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## EARLY CHILDHOOD IN FOCUS

*Series edited by Martin Woodhead and John Oates*

Early Childhood in Focus is a series of publications produced by the Child and Youth Studies Group at The Open University, United Kingdom, with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

The series provides accessible and clear reviews of the best and most recent available research, information and analysis on key policy and practice issues, spanning all aspects of early childhood care and education, as well as the full age range, from infancy through to the early years of school.

Each publication is developed in consultation with world leaders in research, policy, advocacy and children's rights. Many of these experts have written summaries of key messages from their areas of work especially for the series, and the accuracy of the content has been assured by independent academic assessors, themselves experts in the field of early childhood.

The themes of the series have been chosen to reflect topics of research and knowledge development that address the most significant areas of children's rights, and where a deeper understanding of the issues involved is crucial to the success of policy development programmes and their implementation.

These publications are intended to be of value to advocates for the rights of children and families, to policy makers at all levels, and to anyone working to improve the living conditions, quality of experience and life chances of young children throughout the world.

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# Culture and Learning

*Editors*

**Liz Brooker**  
**Martin Woodhead**



EARLY CHILDHOOD IN FOCUS 6

Young children experience the most rapid period of growth and change during the human lifespan, in terms of their maturing bodies and nervous systems, increasing mobility, communication skills and intellectual capacities, and rapid shifts in their interests and abilities ...

Young children actively make sense of the physical, social and cultural dimensions of the world they inhabit, learning progressively from their activities and their interactions with others, children as well as adults ...

Young children's experiences of growth and development are powerfully shaped by cultural beliefs about their needs and proper treatment, and about their active role in family and community ...

In planning for early childhood, States parties should at all times aim to provide programmes that complement the parents' role and are developed as far as possible in partnership with parents, including through active cooperation between parents, professionals and others in developing 'the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential'.

*(United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, Paragraphs 6 and 29)*

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# Preface

Promoting young children's learning is a major responsibility for professionals and parents, everywhere. It is tied to the broader goal of ensuring 'the development of the child ... to the maximum extent possible', which is part of every child's rights under the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989, Article 6).

One central question is how far development and learning should be understood as cultural processes that vary between communities and societies, and how far as natural processes that are the same for all children, everywhere. On the one hand, cross-cultural research describes diverse developmental niches inhabited by young children, which shape what they learn, how they learn and where they learn. On the other hand, universal features of early childhood, such as the progressive development of physical, motor, cognitive and communicative capacities, are equally well documented. One resolution of these conflicting accounts comes through recognising that learning and development are 'naturally cultural' (Rogoff, 2003). Babies are biologically pre-adapted to engage in social relationships, and to make sense of their surroundings by sharing with others in a process of intersubjectivity which supports joint activity, cooperation and communication. These processes in turn are strongly shaped by the cultural practices of families and communities, including in early childcare settings and schools.

This isn't just an issue for research. There are major policy questions about the place of culture in early childhood programmes and, equally, about the function of early childhood programmes in the daily lives of young children, families and communities. The role of language in early learning highlights the challenges. A child's first language, or 'mother tongue', is the vehicle for their cultural identity, as well as the major tool for learning. Coping with a different language of instruction at preschool and school, or with conflicting values and expectations, can be very challenging for young children, and can have long-term implications for learning.

The lesson is that 'education for all' goals cannot be implemented in a vacuum, without taking account of children's specific circumstances, including caregivers' and professionals' beliefs about their development and learning. At the same time, respecting cultural diversity is not an alternative to ensuring children's basic rights. Asking about the place of 'working and contributing' as well as 'playing and learning' in the daily lives of young children is a salutary reminder that cultural diversities are not disconnected from economic inequalities. This tension is especially evident in contexts of rapid social change and migration, especially for minority-group children growing up in complex, pluralistic societies, where they encounter competing values and expectations, and are at greatest risk of educational exclusion. Fortunately, innovative models are available, demonstrating what can be achieved in promoting development and learning, while respecting cultural diversities.

**Liz Brooker**  
**Martin Woodhead**  
Editors

# I.

## Development and learning



*The concepts of 'development' and 'learning' are intertwined: development is a holistic concept, encompassing growth and changes in all aspects of the individual's physical, mental and social functioning; learning refers to the specific processes for developing knowledge, skills and identity.*

*Development and learning are universal processes, but they take place in specific social and cultural contexts, including childcare and early education settings.*

*Variations in children's development and learning are shaped by cultural values, but they are also strongly linked to economic and structural inequities, as these impact on the capacities of parents to promote their children's development.*

*Supporting the child's development entails both respecting and supporting the family and community which carry the major day-to-day responsibility for the child.*

*Young children's close relationships offer the immediate context for all aspects of their development and learning, and introduce them to the cultural tools through which their knowledge and understanding grow, notably language.*



