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## **“Early Childhood Development: a question of rights”**

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### **Abstract**

A right to development is one of the basic principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Several articles are specifically about protecting and promoting children's development, and other articles refer to developmental concepts of maturity and evolving capacity. Realizing young children’s right to development is informed by numerous sources: cultural understandings, beliefs and values as well as scientific knowledge and theories. I offer two contrasting ways of thinking about children’s rights to development. The first is summarised as three ‘Ns’, emphasising ‘normal’ development, children's ‘nature’ and their ‘needs’. The second is summarised as three ‘Cs’: recognising that development is ‘contextual’, ‘cultural’ and respecting children’s ‘competencies’. I explore the potential as well as the limitations of each approach, drawing attention to the tension between universalistic theories and the plurality of pathways through childhood, the respects in which development is a natural versus socio-cultural process, and the implications of recognizing children as active participants, with their own perspective on child development issues, while at the same time ensuring they are adequately guided and protected.

### **Introduction**

In the book ‘The Twelve who Survive’ eight lines of argument are offered for investing in early childhood development. These included the scientific case - that early childhood programmes have proven effectiveness; the economic case – that the long term benefits to society can outweigh the costs; as well as the social equity case – that early childhood is a powerful tool for intervention in social inequalities (Myers, 1992). Such arguments have long been employed by advocates working on behalf of young children. But at the head of Myers’ list was a less familiar line of thought for many of us at that time: ‘...that children have a right to live and to develop to their full potential’. A human rights case for investing in early childhood development is in many ways the most compelling of all.

It does not rest on the availability of scientific evidence, cost-benefit analyses, nor even a political context valuing social justice, even though each of these is important to realization of rights in practice. Instead, rights to survival, to health and to develop potential are each child's entitlement, most powerfully expressed within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989).

The UNCRC has become a powerful catalyst for action on behalf of young children, with ratification virtually universal, (191 countries; all except USA and Somalia). The Convention requires all children to be respected as persons in their own right, including the very youngest children. National governments ('States Parties') make regular reports on progress in meeting their obligations to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, providing a highly significant mechanism of international accountability. But the influence of the UNCRC is arguably much 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 promotion of well-being for millions of the world's children.

Dialogue around children's rights is important in another sense too. The 41 substantive articles that make up Part 1 of the UNCRC are detailed in their specification of rights, but they are necessarily at a level of generality that demands detailed interpretation and implementation in ways that are appropriate to the particular circumstances of different societies, communities and children, including the youngest children. In fact, the UNCRC makes little specific reference to young children, or any other age group within childhood. The UNCRC defines a child as "...every human being below the age of eighteen..." (Article 1). Consequently, young children are holders of all rights enshrined within the Convention. However, the importance of giving attention to the particular features of early childhood that impact on realization of young children's rights became clear during a day of general discussion on early childhood organized by UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Geneva, September 2004 (<http://www.ohchr.org>) As a follow-up to the recommendations from that meeting, a General Comment on 'Rights in Early Childhood' is in preparation, and planned for ratification by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child during autumn 2005.

This article is a contribution to that dialogue, focussing especially on the significance and interpretation of young children's 'right to development'. In the next section, I draw attention to a concept of development as one of the cornerstones of children's rights and

then ask about sources of belief, knowledge and understanding about developmental questions. In the main body of the article I explore the concept of development further by juxtaposing two competing perspectives, which I summarize as a debate between the three 'Ns' and the three 'Cs'.

## **A right to development**

The principle that children have 'a right to development' goes back at least as far as the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adopted by The League of Nations in 1924 and including the statement: "The child must be given the means needed for its normal development, both materially and spiritually". Thirty-five years later, in the context of a very different world order, the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) also included development amongst its ten principles: "The child shall enjoy special protection and shall be given opportunities to develop in a healthy and normal manner, and in conditions of freedom and dignity". A further thirty years international human rights work resulted in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, 1989, with its much more comprehensive coverage of protection, provision and participation rights. The UNCRC draws heavily on the principle that children have a right to development, notably in Article 6:

'States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child', (UNCRC, 1989, Article 6).

