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# **Changing perspectives on early childhood: theory, research and policy**

Martin Woodhead  
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**Martin Woodhead** is Professor of Childhood Studies at the Open University, UK. Since his first book, *Intervening in Disadvantage: a challenge for nursery education* (NFER, 1976), he has published extensively on early childhood, including *In Search of the Rainbow*, (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 1996) and *Cultural Worlds of Early Childhood* (Routledge, 1998). He has carried out policy analysis and research review for Council of Europe, OECD, UNICEF and Save the Children, and has also worked on child labour and children's rights, including several international studies. Recent publications include three co-edited textbooks *Understanding Childhood*, *Childhoods in Context* and *Changing Childhoods*, (all published by Wiley, 2003). Martin is co-editor of the journal *Children & Society*, a member of the editorial board for *Childhood*, and the International Advisory Committee of *Journal of Early Childhood Research*. During 2005 he was appointed Special Advisor to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Geneva, in preparation of General Comment 7: *Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood*.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Early childhood policies and practices are shaped by competing images and discourses of the young child. This paper reviews four core perspectives that have been most influential. Put very briefly:

1. A developmental perspective emphasizes regularities in young children's physical and psychosocial growth during early childhood, as well as their dependencies and vulnerabilities during this formative, phase of their lives;
2. A political and economic perspective is informed by developmental principles, translated into social and educational interventions, and underpinned by economic models of human capital.
3. A social and cultural perspective draws attention to respects in which early childhood is a constructed status and to the diversities of ways it is understood and practised, for, with and by young children, with implications for how goals, models and standards are defined, and by whom.
4. A human rights perspective reframes conventional approaches to theory, research policy and practice in ways that fully respect young children's dignity, their entitlements and their capacities to contribute to their own development and to the development of services.

For each of these overarching perspectives, the paper outlines a cluster of specific theoretical, research and policy themes, summarizes major areas of controversy, and identifies a range of alternative visions for early childhood.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Enhancing the quality of young children's lives is now a national and international priority, expressed through research and policy initiatives, programme development and advocacy. Improving early childhood education and care is a major theme. Participants at the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, pledged to provide primary education for all children and massively reduce adult illiteracy by the end of the decade. This was followed up in 2000 with the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All. Goal 1 is "Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children."

Contributing to a review of the implications of Goal 1 is the immediate stimulus for this paper, but responses to Goal 1 need to be set in context of other international early childhood initiatives from UNICEF, The World Bank etc, and from numerous other regional and national agencies, and non governmental organisations and foundations. Moreover, early childhood policy developments are increasingly informed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, and by the work of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, with responsibility for monitoring States parties' progress in meeting obligations agreed to under the Convention. In 2004, the UN Committee set aside a day of general discussion on early childhood, and this has been followed up by preparation of General Comment 7 on 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood', formally adopted at the Committee's session in September 2005 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005).

This paper does not focus on policy developments per se, but on underpinning knowledge and beliefs about young children's development and their role in families, communities and society. It is especially concerned with the theories and research

traditions that inform early childhood policy development and practices. My aim is to provide a brief survey of some major landmarks in a complex and rapidly changing field. What follows is inevitably selective. No topic is comprehensively reviewed, but I have indicated some major sources in each case. Other commentators – from a different region of the world, or with a different disciplinary background, or with a different research biography – would no doubt tell a different story, and indeed many of the books and articles referred to throughout the paper offer these alternative accounts.

Philosophical and scientific interest in early childhood has a very long history, and relevant contributions span the full range of academic disciplines, (including biology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics) as well as major areas of applied research (notably, education, social policy, health research, law, development studies). The field can appear quite fragmented, with competing theoretical frameworks linked to profound differences in scientific and epistemological perspective, and in some cases these are closely aligned with particular policy objectives and narratives (e.g. early intervention and school outcomes; working parents and child care services etc) and approaches to curriculum and pedagogy (e.g. child-centred developmental models; community based ecological models). Another significant feature of the field is that dominant paradigms (and the range of competing paradigms) have been largely associated with recent history of economic, educational and social changes in a minority of economically rich, Western societies. Critique of these dominant paradigms has in itself been the stimulus for much innovative theoretical study (as later sections will explain). Ironically perhaps, these critiques have for the most part also originated amongst Western scholars, and in some cases continue to privilege early childhood settings and aspirations for young children only available to a tiny minority of children and families. Recent emergence of a much stronger rights based approach to policy development draws attention to global injustices in early childhood, including millions of young children daily denied their most fundamental entitlements to survival, health and well-being. This is matched by growing interest amongst scholars in the prospects for a more interdisciplinary, international Childhood Studies, along with other small steps towards achieving more globally balanced capacities for research, innovation and evaluation.

Finally, the relationships between research and policy are rarely linear - of research informing policy, or vice versa. Research and policy more often appear to function as parallel and sometimes interconnected communities of interest, sometimes shaping and sometimes feeding on the other, and other times in dispute about implications of research or justifications for policy. Meanwhile, both shape and are shaped by the broader political/economic/cultural context of early childhood work, nationally and regionally, and accommodate (to greater or lesser degree) to global economic, political, demographic, technological and cultural change. From time to time, research may have a significant impact on the direction of policy, for example as when new evidence emerged during the 1980s about long term benefits of early childhood programmes. But equally, it is often policy developments that shape research priorities, not least where research is driven by political as much as educational or scholarly agendas.

To put some order on disparate approaches to early childhood theory and research, this paper is organised into four broad perspectives or paradigms:

- Developmental;
- Economic and political;
- Social and cultural;
- Human rights.

A number of research stories, themes and clusters of theoretical work are explored in each case, with specific sets of questions and issues often linked to methodological approaches, conceptual frameworks and policy concerns. Some are relatively recent. Others can be traced to antiquity. Sections of the paper trace the emergence and major features of each paradigm. The narrative imposes a very approximate chronology on the recent history of early childhood ideas. For each major paradigm, I aim to show how theory and research has been linked to policy/practice implications, and I also offer some critical commentary. In particular, I note the perennial temptation to inflate the significance of a particular theory or evidence where it serves advocacy, which is ostensibly on behalf of young children's rights and wellbeing, but frequently is also linked to particular visions for early childhood, specific stakeholders or set of political priorities.

## **I. A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE**

### **The formative years of life**

That the early years are formative of children's long-term prospects is one of the most ancient, enduring and influential themes shaping early childhood policy. It has specific resonance with programmes aiming at intervention in social/economic disadvantage and other adversities, and at prevention of the negative consequences for children's fortunes. But its repercussions are expressed much more broadly, including curriculum and pedagogical assumptions about developmental appropriateness, economic theories of human capital and political theories of social justice.

The core idea can be traced back at least as far as Plato (428-348BC):

‘And the first step... is always what matters most, particularly when we are dealing with the young and tender. This is the time when they are taking shape and when any impression we choose to make leaves a permanent mark’  
(cited in Clarke and Clarke, 2000, p 11).

It found influential expression within John Locke's eighteenth century claims about ‘tabula rasa’, as well as through a host of influential early childhood reformers and pedagogues throughout the centuries. The first detailed systematic observations of infant and child development were carried out within a scientific frame in the late nineteenth century, (notably by Darwin himself), and this field of research was soon firmly established and increasingly influential throughout the twentieth century. A few key theorists have dominated the textbooks, notably Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky and their work has directly informed a range of curricula and pedagogies (see MacNaughton 2003 for an overview and more recent critical perspectives on developmental models).

Leaving aside the specific emphases of influential current theories, developmental perspectives encompass the following (for the most part uncontroversial) themes:

- Young children's physical, mental, social and emotional functioning is distinctively different from that of older children and adults, comprising distinctive phases, stages and milestones of development.
- Numerous progressive transformations occur in children's physical, mental, cognitive and social-emotional competencies, from earliest infancy to the beginnings of schooling in modern societies. These transformations mark the acquisition of skills and capacities, ways of relating, communicating, learning and playing etc;
- Early childhood is the period of life when humans are most dependent on secure, responsive relationships with others (adults, siblings and peers), not just to ensure their survival, but also their emotional security, social integration and cognitive and cultural competencies.
- Young children's development is especially sensitive to negative impacts from early malnutrition, deprivation of care and responsive parenting, or disturbed and distorted treatment;
- Where children's basic needs are not met, or if they are maltreated or abused, the repercussions are often felt throughout childhood and into the adult years.
- While early development can be summarised in terms of universal general principles, the contexts for, experiences of, and pathways through development are very variable, notably linked to young children's individual capacities and special needs, their gender, ethnicity, and economic, social and cultural circumstances;

Insights from child development research have long been a major source of theories, evidence and controversy surrounding care and education of young children. Rapid industrialization and urbanisation, and the establishment of universal schooling in Western societies created a widespread demand for knowledge about children's needs and capacities at particular ages, not least to inform training for new teachers and other child professionals, as well as manuals of advice to parents (Walkerdine, 1984; Rose 1985; Woodhead, 2003). Making sure the particular needs of the youngest children were recognised was already a focus of concern, with advocates for early education (nursery schools, kindergarten etc) drawing on insights from developmental research in their advocacy, notably for informal, holistic, child-centred, play based settings. One of the most enduring policy debates was already well-established during the first decades of the twentieth century, with advocates for young children in Britain arguing for a 'nursery education' appropriate to young children's needs and development, and in particular rejecting the formal teaching methods and emphasis on numeracy and literacy skills commonplace in primary schools of the period. Debates surrounding recognition of the early years as a distinctive phase in children's development have as much resonance now as a century ago and are most often expressed as about promoting 'developmentally appropriate' policies and practices (Bredenkamp and Copple (1997), and about avoiding the developmental risks for the 'hurried child' (Elkind, 1981).