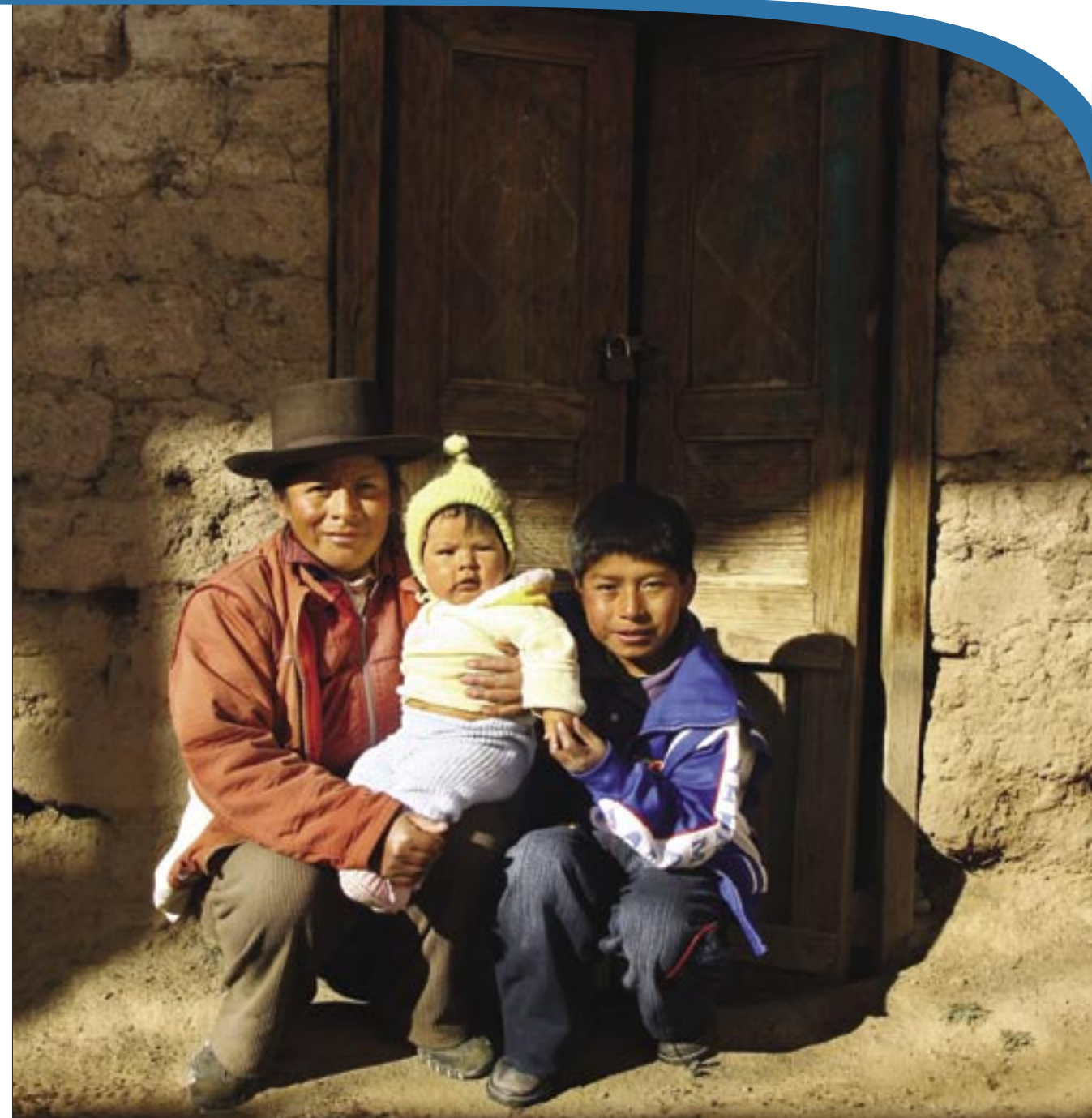
## A right to development

Article 6 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* requires States Parties to ensure every child develops 'to the maximum extent possible'. While the principle is clear, there is less agreement about how to define development, how development links to learning, and how both can best be promoted. The international Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) (1993) has offered some definitions, along with implications for policy makers and providers:

- *Development begins prenatally and learning is occurring at birth.* Therefore attention to the developmental and learning needs of children begins with pre- and postnatal interventions.
- *Development and learning occur continuously as a changing child interacts with a changing environment.* Therefore interventions can focus on changing the child and/or on changing the environment (which includes the immediate family, the community, social institutions and cultural beliefs).
- *Development has several interrelated dimensions and learning occurs in each of them.* Therefore development and learning must be seen holistically and interventions should provide integrated attention to the child, including attention to needs for protection, food, health care, affection, interaction and stimulation, security provided through consistency and predictability, and play allowing exploration.
- *Development proceeds in predictable steps and learning occurs in recognised sequences.* Therefore interventions should follow an appropriate sequence. Activities should not be introduced before a child is developmentally ready for them.
- *Children learn in many ways: by playing and exploring, by using all their senses, by imagining, by imitating, by interacting socially with others.* Therefore integrated interventions promoting social and emotional as well as cognitive learning can take advantage of varied forms of learning, consistent with cultural ways even while taking into account that there are recognised sequences and activities that facilitate learning.
- *It helps children to develop and learn when adults are emotionally responsive to children, involving them in the everyday life of their family and community, and supporting their developing knowledge, skills and competencies through their own attention and interest.* Therefore interventions should include attention to adults as well as to children.

(adapted from Consultative Group on ECCD, 1993)

- *Support for young children's development and learning must be holistic, taking into account all aspects of children's growth, and all aspects of their families' social, cultural and economic circumstances.*
- *Interventions must be carefully planned to facilitate the well-being of adults as well as the children they care for.*



## The universal and the particular

Although some universal principles explain how all children learn and develop, in practice learning and development are so tempered by circumstances and so grounded in local knowledge that they cannot be supported without an understanding of local contexts. In early childhood, this is a critical issue, because of the intimacies of child rearing. Jerome Bruner (1982) writes that:

perhaps even more than with most cultural matters, childrearing practices and beliefs reflect local conceptions of how the world is and how the child should be readied for living it.

The question of whether there can be universal codes of explanation, conduct and behaviour, based on empirical evidence, has been a matter of philosophical, legal and economic debate for centuries. Science claims to be universal, but the ethical, moral and social issues which surround scientific advance are highly problematic. Child development claims to be a science, and therefore universal, but even if this claim is true – and it is disputed (Burman, 2008) – there are still many questions about how to apply these theories of child development.

Many early childhood programmes in low-income countries, for example, focus on individual parenting skills irrespective of the daily circumstances mothers face and the long hours they might work. In addition, these parenting programmes are usually drawn from standardised Anglo-European models and make assumptions about mother–child talk, mother–child control and direction, and time usage, which are culturally inappropriate. In some societies children’s important learning experiences come from siblings, peer groups and wider social networks as well as – or even instead of – mothers or carers, but such approaches are understated in the child development literature. (LeVine and New, 2008).

In her Afterword to the study of globalisation in three early childhood settings by Cleghorn and Prochner (2010), Jessica Ball concludes that any approach to early childhood needs to combine:

traditional and modern, indigenous and transcultural approaches to create new preschool practices that are fitting to the particular children, parents and schools in a particular community.

**Helen Penn**, Professor of Early Childhood Education, University of East London, UK

- *The ‘science’ of child development which underpins international programmes must always be interpreted through the lens of local variations in goals for children.*
- *When planning interventions, programme providers need to be aware of the ways local circumstances, beliefs and practices both constrain and create opportunities for learning.*



# Enabling conditions for development and learning

*Creating the conditions in which children can thrive is a basic prerequisite for learning*

Millions of the world's children do not experience enabling conditions for development and learning. They do not have ready or easy access to education and health services, and they lack the basic requirements for everyday life: enough food, clean water and decent shelter, let alone sanitation or electricity. For example, even in a middle-income country like South Africa 55 per cent of children live in 'ultra-poor' households and are undernourished (UNICEF, 2007). Children who are always hungry and often ill do not learn easily, even if they get to school (Grantham-McGregor *et al.*, 2007).

It is important to create the conditions in which young children can thrive. That means understanding and doing something about the causes of poverty and inequality, whether within countries or across rich and poor countries – a difficult and controversial task for many reasons (Penn, 2008). Inequality within and across nations undermines progress. Conversely, equal societies have the best outcomes in health and education for young children (UNESCO, 2008). As Martha Nussbaum has demonstrated in her work in India on human capabilities, altering *the structural conditions in which families – and mothers in particular – live* gives them hope and enables them to reassess their circumstances, including what they expect from their children (Nussbaum, 2000). By contrast, programmes which only operate at a micro-level, in support of the individual child, parent or family, are less likely to be successful.

These two universal principles concerning children's rights to a decent life, and immense respect for local autonomy, are difficult to achieve and sometimes appear to be in conflict with one another. But young children's successful learning and development are contingent on both of them together.

**Helen Penn**, Professor of Early Childhood Education, University of East London, UK

- *Inequality and poverty, even within the most affluent nations, have the largest impact on children's access to health and education.*
- *Efforts to reduce poverty and inequality are an important strategy for promoting children's development and well-being, by raising the expectations and capabilities of their families.*



## Relationships as the foundation

Young children are active participants in their development. At birth, they seek out responsive care and nurturance from those around them. Under normal circumstances, these earliest interactions grow into secure emotional attachments with mother, father, or other major caregivers, as well as siblings. The child's earliest relationships are the foundation that normally ensures the child's physical survival and emotional security, on which they build their cognitive, language and social skills (Oates, 2007).

One of the most distinctive features of human learning is that it is built on capacities for intersubjectivity and communication. The growth of intersubjectivity in infants has been studied most extensively through examination of the close relationships that typically develop between babies and their caregivers in the early months of life. Trevarthen (1979) describes intersubjectivity as the recognition and coordination of intentions in adult–infant communication. The earliest signs of shared understanding are seen during feeding, when it is evident that the adult coordinates their own movements with the babies' stop–start sucking behaviour, and babies in turn begin to coordinate their behaviour with the person feeding them, in an early form of turn taking or 'proto-conversation'. Such 'meshing' of turns creates 'pseudo-dialogues' to which both child and caregiver contribute.

