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Wilkinson, J.E. *Taking stock*. In Wilkinson, J.E. *Early childhood education - the new agenda*, Chap 7, pp. 67-77. Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic (2003)

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/archive/00002123/>

## Chapter 7 : Taking Stock

### 7.1 *Introduction*

Since 1997 Scotland has witnessed groundbreaking policies in the provision of education and care for children under the age of 5. The Childcare Strategy, the Curriculum Framework, Sure Start and the Care Commission are the bedrock of these policies. They were introduced by the Labour Government at the end of the 1990s and subsequently endorsed by the Scottish Executive, a coalition between Labour and Liberal Democrats. They are a watershed in redefining the role of the state in relation to families with young children, a redefinition that endorses regulation and control. This trend is not merely a characteristic of modern Scotland; the entire UK is affected, as is the United States:

*It is indisputable that the child-rearing landscape has changed greatly in the English-speaking world over the past several decades. This is particularly so in the United States, but true in the United Kingdom as well.*

(Belsky, 2001, p 845)

In these circumstances it is essential to reflect on whether the leap forward in state control acts in children's best interests. It is not in dispute that children need to be protected from the harm that can be inflicted by a minority of adults and other children. Nor is it disputed that the caring professions should learn to collaborate more effectively. But children also need to be brought up in a society that cherishes freedom, flexibility, creativity and responsibility. Unfortunately, there is a real danger that the tiny number of horrific and subsequently sensationalised cases of lethal abuse of children in Britain will provide legitimisation for enhanced regulation by the state and over-protection by parents. It would be catastrophic for the future of Scotland if the well-intentioned regulatory frameworks for the education and care of young children introduced since 1997 inadvertently provided a platform for a new

paternalism where the authoritarian forces of restriction inadvertently generated isolation, frustration and fear. But how can such a situation be avoided? What strategies do we have available? One such strategy is to re-visit our conceptions of childhood and to re-assert how diverse childhoods might flourish in contemporary society. The starting point for this strategy is to be found in the work of Rousseau, a French philosopher writing in the eighteenth century.

## 7.2 *The legacy of Rousseau*

It is generally accepted in post-enlightenment Scotland that Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*, published in 1762, was a beacon for parents and professionals alike, not in the sense of a quick-fix 'Dr Spock type' manual in child-rearing but as a catalyst for the nourishment of thoughtful and sensitive relationships between adults and children.

*Emile is an account of the development of a fictitious eponymous pupil who is in the care of a tutor (effectively Rousseau himself). The guiding principle throughout is that what is to be learned should be determined by an understanding of the child's nature at each stage of his development.*

(Darling, 1994, p 6)

All those who work with young children, including parents, should be aware of Rousseau's work. It is commonly regarded as the foundation of progressive theories in education, in particular the child-centred movement. Central to this movement is the critical role of 'experience'. According to Rousseau nature has implanted in the child certain instincts for activity and engagement with the world that promote the child's development. *Emile* gives us clues as to how the child's experiences can and should be managed by the adult in the pursuit of the child's happiness. The child *should not be subjected to threats, punishments and other vexations.*

The publication of *Emile* in 1762, according to Darling, *had an electrifying effect*. It was so threatening to much of the established order at that time that copies of the book were burned in the streets of Paris!

Nevertheless, the progressivist movement took hold and the ideas can be traced through to contemporary policies and practices in early childhood education in Scotland via Pestalozzi, Dewey, Froebel and Piaget. Running throughout these theorists is the emphasis on nature. Each child is regarded as having certain 'natural' instincts that must be allowed expression and given recognition and support. As Darling puts it:

*Froebel admired much of what he saw : the nature walks, the games and songs, the conception of education as development, the attempt to base education on the nature of the child.*

(Darling, 1994, p 20)

The emphasis on nature in progressivist theory led to the growth of developmental psychology in the US and Europe during the twentieth century. Developmental psychologists have been striving to identify universal characteristics of childhood. According to James, Jenks & Prout (1998): *The single most influential figure in the construction of the model of the naturally developing child is Jean Piaget.*

There is little doubt that Piaget's epistemological theory based on natural and universal biological processes has been very influential with nursery nurses and early years teachers. At the core of the theory is the assertion that all children, irrespective of culture, colour or creed pass through a series of clearly defined developmental and universal age-related stages from birth to adolescence. The role of education was interpreted as facilitating the development of children from one stage to another - from the sensory motor stage to the pre-

operational, to the operational and finally to the stage of formal operations associated with the mature adolescent and adult. Embedded in Piaget's 'age and stage' theory is the notion of 'readiness'. According to the theory, if a child has not reached a given developmental stage the child is not ready to learn. This notion of readiness still has a strong influence today and is often used in the debate about the optimal age at which children should start primary school.

