loaned literacy resources, planned interesting events and meetings for small groups of families and exchanged letters and cards with the children.

We learned that *all* children do some literacy activity at home (Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003) and – despite other research to the contrary – we learned that many fathers have active involvement in their children’s early literacy development (Morgan et al., 2009). The studies relating to this thread of research are considered in Chapters 7 and 14, on parents and ECE, and on early literacy development respectively.

INCLUSION

Early childhood education provides the ground in which children will enjoy – and hence make an ideology of – a sense of inclusion.

Respectful educators will include all children – not just children who are easy to work with, obliging, endearing, clean, pretty, articulate, capable, but every child – respecting them for who they are, respecting their language, their culture, their history, their family, their abilities, their needs, their name, their ways and their very essence. (Nutbrown, 1996: 54)

My ‘thread’ of inclusion – born directly, I now see, out of my concern for issues of rights in early childhood education – is fundamental to early childhood education. If we think about inclusion, often the first things that come to mind are issues of exclusion – who is *not* included – along with instances of learning difficulty and disability. Any exploration of what it might mean for settings actively to pursue the inclusion of all young children through approaches to curriculum and pedagogy should have, as their very core, the ethos of inclusion (Clough and Nutbrown, 2004). Inclusive educators and inclusive settings must examine their practices in terms of how the voices of *all* the children in those settings are listened to and how each and every child they work with could be said to be included – included as respected and belonging citizens of their early years communities (Nutbrown and Clough, 2004). Because inclusive *policies* are, in fact, only realised in acts of inclusive *practices*, *what* happens and *how* children are enabled to *belong* are crucial.

When we can see young children as citizens – in their settings, their communities and society – then perhaps we can call ourselves *inclusive*. Early childhood education practice and research has a strong thread of inclusion of children, inclusion of parents and inclusion of practitioners. But ultimately, fundamentally, and in all cases, inclusion is a matter of simple respect: respect for children, for families and for the people who work with and for them. and this research theme is further considered in Chapters 6 and 8, on poverty research, and on inclusion and diversity in ECE respectively.

Barbara Hepworth's words have long inspired me – she wrote:

Perhaps what one wants to say is formed in childhood and the rest of one's life is spent trying to say it. (Hepworth, 1985: 3)

We need education and care in the early years that help children learn the importance of belonging, and of citizenship, so that the beliefs and values they form in childhood last them for the rest of their lives. And there remains a job to be done, by practitioners and policy-makers, and also, in the context of this book, by early childhood education researchers.

THE ARTS

Our primary sense of the world is aesthetic and our curricula for young children should maximise this essential characteristic.

Elliott Eisner wrote:

The arts inform as well as stimulate, they challenge as well as satisfy. Their location is not limited to galleries, concert halls and theatres. Their home can be found wherever humans choose to have attentive and vital intercourse with life itself. This is, perhaps, the largest lesson that the arts in education can teach, the lesson that life itself can be led as a work of art. In so doing the maker himself or herself is remade. The remaking, this re-creation is at the heart of the process of education. (Eisner, 1998: 56)

There is common agreement that Christian Schiller, Robin Tanner and Alec Clegg (born between 1885 and 1909) from the 1920s onwards were amongst the grand architects of an Education and the Arts movement in the UK. Informed, no doubt, by the work of Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel, they spoke and worked in a way that no one had done before in promoting a change in primary education which was radical and far reaching. From around 1930, Alec Clegg emphasised the importance of creativity in education, pioneering in-service courses for teachers, and between 1930 and 1974 he personally visited hundreds of schools, talking with teachers about their work and developing an extensive collection of children's art work. He noted that:

there are two kinds of education: the education of the mind by imparting facts and teaching skills, and the education of the spirit, and the material to be worked on here is the child's loves and hates, hopes and fears, or in other terms, courage, integrity, compassion and other great human qualities. (Clegg, 1972: 23)

In 1977 HMI (Her Majesty's Inspector) Robin Tanner, in a lecture to teachers held in the University of Sheffield, said:

children's sense of awe and wonder at the phenomena of the natural world should be central to their learning and ... in every school education should be primarily through the arts.

Because of the work of Clegg, Tanner and Schiller and others more recently – particularly in Creative Partnerships and other Arts Council England initiatives – there is a chorus running through recent history which lauds the arts and promotes creativity and discovery as essentials in learning. New generations somehow have to rediscover this truth, but the recurrent theme of arts and creativity in early education bears testimony to what is, I believe, an indisputable truth, that it is the arts which remind us of our humanity and the arts which offer us ways of expressing that humanity to others (Dissanayake, 1995; Nutbrown, 2013).

HISTORY

As professionals, we inherit traditions of practice, and we should be critically aware of where we have come from in order to justify our future acts.