Another equally longstanding policy debate focussed on young children's emotional needs, the significance of early attachment relationships and the appropriateness of care outside the family, in day care centres or with childminders etc. Much of the initial research came from studies of children whose lives had been disrupted by

World War II, as well as children in residential institutions, and in hospitals. It was especially linked with the concept of ‘maternal deprivation’ and subsequent work on early emotional attachments (Bowlby 1953; Ainsworth et al 1978; reviewed by Schaffer 1996). Concern about the well-being of young children in institutional settings played into much wider debates about women’s role in family and economy (e.g. Singer, 1992; 1998). It is unclear how far this research influenced policies on early care and how far it merely reinforced competing ideologies, especially since anxieties about risks to the well-being of young children were expressed much more strongly in some European societies (e.g. UK) than they were in others (e.g. Sweden) where day care services have more often been viewed as a positive experience for children and for parents. While the debate is no longer as polarized as in the past, and is beginning to take greater account of diversity in child care arrangements globally, issues about appropriateness and quality of care continue to be a major focus for research and policy, especially where very young infants are concerned (e.g. Belsky 2001; 2003).

The somewhat artificial academic divisions in theory, research and policy between children’s cognitive/educational and their social/emotional development became a significant issue in its own right during the latter decades of the twentieth century, with concerns about fragmented policies and services in many western societies, and significant experiments in co-ordinated services. Again, Scandinavian countries offered an alternative model, with integrated care/education arrangements longer established, and most recently expressed through the emergence of the ‘social pedagogue’ as a model of multi-disciplinary professional work (Moss and Petrie, 2002).

## **A critical... or a sensitive period?**

Research highlighting the formative significance of early childhood has fuelled policy work for at least a century. It crystallized in debates about how far the early years are ‘sensitive phase’ versus a ‘critical period’. Put simply, how far do experiences in early childhood have a determining and irreversible impact on children’s futures (reviewed by Schaffer, 2000; Clarke and Clarke, 2000)? If they do, the individual and social consequences of inadequate services and protection are dire; and the implications for early childhood policies are compelling. This debate has been expressed scientifically through studies of the impacts of extreme deprivation, abuse, and other adversities, along with evaluations of the impact of interventions at various age points, in order to establish the ‘reversibility’ - or otherwise - of negative impacts from initial adverse experiences.

This review focuses mainly on psycho-social dimensions of early adversity but it is important to emphasize that the impact of early health risks, disease and malnutrition is also well established, affecting physical growth, cognitive functioning and school achievement (Pollitt, 1990). Comprehensive early childhood programmes are a major vehicle for combating health risks and reducing long term outcomes (Pollitt et al 1993), ensuring young children are provided with adequate nutrition and their parents are provided appropriate information and support. In many poverty contexts, physical and psycho-social risks co-occur and interact in long term outcomes. The major evidence on these psychosocial risks comes from young children deprived of adequate parental care and reared in a low quality institutional setting. Decades of research provide indisputable evidence of severe developmental delay and emotional

disturbance. However, follow up studies of children moved into a positive environment with adoptive families paint a more optimistic picture, consistently demonstrating improvements in social, emotional and intellectual functioning. For example, one study of institutionalised children adopted between two and seven years old found remarkable evidence for emotional attachments established with adoptive parents, at a much older age than would have been thought possible according to dominant theories at that time. There were also improvements in cognitive and social functioning, but even so some social adjustment problems remained, notably a tendency for formerly institutionalised children to be over-affectionate and even indiscriminate in their relationships with adults, as well as more often experiencing peer relationship difficulties than a non-adopted control group (Tizard, 1977).

More recent studies of children whose earliest years were spent in orphanages in Romania during the 1980s, but who were subsequently adopted within British families provides further insight into the ‘partial truth’ of the critical period hypothesis. This study was able to compare outcomes for children adopted before the age of two with outcomes of later adopted children, demonstrating that all made marked improvements, but earlier intervention (i.e. before the age of 2) produced much more rapid and complete catch-up (Rutter et al 1998). The headline message for policy might be characterised as ‘early is best’ but it is (almost) ‘never too late’.

## **Implications of neuroscience**

Scientific arguments for recognising the early years as a sensitive period (developmental ‘prime-time’) have received tantalizing endorsement in recent decades through advances in neuroscience (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). For example, a widely cited Newsweek article made the dramatic claim that:

“A newborn's brain is composed of trillions of neurons... The experiences of childhood determine which neurons are used, that wire the circuits of the brain. Those neurons that are not used may die”

(Begley 1996, cited at <http://web.worldbank.org>)

The basic facts are compelling. The human brain grows most rapidly during the prenatal period and the first few years of life, reaching 50 per cent mature weight by six months and 90 percent by the age of eight. Children’s physical growth is also very rapid during the early years, but physical maturation is a much more extended process compared with the changes taking place within the nervous system (Rutter and Rutter, 1993). The earliest months of life are also the period of most rapid synapse formation – constructing the dense networks of neural connectivity on which cortical activity depends. Synaptic density increases most between birth and 1 to 2 years of age (when it is 50% higher than for more mature adults). Densities decline gradually over the period from 2 to 16 years of age. Some popular interpretations of current knowledge go well beyond the evidence, under such headlines as ‘Use it – or lose it!’. For example, it has been assumed that synaptic density is an indicator of intelligence, that maximal infant stimulation will promote optimum connectivity, and that connectivities established in the earliest years become ‘hard-wired’ for life, (critically reviewed by Bruer, 1999). These issues all require further investigation, as do hypotheses about infants’ neuropsychological requirements for responsive interpersonal attachment relationships (e.g. Schore, 2000) and claims about specific effects of abuse and trauma on the infant’s brain (Teicher, 2002).

Research into early brain development is especially significant in drawing attention to the prenatal period and the very earliest months and years of life, and emphasizing the crucial importance of adequate nutrition, responsive care and a supportive environment at a time of successive, qualitative shifts in development. While early childhood policy development tends to give priority to the pre-primary years, evidence from developmental neuroscience argues for a more comprehensive ECCE strategy, encompassing the welfare of children and families from well before birth. Having said that, there is much still uncertain about the implications of this relatively new area of research. One area of current debate centres on the question: how far does the infant's maturing nervous system demand specific environmental input for optimal development. Much current theorising builds on evidence from human and animal research demonstrating the impact of sensory impairment on neurological development (e.g. the visual cortex 'expects' exposure to visual patterned stimulation for normal functioning). Similarly - the argument runs - areas of the brain concerned with social, emotional and cognitive functioning 'expect' specific stimulation, notably early interactive experiences normally provided through sensitive parenting, which become the foundation for secure attachment, communication and learning. But evidence from other areas of developmental research, notably studies of human resilience (see below) suggest pre-requisites for adaptive functioning are relatively non-specific. To make the point very simply, in the same way that healthy physical growth demands a balanced diet, but this can be achieved through a wide variety of foods, so human neurological development requires basic elements consistent with secure, stimulating and responsive care, but does not make precise prescriptions. It appears that optimal human development can be achieved through a wide range of family settings, child care practices and pedagogic approaches:

“Infants do not need highly specific, carefully tailored experiences for this kind of species-typical development to occur...critical periods do not really speak to how we should design preschool...choose toys, time music lessons, or establish early child care policies”  
(Bruer, 2004, p. 428).

It will take further research to establish the boundaries on what counts as a 'balanced diet' from a psychosocial point of view, which in any case must always allow for individual differences in children as well as for cultural differences in expectations for their development.

Meanwhile, the attention currently being given to graphic but oversimplified accounts of early brain development makes for persuasive advocacy. But its contribution to policy development on behalf of young children and families is less clear. For example, in *State of the World's Children, 2001*, UNICEF writers assert:

“... before many adults even realize what is happening, the brain cells of a new infant proliferate, synapses crackle and the patterns of a lifetime are established...Choices made and actions taken on behalf of children during this critical period affect not only how a child develops but also how a country progresses” (UNICEF, 2001, page. 14).

A few pages later, the cyber imagery becomes even more colourful, in a discussion of consequences for young children in emergency, displaced or post-conflict situations: ‘...only a few synapses fire, while the rest of the brain shuts down. At these young ages, a shutdown stalls the motor of development’ (UNICEF, 2001, page 9).

## **A time of vulnerability...and resilience?**

Fortunately for the species, and the future of children facing adversity and trauma, the young human brain does not normally ‘shut down’, and development does not normally ‘stall’, either literally or metaphorically, except in the short term or in the most extreme circumstances for the most vulnerable children. Evidence abounds on multiple adverse effects on children’s well-being from material deprivations, disrupted, distorted and abusive relationships, conflict, displacement and forced migrations. Yet, increasingly, researchers have argued that generalised evidence offers an incomplete picture of the impact of adversities in children’s lives, by overlooking significant numbers of young children who appear to thrive – despite adversity (e.g. Masten, 2001; Luthar, 2003). The concept of resilience (or invulnerability) has been widely applied to circumstances where children appear better able to cope with stress than their more vulnerable peers.

