Towards a child-centred curriculum

Georgina Trevor, Amanda Ince and Lynn Ang

The need for transformative change

Between the landmark publication of the Plowden Report in 1967, which advocated a child-centred curriculum in primary schools and declared ‘at the heart of the educational process lies the child’, and the evolution of supra-national evidence on curriculum via the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and other international bodies in the mid-2000s, the idea of curriculum in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services achieved a new prominence in the lives of families with young children. For example, ECEC began to be seen as a means of ameliorating the impact of social disadvantage, and the advent of a formal curriculum, such as the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), established under the Childcare Act 2006 and implemented in 2008, is one aspect of this shift in educational thinking. A curriculum was considered essential in expressing ideas of what children should learn and be able to do, whatever setting they attended. The EYFS was also seen as an integrating mechanism across a sector that was (and is) split by auspices and age groups (see Chapters 4 and 5). In this chapter, we briefly review the development of the curriculum in England’s ECEC sector and argue that its evolution has been marked by the competing agendas of, on the one hand, child-centredness and theories of learning, and, on the other, marketisation, ideas of school readiness, and neoliberal agendas that promote a standardised, one-size-fits-all approach.

The EYFS is the national curriculum framework in England on the standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to 5 years old. It has seven ‘areas of learning’: communication and language; physical development; personal, social and emotional development; literacy; mathematics; understanding the world; and expressive arts and design.
It is mandatory for all registered ECEC providers, such as schools, nurseries, preschools (formerly playgroups) and childminders. The sheer diversity of childcare and education settings available in England presents challenges when implementing a universal curriculum. This is exacerbated by a pervasive neoliberal marketised sector (see Chapter 6) and a national inspection framework implemented by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), which regulates all providers against a uniform set of quality standards. We explore these challenges, tensions and contradictions in the implementation of the curriculum, propose alternative visions that recognise children’s capacity to actively participate in the construction of a rich curriculum, and re-imagine the skills and knowledge that such a curriculum has the potential to develop.

The Plowden legacy

While the Plowden Report was focused on primary schools, it noted that ‘the under fives [are] the only age group for whom no extra educational provision of any kind has been made since 1944’ (Central Advisory Council for Education 1967, 291). The Playgroup Movement (providing private, non-profit, part-time provision for 3- and 4-year-olds, often organised by parents) was still in its infancy and Plowden highlighted nursery schools and classes as ‘transitional’ settings between home and primary school, desirable not only on educational but also on health, social and welfare grounds, and even went so far as to outline suggested levels of staff qualification, safeguarding, funding, staffing structure, child to adult ratios and inspection processes for settings (Central Advisory Council for Education 1967, 299, 311, 333, 343). The report thus set the tone not only for the curriculum but all early years provision for the next 50 years (Boyd and Hirst 2016; Palaiologou 2016).

In the years following the report, the possibility of tackling inequality in education to bring about social change (Halsey and Sylva 1987) was severely impacted by the austerity of the Thatcher years, and, by 1990, public investment in education and expenditure in relation to GDP had declined. There was, however, a sharp rise in private sector childcare to accommodate the needs of working mothers and the private sector was supported by national and, subsequently, local government’s public sector reform agendas (Penn 2011). By 2001, parents in the UK were spending £3 billion on childcare (Palaiologou 2016); while by 2013–14, educational economists reported that the private childcare market in the UK was worth an estimated £4.9bn (Gyimah 2015, cited in Lewis and West 2017).
Investment in the curriculum

In 1997, a Labour government was elected with a commitment to education for young children and childcare for working parents. The National Childcare Strategy Green Paper ‘Meeting the Childcare Challenge’ (DfEE 1998) represented the ‘first time in British history the government realised the need for a national childcare policy’ (Palaiologou 2016, 15) and noted the absence of standards about what constituted ‘good quality childcare’ that could be applied across all settings. Sector integration was critical to the success of policy goals of expanding access, and standards were a means to achieve integration. Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage was issued in 2000 (QCA–DfEE 2000), aimed at providing support to practitioners in planning a curriculum for 3- to 5-year-olds, which enabled children to achieve the early learning goals (ELGs) via ‘stepping stones’ ‘that show the knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes that children need to learn’ (QCA–DfEE 2000, 8), en route to the national curriculum’s Key Stage 1. It had a series of areas for learning, endorsed parents as partners in learning, and emphasised the need for ‘a well-planned and resourced curriculum to take … learning forward and to provide opportunities for all children to succeed in an atmosphere of care and of feeling valued’ (QCA–DfEE, 2000, 8). Practitioners should show planning, assessing and teaching skills.