The origin of skilled turn taking observed in such dialogues may actually lie more in the adult's control of the interaction, as they fine-tune their own responses to the baby's signals. It may be that the caregiver fits their behaviour around the natural ebb and flow of their baby's behaviour so that a conversation-like interaction is sustained, but with little adjustment or use of social skill on the baby's part, initially. But this does not detract from the significance of the dialogue for the baby.

Probably the most important consequence of meshed interactions between caregiver and infant is that they can give the infant the *experience* of taking part in a dialogue. This experience is unique to interactions that the infant has with other human beings and provides the first experiences of relatedness. No other 'objects' in the infant's world can give this experience (Oates, 2005).

**John Oates**, Senior Lecturer in Developmental Psychology, The Open University, UK

- *Babies' active participation in non-verbal dialogues with their mothers and other early caregivers provides the foundation for all subsequent learning.*
- *The caregiver's role in these dialogues is to provide the infant with the opportunity to experience turn taking and mutually satisfying communication, the basis for future language development.*



# Developing communication, learning language

*Learning to talk is essentially a social and a cultural activity*

Learning to talk is one of the most significant expressions of human activity, and language is the most significant cultural tool for sharing knowledge, skills and understanding, and developing personal identity throughout early childhood. Although differing theories of language 'acquisition' or 'development' have been proposed in the last century (Messer, 2000), most researchers now agree that both the biological (innate) characteristics of human infants and the cultural (experienced) characteristics of their environments are involved in shaping human language learning.

There are, in consequence, both universal and local aspects to language learning, and it is important for providers and programme makers to be alert to both aspects when planning support for children's developing communicative skills. In Bruner's words, language acquisition does not depend on 'the virtuoso cracking of a linguistic code'. It is neither 'the spin-off of ordinary cognitive development' nor 'the gradual take-over of adults' speech by the child'. Rather it is the outcome of regular and consistent experiences of language in use within a particular cultural environment, the result of 'a subtle process by which adults artificially arrange the world so that the child can succeed culturally by doing what comes naturally, and with others similarly inclined' (Bruner, 1982).

The extent to which adults 'artificially arrange the world' for the benefit of infants and young children shows great local variation. In subsistence economies, adults have little leisure and few resources to make special provision for children – engaging in face-to-face interactions using heightened speech, simplification and repetition, for instance. Children may learn their language through a gradual process of observation and participation in family and peer-group activities. But in affluent societies, infants and young children may be given access to highly specialised input from adults, designed to make the process easier.

Children acquire their 'language' and their 'culture' simultaneously, as described by Cole in his account of children's participation in everyday activities:

As children in such activities struggle to understand objects and social relations in order to gain control over their environments and themselves, they recreate the culture into which they are born, even as they reinvent the language of their forebears.

*(Cole, 1998, p. 30)*

**Liz Brooker**, Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood, Institute of Education, University of London, UK

- *Babies and toddlers learn to talk by participating in the opportunities for interaction offered within their cultural community.*



# Cultures of caregiving – mothers and others

*Children's experiences of caregiving are shaped by economic circumstances as well as cultural traditions*

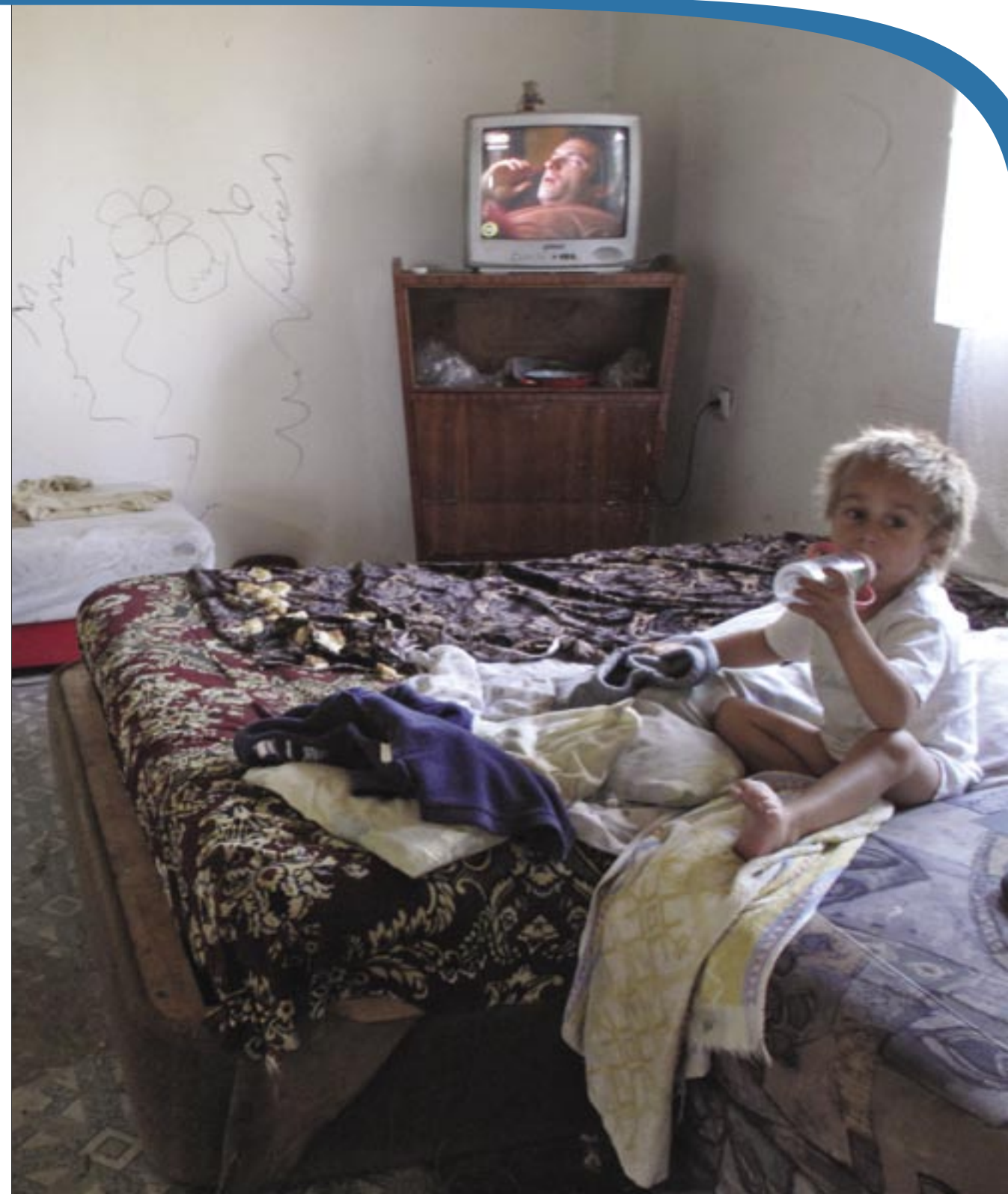
Cultural differences in caring for the young include who cares for children, their availability, and the kinds of interactions, communication, and activities in which care is provided. Mothers are the primary caregivers in most societies. They provide nurturance and support in raising the young and shaping their development and learning. However, caregiving in mother-child relationships takes place in different kinds of attachment relationships depending on cultural priorities. When it is necessary to share caregiving with others, mothers play a significant role in determining the division of labour within the constraints of their communities.