The responsibility of governments to promote children's optimal development is one of the cornerstones of the UNCRC. Several articles refer specifically to "the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development, for example Article 27 (on provision of an adequate standard of living) and Article 32 (on protecting children from harmful work). Many other articles can also be seen as about promoting development, for example, Article 24 (on rights to health), Articles 28 and 29 (on rights to education) Article 31 (on rights to play and recreation), as well as Articles 5 and 18 (on responsibilities of parents). For detailed commentary on UNCRC Articles see Hodgkin and Newell (1998).

The UN Committee emphasizes that rights to development are to be understood in a holistic way and that all rights are interrelated, interdependent and indivisible. To this end, the UN Committee has identified four articles which - when taken together - can be seen as offering general principles. These, briefly, are:

Article 6 on survival and development (as quoted above);

Article 2 ensures rights to every child without discrimination;

Article 3 sets out that the best interests of the child are a primary consideration;

Article 12 states that children have a right to express views in all matters that affect them.

The reason for highlighting these general principles is that - when taken together - they begin to point to some of the challenges in interpreting children's right to development. For example: can development be defined in a way that is universally relevant, or should we be thinking more in terms of pathways to development? How can a balance be achieved between respecting diversities in children's development, (in terms of expectations, treatment, styles of care and approaches to education) and realizing rights

without discrimination? How should ‘best interests’ be interpreted in the face of competing views – how far does protecting and promoting development provide a yardstick? How far can or should children be active in shaping the course of their development, expressing their views on their best interests, and what are the roles and responsibilities of adults with responsibilities for guiding children’s effective participation?

## **Science and social construction of development**

As we have seen, questions about children’s development are crucial to interpretation and implementation of the UNCRC. This is especially true for young children who are changing physically, mentally, socially and emotionally more dramatically than at any other phase in their lives. Defining development appears deceptively simple, yet as we have already seen, interpretation in the context of UNCRC requires balancing a set of quite complex considerations. Interpreting the UNCRC in practice also depends crucially on beliefs and knowledge about how development occurs (including ‘physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development’, what factors harm development and how development can best be fostered.

Those responsible for promoting development in young children are able to draw on a wide range of concepts, theories and discourses. A government’s priorities for children’s development are expressed through its laws and policies, and through the ways services are organized and monitored (OECD, 2001). Visions for children’s development are also expressed through curriculum frameworks for the early years, approaches to teaching, and expectations for professional training (Miller et al 2003). Parents’ day to day care and treatment of young children is mediated by cultural and personal beliefs about growth and learning and about how children should be treated (Goodnow and Collins, 1990). Finally, young children themselves soon acquire a sense of themselves as a young person, with their own interests and priorities for their development (Maybin and Woodhead, 2003).

Looking more closely at the question ‘what is development?’ soon reveals a variety of definitions of ‘healthy’ or ‘normal’ development, and sometimes strongly contested beliefs about what experiences and opportunities are good for young children, and which skills it is most important for them to learn. Many beliefs about development are informed by longstanding cultural discourses. For example, four competing ideas about young children have shaped beliefs about young children in Western societies over many centuries. These can be summarised as:

- The young child is naturally wild and unregulated – development is about socialising children to take their place within society (e.g. as in the writings of Thomas Hobbes 1588-1699)
- The young child is naturally innocent – development is fostered by protecting their innocence and giving them the freedom to play, learn and mature (e.g. as in the book *Emile*, by Jean Jacques Rousseau, 1712-1778)

- The young child is a ‘tabula rasa’, a blank slate – development is a critical time for laying down the foundations that will enable children to achieve their potential (e.g. as argued by John Locke, 1632-1704)
- The young child is shaped by nature and nurture – development is an interaction between potential and experience (e.g. linked to the philosophy of Emmanuel Kant, 1724-1804)