The integrationist push continued and the EYFS framework came into being in 2008, covering children from birth to 5 years old. It was described as ‘a radical innovation … transforming early childhood education’ (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2008) and was positioned within a wider policy context, responding to calls for a ‘comprehensive, integrated and coherent early childhood service’ (Moss and Penn 1996, 165). It replaced several existing policy documents: the non-statutory Birth to Three Matters guidance (Sure Start 2003), the National Standards for Day Care (DfEE 2003) and the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage curriculum for 3- to 5-year-olds (QCA–DfEE 2000). It also addressed Ball’s Start Right report recommendation for the ‘systematic public provision of high quality preschool education’ (Ball 1994, 1), as well as responding to research evidence that children’s intellectual, behavioural and social development is positively affected by ‘high quality’ preschool education (Effective Provision of Pre-school Education [EPPE] project: Sylva et al. 2004; Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years: Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002; High/Scope Perry Preschool Study: Schweinhart 1993; Millennium Cohort Study, Third Survey: Hansen and Joshi, 2008).
The EYFS was tied to the government’s ‘Every Child Matters’ agenda, covering all services for children and young people, with its outcomes of staying safe, being healthy, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and achieving economic well-being. The EYFS sought to: set standards for the learning, development and care that young children should experience in ECEC; provide equality of opportunity and inclusive practices that did not disadvantage any child on grounds of ethnicity, culture or religion, home language, family background, learning difficulties or disabilities, gender or ability; create a framework for partnership working between parents and professionals; improve the quality and consistency of the early years sector through a universal set of standards that apply to all settings; and lay a secure foundation for future learning planned around the individual needs and interests of the child, and informed by the use of ongoing observational assessment (DCSF 2008).

Alongside the seven ‘areas of learning’ (noted above), the EYFS had four ‘guiding themes’ for practice. These were:

1. All children are unique and competent learners from birth who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured.
2. Children learn to be strong and independent through positive relationships with parents and/or a key person.
3. Enabling environments are those that support children’s learning in multiple contexts.
4. Children learn and develop in different ways and at different rates, and all areas of learning and development are equally important and inter-connected.

The EYFS had a long list of 69 ELGs, against which children were assessed. For example, in relation to creative development, which should be supported through extending opportunities for play and exploration in a variety of mediums, practitioners were required to document the ways in which children met learning goals such as: (1) respond in a variety of ways to what they see, hear, smell, touch and feel; and (2) express and communicate their ideas, thoughts and feelings by using a widening range of materials, suitable tools, imaginative and role-play, movement, designing and making, and a variety of songs and musical instruments.

Overall, this early version of the EYFS was considered by many to promote a more spontaneous, natural, child-led and playful pedagogy (Boyd and Hirst 2016). But subsequent EYFS revisions (2012, 2014, 2017) increasingly shifted the focus to ‘planned, purposeful play’ (DfE 2012, 10) with positivist and universal objective standards of ‘quality’
re-established through influential reports such as Ofsted’s ‘Getting it Right First Time’ (2013). Later versions of the EYFS also began to incorporate the ‘school readiness’ agenda (DfE 2017) in which children must demonstrate progress towards predefined targets and ‘goals’ (Eke et al. 2009; Alexander 2010), rushing them through a ‘hurry along curriculum’ (Ang 2014) to meet developmental stages ‘typical for their age’ and ensuring they are ‘adequately prepared for the start of their statutory schooling’ (Sir Michael Wilshaw, Chief Inspector and head of Ofsted, 2012–15, cited by Jones 2015, 22).

