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# Towards a global paradigm for research into early childhood education<sup>1</sup>

by

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## Abstract

Early years education is now a global activity, as school systems expand and diverse programmes become established in countries throughout the world. We inherit a rich legacy of theories, methodologies and evidence, from the vision of early childhood pioneers to the latest empirical research. I want to step back from particular initiatives and research evaluations to consider the underlying images of the child that inform early childhood research and practice.

What would be an appropriate child development paradigm for promoting quality early years education in a global context? I question the adequacy of much theory and research to encompass global childhoods, especially the dangers inherent in current knowledge-imbalances. I ask about the way child development is conceptualised within early childhood work, and the potential of a sociocultural perspective. Finally, I ask about the status of young children themselves within early education research and practice; whether they are viewed as subjects in a child development project, as participants in a process or as consumers of a service. For each theme, I will argue that we are witnessing a paradigm shift which takes us beyond idealisations about normal development, children's nature and their needs. An alternative paradigm emphasises the plurality of pathways through childhood, the respects in which early development and education is a sociocultural process, and the status of children as active participants, with their own perspective on issues in their lives.

## Quality and the globalisation of early childhood

The title of this conference series is "Quality of early childhood education". We all want quality in the lives of young children. But we don't always agree what quality is, how to achieve it, and how to know when it has been achieved. "Quality" is a difficult concept. It is not just a technical question, about specifying indicators, and constructing reliable and valid evaluation tools. Sound techniques of quality evaluation are crucial, but they aren't enough. Fundamentally, the concept of "Quality" has a subjective component, it depends on values for childhood, whether expressed at a personal or political level (Moss and Pence, 1995). Moreover, appearances of "quality" may be deceptive. Paying disproportionate attention to indicators of material resource may lead to more subtle qualitative, process indicators being overlooked.

Carrying-out studies of quality is difficult enough within specific settings, or within a municipality or even within a whole country. To start to address questions about quality in a global sense raises fundamental issues, that go far beyond the technicalities of evaluation. It is these issues I want to concentrate on, especially about the underlying assumptions about child development and the goals of early education that are promoted through research and evaluation.

The case for a global perspective on early childhood is clear enough, although globalisation is full of contradictions. A few examples will suffice. Firstly, we are constantly reminded that we live in a global economy, yet we witness gross economic inequalities between richest and poorest childhoods. Secondly, universal schooling is a global right for childhood, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Education is generally regarded as one of the most powerful tools for enhancing children's quality of life. Yet millions of the world's children are unable to attend school, and even where they do attend the resources can be mediocre, the teaching inappropriate and the benefits unclear. Thirdly, we are witnessing a global technological revolution, such that children throughout the world can watch the same TV satellite channels, their thoughts and aspirations shaped by the same media images and marketing pressures. When people talk glibly about globalised childhoods I am torn between competing images - on the one hand an image of acute and highly visible social inequalities - and on the other hand an image of standardised childhoods regulated on the same technically regulated mass production principles as the fast food industry!

What, you may ask, does all this have to do with early education, and especially European research into early education? In the first place, early education is now part of the process of globalisation. Diverse programmes of family support, child care and early education can now be found throughout the world, very often strongly influenced by models that originate in Europe or North America, (Lamb et al 1992. Moreover, research evaluations

increasingly take a cross-national perspective, comparing quality in different country contexts (eg Olmsted and Weikart 1995). In the second place, global trends are relevant even to those whose work is firmly rooted in European contexts. They are an antidote to parochialism - the main symptom of which is a persistent and often dogmatic belief that there is only one way forward where quality is concerned. Setting European quality issues in global context (as well as in historical context), encourages a broader perspective on the particular issues, constraints and priorities that determines what counts for early childhood quality in specific economic, cultural, educational and political contexts. Finally, while my presentation will concentrate mainly on contrasts between European and non-European early childhood contexts, many of the same arguments apply to the diversity to be found within Europe, in terms of social, ethnic and cultural experiences of our very youngest citizens.

### **Early childhood quality issues - Henry's experience**

I've come to these themes through two recent international projects on child development. The first was specifically on quality issues in early education programmes, a Bernard van Leer Foundation project that included case studies in Kenya, France, India and Venezuela. I will introduce this project by describing very briefly the situation of one child.