Individual qualities help children cope - their temperament, resourcefulness, flexibility, their age and maturity, social competence and so on. Younger children and children whose general health and stamina is weaker are more vulnerable. But longitudinal studies also identify ‘protective factors’ in children’s environment; the assets or resources that help young children cope with difficult situations – such as supportive parents, teachers or other significant adults, peer group solidarity, and so on. In terms of policy implications, it is clear that well-resourced ECCE – as part of a comprehensive programme of support for children and families - can be a very significant ‘protective factor’ helping young children, parents and other caregivers cope with adversities. By the same token, absence of protective factors may amplify the risks to young children’s well-being, for example where children are deprived of ECCE opportunities, or children and families are victims of social exclusion or discrimination (e.g. related to children’s gender, ethnicity or special needs). These studies point to the general resilience of developmental processes, and to the scope for compensating for the negative consequences of adversity. They offer a more optimistic picture for early childhood, reinforcing the case for early intervention (and preferably early prevention, France and Utting, 2005) as the most effective basis for assuring children’s positive long-term well-being. They provide a framework for policy, in terms of identification of ‘protective’ as well as ‘risk’ factors in early childhood, and identification of children who are most at risk – due to the unavailability of protective factors in their environment as well as their personal vulnerabilities, related to their health, social competence, susceptibility to neglect or abuse etc. This paradigm can be applied to a range of adversities, including natural disasters, family poverty and breakdown, HIV/Aids etc. It’s policy relevance applies specifically to ECCE programmes (which can be crucial protective factors) and is broadly relevant to ensuring protection for children at risk from abuse, and providing support to parents or other caregivers responsible for young children in difficult circumstances.

## **II. A POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE**

### **Compensating for disadvantage and equalising educational opportunities**

The areas of research and theory briefly summarised in Section I provide an important theoretical and empirical backcloth to more focussed research and policy studies within ECCE, many of which have been about directly testing the hypothesis that intervening during the critical – or at least formative – early years can compensate for disadvantages, equalize opportunities and provide a head start for children growing up with poverty or other adversities. This vision for early childhood education was notably pioneered within the US programme of that name, launched in 1964 as part of a ‘War on Poverty’. The goal of achieving social and economic change through early intervention was explicit:

“We were interested in trying to change the poor so that they could become independent human beings...” (Sargent Shriver, Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, quoted in Woodhead, 1985)

Justifying early childhood programmes in terms of ensuring school readiness, equalizing opportunities and promoting social justice has been widely cited as an underpinning rationale for ECCE (Myers, 1992) and widely replicated (for example Sure Start in the UK).

The originators of Head Start in the 1960s were influenced by theoretical work challenging conventional class- and race-based beliefs about inherited abilities and pointing to the formative significance of the early years, (notably Hunt 1961). They were also tantalized by visions from preventive medicine of a parallel with the proven power of medical interventions and disease eradication – encapsulated in the idea that early education could be an ‘inoculation against failure’. Finally, the vision for Head Start included a belief in the power of science to resolve issues of social reform:

“The assumption of the time was that the results of scientific research and evaluation would ultimately be so precise as to allow social scientists to determine which programs and policies were worthy of the investment of public funds and citizen energies. Proven models would be described, disseminated and ultimately cloned” (Schorr 2004, p xvii).

### **Evaluating long-term outcomes from early intervention**

Decisively demonstrating the long-term outcomes from Head Start turned out to be more elusive than the pioneers first imagined (Bronfenbrenner 1974), although recent reviews offer encouragement of tangible, enduring benefits (Currie and Thomas, 1995; Currie 2001; Zigler and Styfco 2004). The most influential scientific evidence comes not from evaluations of Head Start itself, but from smaller scale, carefully controlled experimental evaluations of model programmes. By the early 1980s, meta-analysis of the well designed US experimental projects (Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983) offered compelling evidence of significant positive outcomes

(Woodhead 1988), and several other notable long term US investigations have fed policy development with robust data (e.g. Campbell & Ramey, 1994).

One study in particular has become emblematic of research-based claims for ECCE programmes, with its influence extending far beyond the specific policy context in which it was based. The High/Scope Perry pre-school study was focussed on a relatively small sample - 123 African-American children growing up in the early 1960s near Detroit, USA. The credibility of the High/Scope study rests on its claim to being an experimental design, with 58 of these children (randomly) selected for a high quality early education programme. The impact of the study rests on its startling long-term evidence, notably lower drop out rates and higher school achievement amongst treatment group children, and lower referral rates to special education, and lower incidence of crime compared with the control group. These results have been all the more persuasive because of high sample retention (median 5% loss on measures) through successive follow-ups over nearly 40 years (Weikart et al 1978; Schweinhart et al 1993; Schweinhart, 2003).

The High/Scope evidence – along with other experimental evaluations - demonstrates what can be achieved through well-planned intervention. It does not guarantee these results will be achieved in another policy context or preschool setting. Advocates for investment in early childhood have not always acknowledged the limits on how far conclusions from relatively small scale US experiments can be generalised even within US, never mind on a global scale (Woodhead 1985; Halpern and Myers 1985). Most attention has been paid to issues of quality – how far the specific conditions of the High/Scope Perry project are replicated – daily, half time preschool over two years, with ratios of 6 children to each teacher (qualified to Masters level) plus weekly 90 minute home visits (Schweinhart et al 1993). Replicating features of an intensive high quality programme would be a necessary but not sufficient condition for long term positive outcome.

An educational programme is a social intervention, whose success depends on the particular characteristics of - and relationships established amongst - children, teachers, families and communities, over an extended time period. Meta-analysis of studies confirms that main effects are not for the most part transmitted through sustained improvements in children's intelligence (Barnett, 2004). In fact, initial improvements tended to fade out. Instead, evidence points towards more complex transactional processes, whereby short term boosts in children's abilities and motivation encouraged parents' support for their offspring, as well as raising teachers' expectations during the early stages of elementary school. (Or, to anticipate the next section, increased 'social capital' was as significant as 'human capital' in giving these children the head start.) It is also probable that long-term effects were amplified in part through socially divisive practices common within US school systems in the 1970s. For example, the practice of referring disadvantaged black children perceived as low ability and potential into 'special classes' all too often reinforced their low achievement prospects. Ex-preschool children were more likely to 'show promise' and remain within the mainstream, (Woodhead 1988; 1990).

The implication is that experimental evidence for the effectiveness of early childhood programmes are best interpreted within a life course framework. A comprehensive framework would not only take account of children's developing capacities at

various ages and stages, but crucially also the particular family and school settings and practices through which those competencies are recognised and fostered, or not as the case may be. Put another way, the policy implication of this line of research is not just about ensuring the readiness of young children for school. It is also about ensuring the readiness of schools for children (Myers and Landers 1989). Evidence on the ways benefits from ECCE may be either amplified or attenuated by the school experiences that follow is now available in longitudinal data showing benefits of Head Start fade out more quickly for black children because they are more likely to attend poorer quality schools than are white ex-Head Start children (Currie, 2001). Even the best resourced, high quality early childhood programme is unlikely to deliver long term positive outcomes for children if they progress to poorly resourced primary schools, where they are taught in large classes by inadequately trained teachers, and where grade repetition, drop out and widespread underachievement is the norm. Such evidence points to the importance of integrating policies and investment strategies for early childhood care and education within a comprehensive policy for the improvement of basic education, and early childhood services more generally.

To summarize, caution is needed before assuming specific patterns of long term benefit will necessarily be replicated on a wider scale. Even within the USA, another equally rigorous experimental study, the Abecedarian study (Campbell & Ramey, 1994), failed to find long term impacts on crime equivalent to those found for High/Scope children (cited by Schweinhart 1993; see also Penn et al 2006). Specific outcomes from early childhood programmes cannot be assumed to generalize from experimental studies. Specific patterns of effect cannot be divorced from (and need to be understood within) their historical and cultural context. However, recognising this important implication does not detract from the overwhelming weight of evidence for quality early childhood programmes. Large numbers of quantitative and qualitative investigations are now available involving a range of home and centre based programmes and curricula – including significant evidence, for example, from Turkey (Kagitcibasi et al., 1995), Czech Republic (Havlinova et al., 2004), New Zealand (Wylie and Thompson, 2003) and the UK (Sylva et al., 2004), plus a major cross-national IEA study (Montie, 2005; Montie et al 2006). See also Browning (2006) for brief overview.

## **Early childhood and human capital**

High/Scope researchers were amongst the first to recognise that the policy audience for their research went far beyond the educational community – and that their communications strategy needed to take account of the more conservative political climate since the inception of Head Start. In presenting policy messages, data framed in the language of early human development, social reform and equal opportunity was translated into the language of economics, human capital, and returns on investment. Initial economic analysis reported in 1982 suggested that the High/Scope programme would yield a 400% return on the initial investment in terms of reduced expenditure on special education, youth justice, social welfare etc (Breedlove and Schweinhart 1982). More recent follow-up of experimental and control groups through to the age of 27 shows that children who participated in the preschool programme reported higher monthly earnings, higher home ownership and lower use of social services. High/Scope subsequently offered even more tantalizing benefit-cost estimates, concluding that the preschool program has saved US\$7.16 to society for every US\$1 invested in early childhood (Barnett, 1996; Schweinhart 2003). Other US studies have

also offered their own tantalising benefit cost-estimates, notably the Abecedarian Programme and the Chicago Child Parent Centers (see Penn et al 2006, for systematic review).

The Human capital model of early childhood is now strongly expressed within international ECCE policy initiatives, notably by the World Bank (see Penn 2002a). Their website graphically suggests a linear relationship exists between human capital investment and rates of return in early childhood, with benefits well above costs, but also shows rapidly diminishing returns from investment during later childhood. The accompanying text offers the promise that:

“A healthy cognitive and emotional development in the early years translates into tangible economic returns. Early interventions yield higher returns as a preventive measure compared with remedial services later in life. Policies that seek to remedy deficits incurred in the early years are much more costly than initial investments in the early years” (Source <http://web.worldbank.org>)

The website also offers an ‘ECD calculator’ developed by Amsterdam Institute for International Development, (van der Gaag, 1996). This allows policy makers and program managers to calculate the economic benefits of early years investment.