The 2017 version of the EYFS has fewer ELGs than the 2008 version, 17 altogether, but more specificity about method. This latest version of the EYFS (the government is consulting on a further revision at the time of writing) has three ‘prime areas’ of learning (communication and language, physical development, and personal, social and emotional development) and four ‘specific areas’ (literacy, mathematics, understanding the world, expressive arts and design). Guidance states that ‘the three prime areas reflect the key skills and capacities all children need to develop and learn effectively, and become ready for school’ (DfE 2017, 9). Providers should offer children a mix of ‘adult-led and child-initiated’ activities, but as children ‘grow older, and as their development allows, it is expected that the balance will gradually shift towards more activities led by adults, to help children prepare for more formal learning, ready for Year 1’ (DfE 2017, 9).

The EYFS includes a requirement for ‘ongoing assessment’ via observation and ‘shaping learning experiences’ accordingly, using only paperwork that is ‘absolutely necessary’ and in partnership with parents (DfE 2017, 13). Furthermore, children will be assessed via a progress check at age 2, with a ‘short written summary of a child’s development in the prime areas’ (DfE 2017, 13); this report should identify any developmental delay or special needs. Before moving on to Year 1, an EYFS profile is completed, which shows practitioners’ assessments about whether a child is meeting, exceeding or not yet reaching expected levels of development for each ELG.

Over time, the ECEC curriculum has been subject to growing tension between the proponents of the theoretical significance of varied, rich and complex free play inherent in a curriculum that recognises child-initiated activities and play as ‘essential for children’s development’ (DfE 2017, 9), and the exigencies of a prescribed and structured curriculum with explicit intended outcomes in line with ‘social investments with good rates of return’ (Allen 2011, 11; Aubrey 2004). Successive governments’ increasing concern regarding the impact of early years education on the UK’s economic competitiveness within a global market (Roberts-Holmes 2012;
Dahlberg et al. (2013) saw a ‘unified conception of learning in childhood’ as being in a country’s interests and for the ‘public good’ (OECD 2006, 58–9). The dominant story of ‘quality and high returns’ (Moss 2014, 3) presupposes that investment in early childhood education will guarantee national success, and signifies a shift towards a politically motivated and results-driven approach to early years education and the ‘view of the child as future pupil’ (Soler and Miller 2003, 66).

**The current curriculum landscape**

The school readiness agenda is now apparently firmly established in the ECEC curriculum. Moss (2013) argued there seems to be a societal shift towards education as a meritocratic vehicle for boosting mobility aimed at economic success, with a focus on early childhood education readying children for the first stage in that journey. In response the EYFS framework can be read as a prescriptive and homogenous nationalised curriculum (Palaiologou 2016).

There are pressures for teachers to comply, despite disagreeing, with the school readiness agenda. They feel it is their responsibility to prepare children for the next stage in their education, fearing a failure to do so could result in their complicity in a growing gulf between what a child can measurably achieve and what they are expected to know. The increased documentation requirements of early years and primary education and the misalignment of reception outcomes and Year 1 targets significantly challenge practitioners’ and teachers’ ability to interact with children and listen to their perspectives (Bradbury 2013).

The formation of a national approach to learning has surfaced, which aims to achieve numerous and often conflicting outcomes as a means of measuring success and achieving ‘desirable’ results. Investment in ECEC thus reframes the social construction of the child as economic potential and perpetuates the Human Capital Theory of early investment leading to profitable returns, and education ensuring ‘economic success’ (Becker 2002). The result is the development of the curriculum as a technical practice that seeks to provide ‘high-quality’ education, thus enabling socio-economic child future-proofing. Responsive pedagogy is replaced by an approach that ‘privileges adults’ provision for play and only acknowledges their interpretation of children’s outcomes in line with predefined developmental indicators, curriculum goals and the school readiness agenda’ (Wood 2013, 48), creating a tension with efforts to maintain ‘quality’ within an early years framework that purports to be a reflective, holistic and context-specific curriculum.
Towards transformative change

