

Chapter 17

**The spirit of the child inspires learning in the community: how
can we balance this promise with the politics and practise
of education ?**

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Abstract

Our contributors offer inspiring stories -- from psychology of early childhood and teaching experience that appreciates the spiritual values that young children affirm in shared enjoyment of life. We confirm that every child has motives of an affectionate learner, seeking companions for an active and imaginative life. Each boy and girl, with their individual characters and interests, wants to take part in the 'common sense' world of a community with its treasured moral and artistic values, sharing joy in discovery of a natural and meaningful world. They do not just need to be taught how to use material possessions, and how to obey social and cultural rules. We seek principles for early education and care to support responsive teachers in the years before formal school begins. Scotland's kindergarten tradition and its contemporary policies for transition to school offer a distinguished history of curriculum reformation, following the spirit of the child.

Keywords:

Principles, policy, practices, communication of understanding, sharing creativity, supportive education, intimate playful learning, the child's way, transition to school, Scotland's way.

Motives of child development and learning

Early conviviality, acquiring common sense in intimate play, with mutual trust

"Against the assumption that the Self is at least primarily a 'knowing subject', I have maintained that its subjecthood is a derivative and negative aspect of its agency. This corresponds to the fact that most of our knowledge, and all our primary knowledge, arises as an aspect of activities which have practical, not theoretical objectives; and that it is this knowledge, itself an aspect of action, to which all reflective theory must refer. Against the assumption that the Self is an isolated individual, I have set the view that the Self is a *person*, and that personal existence is *constituted* by the relation of persons."

(Macmurray 1959, Introductory to *The Self As Agent*, pp.11-12, italicised words as in the original)

All a clever human mind contributes to their culture is founded on the readiness of the child for convivial activity -- an innate capacity for imitation of purposes with feelings and for learning in companionship with others. A newborn infant searches for eye-to-eye contact with a person who offers attention to them, and the baby can imitate many expressions, and then repeat them to evoke a confirming response. We are born to learn in dialogue.

This foundation for companionship of states of life in movement, imaging or 'mirroring' the correspondence of body parts, is the inborn power of our animate self. It requires no learned explanation or 'theory of mind'. It is not acquired by a process of conditioning of appetitive reflexes. It is an 'innate sympathy', a creative feeling for relating that seeks to complement and contribute to what other human beings experience. Its vitality has an acute sense of time for the universal rhythms that guide human body movement, a pulse of excitation which originates in the brain, many months before a child is born. At birth the child, if alert and contented, is willing to share small projects of imaginative action, which require serial ordering of movements in compositions with narrative form. They are projects to be carried out with feeling, and stories to be told.

A rapid maturation of visual awareness in the first few weeks after birth transform the first efforts at dialogue into well-formed cooperative 'proto-conversations' with phases animated

as 'introduction', 'development', 'climax' and 'resolution' (Bateson 1979, Malloch and Trevarthen 2010; Delafield-Butt and Trevarthen, 2015). Now the baby is capable of sharing a mother's story of their mutual interest, and can tell his or her own version of what is happening. As Jerome Bruner discovered, that is the way each of us claim and defend our place in society, by telling our personal life story (Bruner 2003). A young child at school, or a post-graduate student at University, wants teachers that understand this ambition to take an honourable role or place in a meaningful world. Learning facts and symbols to recall them is part of the method of doing well with 'common sense', the product of a rich communication before language. As von Bonsdorff and Nye explain, the impulses and feelings of the child expressed in imaginative ways have the essential qualities of artful and spiritual creativity for a lifetime of achievement.

Everything that happens in affectionate life, in play with siblings or peers, and in class with a teacher may be conceived as a 'communicative musicality' shared in the dynamics of human vitality (Erickson 2010). This instinctive rhythm of relating is enriched and preserved by assimilating conventional forms of art, reasoning, or technique. It does not begin with them. The childish language of this talent is expressed in spontaneous activities of play.

The realm of shared invention of possible actions with the feelings they inspire remains the place where great achievements are made in literature, science and mathematics. As an example we quote Einstein, who confessed that his experience of mathematical invention was in sensations of bodily movement, which is a way of saying that, for him, making advances in mathematics was play.

“The words of language, as they are written or spoken, do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought. The psychical entities which seem to serve as elements of thought are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be “voluntarily” reproduced and combined. ...