## **Human capital, ethics and politics**

Basing advocacy for ECCE in benefit-cost analysis is a compelling but high-risk strategy, raising expectations for ECCE policies that are unlikely to be realised in practice, even within well-resourced large-scale programmes. For example, detailed study of long term outcomes from Head Start led one commentator to the modest (but still positive) conclusion that the benefits of a large-scale programme like Head Start could offset just 40-60% of the costs (Currie 2001). Such relatively low returns may appear disappointing within an economic framework, but human capital is not the only - nor necessarily the most appropriate - basis for defining ECCE policy, especially in global contexts.

In part this is an issue of generalization (as discussed above), namely how far the conditions within which the early childhood intervention paradigm has been originated and ‘proven’ can be assumed to apply in the contexts within which it is being applied. As noted above, evidence suggests positive impacts are not just about increased human capital (i.e. young children’s intelligence, communicative and other competencies). They are also about social capital (i.e. an altered relationship to their social environment, selection into classroom settings and groups where there are positive attitudes and expectations). At the very least, this requires ensuring adequate services, staffing and equitable resources for all children (and especially the most at risk) in otherwise impoverished communities, and ensuring continuous quality throughout early childhood and primary education. Achieving this goal is far from straightforward. For example, experience in Brazil suggests that World Bank promoted programmes have promoted far lower standards of care for poor children than is acceptable to wealthier families from the same community (cited by Penn, 2002b, p127). Moreover, in many developing country circumstances, opportunities for basic primary education cannot yet be assured, especially for girls. And even where children do have access to school, this does not mean that classroom conditions, curricula and staffing ratios will be of sufficient quality to ensure benefits

from an early childhood programme are reinforced, and translate into long term outcomes.

Once again, research points towards the importance of integrating policies for ECCE within comprehensive school reform targeted to embrace all children (especially the most vulnerable groups), including giving attention to issues of transition between sectors, with the goal of achieving a balance of continuity and challenge to developing minds. These theoretical and technical questions about the potential of early childhood programmes ‘going to scale’ are not the only area of debate. International ECCE strategies have also been challenged for their assumption that norms, goals and expectations for young children’s development, care and socialization in Western settings can be applied in an unproblematic way within diverse societies with very different cultural traditions and child rearing practices (Woodhead, 1996; 2000). According to this view, it is through the science of early childhood development and technologies of early intervention that specific cultural practices have been normalised, naturalised and then disseminated globally (Boyden, 1990; Burman 1996). Section III elaborates on this cultural critique.

Even more fundamental ethical objections can also be offered to investment in human capital as a major rationale for developing ECCE policy, in particular through its linkage with an instrumental view of the young child as a natural resource to be exploited. This instrumental goal for early childhood combines with a vision of ECCE as a technical strategy, introducing institutions and practices to harness children’s potential. Both the goal and the strategy are underpinned by belief in the power of science to prescribe for children’s needs and development, along with curricula and assessment technologies appropriate to this grand project in social engineering:

“A foregrounding of technical practice connected to a highly instrumental rationality is nothing new. It is the product of a mindset or paradigm that has been influential for more than two centuries, and which has often seen children as redemptive agents, ideal subjects for technical practice, through which we will fix problems without having to address their structural causes” (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005, p11).

### **III. A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE**

So far, this paper has concentrated on approaches to ECCE that build on a developmental paradigm, emphasizing the distinctive universal features of early development, the formative (and in some respects critical) significance of the early years. These themes have clear policy implications, whether framed in terms of optimising children’s development, promoting more equal opportunities or investing in human capital. In the sections that follow I turn to some other major strands of theory and research and consider their implications for ECCE policy development, under the general heading of ‘social and cultural perspectives’. In part, these arose through critique of the dominant developmental paradigm, notably as expressed within policy statements about ‘developmentally appropriate practices’.

## **‘Developmentally appropriate practices’ in context**

‘Developmentally Appropriate Practice’ (DAP) has been a catalyst for very significant debates around underpinning frameworks for early childhood policy and practice. The idea of a DAP was most explicitly formulated by the US National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) during the 1980s, in part as a ‘scientific defence’ of informal, play based programmes for young children, (Bredekampf, 1987). For the most part, DAP echoed traditional child-centred values, reinforced by Piagetian theory, emphasising: respect for universal stages of development; young children’s natural play, exploration and activity-based learning; and the guiding, supportive role of the skilled practitioner. This original formulation of DAP was strongly criticised even within USA, because of its insensitivity to cultural diversity in children’s family experiences, and parenting practices (e.g. Mallory and New, 1994). Subsequently, NAEYC issued a revised, 12 point position statement, which included point 6: ‘Development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts’ (Bredekamp and Copple 1997).

Unfortunately, assumptions about what counts as normal development are frequently applied unqualified within international policy and curriculum development. For example, the World Bank proposes that the first 8 years of life can be summarised in seven ‘Developmental Stages’. In each case, children are described in terms of ‘What they do’ and ‘What they need’. For example, ‘children’ at 1 to 2 years ‘...enjoy stories and experimenting with objects, walk steadily, climb stairs, run, assert independence...’ and by 2 to 3.5 years require opportunities ‘to engage in dramatic play, increasingly complex books, sing favourite songs, work simple puzzles...’ ([www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)).

For early childhood experts rooted in Western cultural traditions and values, these stages express taken-for-granted truths about early development. In reality, these descriptions are full of culture specific assumptions, for example about children’s home environment, the availability of books and puzzles and the value placed on independence. At the same time they homogenise ‘children’, making no allowance for individual differences, nor for gender differences, nor for any other aspects of diversity. In consequence, this vision for early childhood development bears little resemblance to the realities of the lives of millions of the world’s children, even less to the resources realistically available to foster their development. Idealised assumptions about what constitutes a quality environment for early childhood are also reflected in the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, ECERS, (Harms and Clifford 1980), also widely used, despite being based on relatively narrow cultural assumptions about what counts for quality in early childhood. These cultural assumptions are brought into sharp focus when compared with more ethnographic studies of children’s lives throughout much of the Majority World, highlighting the circumstances where values for childhood are about early socialisation into work and economic contribution rather than about realising individual human potential through education (Woodhead, 2003).

One way to counter the idealised, universal developmental assumptions implicit within DAP is by proposing the alternative acronym CAP, ‘Contextually Appropriate Practice’ (Woodhead 1996; 1998). Offering an alternative acronym draws attention to the many respects in which early childhood policies, services, curricula and practices must of necessity take account of the circumstances of children’s lives, the material

and cultural resources available to parents and communities as well as their expectations and aspirations for their young children. Cross-cultural research into early development and child-rearing practices has been a major source of theoretical and research evidence into the power of culture and context, notably the landmark “Six Cultures Project” (Whiting and Whiting 1975). For a recent overview, see Gielen and Roopnarine, (2004). ‘Developmental niche’ emerged as a key concept, by drawing attention to three components of children’s environment: the physical and social settings they inhabit; the culturally regulated customs and child-rearing practices; and the beliefs or ‘ethnotheories’ of parents, teachers and others responsible for their care and development (Super and Harkness, 1986). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework has also been highly influential in the re-conceptualisation of early childhood in context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The child’s development is embedded in a series of interacting systems, usually portrayed as a series of concentric circles. Microsystems are closest to the child, comprising their everyday settings and relationships in home, school and community. Mesosystems refer to the inter relationships between micro-systems, such as between home and school, parents and teachers. Exosystems refer to powerful influences that act indirectly on the child, e.g. employment practices for parents that generate resource that may be directed to the child’s well-being but also shape arrangements for their day to day care. Finally, macrosystems and chronosystems acknowledge the mediating influence of dominant beliefs and values around young children, plus the fact that systems are not static but changing. These frameworks have the potential to encompass the significance of multiple settings and influences in children’s lives, although they are still oversimplifications. It is very difficult for any theoretical model to encompass the complexities in young children’s lives, including the full range of relationships and influences, especially in circumstances of family change, urbanisation and cultural diversity in beliefs, practices and discourses of early childhood within a single community and even within a single early childhood setting.

Setting CAP against DAP draws attention to a key theoretical debate about the nature of early child development. The dominant paradigm outlined earlier in the paper was increasingly being challenged during the later decades of the twentieth century, from within the discipline of psychology and from post modernist, social constructionist theories, as well as from development studies. Three key themes can be singled out that have particular salience for ECCE policy: (i) diversities in early childhood; (ii) development is a social and cultural process; (iii) early childhood is socially constructed.

## **Diversities in early childhood**

As discussed above, accounts of the ‘normal’ developing child fail adequately to acknowledge – far less account for – diversities in young children’s lives, the striking variations in how childhood is understood and experienced, and how it is applied to individual and groups of children, in relation to their age, gender, maturity, social status etc. Cross-cultural studies go some way to offering an antidote to the de-contextualisation, idealisation and normalisation of particular child development practices (Segall et al 1990). For example, the care-giving style of white, middle class mothers has dominated research, a style which in global terms is atypical (and quite probably also atypical even within the USA), (Whiting and Edwards, 1988). Yet, this style of interaction has become part of child development orthodoxy, as the normal, and indeed healthy way for adults to relate to their children. Studies of

mother-infant attachment also illustrate the ways particular, culture-specific expressions of universal early relationship processes can all too easily be over-generalised, and acquire the status of a pedagogy, strongly informing child care policies and advice to parents (Singer, 1998). Accounts of 'normal' development are also weak in their capacity to accommodate the impact of major social changes on care systems. For example, the HIV/Aids pandemic has resulted in loss of parents and/or siblings becoming a 'normal' feature of child development, with consequent reliance on alternative care systems for millions of young children.