Contextually appropriate practice

The certainty implied by offering the EYFS as ‘the right foundation’ (DfE 2017, 5) implies a value-laden reading of the curriculum as the sum total of all possible learning and development in the early years. The inherent danger is that we ‘focus our attention on the map, rather than the actual terrain’ (Dahlberg et al. 2013, 122), leading practitioners to believe, wrongly, that they must work only within the confines of the EYFS framework, or worse, through a checklist, gathering evidence of achievements and planning to fill the ‘gaps’. With goals and outcomes increasingly tightly defined, education becomes a transfer of knowledge relating to specific, measurable competencies, the acquisition of which are observed, assessed and tested at predetermined key stages in a child’s life. Rigid frameworks born of the hubristic notion that a single construction and measure of learning exists result in teaching to tests and will not suffice in an increasingly unpredictable and changeable present and future. The narrative has strayed from the ‘flexible approach to care and learning’ (DCSF 2008, 7) promised in the early iterations of the EYFS, into an understanding of curriculum that conflates (developmental) education with (instructional) training. Given the wide range of qualifications and professional backgrounds among ECEC practitioners, it is possible that less flexible and more instructional approaches that require fewer situated judgements will prevail. Despite recognising the need for change and successfully initiating it, the English education system appears to possess an inability to appropriately see it through (Burton and Brundrett 2005).

The sustained, progressive endeavour to formulate a collective approach to best address the complex and shifting learning and developmental needs of children positions the curriculum, a set of increasingly normalised statutory standards, programmes of study and attainment targets, as ‘one of the most important elements of education’ (Wyse et al. 2015, 57). There is, however, no comprehensive and agreed conception of curriculum. In the United Kingdom alone, the four nations (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) each have their own distinctive early years policy and curriculum. Curriculum frameworks thus reflect areas of knowledge deemed of value in the context of the wider society within which they operate, and offer sequenced models of learning to build skillsets children may need in the short, medium and long term. How the content of the curriculum is unpacked by the practitioner and
co-constructed with children is influenced by the children’s diversities and interests, practitioner training, academic and pedagogical knowledge, practical experience or ‘knowledge-in-practice’ (Schön 1987) and ‘funds of knowledge’: a knowledge base of experience, social practices and social and emotional experiences of all parties (Moll et al. 1992; Wood 2013).

The importance of context as the site of curriculum co-construction transforms the interpretation of an immovable curriculum as ‘universal’ truth into potentially participatory, adaptable and reflexive approaches. The need for pluralistic and pragmatic local interpretation of any socially constructed framework highlights how ‘context [is] inseparable from human actions in cognitive events or activities’ (Rogoff 1990, 27). Teachers, practitioners and children must be afforded considerable pedagogical space to allow for complex interpretations to unfold and refold, establishing an interwoven web of relations that form the ‘fabric of meaning’ (Carr 2001, 82). When integrating a curriculum such as the EYFS into school and other settings, pedagogical approaches must constantly adjust themselves, through a culture of listening to the perspectives of the children, in order to create relevant and meaningful understandings of children’s learning experiences (Clark and Moss 2011).

The EYFS, used in conjunction with guidance documents such as ‘Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage’ (Early Education 2012), allows for the English early years curriculum to be situated within a ‘landscape of possibilities, not a road map’ (Stewart 2016). Positioned within everyday practice, it relies on observation and interpretation embedded in participatory practice to deliver meaningful learning experiences, with practitioners continuously reviewing and evaluating the impact of the curriculum. But this requires that time must be given to carefully develop a ‘transactional theory of knowledge’ (Wyse et al. 2015, 67; Biesta 2014), which seeks to establish a curriculum of possibility rather than certainty. The EYFS is not, then, a standalone curriculum, but should ideally be approached as a tool to be used in conjunction with skilled practitioners and their judgements.