Critical engagement with historical ideas and developments, influences on early childhood education, issues of policy development and implementation, and the impact of research on policy are essential. We can see where early childhood education has come from and where present policies fit, or do not fit, with the lessons of history. Awareness of the ways in which childhood has been constructed throughout recent history helps us to critique policies which have moved from the central aim of 'nurturing childhood' to a situation where 'raising educational achievement' is the main goal. With critical awareness we can also see how new policy-imposed terminologies have influenced early childhood practice.

Sheffield's history of early education is typical of many cities in the north of England. The city's Nursery Education Guidelines from 1987 include this overview:

Nursery Education began in this country at the beginning of [this 20th] Century at the instigation of people who were concerned about the plight of children in industrial cities: Sheffield children were typical of these. The social climate was such that by the late 1920s Sheffield was beginning to suffer in the Depression: unemployment was rife and poverty was very real. In the centre of the city buildings consisted of many terraced houses and factories, with little opportunity for the children to grow and develop in a healthy environment.

12 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

The local Women Councillors (in Sheffield) decided to fight for a nursery school and, although it was an uphill battle Denby Street Nursery School was opened in 1928 based on the McMillan open-shelter type. It was open from 8.30 am to 5.00 pm and holidays. There was practically no money, very little equipment and a skeleton staff.

The emphasis was on physical care. The children were fed, washed, rested and loved. The food was simple and plentiful – buttered rusks, dripping toast, hash stew, shepherd's pie, lentil roast, milk puddings, custard and fruit and steamed puddings. The nurse and doctor visited regularly. Cod liver oil was administered and children monitored for impetigo, rickets, poor eyesight, etc. School became a haven especially if children were from families living in only one room, although the schools were very careful not to usurp the home.

Outdoor play was robust and skilful as many of the children had played in the streets from a very young age. The imaginative play – particularly domestic play – was very real. The children were independent, practical, capable and resilient, many having to be so from a very young age, especially if they came from a large family. (Sheffield Local Authority, 1987: 2–3)

Learning from the past is one way of trying to ensure that new policies and investment do not repeat the mistakes of previous generations. But, as we know, policy-makers do not always learn from the past and ideas sometimes seem to return, are seemingly reinvented and appear in 'new clothes' but nevertheless bear distinctly familiar shapes (even if bringing new intentions) (Nutbrown and Clough, 2014).

Most recently, as has been the case over the centuries, many people have looked to the development of early years provision as a way of addressing (at least partially) social, economic and thus political difficulties (McMillan, 1925; Montessori, 1962; Field, 2010; Allen, 2011). We could identify the work of Robert Owen (1920) as pioneering provision that offered workplace education and care ensuring children learned whilst their parents worked. Alongside schooling for children was housing for workers and their families and classes in health and cooking for parents. Owen's work in New Lanark can be seen as the forerunner of Sure Start Centres, where provision for families connected to ensure children were safe and learning, and workers had a home and a reasonable (if not generous) wage.

Through the centuries, the work of many early childhood pioneers contributed to the weaving of a rich tapestry of understanding about young children's learning – and some of the threads I have woven in this chapter. This is something I shall return to towards the end of the book in Chapter 18. The point here is that whilst those who have their place in history made important contributions, it is up to us, and the researchers and practitioners of today, to take their work and craft it into our own work today. For as Christian Schiller wrote:

There have been great men and great women whose vision and action have inspired a generation ... But they pass away – and their ideas pass with them unless these ideas are fashioned into new forms which reflect new circumstances and stand the test of new practices in the contemporary scene. The pioneers take such ideas and refashion and temper them in their daily work ... Patiently, day after day, week after week, year after year, they make the pathway from the past, through the present towards the future. (1951: xvii, in Griffin Beale, 1979: 57)

SOME PRINCIPLES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

I want to conclude this introductory chapter by moving from the threads of research which have inspired me, to identify some principles for early childhood education.

YOUNG CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Young children are imaginative and capable learners – curricula should match their developmental needs and their patterns of learning.

We need to work with children's developmental stages, not battle against them. Research has repeatedly shown that real learning takes time, and the best way to help children be successful learners when they are five is to allow them to be three when they are three and four when they are four; rushing them on – too fast – means some will get left behind. Learning, as Vygotsky reminds us, is a social process, brought about when people communicate and test out and talk together. (We can only imagine the contribution his work would have made to our understanding if he had not died at the age of 38 years.)

PARENTS' ROLES

Early childhood educators need opportunities to share their pedagogy with parents in order to maximise opportunities for all young children.

Chris Athey (2007) argued that parents, professionals and pedagogy together were the three ingredients to support young children's thinking. From my own work and that of others found in this book, we know that parents are interested in their children and want to do all they can to help them. And they welcome the opportunity to learn more about how they might help.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Building early childhood education on the basis of children's rights will promote high quality experiences for all children.