I met four year old Henry at a preschool I visited in Nairobi. He lives in one of the poorest and most overcrowded districts of the city. His home is a one room hut which he shares with his mother and sisters, the same living conditions as most of the other children in his preschool. His mother is a single-parent, and like many of the women in the community, ekes out a living by helping-out in the market, or by trading her own body in the local sex industry. Henry is fortunate to attend what is widely regarded as a high-quality preschool, run by a local NGO.

Quality for Henry means sharing a classroom with 50-60 other children, much of the time with just one adult. There is no play equipment or learning materials to speak of. There are some benches, and the children sit obediently in rows. As a visitor, this picture reminded me of the photographs I have seen of British elementary school classrooms at that turn of the century, that were so strongly condemned by many of the pioneers of early childhood education. But how should I react? Should I apply the same quality principles to Henry's preschool as might be used to judge a nursery school in Britain? To do so would logically entail condemning perhaps the majority of the world's early childhood centres! Leaving aside the resourcing and political dimensions of the issue, I wasn't even sure that such condemnation would be appropriate from an educational point of view.

Much of the curriculum and pedagogy of Henry's preschool was based on wall charts of the English alphabet. The teacher led the group, the children recited the words and letters in unison. Discipline was strict, children didn't

risk speaking out of turn. Clearly, many different factors were shaping Henry's early childhood experience. One of the most powerful was to do with the elementary schooling which is highly competitive, very formal, and later grades are dominated by the English language. Looking at Henry's preschool within the broader context of schooling helped me to understand respects in which it might be 'contextually appropriate', even if from other points of view it might not be recognised as 'developmentally appropriate'. From these and other experiences I went on to elaborate a more ecological framework for thinking about quality issues, in the van Leer monograph, "In Search of the Rainbow" (Woodhead 1996; 1998a).

### **Children's working lives - Moni's experience**

The topic for the second project was on the face of it very different. I coordinated a project about child labour for Radda Barnen (Swedish Save the Children) in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, The Philippines and Central America.

Moni is a 'brickchipper' in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She works with her mother, breaking up bricks, by hand with a hammer, to provide chippings for road-building. (possibly her home was amongst those washed away in the floods last week when at least 20 million people were made homeless). Moni has already finished with school, in fact she only attended for a few months, but the costs became too high for her parents to afford, and in any case they needed her meagre wages to help pay for the medicines for her brother who had been very sick.

There is now a strong international movement to eliminate exploitative and harmful child labour, spearheaded by Unicef and ILO. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 32 is targetted to situations like Moni's:

"States Parties recognise the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development"

In order to implement this article of the Convention, appropriate indicators for child development are required that can be used to determine degrees of 'harm'. In many ways, identifying harm is the 'flip-side' of promoting quality. Physical injuries are clear enough, but 'mental, moral and social development' much less readily operationalised in universally appropriate ways. Also any interventions interventions designed to liberate children from harmful work, must be planned within a more comprehensive understanding of the context of their lives. Otherwise there is a danger that they will be 'liberated' into circumstances that may be even more prejudicial to their development and well-being. This was the starting point for the study "Children's Perspectives

on their Working Lives", which has tried to look at the impact of work in children's lives - from children's own point of view (Woodhead 1998b; 1998c).

## Child development research and policy

What both of these studies drew to my attention is the central role that child development beliefs, knowledge and research play in informing standard setting in childhood policy and practice. What also became clear was the serious knowledge imbalances where young children's development and learning is concerned. The vast majority of studies of early child development and education have been carried out in a very narrow socio-economic and cultural contexts - mainly in Europe and in North America. Yet as Helen Penn recently noted, Europe only constitutes 12% of the world's population, North America a further 5% (Penn 1998). The partiality of research emphasis is in many ways inevitable. As researchers, we have to make choices about which contexts are studied, which children included, which questions asked, which indicators selected, which instruments used, how data recorded, how it is analysed and interpreted etc. The problems arise when that partiality is not acknowledged, both in terms of the generalisability of research contexts and outcomes, and more subtly in terms of the generalisability of the interpretive frame of beliefs and values that shape all social scientific research (Hwang et al 1996). At worst context-specific, cultural accounts masquerade as universal statements about what is 'natural', 'normal' or 'developmentally appropriate' (Kessen 1979; Burman 1994).