Curriculum as intent, implementation and impact

The EYFS has become orientated to data-based assessment as a way to measure the performance and effectiveness of provision, approaches to teaching, and the children themselves (see Chapter 11 for more on data-based assessment). Children’s perception of the use and purpose of assessment can lead to increased anxiety and pressure (Carless and Lam 2014) as they learn to adapt to a culture of formal assessment by
developing their own understanding of what is being asked of them (Snyder 1971). This may lead to a surface approach to learning in which children ‘perform’ without actually comprehending or engaging with the intended learning or proposed teaching. A focus on outcomes also means practitioners may miss children’s inquiry cues and not extend their learning opportunities in spontaneous teaching.

Assessment, in all its guises, is inextricably linked with the construction of the learner, perspectives of the child, balance of power, roles of the players, ways in which it is conceived of and carried out and its intentions and end uses. The interplay of curriculum and assessment is ‘highly complex and sophisticated’ (Kelley 1992, 16) and crucial in determining how effective either has the potential to be (Dunphy 2008). Within the EYFS there exists a tension between the notion of an inclusive framework that recognises the child as ‘unique’ and the goal-orientated framework that champions ‘school readiness’ and echoes a Piagetian ages and stages approach. This is further complicated by contradictory guidance material – ‘Early Years Outcomes’ (DfE 2013), which trammels children into ‘typical’ age and stage requirements, and the more holistic, inter-connected ‘Development Matters’ (Early Education 2012).

Recent changes to the Ofsted Early Years Inspection Handbook see greater emphasis placed on curriculum, with the ‘quality of teaching, learning and assessment’ replaced with one overall ‘quality of education’ judgement, broken down into three components: ‘intent’, ‘implementation’ and ‘impact’ (Ofsted 2019). The new methodology, while considered by many to be more sensitive to the early years observation model of assessment, still aims to calculate quality through inconsistent ‘scrutiny’, which is not appropriately supported with sufficient time or resources to allow for apposite judgements. And while revisions to the EYFS and its accompanying guidance document ‘Development Matters’ are arguably needed to ensure they remain up to date with current thinking and professional knowledge, planned revision in 2020–21 follows on from proposed changes to the ELGs, published in June 2018, and the implementation of the revised Ofsted inspection framework in September 2019. The EYFS end goals, and the inspection framework through which successful delivery of the EYFS is assessed, will therefore have been revised before the curriculum framework itself has even been revisited.

The revised ELGs see the introduction of ever narrower language, with descriptive narratives replaced by bullet points read as a tick list of descriptors, aligning the goals with Year 1 of primary school, moving yet further away from the earlier holistic concept of the EYFS and its developmentally appropriate approach. The chronology of these changes,
following the government’s consultation on primary school assessment in 2017, appears to support a top-down outcome-orientated agenda, with reception class being reframed as the waiting room to the national curriculum, and in which children are trained in formal approaches and behaviours, and starting points are recorded via the reintroduced baseline assessment (see Chapter 11).

Towards a new model of curriculum

When learning is mapped backwards from intended outcomes, it becomes independent from any meaningful context, with a child’s skills or knowledge merely summed up using predetermined checklists as part of convergent assessment. This approach relies on assumptions regarding competence, deficit and the achievement of a ‘hierarchy of skills’, and objective observation for the purposes of obtaining approval of external agencies (Carr 1999, 2001). While the EYFS continues to signpost the ‘unique child’, who develops and learns in ‘different ways … and at different rates’ (DfE 2017, 6), its foundations are built on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological domains, which have increasingly been criticised as situating the child as a passive recipient at the centre of its hierarchical ‘nested structure’, constraining the inner individual, with little agency or power (Boyd and Hirst 2016; Brock et al. 2013; Rogoff 1990, 2003). If we take Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory model as a starting point and then allow for intellectual space, both physically and conceptually, we can make a small but practical change, away from the existing construct, which sees homogenised determinism assume a linear exchange of information from micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chrono- systems to the individual, and towards a tapestry made up of the ‘complexities of children’s developing minds, bodies and emotions’ (Nutbrown Review 2012, 19) and their environments.