These debates live on. Indeed, beliefs about what makes for a healthy physical, intellectual and especially psychosocial development are highly variable between different societies and cultural groups and at different points in history (Woodhead 1996). A simple illustration would be the contrasting parents’ and teachers’ responses to the question "What are the most important skills for four year olds to learn?". This question was part of a cross-national study conducted by High/Scope for IEA. A sample of parents and teachers in the USA generally agreed that social and language skills were their highest priority for their young children, and gave much less emphasis to pre-academic skills. In a Nigerian sample, there was also agreement that language skills are important, but Nigerian parents and teachers identified pre-academic skills as the highest priority. In Hong Kong, the High/Scope study identified yet another pattern, including a discrepancy between teachers and parents. Once again, language skills featured highly, but whereas teachers gave low priority to pre-academic skills compared to self-sufficiency skills, amongst parents pre-academic skills were the highest priority (High/Scope personal communication, 1995).

Competing visions for early childhood development are reflected in diverse arrangements for child care in family and community settings, as well as diverse curricula and pedagogies for early childhood. It can be argued that such diversity should be valued and that it is consistent with interpreting children’s global right to development according to local priorities and circumstances, including respecting parents’ responsibilities for deciding what is in the best interests of children (UNCRC Article 5). But other ‘diversities’ are more strongly contested, especially where differential treatment of children can be seen as discrimination (under UNCRC Article 2), notably in relation to gender, ethnicity or disability. The UNCRC also sets clear boundaries on the range of approaches to children’s development that is consistent with children’s right to respect and protection from harm. Use of physical discipline offers a clear example. UNCRC Article 19 obliges States parties to take all appropriate measures ‘to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse...’. Corporal punishment was outlawed in Sweden more than a quarter of a century ago, yet is still tolerated in many societies (see Phillips and Alderson, 2003). At the time of writing (spring 2005), this particular debate was renewed in USA following remarks made by an Oscar winning film actor’s acceptance speech apparently endorsing his grandmother’s approach to his development: ‘when I would act the fool, she would whip me’ (reported by ExchangeEveryDay, 2005, 1203/4).

These debates are, of course, carried out against a background of research activity designed to answer fundamental questions about child development. Scientific knowledge about children’s development offers the most promising starting point for interpreting articles of the UNCRC, setting universal standards, respecting diversity and assessing children’s best interests. Child development research offers a detailed account of complex biological and psycho-social dimensions of early childhood, the sensitivity of the child’s growing individuality to the quality of environmental support, especially the significance of early attachments, sensitive care, guided exploration and communication (Schaffer, 1996). Journals and textbooks of Child Development have a great deal to offer, but child development knowledge should arguably always carry a health warning! It is now widely accepted that applying scientific method to child development issues is not a straightforward technical process. Researchers contribute to the construction of cultural images of childhood through the process of scientific research, through the questions asked, settings and samples studied, methods used, interpretations offered, and especially through the theories offered (Kessen, 1979; Bradley, 1989; Boyden, 1990; Burman, 1994, 1996; Morss, 1996; Hwang et al., 1996; Woodhead, 1999a). While developmental psychology has been the dominant framework for understanding children’s development, social constructionist critiques of conventional theorising have become increasingly influential, and have in turn contributed to alternative frameworks for understanding early childhood, notably the new social studies of childhood, or Childhood Studies, with its emphasis on childhood as a social and cultural construction, understanding children’s worlds and recognising children’s agency, which resonates with respect for children’s rights. (Some recent examples include Mayall, 2002; Woodhead et al, 2003; James and James, 2004; Prout, 2005). These shifting views on study of childhood are not just of academic interest. They have implications for early childhood practice, most clearly illustrated through debates surrounding what counts as quality in early years education and care (e.g. Dahlberg et al, 1999; Woodhead, 1996; 1998) and how models of the child as learner impact on pedagogic practice (e.g. MacNaughton, 2003).