By way of illustration, goals for ECCE typically incorporate the assumption that growing independence and autonomy is a core goal for development, and this is supported by empirical research into how children acquire a sense of self and other, learn about the social rules that regulate family life and acquire capacities for social perspective-taking e.g. (Dunn 1988). Yet social cognitive processes interpreted from studies in the UK and USA do not necessarily travel well:

"...the classic account of the toddler's drive for autonomy and separateness...appears incorrect as a thematic description of toddler development in many non-Western cultural communities...For example, in Zinacantan, Mexico....the transition from infancy to early childhood is not typified by resistant toddlers demanding and asserting control over toileting and other self-help skills (the familiar "no, I can do it") but instead by watchful, imitative children who acquire toilet training and other elements of self-care with a minimum of fuss" (Edwards 1995, p 47)

Kagitcibasi (1990; 1996) has addressed these issues in the context of social change affecting children in Turkey. She argues that modern views of child development are steeped in individualism, with its emphasis on the psychological value of the child to parents, socialisation goals associated with separation and independence, and a style of rearing encouraging autonomy and social development. This contrasts sharply with the interdependent outlook in traditional agrarian societies where obedience training is emphasised and there is little place for encouraging play, for choice or for the exploration of ideas and beliefs. To achieve the goals of 'modernisation', it could be argued the sooner the Western model of child development is adopted the better. Kagitcibasi proposes that this may not be the inevitable, nor necessarily the most appropriate model to follow. She offers a third view, better characterising the experience of many societies, in which the child's development has acquired psychological value, but in the context of family patterns still emphasising interdependence and respect for parental authority.

Respecting diversities between and within societies, and recognising the challenges of social change, migration and multi-culturalism is a core issue for ECCE policy and practice. The ways it is resolved is highly variable, depending on levels of acceptance of cultural pluralism as a positive value in care and education institutions, which in turn is affected by the extent of centralisation of control and the scope for community engagement in shaping early childhood services (e.g. Vandenberg 1999; Carr & May 2000).

## **A social and cultural process**

Recognising the social and cultural dimensions of early childhood is not just about acknowledging diverse and changing cultural traditions, important though this is. It isn't just about acknowledging that 'Development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts' (as in the NAEYC updated statement of DAP referred to above). These attempts to accommodate social and cultural factors falter if they still hold onto core assumptions about development as a largely universal, natural, individual process of the child progressively constructing a sense of self and surroundings through relatively stable stages of development. In fact, the scientific evidence for such core assumptions (largely derived from Piagetian 'Constructivist' theory) is much less robust than is generally assumed, and has been extensively critiqued since the 1970s (notably Donaldson, 1978). At the same time, developmental researchers have increasingly drawn on an alternative theoretical framework which seems to account more adequately for social and cultural dimensions of early development, informed especially by Vygotsky's 'Social Constructivist' theory, (reviewed in Woodhead et al, 2003). On this view, the young child's development is as much cultural as it is natural. Stages are embedded in social practices as much as in processes of maturation. In fact, children's development might most accurately be described as 'naturally cultural'. Patterns of nurturance, communication and teaching are not something that merely influences children's development. They are an intrinsic part of the developmental process, in so far as the child's engages with and participates in these processes from the very start. Social and cultural context should not be seen as something outside the process of development, "as that which surrounds" but "as that which weaves together" (Cole 1996, p 132-135). The most significant features of any child's environment are the humans with whom they establish close relationships – their parents, carers, siblings, peers etc – who give meaning and direction to a young child's experiences, as they variously: introduce them to cultural practices, and scaffold their acquisition of skills and ways of communicating; collaborate, negotiate and compete over shared activities and engage in shared play and creativity.

Studies of newborn babies suggest that one of the human infant's most fundamental needs is to become part of their family, community and culture (Trevvarthen 1998). Newborns are pre-adapted to engage in social interactions with parents or others carers on whom depend, not only for survival and security depends, but also for acquiring communication skills and cultural competencies. From the earliest weeks, babies, strive to make sense of their surroundings, by sharing with others in a process of inter-subjectivity on which joint activity, cooperation and communication is built. Barbara Rogoff has gone furthest in elaborating a socio-cultural model with direct applicability to early childhood education (Rogoff, 1990; 2003). She elaborated 'guided participation' as a framework for examining the way children are initiated into cognitive and social skills perceived as relevant to their community. Comparing mother-child dyads in India, Guatemala, Turkey and the USA, Rogoff et al (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. Most recently, Rogoff (2003) has elaborated this view that development is naturally social and cultural, and explored the ways children are inducted into communities of learners.

Recognising development as a socio-cultural process has important implications for policy, curriculum and pedagogy (reviewed by MacNaughton 2003). Instead of seeing early childhood as a universal, decontextualised process of developing towards a taken for granted state of maturity, it draws attention to young children's engagement with a range of settings, relationships, activities and skills through which they acquire culturally-located competencies and identities. 'Development' is about the acquisition of cognitive tools and cultural competencies which are themselves products of human civilization - forms of discourse, literacy, numeracy, and more recently information technology - that are adaptive to particular socio-economic contexts and historical epochs:

'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).

## **Constructions and reconstructions of early childhood**

A social and cultural paradigm has the advantage that features of early childhood (including the modern Western childhoods that are so often taken as a standard for all) are understood as a product of specific economic, social and cultural processes. This is not to deny the significance of universal maturational processes, nor to deny the particular vulnerability of young children to adversity. But a socio-cultural paradigm emphasizes respects in which early childhood contexts and processes are shaped by human action, profoundly social in character and at all times mediated by cultural processes, including competing cultural views on young children's needs - related to their individuality, gender, ethnicity and a host of other factors. In recent decades, these themes have become a catalyst for theoretical and empirical studies originating within a wide range of disciplines, notably psychology, sociology and anthropology, cultural studies and development studies. Some of these studies are being carried out within conventional scientific disciplines, notably socio-cultural theories of early development outlined above. But early childhood thinking has also been affected by a much more radical critique of conventional theory and research. Social constructionist, post modernist and post-structural perspectives have been especially influential, liberating early childhood from narrow conceptualisations of what is natural, normal and necessary and opening the way to a more historical and political perspective on institutions, policies and practices, as well as on the ways theories, knowledge and beliefs about young children regulate their lives (Qvortrup et al 1994; James and Prout 1990).

There have also been trends towards an interdisciplinary Childhood Studies, recognising that traditional discipline-based studies fragmented the child as much as traditional professional specialisms (Woodhead, 2003). An interdisciplinary childhood studies offers a meeting place for diverse perspectives on early childhood and is more consistent with the trend towards more coordinated policies - and more

integrated services - and increasingly underpinned by a holistic view of children's interdependent rights (see Section IV below).

Major themes embraced by Childhood Studies include:

- Young children's development is a social process. They learn to think, feel, communicate and act within social relationships in the context of particular cultural settings and practices, mediated by beliefs about how children should be treated and what it means to be a child, as well as when childhood begins and ends (Richards and Light, 1986; Schaffer, 1996; Woodhead et al., 1998);
- Cultures of early childhood are also profoundly social, expressed through peer group play, styles of dress and behaviour, patterns of consumption of commercial toys, TV, and other media (Kehily and Swann, 2003);
- Childhood is a social phenomenon (Qvortrup 1994). Childhood contexts and social practices are socially constructed. There is not much 'natural' about the environments in which children grow-up in and spend their time, in built environments, classrooms, and playgrounds, as well as in cars, buses and other forms of transport, in shopping malls and supermarkets. These are human creations that regulate children's lives (Maybin and Woodhead, 2003);
- Childhood is an ambiguous status, even within a given time and place. Individual children are faced with, and frequently take creative delight in exploring the multiple versions of being a young child - at home, at preschool, in the playground, including the contrasts and inherent contradictions, especially in multi-ethnic, urban contexts. (Corsaro, 1997; Woodhead et al., 2003);
- Childhood has been differently understood, institutionalised and regulated in different societies and periods of history. Early childhood has perennially been re-invented - and differentiated according to children's social and geographical location, their gender, ethnicity, their wealth or poverty, amongst other factors (Cunningham, 1991; Hendrick, 1997);
- Early childhood is also political issue, marked by gross inequalities in resources, provisions and opportunities, shaped both by global as well as by local forces (Stephens, 1995; Montgomery et al, 2003);

These perspectives draw attention to the ways early childhood is constructed and reconstructed, by children as well as for children (James and Prout, 1990). Early childhood settings, pedagogies and practices are shaped by generations of human activity and creativity, shaped by circumstances, opportunities and constraints and informed by multiple discourses about children's needs and nature. In consequence, any particular specification of early childhood services, curriculum and pedagogy will inevitably reflect particular combinations of cultural assumptions and aspirations, as well as patterns of power and relationship between governments, children, families and professionals.