This alternative approach recognises learning as dynamic interaction. Fragile intellectual space is reliant on respect, democracy and participatory practice. Pedagogical patterns are co-created across disciplines, and in response to the needs of the empowered child. The focus moves away from outcomes and is reframed using learning dispositions as ‘an accumulated continuum of complexity’, acknowledging the culture and context-specific nature of learning, pointing to a shift towards ‘meaning-making’ and ‘relationships in the experienced world’ (Carr 2001, 5). It strongly echoes Alison Clark’s ‘Mosaic’ approach, which is concerned with ‘creating meaning’ and focusing on ‘children’s lived experiences’, and recognises that a ‘dispositional milieu’ can be created when
learning dispositions ‘become attached to activities and places’ (see Chapter 9 for a fuller discussion of the Mosaic approach).

These patterns cannot be replicated or reapplied, hollowed out and reallocated; learning and education is fluid, discursive, contextualised and formative. The prescriptive, universal approach to curriculum is contrary to our own experiences in a local early childhood setting, which leads us to conclude that we must build relevant curriculum frameworks, situated in contextual processes of knowledge and culture construction (Rinaldi 2006), which do not deny a larger social responsibility, and which have the ability to fit within broader national approaches. An example of this can be seen in Te Whāriki, the national early childhood curriculum of New Zealand (Ministry of Education 2017) which, much like the early childhood education in Reggio Emilia, Italy, reflects the belief that many strands must be incorporated into early childhood education, to ‘weave’ together a context-specific pedagogy. Pragmatically, this can be achieved in practice through the reciprocal relationship between the learning environment and a teacher’s pedagogy; this space must be constantly challenged, de/re-constructed, adapted and transformed to reflect the changing needs of all participants and support a range of ways in which children may choose to engage or express themselves (Moss 2018; Clark 2005; Clark and Moss 2011; Koch 2017).

To further illustrate the possibility of an alternative model, we argue for a culturally relevant assessment approach in early childhood education that foregrounds an ecological, socio-cultural perspective in the way learning and achievement are situated. Rameka (2011) offers an exemplar of a bi-cultural curriculum and assessment framework that is shaped by and for Māori children and aligned with Te Whāriki. Titled Te Whatu Pōkeka: Kaupapa [Māori Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars] (Ministry of Education 2009), the framework offers a professional assessment resource based on Māori values, philosophies and cultural contexts, which practitioners use to explore understandings of children’s learning, cultural identity, what they value as important, what makes them Māori and how this could be reflected in the teaching, learning and assessment practices of an early years setting. In envisioning a new model, in any educational context, the question then is whether practitioners are afforded creative spaces that recognise alternative approaches to learning and assessment, even amidst the often-entrenched performative structures and expectations.

‘Learning dispositions’, interpreted as complex arrangements, skills, values, knowledge and attitudes, emphasise possible approaches to learning and participation in education (Carr 2014). This framework
exists within the context of Bourdieu’s habitus as ‘a system of dispositions acquired by implicit or explicit learning’ (1984/1993, cited in Carr 2001, 10): dispositions such as ‘taking an interest; being involved; persisting with difficulty or uncertainty; communicating with others; taking responsibility’ (Carr 2001, 23). Such an approach is visible in the New Zealand early years curriculum, Te Whāriki, which emphasises how ‘learning dispositions enable children to construct learner identities that travel with them into new contexts and across time, in this way supporting lifelong learning’ (Carr 2001, 23).

There is a choice, therefore, especially in early years settings, to edge away from complete adherence to positivistic paradigms, universal and decontextualised, and engage with other perspectives and approaches. One does not deny the existence of the other – there is room to ‘play the curriculum game’, while also establishing a degree of autonomy. But the reality is one of balance and compromise and it requires the participation of all stakeholders, and the involvement of a transformational leadership team.