In the past, these problems have frequently been exacerbated by the universalist aspirations of the foundation discipline of the field - ie Child Development. The science of psychology has constructed powerful normative models of development, based on a fundamental belief in the psychic unity of human kind (Stigler et al 1990). Shared features of childhood have been emphasised. At best differences have been treated as 'variations on a theme'; at worst as 'noise in the system'. Fortunately, cross-cultural studies go some way to redressing the balance; rendering problematic some of the more ethnocentric assertions that have been made about the needs of young children.

Super and Harkness' concept of the developmental niche is a helpful starting point (Super and Harkness 1986). It draws attention to three features of early childhood environments in particular:

- I. the physical and social setting;
- II. the culturally regulated customs and child-rearing practices;
- III. the dominant beliefs or 'ethnotheories about childhood.



Super and Harkness originated this concept from their research in rural Kenya. But I think it is a salutary lesson to turn the social scientific lens onto the developmental niches occupied by modern European children, including the early childhood programmes they attend, especially to recognise the way they are mediated by the more sophisticated belief systems and cultural practices we elevate to the status of theories of learning.

I will give an example of what I mean in relation to both early child care and children's work.

### **Textbook images of early care and development**

Traditional textbook accounts of early development have been based very largely on studies carried-out in Europe and North America. Studies of children's early attachments and social interactions have mainly been focussed on mother-infant relationships, even though from a global perspective it has long been recognised that multiple caregiving arrangements are widespread, and sibling care has been a very important source of security and learning for infants and young children (Weisner and Gallimore 1977). Studies have also conveyed a particular image of a 'normal' mothering style, marked by close maternal attention to infant interests, and early initiation into playful exchanges anticipating verbal communication. Fortunately, cross-cultural studies have periodically challenged the ethnocentric biases of research. A classic example comes from a cross-cultural study in twelve societies. Whiting and Edwards (1988) concluded that the caregiving style observed in the USA was exceptional in terms of the extent of mothers' sociability with their children, and in the number of playful interactions in which children were treated as equals. Yet, this style of interaction has become part of child development orthodoxy, as the normal, and indeed healthy way for parents to relate to their children.

The point is made most clearly for language and communication. Close observation of Euro-American families has revealed the subtle parental strategies through which infants are encouraged to become partners in 'proto-conversations'. Their language learning is facilitated by caregiver's adoption of so-called 'motherese', in which intonation is exaggerated, vocabulary and sentence structure simplified, and the child's utterances repeated and expanded (Snow 1976). By contrast a cross-cultural study amongst the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, revealed that caregivers rarely engaged their infants in dyadic communicative exchanges, and when they did they tended to be directive rather than reciprocal. Yet these infants acquired their mother-tongue quite 'normally' (Schieffelin and Ochs 1983). It may be that Euro-American caregiving patterns are the exception rather than the norm.

I give the next example not merely to emphasize the existence of different cultural practices, but to draw attention to the very different interpretations that can be put on the same issue - the way different beliefs mediate what counts as appropriate or 'quality' care. Joseph Tobin and colleagues carried-

out a cross-cultural study of preschool settings (Tobin et al 1989; see also Tobin et al 1998). When they were observing in Komatsudani, a Japanese kindergarten, one little boy called Hiroki seemed to be stepping out of line. Asked to interpret his behaviour an American specialist felt that the problem might arise because he was intellectually gifted but easily bored. The Japanese teachers couldn't accept this view at all; they couldn't see how a gifted child could fail to work harmoniously, because this attribute was part of their definition of intelligence. These observers then turned to another line of explanation, to do with Hiroki's emotional relationships. Whereas a Western commentator might draw on the concept of 'attachment', and talk about the growing capacities for autonomy and self control expected in preschool age children, Japanese teachers drew on the concept of 'amaeru', emphasising dependency as something that children have to learn during infancy. At root this example draws attention not only to different views of developmental process, but different views about the development of a sense of self.