## **Quality, critical perspectives and the politics of early childhood**

Social constructionist, post-modernist and poststructural perspectives have been applied to all aspects of early childhood design, curriculum and teaching, drawing explicitly on the work of Foucault, (see MacNaughton, 2005) as well as more general critiques of disciplinary perspectives on early development (see Burman, 1994;

Gergen, 1985). Debates around what counts as 'quality' in ECCE have been an especially influential catalyst since the 1990s, (Moss and Pence, 1994; Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999). Acceptance of the view that children's behaviour, thinking, social relationships and adaptation, are culturally as much as biologically constituted, has profound implications for the ways quality in ECCE is understood, defined and monitored. The 'developmental appropriateness' of children's experiences, the 'harmfulness' or 'benefits' of their environment cannot be separated from the social and cultural processes through which they develop, the values and goals that inform the ways they are treated and understood, and the political context within which their lives are shaped. Unlike frameworks that emphasise absolute (or 'taken for granted') criteria for judging the quality of children's development, as well as the appropriateness of a particular environment or professional practices, cultural approaches argue that these criteria can be (and must be) contested. Dominant policies and practices are based on specific, standardised quality criteria that originate in a narrow range of cultural contexts, values and practices. It becomes important to recognise multiple stakeholder perspectives (politicians, teachers, parents, children etc), as well as inequalities in power amongst these stakeholders (see also Woodhead, 1996; 1998).

More recently, Dahlberg, Moss and others have taken the argument a step further. They challenge the idea that defining quality should be seen as a technical question, of reconciling the multiple discourses that shape the childhood landscape. Quality is seen as about fundamental philosophical and ethical issues, about the values and meanings that attach to young children, the child's role as a co-constructor of knowledge, identity and culture and the scope for a pedagogy of relationships. Early childhood in Reggio Emilia is especially influential (Malaguzzi, 1993), especially the vision of early childhood institutions where '...children and adults meet and participate together in projects of cultural, social political and economic significance, and a such to be a community institution of social solidarity bearing cultural and symbolic significance' (Dahlberg et al., 1999, p. 7). One further step in this radical analysis proposes that conventional designations of early childhood 'institutions' and 'services' be displaced by children's 'spaces' – open to multiple meanings (physical, social, cultural and discursive spaces) and emphasising their democratic ethic of a meeting place for young children and adults (Moss and Petrie, 2002; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005).

In summary, the general implication is that benchmarks of quality in early childhood are not intrinsic, fixed and prescribed by scientific knowledge about development, although science clearly has a crucial role to play in informing quality development. In due course, human societies may come to share beliefs about what is 'normal' and 'natural' and 'appropriate' for all young children. But universal consensus would not make these beliefs, or the arrangements for their implementation, any less cultural.

## **IV. A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE**

### **A new, universal paradigm**

Social and cultural perspectives on early childhood have liberated early childhood research and policy from over reliance on normative developmental accounts. Much

more inclusive frameworks are now available, within which diverse early childhood settings and practices are identified, taken-for-granted early childhood discourses deconstructed and multiple stakeholders identified within the so-called 'quality debate'. But the path of social constructionism has also led into difficult and controversial terrain from a policy point of view, with the accusation that attention to social and cultural relativity can appear to justify moral and political relativity (Evans and Myers 1994). The boundaries between on the one hand 'respecting diversities' and 'multiple perspectives' and on the other hand, combating adversities, inequalities and discrimination, have sometimes appeared blurred. Respect for cultural context and traditions opens the door (it has been claimed) to unequal distribution of resources and services. At worst it is seen as undermining attempts to regulate against harmful and abusive child-rearing practices. In defence, it can be argued on the contrary that critique of dominant early childhood discourses is the starting point for recognising structures of social control, oppression and social exclusion, social inequalities and injustices, thereby opening the door to a more politically conscious scholarship on behalf of young children (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005).

Meanwhile the policy landscape has shifted dramatically, with advocacy for early childhood increasingly based on recognition of young children's universal rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) requires all children to be respected as persons in their own right, including the very youngest children. In so doing, it establishes a new kind of universal standard. The UNCRC four 'general principles' are especially significant for earlier debates: the right to survival and development; to non-discrimination; to respect for views and feelings; and the 'best interests of the child' as a primary consideration (Articles 6,2,12 and 3, see General Comment 7). Whereas international advocacy had in the past relied heavily on the power of scientific evidence for young children's universal nature, needs and development, the strength of the UNCRC rests on political consensus. This is a crucial distinction. While earlier sections have reviewed perspectives on early childhood that have their roots in theories and research spanning the biological and social sciences, human rights draws on quite different ethical and legal principles, which inform as much as being informed by research. The significance of the UNCRC for early childhood policy lies in the fact that it has been ratified, or acceded to, by 192 States (only the United States and Somalia have not yet ratified it). There are also significant mechanisms of international accountability. National governments ('States Parties') make regular reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on progress in implementing the UNCRC. But the influence of the UNCRC is arguably even more pervasive, as fundamental children's rights principles gradually become embedded within the policies and practices of all who work with and on behalf of young children:

"The CRC has more signatories than any other international convention, and it is important for us to recognize the legal implications of this achievement in how we position our work. Countries are legally bound to honour children's rights, and this gives us a strong basis for initiating public dialogue and action on behalf of young children" (Arnold, 2004, p.4)

The emphasis on 'initiating public dialogue and action' is important, especially in the face of global poverty and associated inequalities in availability of institutional and

professional infrastructures. These are amplified by multiple other adversities to frustrate the development and well-being of millions of the world's children.

The UNCRC is arguably the most significant starting point for policy development on behalf of the world's young children. But this universal prescription for childhood has also been contested, especially for endorsing distinctively western liberal and individualistic discourses of childhood (see Boyden, 1990; Burman 1996). The UNCRC is also – necessarily – a very general statement, and draws heavily on concepts that are open to wide ranging interpretation. For example, the child's right to survival and 'development' is a substantive principle within the Convention (within Article 6). 'Development' is also a major indicator in articles concerned with promoting well-being, through for example provision of an adequate standard of living (Article 27) and protection from harmful work (Article 32) (Woodhead, 2005). Clearly, asserting a child's right to development is the beginning not the end of any policy debate, because of the different beliefs, values and theories about what are necessary, natural or appropriate experiences and outcomes for young children. For some, these generalities are weaknesses of the tool. For others they are its strength. Pragmatically, they have made it possible to achieve near universal consent for the Convention as a starting point for detailed scrutiny of national policies and practices through the UN Committee reporting process. General principles also create space for diverse local interpretations of quality development, provided these are consistent with other articles of the Convention, notably by setting clear boundaries related to non-discrimination (Article 2), promoting the best interests of the child (Article 3), and respecting their views and feelings (Article 12).

Despite arguments about the imperfections and imprecision of the UNCRC, it's potential influence in shaping stronger policy agendas for early childhood is highly significant, especially because of its near universal adoption, the procedures of accountability, along with transparent self-assessment through periodic reports monitored by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. These processes of monitoring, reporting and discussion are – and will increasingly become a catalyst for local, national and international debates around key policy issues (Santos-Pais, 1999). But embedding a rights perspective within policy development has a long way to go. It is likely to be a gradual, incremental and in some respects contested process, more readily achieved in some cultural contexts than in others. This is because realizing the rights of every child is not just about more effective or more comprehensive services for children and families. Realizing rights also entails a fundamental shift in the image of the child within society. Governments, policy makers and child professionals inherit a legacy of discourses of childhood that have underpinned policy development at various times and in accordance with changing socio-economic circumstances and political priorities (Hendrick, 2003; Parton, 2006). For example, policy development within the UK – a highly industrialised and urbanised western democracy - has been strongly shaped by welfare perspectives rooted in philanthropic and charity work, founded on discourses around children's (and families') "needs" (Woodhead 1990/1997) and of desirable "outcomes" in terms of health, development, and education. Following a highly critical report into short comings of child protection, the British government has embarked in a fundamental reform of children's services, under the headline 'Every Child Matters', including major legislation, (Children Act 2004). As the official website explains:

“The Government's aim is for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to:

- \* Be healthy
  - \* Stay safe
  - \* Enjoy and achieve
  - \* Make a positive contribution
  - \* Achieve economic well-being”
- ([www.everychildmatters.gov.uk](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk))

These reforms are built around providing more integrated provision and more comprehensive protection for children. Even so, there is very little explicit reference to rights. Policies are still framed in terms of what children “need”, and by specifying five major “outcomes” for children, although they can be mapped onto articles of the UNCRC (see [www.unicef.org/uk/tz](http://www.unicef.org/uk/tz)). There are other respects in which UK reforms move some way towards embracing rights principles. For example, ‘Effective communication and engagement with children, young people and families’, including ‘listening to children’ is one of the newly defined ‘Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children's Workforce’. Another indicator of greater respect for the child is the appointment of Children’s Commissioners for Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and most recently England. On the other hand, the British government has resisted pressures to outlaw all physical punishment of children, which is seen as undermining parental responsibility for children’s socialization (see Phillips and Alderson, 2003). These examples from the UK illustrate continuing ambivalence towards making the rights of the child the explicit, foundational principles underpinning reform of children’s services. It is important to acknowledge other western democracies that have been much quicker to embrace the rights of the child, for example Norway appointed the first ever ombudsman for children as long ago as 1981.

The challenges are of a different order in many of the world’s poorest societies, especially post-conflict and transitional societies, where child and family focussed infrastructures are often least developed, where policy development and governance is weak, and basic capacity building is the first priority (World Bank, 1998). Moreover, respect for every young child’s rights may appear alien in societies where this individualistic vision sits uncomfortably alongside collectivist values emphasizing human interdependencies (Kagitcibasi, 1990;1996), and especially where hierarchical structures devalue the child, especially girl children, disabled children, low caste, ethnic minority or other excluded groups, who are least likely to be assured basic rights to survival, development and education (UNICEF, 2006).

Competing cultural discourses related to the rights of the child are highlighted by contrasting the UNCRC with the very different statement of ‘rights and duties’ within the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (OAU, 1990, discussed in Burr and Montgomery, 2003). For example, Article 31 of the African Charter states that: ‘Every child shall have responsibilities towards his family and society... The child, subject to his age and ability, ... shall have the duty: to work for the cohesion of the family, to respect his parents, superiors and elders at all times and to assist them in case of need... etc”.