Cultural traditions as well as economic and political factors shape structural differences in children's living arrangements. These differences determine the availability of caregivers and the kind of care children receive (Whiting and Edwards, 1988; Rogoff, 2003). For example, children in most industrialised communities have traditionally grown up in nuclear families where caregiving was shared between parents and siblings, although such traditions have been transformed in recent years by the influx of new cultural communities through migration. Equally, children in the non-Western world have traditionally grown up either in extended families with relatives or in close proximity to their relatives, although these traditions too are changing with increasing globalisation. Where extended family patterns persist, in both industrialised and developing societies, other adults (such as grandparents) and other children (such as cousins) also participate in the care of young children. Also, it is common in many non-Western communities for non-kin to participate in caregiving, being available as potential attachment figures.

Traditional patterns of caregiving are changing in most societies, as internal migration, industrialisation, and new patterns of employment promote the introduction of out-of-home care ('childcare') for many young children. Different caregiving arrangements shape children's relationships and their opportunities for learning.

**Artin Göncü**, Professor of Educational Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

- *Children's earliest experiences of caregiving are influenced by the social and economic as well as the cultural aspects of their environment.*
- *Traditional comparisons between 'individual' (maternal) and 'collective' (extended family) caregiving are being eroded as geographical and demographic factors re-shape the ways in which families organise their lives and communities.*



# Caregiving interactions

*In modern societies, caregiving roles have become more specialised*

In traditional communities dependent on a subsistence economy, caregiving has often been embedded in the communal/group activity and shared among adults and other children, enabling multiple interactions (Tronick *et al.*, 1987). In contrast, in most industrialised societies adult and child lives have become more segregated, with adult work life and children's schooling taking place in different places away from home and without shared experience most of the day. In these situations, caregiving often becomes a more specialised role with an emphasis on dyadic interactions between caregiver and child (unless specific arrangements such as day care are made).

For example, in studying the cultural practices of urban and schooled communities in both the USA and Turkey, we found that caregiving often occurred between the mother and her toddler in dyadic interactions in the contexts of exploring novel objects, dressing and playing (Rogoff *et al.*, 1993). However, similar studies in rural communities in India and Guatemala showed that caregiving in these activities was embedded in the group.

In the communities in India and Guatemala, which relied on a subsistence economy and in which children were not segregated from adult activities, children appropriated the skills necessary for their functioning through active observation and participation in community activities, with the caregivers supporting children's efforts by responsive assistance. However, in urban, middle-income communities such as Keçiören (Ankara, Turkey) and Salt Lake City (USA) where parents were schooled and their activities were segregated from those of children, adults took the responsibility for managing learning through organised instruction.

With the rapid pace of change in the last two decades, however, including modernisation, migration, childcare and near-universal schooling, it is likely that children's experiences of caregiving have become more varied and more complex, even within a single community.

**Artin Göncü**, Professor of Educational Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

- *The extent to which young children share in the lives of adults, or experience a child-focused world, has consequences for the ways in which they develop and learn.*
- *Changes in the organisation of family and community life, as the result of migration and globalisation, are changing the opportunities given to children to learn, through participation or through instruction.*



# POLICY QUESTIONS



- ◆ What strategies should be prioritised in supporting children's early development in diverse communities?
- ◆ How far do early childhood programmes take account of both the cultural and the socioeconomic conditions of families and communities?
- ◆ Is it sufficient to intervene in young children's development at the local level without first addressing the structural inequalities which shape development?
- ◆ How far do policies and programmes support mothers and other caregivers in forming the close and nurturing relationships which are the foundation for children's earliest development?
- ◆ How far can traditional childrearing practices be respected while at the same time ensuring children's rights are protected?
- ◆ Are there universal and shared understandings about the roles of parents in the care of young children, or must these always be the subject of local decisions?
- ◆ How can laws and policies ensure appropriate support is accessible to families and communities whose lives are radically altered as a result of migration or globalisation?





## II.

## Living and learning



*Much learning in families and close communities takes place implicitly and even unintentionally, as children participate with others in household activities. Adults and peers support younger children in their growing understanding of their home culture.*

*Daily routines provide their own learning opportunities for young children as they come to understand the rules of their community, including such matters as how time and space are organised in the home, and how relationships between adults and children are established and regulated.*

*Young children's play, and particularly their pretend play, is recognised as a unique medium for learning in the early years. Children are motivated to practise the roles of the adults in their community, and in this way come to understand the responsibilities and experiences that may lie ahead of them.*

*Being protected from harmful work is part of every child's rights, but modern visions of early childhood neglect the continuing role of children's economic activity as a way to learn skills and responsibilities, especially in poor rural and urban communities.*

# Learning through participation

*Children's cognitive development is an apprenticeship – it occurs through social activity with companions who support and stretch children's understanding*

Children's cognitive development is an apprenticeship – it occurs through guided participation in social activity with companions who support and stretch children's understanding of and skill in using the tools of culture. The sociocultural basis of human skills and activities – including children's orientation to participate in and build on the activities around them – is inseparable from the biological and historical basis of humans as a species. The particular skills and orientation that children develop are rooted in the specific historical and cultural activities of the community in which children and their companions interact. [...]

Guided participation involves interpersonal communication as well as stage-setting arrangements of children's activities. It includes explicit efforts to guide children in development as well as tacit communication and arrangements that are embedded in the practical and routine activities of daily life that do not explicitly focus on instruction or guidance. Guided participation is jointly managed by children and their companions in ways that facilitate children's growing skills and participation in the activities of mature members of their community.

The processes of guided participation – building bridges between what children know and new information to be learned, structuring and supporting children's efforts, and transferring to children the responsibility for managing problem solving – provide direction and organization for children's cognitive development in widely differing cultures. At the same time, cultural variation in the lessons to be learned and in the means by which children learn them underscore the importance of children's roles in observing and participating in social activity, the tacit arrangements of children's roles, and the multiple roles of parents and other companions in guiding children's development. [...]

Peers may be less skilled partners than adults in some activities, but may offer unique possibilities for discussion and collaboration when they consider each other's perspective in a balanced fashion. Peers also serve as highly available and active companions, providing each other with motivation, imagination, and opportunities for creative elaboration of the activities of their community.

Each community's valued skills constitute the local goals of development.

*(Rogoff, 1990)*

- *Children's learning through participation in the daily activities of their families and peer groups is motivated by a strong sense of identity and belonging.*
- *Cultural learning is mediated by the arrangement of the child's environment, as well as by social interactions: the environment 'teaches' the uses of time and space, and the routines and relationships which shape daily life.*



# Daily routines as learning opportunities

*The organisation of time, space and routines shapes opportunities for learning*

In the course of their daily interactions with family members, children are surrounded by messages about what is allowed and expected, and what is not, within their family and community. Schaffer (1996) describes the processes by which children acquire cultural knowledge, and the importance of attentive adults:

Family life, by its very nature, is an emotional affair; when a child's learning is embedded in family relationships, it will inevitably occur in the midst of much joy and excitement but also amongst strife and dispute. An important function of such emotion is to heighten children's awareness of their experience: whether the emotion is positive or negative the child is more likely to recall what occurred in an affectively charged situation than an emotionally neutral one .... For preschool children the learning potential of the home is thus very considerable ... the home has the advantage not only of providing lots of interesting and meaningful information but also of stirring the child's curiosity through showing willingness to satisfy that curiosity.

*(Schaffer, 1996, pp. 259–64)*

As Rogoff (1990) points out, however, much of children's learning in the family is acquired through the tacit arrangement of time, space and routines rather than through explicit instruction. The rules concerned with eating and sleeping, learning and playing, work and recreation, are embedded in the cultural environment fashioned by the family. This environment reflects parents' beliefs, goals and circumstances: it is one which, within the limits of their resources, they believe will best achieve the desired outcomes for their children (Cole, 1998).