However, over the past twenty years or so there has been a growing dissatisfaction with Piaget's theory (see, for example, Donaldson, 1978), not least because it has been demonstrated that children possess crucial competences long before Piaget would have us believe. Educationalists have increasingly turned to the work of the Russian psychologist, L.S. Vygotsky, whose theory is based on the notion that children's learning and cognitive development are socially mediated, that is, subject to the influence of social phenomena in the child's external world as opposed to natural, internal biological processes. This does not mean to say that biological pre-programming is not important. Clearly, internal processes are at work in human growth, both intellectually and physically. However, according to Vygotsky, children's intellectual growth and the emergence of 'mind' reflect *their cultural experiences and their opportunities for access to the more mature who already practise specific areas of knowledge*. (Wood, 1988, p 25). Vygotsky's work is now often cited as a source of ideas for early childhood educators and forms the basis of the new socio-cultural psychology as outlined by Anning and Edwards (1999) (see Chapter 4) as a means of supporting children's intellectual journey.

One of the central concepts in Vygotsky's theory is the idea of the 'zone of proximal development'. This zone refers to the gap between what a child is able to achieve alone and what the child can achieve with the support from a more informed other. It is at this time that the mediating role of the educator as 'other' is crucial as the 'messages' transmitted from the educator serve to embed in the child's mind a confidence in dealing with new knowledge and understanding. How the educator therefore delivers these messages becomes crucial to the

child's future, whether the message be located in behaviour (for example, role modelling) or whether they be verbal messages. Such language transforms the way in which children learn, think and understand (Wood, 1988). It therefore becomes essential that the educator is fully aware of the role of language - both formal and informal - in shaping children's learning in every sense - not just learning about the world but learning about self and others, which is a central feature of Golman's concept of 'emotional intelligence' (Golman, 1996). Unfortunately Vygotsky's theory is sometimes used to justify more instructional modes of learning, which if taken to extreme lengths can put children in situations that are too demanding, with consequences for their well-being.

Acknowledging that children's learning and development is more subject to cultural influence than had been previously thought has profound implications for education. Parents, teachers and nursery nurses have a renewed responsibility to be more sophisticated in their interactions with children where greater awareness and time for reflection are paramount. Whilst the psychological theories of Piaget, and more recently, Vygotsky may help early years professionals to manage children's learning experiences in the context of the overt curriculum, children are subject to cultural influences often less visible and less formal, yet potentially more powerful in children's construction of themselves, a process that helps to generate diverse childhoods.

Now that the vast majority of 3- and 4-year olds in Scotland attend an early years setting, these settings have a significantly enhanced role in society. It is not inappropriate to ask, therefore, what images of childhood are being transmitted by families and early years settings to our young children being brought up in contemporary Scotland? Deeply embedded in our culture are powerful images of children that play on our emotions. They range from what James et al. (1998) refer to as the *evil child*, the *innocent child*, the *immanent child* and the *unconscious child*. The concept of the evil child has its roots in the religious dogma of the

16<sup>th</sup> century. In those days children were seen as being born evil and, as a consequence, had to be trained to be good:

*Children...enter the world as wilful material energy...demonic, harbourers of potentially dark forces which risk being mobilised if, by dereliction or inattention, the adult world allows them to veer away from the 'straight and narrow' path that civilisation has bequeathed them.*

(James et al., 1998, p 10)

According to this view, even in modern times, if children are left unsupervised for any length of time 'badness' could ensue. Perhaps this is why adults are ready to label children as being 'naughty' at the first signs of anti-social behaviour in order to prevent the emergence of something more sinister.