### **Work in child development**

As part of the project on child labour I asked the question: "Is there a place for work in child development? (Woodhead 1998b; 1998c). Two kinds of answer are possible. In terms of children's lived experience the answer is that at least 190 million children in the 10-14 age group are working, according Unicef estimates. Three quarters of these children work six days a week or more (Unicef 1997). This figure does not include the domestic help and casual work carried out by many millions of children, including very young children throughout the world. But textbook accounts of child development convey a different story. Textbook authors do not write about the child development experienced by the world's children. They construct an image of a very particular kind of childhood, as a period of life spent almost entirely in the contexts of family and school, where the emphasis is on care, play, learning and teaching, at least until adolescence, when self-esteem and social relationships within peer groups assume importance. Ironically, this is called 'normal' childhood.

Table 1 here

Table 1 Summarises index entries for eight child development textbooks published between 1987-95. This is of course only a very crude indicator of the relative emphasis given to various topics. The striking thing was the consistent neglect of the formative influence of work in children's lives, with only 1 entry across all eight textbooks - a brief account (by Cole and Cole, 1989) of the effects of part-time work on adolescents' school performance in the USA.

In defence of these eight textbooks, it could be argued that the selective treatment of child development topics reflects childhood realities in the European and North American contexts. But the exclusion of work as a

significant influence in child development cannot be justified even within these minority world contexts. While paid work has been marginalised by universal compulsory schooling for nearly a century, child employment remains widespread in the UK (Mc Kechnie et al, 1996) and USA (Pollack, Landigran and Mallino, 1990) . Family-based domestic work for children is also quite normal (Morrow, 1994). Yet work is not part of the textbook writer's definition of childhood, despite its impact on their skills, identity, self-esteem, social relations and school experience.

This example is a further illustration of the ways in which 'child development' is an idealised construction, which not only under represents the diversity of Western childhoods, and but seriously misrepresents childhoods within a wider global context. Children themselves may have a different view. For them, work is not only normal - it is a core part of growing-up. As one boy fishing in the Philippines put it:

'...to work is a natural thing to do. Our friends do it. My parents work, my brothers work so why shouldn't I work? Even schooling is not an excuse not to work...' (cited in Woodhead 1998c)

Part of the problem is that even where children are engaged in work activities in the West, the dominant construction of childhood as work-free means that these are relabelled as play or learning or taking social responsibility. Rheingold (1982) drew attention to this issue in her study of US toddlers helping their mothers carry-out domestic chores:

"All the children, even those as young as 18 months of age, promptly and for the most part without direction participated in some everyday housekeeping tasks performed by adults...."  
(Rheingold, 1982, p122).

As an anecdotal illustration, my sister-in-law told me about her experience of looking after her twenty month old grand-daughter for the day, while at the same time trying to prepare a dinner party. She did everything she could to interest Emma in toys and games, so she could get on in the kitchen. After several hours, and with the house littered with discarded toys, she gave up, telling Emma she must get on with her work in the kitchen. Emma's reaction was to pull herself up onto a chair and reach for a carrot and a knife. "Me help granny" she insisted.

Wanting to contribute is as much a feature of early childhood as wanting to learn or wanting to play. This even applied to some of the children in the Radda Barnen study whose working lives are harsh and potentially dangerous. One of Moni's friends (brickchippers in Bangladesh) how strongly she identified with her family's work.:

'...when I was a child I used to cry for a hammer. So my mother bought me a hammer and I started to break bricks (cited in Woodhead 1998c)

Dominant expectations of what is 'normal' child development can be seen as reflecting features of a very particular developmental niche (Super and Harkness, 1986). The danger lies when these features are taken to be a standard for all. From our perspective (mostly as European professional educators and researchers), we may view particular styles of adult interaction, ways of teaching and approaches to play and learning as appropriate for early childhood. We may not feel that work has any place at all in a quality childhood, that it can interfere with children's education, etc. But this does not justify excluding other childhood experiences and influences as outside the range of 'normal' or 'healthy' child development. The consequence is that other people's childhoods too readily become labelled as deprived, deficient and damaging. To progress the quality debate in a global context, a paradigm is needed that still recognises where young children may be at risk of harm, injury or abuse, but at the same time is more inclusive of diversity of contexts beliefs and practices. As I mentioned earlier, adopting a more inclusive, globally-appropriate paradigm can also enable early childhood theories and practices that have evolved within familiar contexts to be understood within a wider framework.