In many parts of the industrialised world, due to parents' emphasis on early independence, children learn to sleep in their own beds (and in their own rooms) at a very young age, and often follow a bedtime routine (such as listening to a story). Children in non-industrial societies, on the other hand, may continue to sleep with their caregivers during infancy and childhood. These early experiences shape children's expectations although their distinctiveness may only become apparent when children enter school (Heath, 1982; 1983).

**Liz Brooker**, Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood, Institute of Education, University of London, UK

- *Learning experiences within family relationships are particularly powerful and enduring because they are associated with the strong emotions, both positive and negative, which run through family life.*
- *Domestic arrangements for work and play, eating and sleeping, teach children ways of being and learning which will influence their adaptation to formal schooling.*



# Play: promoting development and learning

*Young children's play is universally recognised as important for their well-being and development*

Evidence of changing understandings of young children's development can be found in the global spread of the notion that children 'learn through play' (Bennett *et al.*, 1997). Interest has grown, in recent decades, in studying not only the ways that children play in diverse cultures, but the views of adults in these cultures on the contribution of children's play to their development and learning.

In 'Western' societies, early study of the impact of play on development, linked with the emergence and dissemination of constructivist theories of learning (Piaget, 1951; Sylva *et al.*, 1976; Vygotsky, 1978), prompted widespread enthusiasm for providing 'playful learning' in both family and preschool settings. The shift from formal to informal theories of learning produced, in some instances, a laissez-faire approach to early learning which was in stark contrast to the traditional instructional methods which had earlier prevailed, and which are still prevalent in many non-Western cultures. The resulting 'play pedagogies' (Wood, 2008) were viewed for a time as both Eurocentric and culturally inappropriate for children in the Majority World where, it was assumed, 'childhood' was a time for work or study rather than for play.

Cross-cultural studies have helped to restore the balance, showing that parents in most societies value play as an activity for children, and that in many communities children's play is understood as beneficial for their development and learning. Gaskin and colleagues (2006) offer case studies to support a classification of cultural attitudes to play as 'cultivating' (Euroamerican and Taiwanese families), 'accepting' (the Kpelle community in Liberia) or 'curtailing' (a Mayan community in Mexico), and suggest how these attitudes are linked with the economic and other aspects of daily life in each community. Nevertheless, the apparently universal appreciation of 'pretend play' as a preparation for adult life, and a space to try out cultural behaviours, suggests that parents everywhere are able to identify a role for play in preparing children for participation in the community, if not for teaching them school-like knowledge and skills.

As Bornstein summarises (2006, p. 115):

Although human societies vary in the amount and type of such play, anthropological accounts attest that fully developed pretend play ... appears to be universal.

**Liz Brooker**, Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood, Institute of Education, University of London, UK

- *In traditional societies, play is viewed simply as a pastime for children, or a preparation for growing up, whereas in many Western societies it is seen as the means for children to begin their school learning.*



*Young children use every opportunity to play, with whatever resources they can find*

## Play: a case study from Sudan

The following observation is derived from field notes made in the course of an ethnographic study of life in the Sudanese village of Howa (Katz, 2004). It forms part of the story of a typical day in the lives of young children in the village, and describes the way that a mixed-age group of girls play together with dolls after finishing their morning tasks in and around the village:

The dolls were made of two sturdy pieces of straw crossed so that the horizontal piece served as the arms, and the vertical piece the head to toe. Each doll had a name and was dressed in scraps of fabric. The dolls were male and female and of all ages. The girls manipulated them in and around houses that they established with dividers made of shoes, pestles, bricks and pieces of tin cans. They used all manner of found objects for props, including an enamel cup, shards of glass and crockery, can lids, battery tops, small bottles, grass, razor-blade wrappers, a soap carton, a hollowed-out D battery, empty food tins, dirt, charcoal bits and cardboard.

One girl had her doll prepare sorghum pancakes and stew by spreading dirt on a can top, then breaking up pieces of grass and leaves and putting them in a shard of glass. In the course of the afternoon the dolls cooked, cleaned, ate, went to the well, ran errands and visited. The girls clearly enjoyed this game, in which they experimented with both their present tasks and potential adult roles. They played 'house' at least four times a week.

Although girls playing 'house' acted out collecting firewood or fetching water, their focus was largely on the domestic environment and the domain of daily activities, which included child care, food preparation, cooking, cleaning, washing, eating, and visiting, as well as the social events that marked important life passages, such as birth, death, marriage, circumcision, and naming ceremonies. Their playfully elaborate participation in these events and the full range of domestic chores associated with them enabled the girls to experiment with and practice future social roles and to learn about and internalise the domestic activities in which they participated as children, but for which they would be responsible as adults.

**Cindi Katz**, Professor, Geography and Environmental Psychology Programs, The Graduate Center, City University of New York, USA

- *Children spontaneously participate in 'pretend play' as they try out the adult roles of their local community, as if in preparation for their own future lives.*



# Learning through work, and learning how to work

*The significance of work in children's lives is underestimated in many global child development policies*

Young children have many opportunities to learn useful skills as they take on culturally valued work responsibilities and participate in routine activities alongside more competent family members and others (Rogoff, 2003). The significance of work in children's lives has been played down in contemporary global policies, which instead emphasise school as the route to learning. Yet in the Majority World, and while there are many exceptions (UNICEF, 2005), children are expected to take on domestic, agricultural and communal responsibilities, beginning during the early years. Internationally, children's work is regulated by the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Article 32) and by the International Labour Organisation Convention 182 which seeks to eliminate the worst forms of child labour (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), 2002; Woodhead, 2004). While there is some evidence of the exploitation of children, many studies (such as Bray, 2003) report that children value the support they provide to families, and adults value their contribution.

As well as learning values such as helpfulness, important skills are transferred through work (Bray, 2003; Woodhead, 2004). A sense of identity and connectedness is likely to be enhanced through participation in work alongside kin. Self-esteem and self-efficacy are supported as new skills are recognised by family and community members. Cognitive abilities, technical skills and local cultural competencies develop in parallel. For example, numeracy is stimulated as children learn to recognise (and count) family cattle by the patterns on their hides. Motor skills develop when assisting with tasks such as weeding the vegetable patch, sweeping the house or hanging up the family washing. Children in Zimbabwe who sell vegetables to the market with their parents begin to understand profit earlier than their counterparts in modern societies (Jahoda, 1983).

Observations in rural Bolivia point to the developmental benefits of such work:

Even from an early age children carry out some tasks independently and they should not be seen purely as helpers but active contributors in their own right. Their unpaid work not only benefits the household ... but also increases their sense of autonomy, enabling them to gain skills and competencies useful for their individual independence.

*(Punch, 2001, p. 818)*

**Andy Dawes**, Professor (Emeritus), University of Cape Town, South Africa

- *Participation in family and community activities enables children to develop a range of skills at the same time as they contribute to the household income.*
- *Appropriate work roles can help children to achieve a sense of identity and belonging, as well as developing confidence and pride in their own knowledge and skills.*



# Understanding work in children's lives

*While children may learn from their work, they are also entitled to protection from harmful work*

Understanding the contribution of work to young children's development has implications for policy and programming. Agencies seeking to intervene in the lives of children in the poorest countries of the world need to consider three important aspects.