The above mentioned elements are, in my case, of visual and some of muscular type. Conventional words or other signs have to be sought for laboriously only in a secondary stage, when the mentioned associative play is sufficiently established and can be reproduced at will. ... According to what has been said, the play with the mentioned elements is aimed to be analogous to certain logical connections one is searching for. ... In a stage when words intervene at all, they are, in my case, purely auditive, but they interfere only in a secondary stage as already mentioned.”

(Hadamard 1945, Appendix II, pp.142-143)

This can be read as a concise description of the life of an infant, with an 'unspeakable' consciousness of life in movement, including impulses and pleasures that are shared with companions of all ages. We are not only born with communicative musicality, we feel mathematical forms that can be discovered in our moving.

Moral foundations of human culture in infant care and education

Kurth and Narvaez describe how protection and education of early life in an 'evolved developmental niche' of intelligent group care supports the growth of the human brain and mind born in an early stage of its long development. Adaptations of a child born so immature, and of adults, especially loving parents, who give essential protection and support, show the way to a life of sympathetic relationships and shared responsibility in a whole society, and build strength of character in individuals. Need for intimate attention and care and the benefits of an established and stable parenting, as well as creative participation in a familiar community with its cultivated environment and habits has evolved to transmit cultural understanding through countless generations. It needs a long period of social play in a protected habitat with intimate communication of inner needs and shared creation of knowledge and skills.

Group care in the modern world is changing. Family life is transformed and new artificial competences are required early in the life of children, to fit the regulations of mobility, of access to the natural world, and for use of processed habitations and food, and methods of sanitation and health care. Exaggeration of these regulations and restrictions in relationships and experience can lead to serious disorders of behaviour and self-regulation, which require special compensation to recover the inherent talents for a shared life.

Policies for education that respond to the spirit of the child

Humanising the curriculum of symbolic and industrial education, and its testing.

As recorded in Chapter 2, throughout the recorded history of Europe and the colonial world it has created, there has been a conflict of purposes in early child education. On one hand, there were those eager to formulate a curriculum of instruction that will lead an impressionable

young mind to mastery of what the Romans called the 'trivium' of formal knowledge -- 'grammar, logic and rhetoric', as training for literary and mathematical skills of a 'free man' in a rich industrial culture. On the other hand are the 'educational reformers' who have strived to liberate the impulses of the young person to share a life of discovery and mastery of skills (Quick 1894). In the past 300 years, since the industrial revolution this battle has led defenders of the early years to pronounce humanistic rules for rich and productive teaching practice that strengthens the community

The crucible of our thinking about education and care for early years is the small northern nation of Scotland. The origins of this book lie in a struggle to combat local policy which has sought to make swingeing cuts in the face of the top-down austerity policies of recent years, choosing the non-mandatory elements of the child's early learning journey to make savings.

Now Scottish Government seeks to increase the offer of early learning and childcare to hours equivalent to the primary school day and is making budget available to do this. Scotland's child-garden tradition combined with its contemporary guidance on pre-birth to three and its Early Level 3 to 6 of the Curriculum for Excellence 3 to 18 (Scottish Government 2007), embraces both early learning and care, in the years before school and the first years of primary school, by espousing responsive, play-based child-led approaches supported by well-qualified staff through their relationships with children and their families. The policy promise of early years curriculum transformation has, however, proved to be fragile, especially in the early years of primary education, and in need of stronger articulation. *Building the Ambition* (Scottish Government 2014) and *Getting it Right for Every Child* (Scottish Government 2017) are each strong policy initiatives which, along with the *Early Level of the Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Government 2007) could achieve this transformation with the right mix of staffing and appropriate pedagogies. We believe that the principles we seek to promote in Scotland have international relevance in contemporary changes in early childhood policy and practice.

The collective endeavor of our authors leads to the principles put forward in this book and summarised in Box 1. They place the child at the centre of discovery, appreciated as a non-verbal actor rich with a zest for learning who can, with the right attention and attuned interest and support, energise learning and bring together a community in shared interest and love of companionship. Recognition of the natural, psychobiological zest for a life of knowledge in all children helps steer our professional practice and policy in governance of education and care for early childhood. We must attend intimately and sensitively to individual feelings of confidence or fear, giving reassurance in insecurity and guiding the impulse to rise to a challenge. It is only by responding at this fundamental inter-personal level in trusted relationships that policy can make a difference so our aspirations for the well-being children become realized in ways from which we will all benefit.

[BEGIN BOX HERE]

Box 1. Principles of early childhood education and care advanced in the Child's Curriculum.