## The potential of a socio-cultural approach

In terms of a theoretical framework on early child development, I believe research within the growing field of socio-cultural developmental psychology has greatest potential. This theoretical view originates in the work of L.S. Vygotsky. Vygotsky was working in Soviet Russia during the early decades of the twentieth century inspiration was to recognise that child development is a social process, historically and culturally relative:

'The fundamental aspiration of the whole of modern child psychology ..(is) the wish to reveal the eternal child. The task of psychology, however, is not the discovery of the eternal child. The task of psychology is the discovery of the historical child... The stone that the builders disdained must become the foundation stone'

(Vygotsky, cited by Rogoff, 1990,p 110)

Michael Cole has elaborated this idea that child development is a cultural process, in a very profound sense that isn't just about cultural variation:

".... the capacity to inhabit aculturally organized environment is the universal, species-specific characteristic of homo-sapiens, of which particular cultures represent special cases. A full understanding of culture in human development requires both a specification of its universal mechanisms and

the specific forms that it assumes in particular historical circumstances" (Cole 1992, p 731-2, my emphasis).

On this view, child development is naturally cultural. Briefly, every child is born into a social/cultural/historical context. Infants are by nature attuned to engage with the social and cultural environment of activities and meanings. There is nothing fundamentally natural about environments for child care, either at home or with in a preschool setting. All environments are culturally constructed, shaped by generations of human activity and creativity, mediated by complex belief systems, including about the 'proper' way for children to develop. The most significant feature of any child's environment are the humans with whom they establish close relationships. These individuals (usually family) are themselves cultural beings. They are the product of cultural history and circumstance, which structures their lives and gives meaning and direction to their experiences of their offspring, as they introduce them to cultural practices and symbol systems. The way parents care for their children is shaped in part by their cultural beliefs (or ethno-theories) about what is appropriate and desirable, in terms both of the goals of child development and the means to achieve those goals.

Amongst research most relevant to early child development, Colwyn Trevarthen (1998) has argued from studies of newborn babies that one of the human infant's most fundamental needs is to become part of a culture. Babies actively engage with their social environment from the start, pre-adapted to social relationships, striving to make sense of their surroundings, by sharing with others in a process of intersubjectivity on which joint activity, cooperation and communication is built. Judy Dunn (1988) has worked with an older age group, revealing the way preschool children achieve social understanding in family contexts, negotiating disputes, teasing and joking with adults and siblings, already sharing in conversations about social and moral issues from a very early age. While these studies have been carried out in Euro-American settings they can be the starting point for elaborating the way children become initiated into features of their socio-cultural niche, including the range of settings and relationships, opportunities for sibling and peer interaction, through which they learn about social rules, rituals and meanings. A feature of early learning is young children's capacity to engage in a repertoire of different interactive style according to context and relationship, acknowledging that in complex, changing pluralistic contexts, children may encounter multiple, competing and even conflicting developmental niches as a normal part of everyday life.

To date Barbara Rogoff has perhaps gone furthest in elaborating a socio-cultural model with direct applicability to early childhood education. She has elaborated a model of 'guided participation' as a framework for examining the way children are initiated into cognitive and social skills perceived as relevant to their community (Rogoff 1990). Comparing mother-child dyads in India, Guatemala, Turkey and the USA, Rogoff et al (1991, 1993) found that 'guided participation' was a feature in all these settings, but that the goals and

processes of learning and teaching varied, which in turn was linked to the extent to which children's lives were segregated from the adult world of work.

For example, while US mothers were often observed to create teaching situations, the Guatemalan mothers relied on child's engagement with activities of the community. In one sequence of Rogoff's research video, there is a fine illustration of these mothers' different orientation to communication. In the US context, the dominance of verbal communication is taken for granted. But when a Guatemalan mother wishes her toddler to hand over a toy, she says not a word, but merely touches the toddler's elbow, a simple direct communicative device whose symbolic meaning is already well-understood by the child.