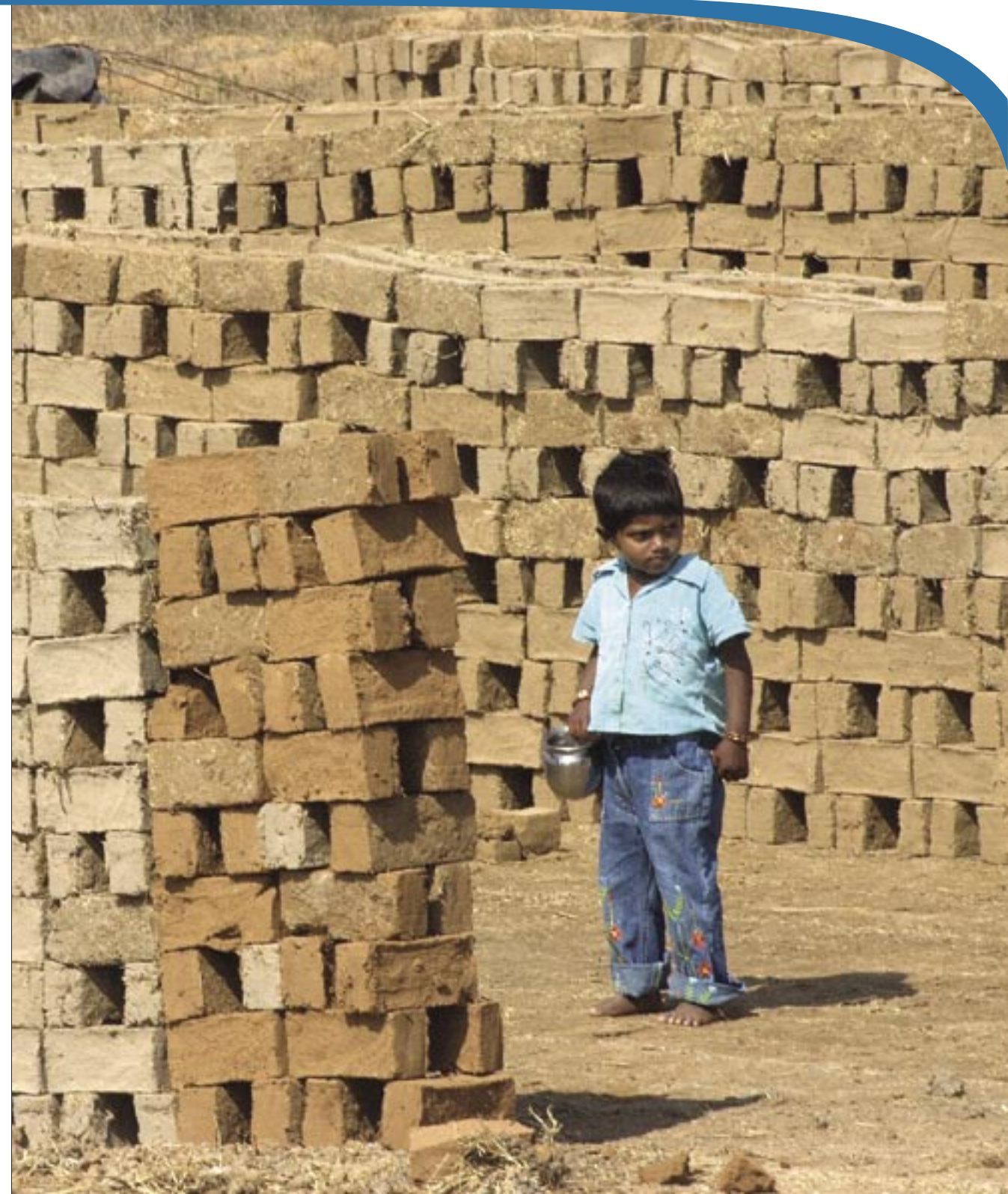
First, it is important to understand local expectations of young children's participation in work, particularly around the home and local community. These can then be incorporated in the content of early interventions to promote child development. For example, an opportunity exists for the carer to stimulate the learning of colours and size as the child helps to hang up the washing. Another possibility is to support emerging classification abilities as the child works alongside a carer in the fields. Carers can point out the characteristics of weeds and crops and name them, thereby extending vocabulary. Young children may be asked to run errands, providing a local opportunity to support self-regulation as the child focuses attention and listens to instructions; memorisation strategies can also be extended – all important in preparation for school.

Second, it is necessary to understand the everyday burdens that many caregivers in poor communities have to contend with and which may impede the uptake of learning in home-based programme delivery. What space is there in the daily routine for the stimulation of early development? Do we expect too much from caregivers? Programming may need to take this into account by not adding yet another burden, and perhaps recognising the carer's need for support before she (it is usually she) has the energy to focus on her young child's development.

Third, while children learn from their work responsibilities, attention needs to be paid to protection from work activity that is harmful to child development. Examples would be carrying heavy loads of wood or water. It is necessary to understand existing local norms for children's work responsibility, while engaging communities to support reductions in harmful practice. Home-based interventions and community campaigns in particular can play a role in the prevention of harmful work activities by recognising their occurrence, assisting carers to understand the risks, and optimally drawing on the support of other community members to reinforce the message. Where children's work is driven by circumstances beyond the family's control, intervention to mobilise support is essential.

**Andy Dawes**, Professor (Emeritus), University of Cape Town, South Africa

- *Policy makers intervening in children's working lives need to be sensitive to community needs and constraints.*
- *Interventions can help to ensure that children are not engaged in excessive or harmful work, and that local practice takes account of children's developmental needs and their rights.*



# POLICY QUESTIONS



- ◆ If everyday experiences make an important contribution to children's early learning, what are the implications for programme development and for supporting parents?
- ◆ How can providers ensure that young children have opportunities to play, as well as work and study, even where local cultural norms do not view play as beneficial?
- ◆ How far do policies respect the knowledge and skills young children have acquired through their family experiences?
- ◆ What steps are required to protect children from harmful or exploitative work while at the same time respecting the positive contribution that appropriate kinds of work can make to children's development?
- ◆ Are policies and interventions, especially in poor communities, informed by the views of parents as well as by scientific knowledge and professional beliefs about children's development?





# III.

## Learning and schooling



*The global expansion of early childhood education and care must ensure equity of access and quality, and at the same time ensure the cultural appropriateness of programme content.*

*For young children starting school or preschool, learning in their first language or mother tongue provides the link which enables them to build on their prior knowledge and gain in knowledge and skills.*

*Innovative programmes, such as Te Whāriki in New Zealand, and the madrasa schools in Kenya, build on the values of families and communities, and support children's transition from home to schooled knowledge.*

*Parents' views must be listened to if programmes are to meet local approval. Understanding local knowledge enables programme makers to design provision which wins community support and encourages participation.*

*When children who have experienced migration or internal displacement enter early education settings, new dilemmas are created for parents as well as practitioners. The cultural identity of both child and parent may undergo change in the new environment.*

# Early childhood programmes and respect for diversity

*Cultural appropriateness and developmental appropriateness are strong foundations for policy and practice*

Globally, it is estimated that 140 million children were enrolled in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in 2007, compared with 113 million in 1999, but with marked variations at every level: between regions, between countries and within countries (UNESCO, 2009). The growth in quantity is not always matched by increased equity of access to quality provision. On the contrary, the poorest, most marginalised and rural children are least likely to attend an early childhood programme in the years before they start school (Nonoyama-Tarumi *et al.*, 2008; Woodhead *et al.*, 2009; UNESCO, 2009). And where programmes do reach the most disadvantaged groups, concerns have been raised about the export of 'Western' goals for children's development into areas where these are unconnected to local beliefs, values and priorities (Woodhead, 1996).