## Implementing child rights in early childhood

Implementing child rights within early childhood policies and practices is still only at the beginning. Indeed, one of the major reasons the UN Committee decided to devote its Day of General Discussion 2004 to early childhood was expressly because country reports had to date been devoting so little attention to implications of the UNCRC for the youngest children. As the Chair of the Committee explained:

“The United Nations Convention on the Child is applicable with regard to all persons under the age of 18. But the Committee on the Rights of the Child has noted regularly when reviewing reports submitted by States parties that information on the implementation of the Convention with respect to children before the age of regular schooling is often very limited. Usually, for these young children, the reports cover only certain aspects of health care, mainly infant mortality, immunisation and malnutrition, and selected issues in education chiefly related to kindergarten and pre-school. Other important issues are rarely addressed” (Doek, 2006, p vii).

It was for this reason, following on from the Day of General Discussion that the Committee decided to prepare an interpretive document, General Comment 7 on ‘Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood’, ratified September 2005 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, <http://www.ohchr.org>). The General Comment comprehensively reviews implications of the UNCRC for policy development in early childhood, covering general principles, assistance to parents and families, development of comprehensive services, young children in need of special protection and resources and capacity building. In the rest of this paper, I summarise just a few of the implications of a rights based approach to policy development in ECCE. For a full commentary on General Comment 7, see UN Committee on the Rights of the Child/UNICEF/Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2006).

The perspective on young children within the UNCRC departs radically from conventional images that have informed early childhood research and policy. Introducing General Comment 7, members of the UN Committee explain that a fundamental goal is “to emphasize that the young child is not merely a fit object of benevolence, but, rather, that the young child is a right-holder as is the older child and, indeed, every human being” (Doek et al, 2006, p.32). Accordingly, the preamble to General Comment 7 confirms that “...young children are holders of all the rights enshrined in the Convention. They are entitled to special protection measures and, in accordance with their evolving capacities, the progressive exercise of their rights... The Committee reaffirms that the Convention on the Rights of the Child is to be applied holistically in early childhood, taking account of the principle of the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights” (Paragraph 3).

Framing early childhood policy in terms of child rights departs radically from a conventional, instrumental paradigm, notably through the insistence on every young child’s entitlement to quality of life, to respect and to well being. Each entitlement is valued as an end in itself and not just as the means to achieve some distant goal of achieving potential. This is matched by identification of the responsibilities of caregivers, communities and the State to enable the young child to realize their rights in practice. Marta Santos-Pais refers to a ‘new ethical attitude towards children’:

“Recognising children’s rights means acknowledging human rights as a question of entitlement and of a consummate responsibility to ensure their effective enjoyment. As members of the human family, children – all children – have inalienable human rights and freedoms that are inherent to the dignity of the human person.

...Entitlement is not simply a question of abstract recognition by the law – even if such recognition is critical for rights to be claimed and safeguarded. In fact, entitlement has practical implications. It implies the creation of conditions in which children can effectively enjoy their rights.

...Entitlement implies benefiting from the action of others – the State, the society, the family – for the rights of the child to become a reality, to be experienced and practised”

(Santos-Pais, 1999, p. 6).

So, framing policy for ECCE services from a rights perspective is not about charity towards the young, needy and dependent. Children are no longer envisaged merely as the recipients of services, beneficiaries of protective measures, or subjects of social experiments. Nor should early childhood be seen as an investment opportunity, about exploiting human capital. As we have seen in earlier sections, each of these paradigms has been associated with significant lines of theory and research, many of which are still continuing. At the very least, they require reframing, to recognise that young children are not merely in a process of development, objects of concern and charity, pawns in adult social experiments (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000). This process of reframing has been evident in the social sciences for several decades, recognising that children’s rights are not best realised while they are researched within an evaluative frame that is mainly interested in their position on the stage-like journey to mature, rational, responsible, autonomous, adult competence. The danger is that they are seen ‘not yet being’, a set of ‘potentials’, a ‘project in the making’ (Verhellen, 1997), ‘human becomings’ rather than ‘human beings’ (Qvortrup 1994), ‘noble causes’ rather than ‘worthy citizens’ Knuttson (1997). The shift in the young child’s status within policy and practice is also signalled by the move away from policies based mainly around adult constructions of children’s needs, (Woodhead 1990/97):

“A needs-based focus produces a vision aimed at solving specific problems... it concentrates on specifics and converts the citizen into a passive subject who must be considered from the standpoint of the problem. In contrast, a rights based approach fosters a vision of citizenship whereby the citizen is a holder of rights...” (Liwski, 2006, p.9).

Moss et al (2000), compare traditional policy discourse of the ‘child in need’ with a discourse of ‘the rich child’ associated with early childhood services in Reggio Emilia:

“Our image of children no longer considers them as isolated and egocentric... does not belittle feelings or what is not logical... Instead our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all, connected to adults and other children” (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 10).

## Participatory rights in theory and practice

A second major feature of rights based policy development concerns the young child's own role in realising their rights. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child encourages States parties to construct a positive agenda for rights in early childhood, recognizing young children are '...active members of families, communities and societies, with their own concerns, interests and points of view...' (General Comment 7, Para 5). Article 12 of the UN Convention is identified as a general principle, which applies both to younger and to older children. As the Committee notes, respect for the young child's agency is frequently overlooked, or rejected as inappropriate on the grounds of age and immaturity:

'In many countries and regions, traditional beliefs have emphasized young children's need for training and socialization. They have been regarded as undeveloped, lacking even basic capacities for understanding, communicating and making choices. They have been powerless within their families, and often voiceless and invisible within society. As holders of rights, even the youngest children are entitled to express their views, which should be "given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (General Comment 7, Para 14).

General Comment 7 elaborates three participatory principles, each with policy and practice implications:

- (a) the child's right to be consulted in matters that affect them should be implemented from the earliest stage in ways appropriate to the child's capacities, best interests, and rights to protection from harmful experiences;
- (b) the right to express views and feelings should be anchored in the child's daily life at home, within early childhood health, care and education facilities, in legal proceedings, and in the development of policies and services; and
- (c) that all appropriate measures should be taken to ensure that all those with responsibilities towards young children listen to their views and respect their dignity.

Emphasising young children's participatory rights resonates with well-established traditions of theory and research, most often expressed in terms of children's activity and agency, and more broadly their role in shaping their own childhoods. For example, constructivist paradigms within developmental psychology take for granted that children actively engage with their physical and social environment, constructing cognitive models to make sense of the world and gradually acquiring increasing sophistication in their intellectual, social and moral understanding. Studies of social development have emphasized children's role as social actors and meaning makers (Bruner and Haste, 1987), partners in social interaction, reciprocal exchanges and transactional patterns of mutual influence (reviewed by Schaffer, 1996). Infancy research emphasizes that newborns are pre-adapted for social engagement, actively seeking out social relationships through which their security is assured, emotions regulated and cognitive and communicative competence fostered. This growing body of research has important implications for the participatory rights of babies, including premature babies (Alderson et al 2005).

In this respect, it is important to note the UN Committee's 'working definition of "early childhood" is all young children: at birth and throughout infancy; during the

preschool years; as well as during the transition to school'; in practice, all children below of the age of 8 (General Comment 7, Para 1 and 4). The reference to 'at birth' is in acknowledgement that the infant is an active, growing sentient being before, during as well as after birth, indeed well before the period of life traditionally called "early childhood". Defining early childhood as below the age of 8 is consistent with the UNCRC definition of childhood as 'below the age of 18 years'. The UNCRC wording intentionally does not specify when childhood begins. Being more precise would have threatened universal ratification because of the implication for moral and cultural debates surrounding abortion and related issues, (Hodgkin and Newell, 1998, p. 1). At the same time, the UN Committee reaffirms the significance of the months before birth, for example by urging 'States parties to improve peri-natal care for mothers and babies' (General Comment 7, Para 10).

Other social science traditions offer a different and in many respects complementary version of these themes of activity and agency. Macro sociology has emphasised the power of social structure to shape individual lives, while micro-analysis of social process has revealed the ways individuals contribute to the creation of social life. Reconciling 'structure' and 'agency' has been a major theme (Giddens, 1979). Interest in children's agency continues to underpin studies into children's socialisation, with a surge of interest in exploring aspects of children's social competence (e.g. Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998) as well as in mapping the ways children construct their socialisation (Mayall, 1994). The significance of young children's personal and social activity, creativity and agency has also been revealed through close study of peer relationships, play and cultural expression in spaces more or less separated off from adult control (Corsaro, 1997), as well as through studies of young children's participation in media and consumer culture (Buckingham 2000; Kehily and Swann, 2003).

Recognising children's activity and agency has been a foundational principle within the emerging critical interdisciplinary study of childhood, at the same time recognising that these concepts disguise some important distinctions, notably that children may be 'active' in the psychosocial sense, without necessarily being demonstrably expressive 'social actors' in family, preschool and peer group; and that neither of these necessarily means they are 'agentic' in the more political sense of significantly influencing their situation, or being listened to. The active, engaged child may find ways to resist oppression or exploitation (James and Prout 1990; James et al 1998; Mayall 2002; Woodhead 2003b). These distinctions owe much to a paper by Charlotte Hardman in 1973, which helped give the study of children's activity and agency a new critical edge (Hardman, 1973). She drew on the concept of 'muted voices' to argue for the study of children in their own right, not just as processes of development, products of socialisation, nor merely as mature adults in the making. While children had been seen as scientifically interesting for more than a century, research into children's lives had until that point been largely shaped by adult agendas for children, and reflected dominant power relationships between expert researchers and innocent, vulnerable, developing children (Alderson 1995; Alderson and Morrow 2004; Woodhead and Faulkner 2000). Put bluntly, respect for participatory rights demands that young children be viewed not just as 'subjects of study and concern', but also as 'subjects with concerns' (Prout 2000). Article 12 demands that a young child's views be respected, not as evidence of their relative competence, but as

evidence of their unique experiences of, and stake in the future of the world they inhabit.