Towards a pedagogy of cooperation and participatory learning

In envisioning a new model, we are also contending for a stronger move towards a pedagogy of cooperation and participatory learning where early childhood education is valued first and foremost for supporting children’s experience of agency, membership and belonging. Studies show that even within an attainment-driven education regime, children’s self-efficacy and overall achievement are connected with positive emotional dispositions such as enjoyment, a sense of belonging, being valued and engaged in a social group (Pekrun et al. 2009; Venninen and Leinonen 2013). Prioritising a pedagogy that actively listens to children’s opinions, promotes opportunities for self-initiated activities, and allows children to participate even in adult-initiated pedagogical decision-making is therefore essential.

As an exemplar, the High Scope pedagogy promotes children’s choices through its emphasis on engaging children in an active ‘plan, do, review’ cycle (High Scope n.d.). A variation of this is the use of images of activities on an interactive whiteboard. Children then place their picture next to the activity they are going to try first. This encourages them to consider their learning and focus, making independent decisions about their own learning rather than just rushing from one activity to the next, as well as helping them understand expectations. At the end of a session, teacher and children come back together and the teacher chooses a few
children to talk about their chosen activity. When the children become a little older they question their peers directly, for example: ‘What did you make in the construction zone?’ or ‘Who are you going to give your picture to?’ (usually copying questions they have heard modelled previously).

In emphasising a pedagogy of cooperation and participatory learning, there is an ongoing need to maintain sight of practices that have been refined and adapted over many years to suit the context of a setting. That is not to say a static ‘solution’ or set of unchanging policies should be blindly adhered to, quite the opposite approach is needed; one that embraces diversity and fluidity and recognises ‘curriculum and child are always already in conditions of becoming’ (Sellers 2013, 33). With the increasing focus on early childhood education as a policy priority in England, countless ‘well-meaning but misguided’ programmes and policies have been introduced, some with little effect, others with serious consequences (Penn 2011, 152). Those who hold a privileged position of leadership must guard against ever-changing policy mandates that are at odds with a setting’s unique practices and pedagogy.

‘There is a constant relational reciprocity between those who educate and those who are educated’ (Rinaldi 2006, 141) and the process of learning is not neutral. Everyday practice recognises ‘curriculum as experiential’ (Sellers 2013, 40) and practitioners must ‘listen between the lines’ (Lazear, 1999, 145) to better understand the perspectives of children. An innovative and adaptable curriculum that recognises the rights of all children, and that permits skilled, well-paid and trusted practitioners to engage in local democratic experimentations, should be a high priority. There is a pressing need for greater agency on the part of teachers and other practitioners in order to, in turn, recognise and support children’s agency (Wyse et al. 2015, 57). Children have the right to express their views ‘freely in all matters affecting [them]’ (United Nations 1989, Article 12), and they need to be repositioned as protagonists, active participants in their own learning (Clark 2010), using methods such as the Mosaic approach as a framework for engaging with young children’s experiences and perspectives as ‘experts in their own lives’ (Langsted 1994; Clark and Moss 2011, 8). The view of the ‘unique child’ in the English curriculum does not go far enough. In Denmark, the law stipulates children’s views of day-to-day life in early years provision must be collected at least once a year and shared with both current and future parents, in order to make visible the child’s perspective and give voice to their interests and concerns (Danish Ministry of Welfare, in Kragh-Müller and Isbell 2011).
Practical issues facing practitioners can be an obstacle to creating a culture of listening (Rinaldi 2005). Training and budgetary limitations, as well as a policy and target-driven culture, can impede reflexive approaches. Alternative local methods can be adapted to better suit a context or setting, and small changes that allow stakeholders to engage in participatory action research as an investigative methodology in ‘real-world problem-solving’ (Lawson et al. 2015) can help to identify and challenge complex issues facing practitioners in their own setting. Examples can be sought and critically examined, such as Dahlberg’s Stockholm project (Dahlberg et al. 2013), which helped to develop ‘the tool of pedagogical documentation as a tool for learning and change’ (Taguchi 2010, 9). Working collaboratively with children to produce knowledge and meaning allows preconceived ideas about learning to be challenged. A successful example from a Swedish preschool can be seen in the ‘Crow Project’ (Moss 2014), which opened the learning experience up to the possibility of multiple perspectives and dialogues in a respectful and democratic environment. If practitioners locate themselves as ‘activist professionals’ (Hughes and MacNaughton 1999), the possibility arises to embrace complexity and conflict as necessary for productive change (Fullan 1993).