Running through the discourse on this view of children is the proposition that there are dangerous places for children to be - both private, for example, the home of a dysfunctional family, and public, such as busy shopping areas - which could precipitate the emergence of evil forces inherent in the child. Children are therefore to be kept away from such places lest they engage in evil acts. Perhaps the most disturbing of such behaviour in recent times was the murder of James Bulger:

*Since the murder of two-year-old James Bulger in 1993, the childhood faces of Robert Thompson and Jon Venables have often featured in the tabloids alongside taglines such as 'freaks of nature' and 'products of the devil'.*

(Barker, 2002, p 569)

We shall never know what motivated Thompson and Venables to behave in such sadistic and lethal acts. But were they evil? Were they the 'monsters in our midst'?

Barker draws to our attention that our society is *particularly shocked and intrigued by the concept of evil children*, yet the number of cases of recorded child murderers remains very low. According to Sereny (1995), only 31 cases of child murders have been reported in the last 250 years. On the other hand, perhaps Thompson and Venables were not freaks but for some unknown reason engaged in sadistic acts that went too far, acts that are more commonplace amongst children than most of us would be prepared to acknowledge. Given that child murderers tend to be male, maybe we should ask: Does the construction of masculinity in our culture encourage disproportionate levels of male violence? Clearly this is a matter for early childhood educators to be more aware of in their day-to-day dealings with young children.

Contrary to this view of children is the image of the *innocent child*. In this discourse children are seen as naturally good, with an intrinsic predisposition to be joyful, happy and pleasing, *with an illuminating halo*. Such innocence, it is often thought, has to be protected at all costs from potential corruption and violence in the external world. But does our pre-occupation with preserving such a romantic notion of childhood impede children's natural and spontaneous curiosity? According to Barker:

*We need to question our unrealistic notion of childhood as a time of pure innocence, since when this is violated, demonisation and lack of understanding tend to follow.* (Barker, 2002, p 571)

Nevertheless, the image of the innocent child still has a powerful influence over how adults treat children - particularly if the adults are the parents. As such, adults are less ready to acknowledge their child's guilt where wrong-doing has occurred.



James et al. also refer to the concept of the immanent child. Here children are regarded as being born as 'tabula rasa', that is, with nothing other than an immanent potential for growth: *children do not possess inbuilt or a priori categories of understanding or a general facility to reason* (James et al., 1998, p 16). Instead children must be taught such facilities. Having its origins in the work of the philosopher John Locke, writing in the seventeenth century, such a view of children has spurred an approach to education that is based on instruction. Young children are seen as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge and reasoning. However, it is Rousseau rather than Locke who is acclaimed as the source of child-centred education visible in present day early years settings in Scotland. It might be no accident that, being a Frenchman, Rousseau has had more influence on Scottish education than Locke, though Hartley (1993) disputes this claim. The special relationship between Scotland and France, often referred to as the 'Auld Alliance' has ensured greater cultural exchange of ideas between the two countries than between Scotland and England (MacDougall, 2001).

The fourth model of childhood prevalent in our culture is the notion of the *unconscious child* which has its origins in the work of Sigmund Freud.

*Within the model, childhood is once again dispossessed of intentionality and agency. Instead these are absorbed into a vocabulary of drives and instincts, with sexuality becoming the major dimension in the development of self....* (James et al., 1999, p 21)

This image of childhood sees children as a source of unconscious energy which, if thwarted to any major extent, results in deviant and potentially abnormal behaviour. In many respects it mirrors the view of Rousseau in his unbounded enthusiasm for children's unquestionable and often insatiable curiosity to be channelled positively, though, as James et al. point out, it has done little to *broaden our understanding of children* beyond notions of the 'id', the 'ego' and the 'super-ego'. Nevertheless, such images of children force us to balance our psychological

knowledge of children with the growing body of sociological theory. As Hartley concludes in his book on bureaucracy in nursery schools:

*Unless the education of those involved in early education moves beyond its present preoccupation with psychology, it will limit their capacity to engage fully in the policy debates to come.*

(Hartley, 1993, p 148)

### 7.3 ***Childhood in a sociological context***

The fundamental distinction between a psychological approach and a sociological approach to the understanding of human conduct is between an individualistic perspective and a group perspective. The former searches for explanations and understandings within individuals, recognising that individual behaviour is a complex interplay of nature and nurture, whilst the latter explores the social world of institutions and structures as a source of explanation. Until recently the dominant theme in the 'social world of institutions and structures' has been the process of socialisation: *Through socialisation individuals learn their society's priorities.* (Scimecca, 1980, p 5).