Taking a socio-cultural approach to children's development breaks away from universalistic assumptions, about both the process and the products of development. Rogoff makes the point clearly in respect of children's intellectual development:

'The developmental endpoint that has traditionally anchored cognitive developmental theories - skill in academic activities such as formal operational reasoning and scientific, mathematical, and literate practices - is one valuable goal of development, but one that is tied to its contexts and culture, as is any other goal or endpoint of development valued by a community... Each community's valued skills constitute the local goals of development. .... In the final analysis, it is not possible to determine whether the practices of one society are more adaptive than those of another, as judgements of adaptation cannot be separated from values' (Rogoff, 1990, p12)

Acceptance of this view - that children's behaviour, thinking, social relationships and adaptation, are culturally as much as biologically constituted - has profound implications for the way we conceptualise and research early years education. Early childhood programmes can be understood for what they are - highly specialised environments with quite distinctive characteristics linked to their goals and priorities for children's learning. Comparing a modern preschool in Europe with a preschool like the one Henry attends in Kenya, or the work-based childhood of Moni in Bangladesh draws attention to taken for granted features of the range of developmental niches of modern European childhoods.

A socio-cultural perspective alters frameworks of quality evaluation too. The 'developmental appropriateness' of children's experiences, the 'harmfulness' or 'benefits' of their environment cannot be separated from the cultural context in which they are developing, the values and goals that inform their lives, their prior learning experiences, and future prospects. Unlike frameworks that emphasise supposedly normal and natural criteria for judging the quality of child development, cultural approaches argue that

these criteria are constructed and contextual. In due course, human societies may come to share beliefs about what is 'normal' and 'natural' for children. The implication of accepting that early child development and learning has to be understood as a social and cultural process is that benchmarks of quality are not intrinsic, fixed and prescribed. They are extrinsic, historically-specific and negotiable within a framework of promoting children's rights and welfare.

## Towards a more inclusive framework for early childhood education

Figure 1 here

In my report to the van Leer Foundation I argued that a 'contextual' approach offers a more inclusive starting point for understanding a range of perspectives on the goals and processes of child development, as well as the contexts that can sustain child development in global contexts (Woodhead 1996; 1998a). In particular, we need to ensure that 'top-down' generalisations are balanced by 'bottom-up' studies about what harms and what promotes development in the context of children's developmental niches, including the issues that confront caregivers, teachers and children themselves. Figure 1 summarises a cycle of quality development, founded on an ecological model of the various contexts that shape children's lives. One of the first steps is to make explicit the perspectives of all those with a stake in these issues, including ourselves! Figure 2 suggests a procedure for doing just this, based on asking three key questions:

Figure 2 here

Who has a perspective on 'quality'? Numerous different interest-groups (or stakeholders) are involved in any early childhood programme, each with their own perspective on quality, for example programme managers, teachers, parents, community leaders, child development experts, not forgetting children themselves.

Who do these stakeholders perceive as beneficiaries from 'quality'? While programmes are first and foremost for children, most stakeholders would

recognise other beneficiaries, notably parents who are freed of care responsibilities, the careworkers or teachers who gain employment, and the community leaders who gain prestige. For some care programmes, older children are seen as major beneficiaries, because they are no longer required to care for their youngest siblings.

What do they take to be indicators of 'quality'? Judgements about quality can focus on any number of things. Indicators range from basic standards (eg physical space, staffing ratios, hygiene, nutrition), and resources for play activities and learning, (eg toys, materials,) to the quality of adult-child relationships, flexibility to parents' working patterns, notions of cost-effectiveness and many more.

This framework accommodates diverse perspectives on the quality of an early childhood programme. It can be a vehicle for making explicit profound differences in perspective on quality in early childhood that might otherwise remain submerged. It can be the starting point for negotiating a shared understanding amongst key stakeholders in a particular community, notably between parents, and teachers or careworkers.