In 1923, shortly before her death at the age of 81, Charlotte Mason wrote about children's rights in early education; written in 1922, her 'Principles of Education' (Mason, 1992) have also been referred to as a child's 'Bill of Rights', arguing for the involvement of parents, for learning outdoors, for high quality books and for a challenging and interesting curriculum: 'it stultifies a child to bring down his world to the child's level', she wrote (Mason, 1992: xxix).

Yet, as Chapter 2 demonstrates, a century on, those who work with young children still do not know enough about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and their part in realising those rights for every child, and governments still have much to do. It is the responsibility of every adult to consider their role in supporting and upholding children's rights.

ASSESSMENT

Measurement and testing alone teach nothing; we need honest assessment for learning, and sensitive tools to identify what babies and toddlers and young children can do, and which do rich justice to their learning and their energy.

Despite research into the importance of appropriate assessment, despite numerous accounts of children learning creatively and holistically, we still have children who are over tested – certainly in England. The *fine mesh* of learning requires detailed, ongoing and sensitive observations of children as they play. The deep riches of children's learning can only be understood by patient, reflective adults who watch patiently and work hard to interpret what they see.

EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Literacy is key to learning – a key to the rest of the curriculum. Knowing the pleasure of the written word is an essential foundation for formal teaching.

We know from Yetta Goodman's work (1986) that young children need to understand something of how useful reading and writing are – the joy of books, rhymes and stories and the power of the written word – before they are formally taught segmented letters and sounds. Literacy *pleasure* comes first – and much of it can begin at home.

INCLUSION

Early education at its best is inclusive education, giving young children and their families a sense of belonging, of a citizenship worthy of the name, and of their own value in their learning communities.

These truths seem to me essential if children are to live in a future where the contribution of *all, everyone*, is valued. And I hold to a view of inclusion as a matter of respect and belonging for everyone – not confined solely to issues related to disability or learning difficulty but concerned with the broad range of issues that divide communities and nations. And as Comenius wrote in *The Great Didactic* in the 1600s:

‘ We are all citizens of one world, we are all of one blood. To hate a man because he was born in another country, because he speaks a different language, or because he takes a different view on this subject or that, is a great folly. Desist, I implore you, for we are all equally human. ... Let us have but one end in view, the welfare of humanity; and let us put aside all selfishness in considerations of language, nationality, or religion. (Comenius, [1657] 1963: 91)

Different views and practices may be foreign to us, but understanding how they came to be puts us in a position to understand, or to challenge.

THE ARTS

The arts are an expression of our humanity – the arts can enhance children’s learning in all aspects of their development and must be central to any early childhood curriculum.

Children need to work with artists – dancers, painters, musicians – and to see how new and amazing things can be created and enjoyed – they need to practise the skill of connoisseurship. And as Elliot Eisner reminded me when we viewed Egyptian jewellery in the Ulster Museum, *human beings must create things – it reminds us that we are human ...* Early education needs to adopt a pedagogy of the arts, and allow young children’s creativity to flow and flourish. International research in this area is sadly lacking and as researchers we need to do more to enhance understanding of young children’s engagement in the arts.

HISTORY

We need to understand the history of early childhood education because it provides a ‘rootedness’ to our work.

It means we are building our work on solid ground and travelling along well-trodden paths. We can be inspired by some whose ideas came, as it were, before their time but yet were not reticent in articulating or realising their ideas. History can remind us that it is worth working for the things you believe in, and the study of history shows how important it is to record ideas and practices for those who follow to ponder.

History also reminds us that we all need others to help us do our work, that no one can stand alone.

But the important thing in early childhood education is not what Susan Isaacs, or Charlotte Mason or Katherine Bathurst might have said or done (inspiring though they were): the important thing is what those who live with, or work with and for young children in our present times and settings say and do. The important thing is that the new pioneers, those working in schools and nurseries and children's centres and elsewhere in the pursuit of the best provision for young children, take these ideas *into the future* (as Schiller would say) *and make them their own*. There is no better tribute to those who have gone than to remould, revisit and revise their ideas for a new today. This is why, in reviewing some of the most recent research in early childhood education, I reflect (in Chapter 18) on how historical perspectives have informed present practice.

Whilst I have presented these threads as distinct, they all in reality come together in an unfinished and imperfect weave – perhaps an untidy tangle! – but they *do* connect. Throughout this book there is a sense of connection, of relationships and of interaction between researchers and their participants. Connection and collaboration with other human beings is essential for every one of us; relationships feed our brain and nourish our intellect and our souls, and it is no different for young children. Children need to be able to make connections with other children and with close, sensitive, caring, loving adults – they need to learn in company with others. Frank Smith once wrote that 'we learn from the company we keep' (Smith, 1987: 9); and when researchers keep company with children, their families and their educators, new learning and new understanding bursts out from multiple perspectives. This book shows us what some researchers working around the world, in more recent times since the year 2000, have contributed to the field of early childhood education.

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