Socialisation is regarded as the process through which children conform to social norms and expectations, a view which rejects a singular commitment to processes rooted in nature:

*The socially developing model is not therefore attached to what the child naturally is, so much as to what society naturally demands of the child.*

(James et al., 1999, p 23)

The process of socialisation is seen by many sociologists as key to our understanding of different childhoods. At the core of such a process is the family, specifically the role models transmitted, often inadvertently, by the adults and siblings in the family. For example, if children display anti-social behaviour, the starting point for an explanation of such behaviour is in the behaviour of adults and other family members. But the most powerful group processes at work in shaping children's minds are those concerned with divisions in the wider society - age, gender, social class, disability and ethnicity. Such differences are often associated with prejudice and inequality. As such, they are hurdles to human progress by acting as barriers to greater awareness, understanding and tolerance.

On the matter of prejudice in age difference, or 'ageism', as it is sometimes referred to, given that children, by definition, are younger than adults and thereby thought to be less competent, less experienced, less knowledgeable and less wise, there is an assumption that adults necessarily know what is best at all times. Adults often unconsciously exert their power and authority over children with little thought for the consequences. Unfortunately, the physical and psychological abuse of children inside the family is still all too prevalent and authoritarianism has a bad habit of being perpetuated across the generations. Fortunately, there are early indications that the tide is beginning to turn in that more attention is now being paid to hearing 'children's voices'. The establishment of a Children's Council in Glasgow is to be welcomed so long as it is given a role that is not tokenistic. All those who work with children should spend more time 'listening' to their voices and respond appropriately.

Gender is another issue of keen relevance for early years educators as it is a central defining feature of people throughout the world. Very often from birth very young children are stereotyped into male and female roles. 'Blue for boys and pink for girls' is but the tip of the iceberg in the messages about male/female roles transmitted often unconsciously to our children.

*Some children are locked into traditional conceptions of gender while others are able to move partially towards a more liberated view of gender, where their social environment includes women who are active agents in the world, where there are men who have undertaken a significant proportion of the nurturing female roles, and where they have been free to practise non-traditional behaviours in an environment where this is taken to be the normal thing to do.*

(Davies, 1987, p 56)

Davies argues that it is essential for early years education to liberate children from traditional stereotype roles and to help children become aware of their non-maleness if they are boys and their non-femaleness if they are girls. There are increasing signs that society is funding ways of liberating girls but has failed so far to find ways of similarly treating boys.

If progress is now visible in tackling genderism, at least for girls, little progress has been made in addressing the social class issues in our society. This matter, however, is perhaps less straightforward in the context of early childhood education and care. Whilst children may be very aware at an early age of their gender identity there is no extensive evidence that they are also aware of differences in life chances. Social inclusion may be the goal of the Scottish Executive's policies but translating the goal into day-to-day practices in an early years setting is not unproblematic, though respect for diversity and the promotion of equity and fairness must be central. Despite the fact that there is a strong association between socio-economic status and educational achievement, any assumption that a child's background inevitably determines the child's intellectual capabilities must however be challenged.

The issue of racism is a somewhat different matter. Siraj-Blatchford clearly articulates the issues for children and for those who educate and care for them in a pluralistic society such as modern Britain:

*The most common form of racism young black children experience is through racist name-calling or through negative references by white children (or adults) to their colour, language or culture.*

(Siraj-Blatchford, 1994, p 9)

But racism is not merely restricted to overt behaviour of individuals. Increasingly, we are becoming aware of institutional racism, which is more subtle and persuasive. Such a form of racism is embedded in the policies and everyday practices in our institutions and public life. In response, early years educators have been prompted to devise racial equality policies that go beyond multicultural education. In the culturally responsive early years setting, the curriculum should:

- *foster children's self-esteem*
- *acknowledge the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of all children*
- *actively maintain and develop the children's first or home languages*
- *promote the learning of English as an additional language*
- *value bilingualism as an asset*
- *support families in their efforts to maintain their languages and culture*
- *challenge bias and prejudice*
- *promote a sense of fairness*
- *promote principles of inclusion and equity*

(Siraj-Blatchford, 2001, p 106)

The fifth source of tension in our society and of considerable relevance to early years professionals is the issue of disability, which includes children with special educational needs. The key issues are illuminated in an earlier book in this series by Riddell (2002). Under the

influence of current policies on inclusion, progress is being made to engage children with disabilities in mainstream early years settings. But much remains to be done.

All children, irrespective of their race, creed, colour, disability or status, have a right to be treated with dignity and respect. Such a 'right' is enshrined in Article 2(1) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states:

1. *The States Parties to the present Convention shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parents' or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.*
  
2. *States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians or family members.*

More recently, attention has been drawn to other considerations in the sociology of childhood which helps to enhance understanding of how society treats children. This emerging body of sociological theory is often referred to as the new sociology of childhood. James et al. (1998) refer to such concepts as the *socially constructed child* and *the tribal child*. In the former, sociologists de-construct the common assumptions about childhood as being a distinct and absolute form of the human lifespan. Instead, they point to childhood as a product of its time

and material conditions by placing it *squarely in the realm of the culturally located and thus humanly constituted*.

On the other hand the idea of the tribal child is regarded as a recognition of the separateness of childhood with codes, language and rituals somewhat different from those of adults. Children often have their own way of doing things which other children understand. Such tribalism can act as a source of mutual support in adverse situations and often has expression in children's play, particularly when it is unsupervised by adults.

Both concepts are of considerable significance to early years educators. Not only do they require nursery teachers and nursery nurses to be more aware of the assumptions inherent in their own attitudes and behaviour towards children but also to be aware of the tribal culture at work so that they can engage with it more meaningfully.

#### 7.4 ***The New Agenda Revised***

The attention given by the UK Labour Government and the Scottish Executive to early childhood education since 1997 is to be wholeheartedly welcomed. Robust and penetrating policies have been backed up with the necessary resources. The policies implemented since 1997 which are outlined in this book, however, have carried different messages to those involved in the education and care of children in the early years, both professionals and parents. In the late 1990's the policy initiative was predominantly 'educational'. The creation of national curriculum guidelines in the form of the *Curriculum Framework for Children 3-5* emphasised that children's learning was at the centre of the early years experience. In addition, some local authorities - particularly those established after the disaggregation of Strathclyde Region - took the step of integrating pre-school services into one administrative department, that is, the Education Department or its equivalent.

Not everyone welcomed this trend. Concerns were voiced not only about the needs of vulnerable children not being sufficiently well addressed in a traditional educational environment such as a nursery school, but also about the needs of parents wishing to be economically active. In order to establish a balance between the promotion of learning for all children (the 'universality' principle) and the channelling of appropriate support to children 'at risk' (the 'targeting' or 'vulnerability' principle) the new Care Commission was given the remit of regulating early years settings.

It is difficult to reconcile the principle of universality with the principle of targeting. In the early years of the new millennium, the pendulum has swung in the direction of protecting vulnerable children. Whilst this is understandable given recent events, the trend is not unproblematic. The ultimate test of the effectiveness of any educational experience has to be located in the process of modernisation. Such is the challenge of the new agenda in early childhood education in Scotland.

But this is not all. The way forward requires a new level of professionalism that enshrines the need to address in a sensitive but purposeful manner the social divisions in the wider society outlined earlier in this chapter. Promoting awareness, understanding and tolerance is the very heart of the educative process and it begins in the early years of life.

All those who work with young children require to be attuned to the new challenges and responsibilities they now face. The first years of life are critically important, a fact recognised long ago by the Jesuits in the famous phrase: *give me the child till he is seven and I will give you the man.*

The policies put in place under New Labour since 1997 provide early childhood educators and administrators with a daunting opportunity. No longer is early childhood education a luxury for the few: it is in the vanguard for all.