To illustrate the ways cultural beliefs shape the expectations of young children, Penn and Maynard (2010, p. 23), report a conversation with a South African scholar, Nikidi Phatudi, during a visit to a nursery.

We asked what *ubuntu* meant in this context. Dr Phatudi said that it meant respect and self-restraint. Children were taught to respect adults and other children, not to have unnecessary arguments or disagreements. She said that in her own childhood, children were expected at all times to sit and be quiet in the presence of adults, but she could see that this had sometimes been inhibiting and prevented children from 'venturing out' and exploring for themselves. However, she felt that even young children should be able to act with dignity, helpfulness, respect and politeness, and to fail to teach them self-restraint was to deny them their culture. The other side of this coin, of *ubuntu*, was ... dedication to the children and the community. According to the ethic of *ubuntu*, 'my child is your child' and adults in general hold a deep sense of responsibility for the welfare of all the children in their community.

Programmes which are responsive to the local culture experience high levels of enrolment and retention, and prove to be sustainable in the longer term, as parents recognise the value of early education for their children (Arnold *et al.*, 2006).

**Liz Brooker**, Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood, Institute of Education, University of London, UK

**Martin Woodhead**, Professor of Childhood Studies, The Open University, UK

- *It is important to assess equity of access and quality of provision, when describing progress in early childhood education and care.*
- *The cultural appropriateness of provision can only be assured by listening to local people as they explain their views of childhood.*



# Language and early schooling: a 'missing link'

*Mastering a new language can be the first challenge for many children starting school*

The language a child first learns to speak at home has a powerful influence on their identity and learning, especially if they are confronted by a different language when they first enter the classroom. Whether or not a child is taught in their first language has a strong effect on whether or not they attend school, particularly in rural areas. For those who do attend, the language used to deliver the school curriculum pulls down the educational performance of many children who don't have regular access to that language outside school. For children who stay in education, there is a strong negative impact on achievement if their first language is not used for teaching, learning and assessment.

For the preschool and primary years in particular, teaching in a language which is not familiar to a child is often too demanding to cope with – particularly when children face other barriers to education, such as poverty, hunger and poor learning conditions. Children learn by linking new knowledge to what is already familiar to them, and sudden shifts into an unfamiliar language sever those links.

Not being taught in a familiar language is leading to the exclusion of large numbers of children from education. Simply teaching the curriculum through a language which a child does not already know well fails to give children adequate skills in that language, despite being intended to do so. Such failures to achieve second language competency are likely to delay the economic growth of countries moving into the global knowledge economy, and may often be the cause of political instability. These problems can be addressed by providing at least 6 years of mother-tongue education, with other languages introduced gradually.

The world's most linguistically diverse societies, many of which use a single national or international language for schooling, account for a significant proportion of out-of-school children. The most 'linguistically fractionalised' countries contain 72 per cent of out-of-school children. In linguistically diverse countries, particularly those with high rural populations or large divisions between linguistic groups, it makes sense to treat school language as one of the most important factors in improving access to education, and fostering good learning outcomes (Pinnock, 2009).

**Helen Pinnock**, Education Adviser, Save the Children, London

- *School enrolment is lowest in those countries where the medium of instruction in schools is not matched to children's first languages.*
- *Starting preschool or school in a second language has adverse effects on children's development and learning, including their cognitive and linguistic skills, and these effects may persist over time.*
- *Where the medium of instruction is not the child's mother tongue, long-term effects impact on the society as a whole and not simply on the individual child.*



## New Zealand: *Te Whāriki*

*Te Whāriki*, the curriculum for early childhood care and education in Aotearoa, New Zealand, was given a Māori name in recognition of the authors' commitment to the values of the indigenous peoples of the country. In the words of the document (Ministry of Education (MoE), New Zealand, 1996, p. 11):

The early childhood curriculum has been envisaged as a *whāriki*, or mat, woven from the principles, strands and goals defined in this document. The *whāriki* concept recognises the diversity of early childhood education in New Zealand.

The provision offers not only authentically 'multicultural' dimensions, but also a variety of types of childcare and early education to meet the family circumstances of its users, including home-based services and 'language nests' (*kohanga reo*) for immersion in Māori language. One of the early contributors to the curriculum, Tilly Reedy, described the provision as reflecting a *tangata whenua* ('people of the land') perspective on child development, which can be distinctively different from conventional developmental accounts. Within this perspective, children are understood to be linked both to the land and to their past, and are viewed as 'the repository of the teachings of yesterday, the enhancement of the dreams of today, and the embodiment of the aspirations for tomorrow' (Reedy, 2003, p. 58).

The curriculum is founded on clear aspirations for children (MoE, 1996, p. 9):

To grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society.

These aspirations are evident in the curriculum content, which prioritises the child's sense of self (their *mana*, which includes a sense of responsibility to the collective and leadership qualities) over traditional school-based knowledge. Educators focus on five domains of *mana*, which are generally interpreted as well-being, exploration, belonging, contributing and communicating. They share responsibility for children's development with parents and other community helpers, all of whom participate in the provision made for children and in their assessment. Children themselves contribute to the assessment of their developing knowledge and skills, by sharing in the construction of 'learning stories', narratives which describe their growing interest and expertise in aspects of the world around them.

**Margaret Carr**, Professor of Early Childhood, and **Lesley Rameka**, Lecturer in Professional Studies in Education, University of Waikato, New Zealand

- *The Te Whāriki model seeks to build on local values as well as on international 'expert' knowledge about children and their development.*
- *The flexible approach enables participants from different ethnic and language communities, and providers of different services, to work together towards children's well-being.*



# Kenya: the madrasa secular preschools and the spirit of *harambee*

*Linking traditional values with modern priorities*

Today's madrasa preschools, which are found in Kenya and neighbouring states, are a modern version of an 800-year-old institution. They were initiated by Muslim groups concerned about the cycle of deprivation afflicting the children in their community: extreme poverty, poor child health, low school achievement, lack of employment, and continuing poverty in the next generation. When studies undertaken in the 1980s identified poor school readiness as a contributing factor, the solution found was to utilise the under-used facilities of the madrasa buildings to provide integrated preschool education, literacy and numeracy, alongside the existing religious classes, with a curriculum offering holistic care while maintaining the children's Muslim identity. Over time, the initiative led to the foundation of the first Madrasa Resource Centre (MRC) in 1990 supported by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN).

The MRC provides teacher training and low-cost/no-cost educational resources for preschools, as well as coordinating outreach work and community support and self-help. Teacher training includes work with inexpensive or freely available local materials such as shells, coconuts, seed pods and soap boxes, to reflect the children's everyday experience and culture. A second phase of development, initiated in 2000, extended the focus to include parent education, special education, health and nutrition, and community mobilisation, aiming to deliver high-quality early childhood education. Each local preschool is built on a contract drawn up between MRC and the community, which identifies the goals and aspirations of local parents, and arranges for the training of suitable local educators as well as material support with an AKDN-supported endowment fund. When the preschool has achieved sustainability and can rely on local volunteers and an effective management committee to keep it running, it 'graduates' into community ownership with financial oversight of the endowment.

The curriculum in the MRC preschools includes traditional stories and songs, narratives from the Koran and art activities that incorporate African and Islamic motifs, as well as the *adab*, the rules of etiquette, courtesy and cleanliness rooted in East African culture (Mwaura, 2004).

The success of the MRC preschools can be associated with the Kenyan spirit of *harambee* – the principle of pooling resources for the common good.