1. Professional and expert attention to children's agency and interest,
2. Guided pedagogy that supports this interest and curiosity for learning and for establishing meaningful social relations, through art and companionship in play,
3. Recognition of the value of parents and community in the child's development, and intellectual and policy tools to do this work.
4. And of the importance in our society of sensitive and protected support for children's feelings for each other, for family, and in community, as well as a course of guided learning that brings long-term economic and health benefits.

[END OF BOX]

We have strived in this volume to articulate what matters for children and their families and why it matters, aware that levels of subjective wellbeing of the children and those of their parents are linked significantly to each other (Children's Society, 2014).

The ways in which children are perceived politically will inevitably influence how states provide for them. In the worlds represented here in 'The Child's Curriculum' most children experience a more protected childhood than do many children globally. The intention is not to homogenise childhood experience as if it is uniform – diversities are many – but perhaps a

more generalised comparison can be accepted. For many children worldwide 'work' is prioritised over 'play', whereas in the childhoods of our book, children are privileged in their opportunities to play, and their society benefits.

Punch (2003) writes compellingly about the integration of work, play and school among Bolivian children showing through lively examples how children move easily between child and adult worlds, and although their domestic and agricultural tasks become more complex and demanding as they grow older, "they combine their play with both work and school, by negotiating their own time and space to unite these different activities" (Punch 2003, p.288), rather than as may be argued in Western culture, residing firmly in the protected spaces we make for children. In our worlds Governments focus on investing in early childhood and school education as part of raising a productive future workforce, and these investment arguments are predicated on what Vandebroek calls "the Heckmanisation of early childhood" (Vandebroek, 2017): the curve that shows the route to return for investment is in human capital. We need a critical pedagogy in which promotes a dialectical connection or relation between principles, policy and practice.

We need to avoid taking for granted universalising assumptions about early childhood, to consider what images of the child prevail locally and nationally, keeping in touch with the diversity of childhood and with the variety of perceptions held by different people about any single child. The political desire for investment in early childhood seeks to remedy current inefficiencies and inequalities in our society, in order to prevent inter-generational transmission of worklessness and poverty.

"Ideas about children, as well as about parenthood, are changing too. Constructions of children as knowledge reproducers and redemptive agents, who require shaping and processing by technicians, do not sit comfortably with constructions of the child as an active subject, citizen with rights and co-constructor of knowledge, identity and values". (Moss, 2006, p.39).

We now require a different language, as we have strived to achieve in this book, to accept and support the benefits and hopes of human nature, rather than simply the economic imperative. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2013) and Moss (2016) reject the scripts of 'quality', 'high returns' and 'markets', preferring to talk about early childhood education with a different story and vocabulary using words such as: 'projects', 'potentialities', 'possibilities', 'uncertainty', 'wonder', 'surprise', 'lines of flight', 'images', 'interpretations', 'democracy',

‘experimentation’ – and ‘meaning-making’. With such a language the strictures placed on practitioners and children through policy technologies are more visible and may be challenged.

This book carries many ideals and strong ideas of children’s rights and what is right for children in the family, in the community and in the early childhood settings they occupy. The Child’s Curriculum we advance here aims to:

Celebrate the tradition of excellent early childhood provision in Scotland;

Advance principles of child learning and development for excellent education and care in which the child leads the way;

Embrace the life of the child within family, community and culture;

Promote children's nature and children's rights as inseparable.

As we have demonstrated in this book, now is the time to put a richer theory of the human spirit to action in policy and pedagogy, one that recognizes the powers of human nature, the innate dispositions for culture evident in every human community however developed in literacy and technology, its young members seeking enjoyment of a lifetime of learning in affectionate company (Trevarthen, Gratier and Osborne 2014).

Science of the young child's mind has advanced significantly in the past century to bring us to a position today where we can understand the biology and health of every developing boy or girl as inseparable from their psycho-social health and well-being. Their success in learning as inseparable from his or her community of relations of parents and professionals.

In Alfred North Whitehead’s words, “Ideas won’t keep, something must be done about them.” (Price 1954, p.100). With this in mind the Child's Curriculum Group will continue working to help our government give support for the enthusiasm of early years teachers in their valuable work to help children, families and the community. This book is one such effort, that we hope has been of some benefit for you in your work and understanding. Come join us in that endeavour, as we follow the creativity and zest for learning in every child, and put these ideas to practice.

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