In conclusion, we would argue that the Plowden Report is as relevant today as it was 50 years ago when it stated, “Finding out” has proved to be better for children than “being told”. Children’s capacity to create in words, pictorially and through many other forms of expression, is astonishing’ (Central Advisory Council for Education 1967, 461). Transformative change can be brought about through engagement with ethical and political practice (Moss 2015), and approaches that have the courage to seek children’s points of view (Vecchi 2010) and promote pedagogic relationships that support both the agency of the practitioner and child. With calls for the government to enact legislation removing the English Secretary of State’s power over the national curriculum and statutory assessment, instead placing ‘power in the hands of schools, teachers and local regions’ (Wyse et al. 2015, 68), the debate surrounding the need for a drastically revised English curriculum is far from over.

‘The risk we face is not in exploring the unknown, but in retreating to the comfort of the “known”’ (Dahlberg et al. 2013, 196) and maintaining the dominant discourse’s focus on linearity and outcome. We must move away from a conception of education as transactional learning, recognise the richness of human capacity and trust our educators to support children in discovering ‘all life experiences are valued for their potential to inform and inspire learning’ (Sellers 2013, 29). The limitless possibility of technology to support and allow for international
collaboration brings with it immediacy, a multitude of perspectives and the opportunity of alternatives. It allows us to realise we are not alone in our experimentation.

What seems clear in much post-modern, socio-constructivist and contemporary research is the recognition of the child as capable and competent, able to construct their own meaning and through collaborative and participatory processes to engage with an effective curriculum. If we agree then we have a duty to educate and prepare children for ‘responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin’ (United Nations 1989, Article 29) – and we must find a way to do this in relation to the context of each child, in an earnest way to effect real ‘transformative change’.

Further reading

Four resources for further reading and reflection offer a helpful balance between theory and practice, providing informed perspectives from leading experts in the field to practical examples and approaches for practitioners. A group of 12 early years sector organisations including Early Education, KEYU and BERA commissioned Professors Chris Pascal and Tony Bertram to carry out a literature review of the most recent research underpinning the EYFS. The report Getting it Right in the Early Years Foundation Stage: A review of the evidence (Pascal et al. 2019) questions the need for extensive proposed changes to the current EYFS framework, and is available free at www.early-education.org.uk/sites/default/files/Getting%20it%20right%20in%20the%20EYFS%20Literature%20Review.pdf.

Peter Moss’s book Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood: An introduction for students and practitioners (Routledge, 2018) encourages anyone involved in the education of young children to critically reflect on and engage with the ‘multitude of perspectives’ in the field of early childhood education. It offers insight into thinking that challenges mainstream approaches and outlines ways in which change and contestation translate into practice. Crucially it discusses the importance of politics and ethics underpinning alternative narratives to the ‘dominant discourse’.

Amanda Ince and Eleanor Kitto have written A Practical Guide to Action Research and Teacher Enquiry: Making a difference in early years (Routledge, 2020), which can be used in conjunction with professional training or as a standalone guide. This book introduces teacher enquiry and action research as a way to instigate positive and lasting change and
provides guidance that bridges the theory/practice divide to address issues faced by practitioners and leaders in a variety of early childhood settings.

Finally, the Crow Project is an example of pedagogical engagement, which highlights potential experiences that can unfold when children are trusted to lead their own learning and are afforded the time and space needed to observe, question and construct meaning. It is a significant example of the important partnership formed between children and educators and illustrates how actively listening and participating in process-orientated democratic experimentation can foster the growth of skills, knowledge and understanding. It is available in Moss (2014) or free at www.sightlines-initiative.com/images/Library/research/crows%20-%20a%20knowledge%20building%20project%20about%20birds%20by%20ann%20aberg.pdf.

References