**Anil Khamis**, Senior Lecturer in Education and International Development, Institute of Education, University of London

- *The modern madrasa movement in Kenya utilises community strengths and resources to meet the current needs identified by local people.*
- *The movement, which has trained thousands of teachers over a 30-year period, has been evaluated as both successful and sustainable, and continues to grow.*



## Peru: *Wawa Wasi*

A study of young children making the transition from home through preschool to school in Peru was carried out as part of the *Young Lives* longitudinal study of child poverty (University of Oxford, 2009). Fieldwork in Andahuaylas demonstrated the importance of respect for local culture, language and beliefs. In this community, children can progress from a day care programme ('*Wawa Wasi*', or 'House of Babies' in the local language, Quechua) to a preschool and then on to primary school. Parental perspectives on these three forms of provision are linked to their own needs and expectations, and their understanding of what is appropriate for their children.

The *Wawa Wasi* is a community-based day care programme for children from 6 to 48 months old. Selected women from the community take care of up to eight children during weekdays, in their own homes, after undergoing training for the role (Cueto *et al.*, 2009). The *Wawa Wasi* programme is popular with families, and is considered the best provision available for children in the village (even when compared with preschool, primary and secondary school). A study in this and other villages (Cueto *et al.*, 2009) found that *Wawa Wasi* children appeared more communicative and outgoing than non-*Wawa Wasi* children, although both groups had similar indicators for other aspects of development.

From the perspective of parents, *Wawa Wasi* was a place where children were kept safe and fed nutritious meals, allowing their mothers to work – and where their mother tongue was promoted. In preschool, by contrast, children were offered Spanish-medium interactions despite their limited command of that language, and were expected to 'learn through play', a concept which was not explained to families in a way that convinced them. Most mothers chose to keep their children in the *Wawa Wasi* until they were 4 years old, rather than transferring them to preschool at age 3. Once children reached school age, however, a different view was taken, and families expected that children would adapt to the language and ethos of formal learning (Ames *et al.*, 2010).

**Patricia Ames**, Researcher, Young Lives, Instituto de Estudios Peruanos (IEP), Lima, Peru

- *The Wawa Wasi programme enables babies and young children from the poorest Peruvian families to be cared for in home-like environments and to continue to hear their first language spoken until they begin school.*
- *The programme has the support of parents, who recognise it as a service matched to their own linguistic and cultural preferences.*
- *By securing the health and well-being of babies from 6 months, the programme enables parents to work to support the family income.*



# Belgium: migration and changing values

*A childcare programme can feel strange and challenging to children and to their mothers*

Migration and modernisation are changing cultural patterns and experiences – including those related to child rearing – throughout the world. Research demonstrates the dilemmas that arise for parents who move from traditional to modern societies and are concerned about the impact on their child's development.

Qualitative studies show that immigrant parents in Europe face many difficulties, including housing problems and financial insecurity, and their stressful situation is even more salient in contexts of social isolation. Moreover, in many European cities, access to mainstream early years provision is problematic for immigrant mothers, who often lack the personal networks to organise informal care arrangements (Wall and Jose, 2004). This is the case in Brussels (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2008). This reality asks for structural policies that favour access to high-quality provision for all.

In a small-scale qualitative study (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2009), three immigrant mothers with young children were interviewed before they made use of childcare, after one month and again after 3 to 4 months of childcare use. The mothers had migrated to Brussels from the Lebanon, from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and from Sierra Leone. The study confirms that the mothers' relationship with childcare professionals was fundamentally asymmetric (Musatti and Mayer, 2008), and that they would have followed any advice given to them by the professionals. As Neamat (not her real name), the 29-year old mother from Beirut, Lebanon, says:

Because it's my first time that I am a mum and they have a lot of experience. I would have accepted their advice no matter what, honestly.

However, a careful approach of listening to the parents reveals that all three women were very clear about their expectations. The mothers used childcare not only as a necessity (for example, in order to attend the language courses), but also for the socialisation of their child. In their first interviews, they explicitly mentioned that it was very important to for their child to learn the dominant language and to play and socialise with children from a range of backgrounds, especially with children from the majority population. As well as responding to professional advice, they were making their own conscious decisions about the provision that was offered to their children.

**Michel Vandenbroeck**, Senior Researcher, Department of Social Welfare Studies, University of Ghent, Belgium

- *Immigrant mothers in European cities require sensitive support as they adapt their traditional child-rearing practices and expectations to the values of the professional caregivers in their new environment.*
- *Interviews with such women offer important insights into the difficulties they face but also demonstrate the strength and competence they bring to their new circumstances.*



# Belgium: some mothers explain their views

*Parents and educators aim for a balance between preserving traditions and embracing modern childhoods*

In the study by Vandenbroeck *et al.* (2009), mothers discussed their reasons for introducing their children to out-of-home care when they were only a few months old.

One reason is that day care starts the children's learning process early, which they see as a main asset. But the mothers also emphasise that childcare provision offers their children something *different from* and *additional to* their home experience: rather than providing a 'home from home', it introduces them to the practices of the wider community. However, each of the mothers explicitly explained how happy she was when the day care centre adopted techniques from her, such as carrying the baby on her back and adapting to the baby's feeding hours or sleeping habits. The interviews show that this careful practice of adapting to the mothers' own habits builds reciprocity in the relationship, and that this reciprocity enables the mothers to establish hybrid identities for themselves and for their children. This in turn empowers the mothers to make their own personal mix of loyalty to their origins and educational habits acquired from the dominant culture, without experiencing this as a contradiction. A salient example of this 'nomadic' identity is provided by Marie, the 31-year-old single mother from Bandundu, Democratic Republic of Congo.

In Africa, if you don't respect elders, it will not be good for you and your baby! Maybe some time I will take the baby to Africa to visit, yes. So in Belgium if you grow the baby nice, if you grow the baby the way you should have grown him or her, he will respect elders, yes. Then sometimes if your friend come to you at home, if the baby see your friend after one or two years, he will tell the baby 'say hello to aunt', say good afternoon to uncle, say good afternoon to auntie. It's good, yes. [...]

Well, I don't know what they do in the crèche but I know, I understand that they also teach them to respect elders in the crèche. Because I understand that most of the children in the crèche respect elders. Because when you push the bell, they open the door. When you come in, they start to say 'auntie, auntie'.

*(Vandenbroeck et al., 2009, p. 210)*

**Michel Vandenbroeck**, Senior Researcher, Department of Social Welfare Studies, University of Ghent, Belgium

- *In cases where professional caregivers develop strong relationships with immigrant mothers, a more equal balance of power is established as both parties adapt their shared caregiving to accommodate each others' views.*
- *For African mothers, ensuring that traditional and respectful adult-child relationships are maintained is important in giving them security about their own and their child's cultural identity.*





# POLICY QUESTIONS

- ◆ How can equity and quality, as well as quantity, of early childhood provision be assured, when a diversity of providers including market-driven businesses are responsible for ECEC?
- ◆ Is language of instruction recognised as a critical issue in shaping young children's transition to school?
- ◆ What steps are required to ensure that local consultation, with children, parents and other stakeholders, is built into the design and implementation of new programmes?
- ◆ How far do professional development and training for early childhood practitioners include respect for cultural diversity as well as the universal rights of the child?
- ◆ How can programmes support children's transition from local developmental trajectories into participation in school learning?
- ◆ What kinds of support are appropriate for migrant families, which both respect their home cultures and support their adaptation to their new environments?



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*Any comprehensive vision for early childhood respects every child's right to a decent life and also respects the autonomy of those responsible for implementing that right in diverse contexts. These universal principles may appear to be in conflict with each other. But young children's successful learning and development are contingent on applying both of them together.*

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