In presenting this framework I am aware that some critics might argue that it is far too open-ended, far too relativistic, which risks undermining the essential process of standard-setting. At worst it could be viewed as endorsing some traditional child care and education practices that are ineffective, maladaptive, or even harmful (Evans and Myers 1994). So it is important to emphasize that adopting a more inclusive, contextual framework does not undermine efforts to improve quality in the lives of young children. Acknowledging diverse contexts and multiple perspectives is not the end of the story - it is the starting point for debate and for research, including carrying out rigorous evaluations, in ways that make much more explicit the criteria on which one feature or another of children's environment, teaching or behaviour is taken to be an indicator of 'quality'. This is especially important in the context of social change, (in economic, social, cultural and educational systems) which is one of the features of global childhoods.

Numerous criteria can shape quality indicators in early childhood education. Some may be identified at local programme level, others at regional or national level. Some will be internationally agreed, setting the boundaries of adequacy on any early childhood environment. In the final analysis, international instruments like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) set global standards for early childhood quality (Verhellen 1997). There is much work to be done at every level, from the day to day goal-setting of a preschool teacher to the international enforcement of children's rights.

## Status of the child in research and practice



In this paper I have argued for an early childhood quality paradigm that is more inclusive of childhood diversity. I have proposed that a sociocultural approach to children's learning and development is most appropriate, and suggested some implications for the process of identifying quality criteria that are both developmentally and contextually appropriate. I ended the last section by acknowledging globally applicable principles in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. While the Convention is not unproblematic in terms of the cultural images of childhood it presumes (Boyden 1997; Woodhead 1998d), potentially it has profound implications. I want briefly to consider just one Article, about children's status and participation in the issues that shape their lives, including questions about quality.

'States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'

(UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Article 12)

This Article of the UN Convention sets one of the strongest challenges for child development work, which cuts across some aspects of the cultural variability in child development urged in earlier sections of this paper. It is especially significant for those contexts dominated by hierarchical authority relationships where children's voice is not heard. Article 12 reminds us that children have their own perspective on the issues that concern parents, teachers, psychologists and child rights workers, which has legitimacy in its own right. In their own way, children are also trying to understand about their development, and their own place within it, as they interpret the behaviour, demands and expectations of adults and other children, and as they construct a repertoire of ways of acting and reacting. To put it bluntly, respect for children's rights to participation demands that children be viewed not just as the subjects of concern, of care, teaching, research and study, but also as young citizens with concerns of their own.

Early childhood practitioners are already beginning to progress the implementation of this principle in their practice, enabling young children to take responsibility and make decisions (eg Miller 1996). Initiatives are also required that support children's participation in other areas of public life (eg Davie and Galloway 1996; Hart, 1997; Johnson et al, 1995). I want to draw attention to the ways the principle applies also to the way we carry out research into early childhood - our use of intervention, observation, or psychometric paradigms. It also applies to the way we conceptualise the child in theories about how they learn and develop. The question is about the status we accord the child through the methodologies we adopt and the conclusions we draw; and about whether we allow children space to alter our agenda of presuppositions?

Allison James offers a very useful tool for thinking about these issues, (James 1998; see also James et al 1998). James distinguishes four models or images of 'the child' constructed by social scientists through the research methods they adopt, and the way they interpret their observations.

Figure 3 here

The model comprises two dimensions: the extent to which childhood is seen as a 'world apart' from adulthood, and the status accorded to children's expressions of competence.

Within a 'developing child' paradigm, competence is an achieved status. Development is a long journey to mature, adult status. As Verhellen (1997) puts it, within the developmental paradigm, children are in a state of 'not yet being'. They are a set of 'potentials', a 'project 'in the making'. The child constructed by conventional psychological research is closely observed, tested and differentiated in terms of ways of thinking, playing and learning. The 'developing child' is researched within an evaluative frame that is mainly interested in their position on the stage-like journey to mature competence.

This image was neatly captured in the title of a collection of key articles on early development, which I coedited as recently as 1991 under the title "Becoming a Person"(Woodhead et al 1991). With hindsight, this title clearly denigrates children's status as persons from the beginning of life, but at the time it appeared to reflect the growing research literature on the social processes through which young children construct skills and identity. And we should note in passing, that this issue does not only relate to the theoretical frameworks of developmental research. It has also been implicit in the treatment of children as objects of research, who were until recently subjected to experimental procedures with insufficient account taken of ethical considerations (Alderson, 1995; Morrow and Richards, 1996).

