

## EARLY CHILDHOOD AND ENGLISH OBSESSIONS

By Wendy Ellyatt

The more that I read published reports on Early Childhood, whether academic or philanthropic, the more curious I find myself about how they are put together. It seems to me that in far too many cases there is a danger that the way that such research is carried out, albeit rigorous and well-meaning, predisposes it towards culturally specific end results. That worries me because it is these reports that influence our policy-makers. Every researcher knows that by asking questions in a certain way you are in danger of overly influencing the respondents' authentic responses. By knowing what you want to prove and, in the government's case, putting massive resources behind it, you can, if not careful, end up creating research that does just that rather than providing truly authentic interpretation. Later on, in order to back up your assertions, you can also then be selective of what bits of research you want people to see (or not to see) and this is dangerous for all concerned. I am not saying that anyone is knowingly producing, or promoting, misleading research, but I am saying that the very things we measure are an indication of our cultural preoccupations and a reluctance to invest in areas that challenge the current paradigm is very damaging to authentic dialogue and debate. English schoolchildren are now seen as some of the unhappiest in the world. Why is that? And what can the way that we approach research on childhood tell us about it?

If we take, for example, the highly regarded and rigorously conducted EPPE project, it clearly demonstrates that *'pre-school children have better academic and social behavioural outcomes at age 5 compared to children who did not attend pre-school'* (Sammons, Sylva, et al., 2002). It also concurs that improvements, not surprisingly, happen when adult emphasis is put on certain areas:

*The rating scales used to assess quality showed an impact on children's development. For instance, centres which put particular emphasis (as described in the rating scale) on the development of literacy, maths and catering for children's individual needs promoted better outcomes for children in the subsequent development of reading and mathematics. Similarly, high scores on some aspects of the rating scale which focus on promoting positive 'social interactions' were linked with better sociability in children.*

What concerns me is not that such studies have been conducted in any way other than through best practice, but that their very 'Englishness' pre-disposes them to focus on certain areas to the detriment of others. Would, for example, studies carried out in Sweden or Finland demonstrate the same focus? We very carefully and methodically dissect the various aspects of children's dispositions and abilities and measure them against pre-defined rating scales, but who is ensuring that the rating scales themselves encompass the true wealth and diversity of children's unique capacities? Who is, in fact, researching the neutrality of the researchers? And how can we ensure that our own cultural dispositions (for we are all the results of the systems that we have grown up with) are not distorting the overall picture. For example, the balance of the new Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum looks great on paper, but do the most quoted studies accurately reflect such a balance? It seems to me that all too often there is significant and inappropriate priority given to cognitive achievement and measures such as those for literacy and numeracy. There is also often much made of the importance of children's freedom to play, but then a clear leaning towards adults actively 'extending' such play, the highest qualified staff being seen as particularly good at this.

*In all of the case study settings, we found that the children spent most of their time in small groups. Freely chosen play activities **often provided the best opportunities for adults to extend children's thinking**. It may be that extending child-initiated play, coupled with the provision of teacher-initiated group work, improves opportunities for learning. **We found that qualified staff in the most effective settings provided children with more experience of curriculum-related activities (especially language and mathematics) and they encouraged children to engage in activities with higher intellectual challenges**. While we found that **the most highly qualified staff also provided the most direct teaching**, we found that they were the most effective in their interactions with the children, using the most sustained shared thinking.*

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And consultation documents are vulnerable to exactly the same distortions. By forcing practitioners to tick yes and no boxes, rather than seeking to achieve more personal and accurate interpretations of practice, we run the real danger of providing misleading and dangerously framework-led conclusions. And it is these conclusions that policy-makers, themselves not experts in the field, then have to rely on and will endlessly quote when challenged. For example the recently QCA delivered EYFS questionnaire is constructed in such a way that it could be said to be pre-disposed towards desired end results. In methodologically sound questionnaires there will be plenty of open questions, and plenty of space for 'any other comments' – thus inviting critical thinking and offering space for discursive practitioner reflection. We must be enormously careful that such publications invite people into a true dialogue rather than simply asking them to verify the existing system.

Other reports that could have significantly impacted thinking, such as the 'Good Childhood Inquiry', can be equally compromised by making sweeping conclusions that cannot then be substantiated. They are then vulnerable to the challenge of being culturally biased or *'trapped in the anti-family culture of which they complain'* (Jill Kirby, Sunday Times, 8<sup>th</sup> Feb).

For me the greatest danger that we face in Early Years Education is the fact we, ourselves, are results of our own systems. That means we are most comfortable with the things that we were told mattered as they are deeply linked to our own beliefs and values. The emphasis that we place on certain elements of educational curricula is indicative of the boundaries within which we have developed. Teachers, parents and researchers all unconsciously perpetuate systems that they grew up with, but that **may simply not be serving the children of today**. We are increasingly living in a global community and one of the demands that we now face is to be honest about whether our cultural norms stand up against international comparisons.

Young children are immensely sensitive to the messages that adults transmit, with the unsaid as clearly picked up as the said. As soon as teachers are given curricula guidelines they start to create environments that serve the curricula. This is especially so if targets and outcomes are part of the expectation. Children in England are still given the unmistakable message, from the time that they enter pre-school, that one of the things that really matters to adults, and what gives them value, is knowing their numbers and letters. Even if it is not overt it is evident in the tasks they are given and the way that both teachers and parents approach their 'free play'. This is very different to the focus given to young children's learning elsewhere in the world:

*The Reggio Emilia approach...sets out to offer children the opportunity to build thinking relationships between people, ideas and the environment, drawing on expressive, communicative and cognitive languages...Developing learning competencies is at the heart of the approach and the aim is that through dialogue and communication (spoken language, drawing, constructing models, drama, music etc.) children will develop their capacity to think, build and test theories'.*

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Certain features of early years education are recognised worldwide as beneficial to children's learning:

- A holistic view of learning and the learner
- active or experiential learning
- respect for children's ability to be self-motivating and directing
- valuing responsive interactions between children and adults

Research evidence about the impact of curricular experiences, however, tends to be limited to quantitative and easily measurable outcomes for children in particular circumstances, or for

literacy and numeracy, with little or no focus on the more holistic qualitative areas such as intrinsic motivation, flow, empathy, artistic expression, contact with nature or simple happiness. In my opinion this is a serious weakness in the provision of early childhood research, especially if this research is underpinning subsequent government policy-making. The fact that these things are difficult to measure in no way excuses the lack of emphasis that is given to them. In the same way there is an avoidance of undertaking rigorous research studies into the impact and benefits of alternative provision, despite the fact that many parents clearly value what these settings have to offer. It may be that it is the very holistic nature and curricular qualities of these settings that we most need to find ways to examine.

Simply creating impressive curricular outlines that talk about these things does not mean that teachers' and children's day to day experiences within pre-school and reception classes truly reflect them. The English preoccupation with individual achievement and measurement by results has already produced a generation of deeply unhappy children and we have an urgent responsibility to establish research studies that can underpin a new, and more balanced, way forward.