## **Rights and evolving capacities**

Children's participation is not new. For example, 'Child-to-child' projects have offered an alternative to conventional approaches to health care intervention since the 1970s, (Johnson et al 1998). These initiatives have proven effective in diverse country contexts, but they have only rarely involved the very youngest children. During the past decade, participatory principles have been translated into early childhood practices (e.g. Cousins 1999; Alderson 2000; Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003; Lansdown, 2005a). Many of these initiatives have been about effective consultation with young children, and increasing opportunities for contributing meaningfully to decision making about issues that affect them. For example, Lancaster 2006 proposes five principles for listening to children: recognising children's many languages; allocating communication spaces; making time; providing choice; and subscribing to a reflective practice (Lancaster, 2006). Other innovative work comes from the Mosaic study that has developed techniques to listen to the perspectives of three and four year old children on their nursery provision e.g. based around children's drawings, their photographs and tape recordings, (Clark and Moss, 2001).

Risks attach to other, less well-founded participatory initiatives. Respect for participatory principles may be tokenistic, disguising conventional power relationships, built around adult agendas, within which children are encouraged to participate according to their age and abilities. More radical participation is about children's empowerment and protagonism, which may include rejection of conventional power structures based around children's age, maturity and development, their gender, or any other social classification (John, 2003).

Respecting children's competencies is not an alternative to protecting their vulnerabilities, especially for the youngest children. It is important to emphasize the qualifier in Article 12 that the views of the child should be given "due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child". This reference to age and maturity re-connects with more conventional views of the child progressing through stage-like developmental milestones. It is closely linked to another key concept within the UNCRC – 'evolving capacities'. For example, Article 5 (on parental responsibilities) refers to respect for the responsibilities and duties of parents and others to provide appropriate direction and guidance '...in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child'. In similar vein, Article 14 refers to the rights and duties of parents and others to provide direction to the child in the exercise of their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion '...in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child...'.

The centrality of evolving (or developing<sup>1</sup>) capacities within the interpretation of child rights serves as a reminder of the inter-connections amongst the four perspectives outlined in this paper. Political and economic perspectives build on theory and evidence about the formative influence of early childhood interventions for children's future prospects. In the same way, human rights perspectives build on knowledge and judgements about young children's developing social and moral awareness and especially their capacities for decision-making, or need for protection 'in their best interests'. Some of the most significant opportunities for further research and analysis lie at the intersection between these perspectives. One brief example concerns the balance between respecting the competent child and acknowledging their reliance on guidance.

How this balance is struck is crucial to the practical implementation of participatory rights. It depends on a myriad of considerations related to the context, the individual child and the consequences of the decision made. As Gerison Lansdown explains:

“One approach would be to apply a principle of proportionality with a sliding scale of competency according to the seriousness of the decision. Where the risks associated with the decision are relatively low, it would be possible for children to take responsibility without demonstrating significant levels of competence. In order to overrule the child's express wishes, it would be necessary to demonstrate the child is not competent to understand the implications of the choice and that the consequent risks associated with the choice would be counter to the child's best interests” (Lansdown, 2005b).

In practice, assessing 'competency' is far from straightforward, for a host of reasons, not least because it depends on how the process of 'developing' or 'evolving' capacities is understood, and applied to a specific set of circumstances. At root, it also depends on which theoretical views about early child development carry greatest weight. One view (linked to some traditional developmental theories outlined in Section I) would take evidence on stages of normal development as a yardstick to decide the appropriateness of inviting participation, the extent to which a child's voice you should be listened, their capacity to make decisions etc. The role of adults (according to this view) would be to monitor children's growing capacities and make judgements about whether they are ready to participate, including taking account of individual differences in children's achievement of developmental milestones. An alternative view (consistent with Vygotskian socio-cultural theory) would approach the issue quite differently, asking about the support a child requires in order for them to participate effectively, to help them express their feelings etc and asks about the skills required of adults to work effectively with young children etc. In other words, rather than asking when are children ready participate in decision making about this

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<sup>1</sup> Talking in terms of children's capacities as 'evolving' is itself of interest, conveying a very particular image of how development occurs. It is not clear that those who drafted the UNCRC intended a clear differentiation between the concepts of 'evolving' versus 'developing' used elsewhere in the Convention. While the official Spanish translation refers to 'evolución de sus facultades' the official French translation of the UNCRC does not differentiate 'developing' from 'evolving', referring simply to 'développement de ses capacités'.

or that area of their lives, the more useful question would be “How do children’s competencies develop through appropriate levels of participation?” This way of posing the question draws attention to principles of guided participation and communities of learners. It highlights the ways children’s multiple competencies can be guided and supported, or ‘scaffolded’ by adults and more competent peers. (See also Smith, 2002; Woodhead, 2005a; Kirby and Gibbs 2006). According to this alternative view, supporting young children’s participatory rights places new responsibilities on the adult community to structure and organise early childhood settings, guide their learning and enable their positive social participation in ways consistent with their understanding, interest and ways of communicating, especially about the issues that most directly affect their lives. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is very clear on this point in General Comment 7, paragraph 17:

“Evolving capacities should be seen as a positive and enabling process, not an excuse for authoritarian practices that restrict children’s autonomy and self-expression and which have traditionally been justified by pointing to children’s relative immaturity and their need for socialization”.  
(UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005).

Finally, different views on young children’s evolving capacities are not necessarily in opposition. Lansdown (2005b) suggests three interpretations of the concept of evolving capacities: a ‘developmental’ concept - fulfilling children’s rights to the development of their optimum capacities; an ‘emancipatory’ concept – recognising and respecting the evolving capacities of children; and a ‘protective’ concept – protecting children from experiences beyond their capacities. This serves as a reminder that policies and practices intended to promote young children’s participatory rights must be planned within a comprehensive rights framework, balancing participation and protection rights and taking account of another basic UNCRC principle – that ‘the best interests of the child are a primary consideration’ (Article 3).

## **CONCLUSION**

My goal in this paper has been to provide an overview and commentary on some of the most influential perspectives informing early childhood theory, research and policy in a global context. As explained in the introduction, early childhood is a disparate field. Summarising in terms of four key perspectives inevitably risks oversimplification. Early childhood scholarship cannot be organised neatly under four headings. The perspectives outlined earlier are best seen as an analytic device that can help make sense of some major streams of thought, major lines of evidence and major areas of debate.

Any narrative is inevitably constrained by the concepts available, and the shared meanings they convey amongst the community of experts who are most interested in the particular phase of life known as early childhood. It is salutary to remember that ‘early childhood’ is itself a culturally constructed concept, and ask how theories, research and policies about early childhood connect to the young children they purport to describe, explain, protect and promote through laws and services etc. This paper has only dealt with a very narrow range of knowledge, beliefs and

controversies, namely those that are published, research based and/or the product of international policy analysis and debate. This is the international ‘received wisdom’ but I have tried to emphasize that this wisdom is not consensual, but marked by major theoretical controversies, diverse research findings and competing ethical and political positions. One major debate has been about universalising discourses of early childhood that regulate children’s lives, notably expressed through ‘developmental norms’. All too often these have been a reflection of minority western cultural practices as much as an expression of intrinsic qualities of psychosocial functioning during the early years of life. These norms have in turn been strongly shaped by goals and expectations for children’s ‘readiness’ for the school systems that dominate their childhood years. The near universal endorsement of children’s rights presents a new opportunity, for a more genuinely universal consensus around promoting children’s well being. Interpreting young children’s rights in practice is not without difficulties, especially the challenge to assert universal entitlements, combat discrimination, whilst at the same time respecting diversity.

Summarizing early childhood in terms of four perspectives is open to question in another sense too. Diversities, contradictions and debates in public discourses of early childhood convey only a fraction of the challenge, when set in context of (generally unarticulated) diversities in beliefs, ideas and experiences that shape individual children’s lives. Any close study of young children reveals the complexity of the worlds they inhabit, the very different pressures on parents, caregivers and others on whom their wellbeing depends. Starting points for policy development are very different where early childhood is dominated by extreme poverty, inequality or discrimination, or by ethnic struggle, civil or cross-national conflict, or by malnutrition, preventable diseases or HIV/Aids, by family or community breakdown and forced migration, or by weak or corrupt infrastructures of care and education, health and social support. Generalisations about young children’s lives and opportunities have limited value even within so-called stable, materially rich democracies. This is especially the case in rapidly changing, mobile, multi-cultural urban communities where economic inequalities and social exclusion remain prevalent, despite concerted policy initiatives aimed to combat negative impacts on children. Overarching concepts about promoting young children’s growth, learning, development, fulfilling potential etc., do not do justice to realities of their experience, any more than do unqualified assertions about, for example, promoting cultural identity or respecting rights. Young children are typically surrounded by multiple goals and expectations, including of their own early childhoods. They engage in numerous roles and identities: as dependants, playful companions, learners, carers, pupils, and so on. They actively engage with multiple relationships, activities and transitions during the course of their early childhood, as well as coping with separation, disruption, challenges and discontinuities. Asking about young children’s perspective on their own unique early childhood is arguably the most crucial starting point for policy and practice.

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