It is essential to keep firmly in mind that 'child development' is a body of knowledge constructed by adults for other adults, and used in order to make sense of, regulate, and shape children's lives and learning. Piaget's theory is the most influential example of this paradigm. To be fair, one of Piaget's goals was to encourage greater respect for young children's ways of thinking and behaving. Instead of dismissing their words and deeds as due to ignorance, he wanted to reveal the underlying 'logic' of children's reasoning at various ages. The value of the paradigm was in encouraging teachers and parents to provide learning opportunities that were seen as developmentally appropriate. The problem is that respecting developmental stages is a double-edged sword. It can also be used to justify taking actions on children's behalf, or avoid exposing them to difficult issues on the grounds that they are too-young and too innocent to understand what is going on (Short, 1998).

The 'tribal child', is associated with different research traditions, especially ethnographic research. Studying children at play, in the home, the playground and the street, this approach recognises children's separateness from the adult world, but (in the style of anthropology) celebrates their competence in their own cultural terms. William Corsaro's work on peer cultures is a good example of this tradition (Corsaro 1997).

The 'adult child' is a relatively rare paradigm of childhood research, especially early childhood research. James argues that research-images of the 'adult child' most often emerge when researchers encounter children living outside the protected space of modern childhoods. James illustrates the 'adult child' through studies of children coping with multiple hospital operations. In these circumstances the children's superior understanding of their situation places an obligation on the researcher to listen to their perspective.

We adopted a similar framework in embarking on the Radda Barmen study of working children. The study was designed to inform the debate about eliminating hazardous child labour with the views and feelings of those most affected by childhood work, and most affected by any interventions taken 'in their best interests'. By studying children's perspectives, we wanted to give voice to the principal stakeholders, whose concerns were in danger of being overlooked by interventions designed to protect their 'development' (Woodhead 1998c; 1999).

Finally comes what James calls the 'social child'. Displacing an image of the developing child with an image of the competent child must not result in the neglect of differences between younger and older human beings. We must not throw out the baby with the developmental bathwater. The 'social child', which accords children status within society, as well as within the research process, as social actors competent within their own abilities and interests, and respectfully researched within adult-child relationships that enable children genuinely to participate in the process.

The difference between 'developmentalism' and the 'social child' is in the status accorded children as social actors. Instead of being about how children become competent to participate, the social child emphasizes the way children can be enabled to grow in competence through participation. Respect for children's competence as rights bearing citizens does not diminish adult responsibilities. It places new responsibilities on the adult community to respect their status as stakeholders, structure their environment, guide their behaviour and enable their social participation in ways consistent with their understanding, interest and ways of communicating, especially in the issues that most directly affect their lives.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have looked at the issue of promoting early childhood quality in global context. I started by considering the knowledge imbalances that risk creating a distorted picture of what is normal and appropriate for young children, and argued for a sociocultural approach, spelling out some of the implications of taking account of diverse contexts and multiple perspectives on children's development. I also acknowledged the boundaries of any global quality debate, notably in respect for children's rights. I argued that the UN Convention poses a challenge for early childhood work, offering the example of children's right to participation. Finally, I argued that these issues don't just affect the way quality issues are resolved in the design of programmes for young children. They also have implications for researching these issues. Overall, I have argued for an inclusive framework of thinking which acknowledges the actual and potential diversity in perspectives on young children's education and welfare, and which asserts their own central status as principal stakeholders in the process.

I believe these principles are important to assert on academic, moral and pragmatic grounds. Theoretically, a socio-cultural framework opens the way to a more complete understanding of the factors that shape children's lives. It is also a positive framework - recognising that childhoods are socially constructed means that they can also be reconstructed. Pragmatically, an early childhood intervention, child care programme or early education initiative is much more likely to be effective if it builds on the human and physical resources, beliefs, goals and experiences of those who participate in it. Morally, it seems to me that as teachers, students and researchers, we have a responsibility to be attuned to how the tasks of childhood are perceived, felt and understood by those children, their parents and other carers who have to solve the problems of living and growing-up, in circumstances that may be vastly different from those that shape our own personal and academic priorities.

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