In short, implementation of a rights based approach to early childhood requires critical examination of alternative child development paradigms for their appropriateness to the new status of young children within the global contexts of the 21st century. In the rest of this article, I offer two contrasting ways of thinking about children’s rights to development. The first I call the three ‘Ns’. They involve thinking of young children in terms of what is 'Normal' and 'Natural' as well as about their 'Needs'. A second way of thinking about children’s development I call the three ‘Cs’. It is about interpreting young children’s rights to development in ways that are 'Contextual', 'Cultural' and based on respect for their 'Competencies'. For the purposes of debate, the three Ns and 3 Cs can be posed as a set of binaries, as in Table 1.

**Table 1: An early child development debate**

Major theme	‘Ns’	‘Cs’
Universality and diversity	Normal childhood	Contexts for childhood
Influences on development	Natural processes	Cultural processes
Status of the child	Needs of children	Competencies of children

Summarising diverse views on early childhood into 3Ns and 3Cs is of course a gross oversimplification. They are a convenient heading to summarize some major differences in conceptualisation of children's development and highlight dilemmas for those responsible for promoting their best interests. Neither the 'Ns' nor the 'Cs' offer a complete picture, nor are they necessarily in opposition, as will become clear, if we look at each in turn.

## **Normal childhoods or childhoods in a global context?**

Identifying normal patterns of development - as well as the extent and causes of variations - has been a major goal of developmental research. The field is known as Child Development with good reason. The singular 'child' has been the starting point and a major goal has been to identify universal features of growth and change, for example through detailed accounts of stages of physical, mental, social and moral development associated with Piaget, Kohlberg, Erikson and other leading theorists. While identifying universal features of development is an attractive starting point for realizing rights for all children, this approach also has serious limitations. Despite claims to universality, developmental accounts are often very closely tied to cultural assumptions about the developing person, and reflect the context and goals for children's transition from dependency to autonomy within the economically rich, individualistic, Western societies that originate most research. The same applies to research on the role of parents in supporting development, where all too often research carried out in laboratory playroom settings, often with middle class mothers and children, has been the basis for universal generalisations. Many textbook accounts of early child development have given the impression that mother is the only significant care giver; that she engages in reciprocal, playful interactions with her infant; and that she frames or scaffolds her child's learning within an environment well resourced with basic child care equipment, toys and books etc. These accounts have also been translated into tools for assessing the quality of environments for child development, notably, Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, ECERS (Harms and Clifford, 1980). A small number of cross-cultural studies went some way to offering an antidote to the de-contextualisation, idealisation normalisation of particular child development practices (Segall et al 1990). A classic, twelve country study concluded that the care giving style observed in the USA was (in global terms) abnormal, in terms of the extent of mothers' sociability with their children, and in the number of playful interactions in which children were treated as equals (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 loss of parents and/or siblings becoming a 'normal' feature of child development for millions of the world's young children.

Another very striking example concerns the neglect of children's contributions to economic activity within accounts of normal child development, (Woodhead, 2002). At least 220 million children, or 20% of all children under the age of 15 are working as their primary occupation. Many millions more combine work with attending school part time. These estimates do not include the domestic help, family-based agricultural work and casual work carried out by the majority of children, including very young children throughout the world. But these global contexts for child development are almost entirely neglected. Instead textbook authors typically construct an image of childhood as a period of life spent almost entirely in the contexts of family, preschool and school, where the emphasis is on care, play, learning and teaching, at least until adolescence, after which self-esteem and social relationships within peer groups assume importance. Dominant expectations of what is 'normal' child development can be seen as reflecting features of a very particular developmental niche (Super and Harkness, 1986), which has increasingly been offered as a standard for all. Since the eighteenth century, Western childhoods were progressively constructed as a period of extended economic dependency and protected innocence, a period of rapid learning enhanced through universal schooling, which is largely separated off from economic and community life (James and Prout, 1990). Arguably, this has always been an idealised construction. It never fully acknowledged the diverse and unequal realities of children's lives even within Western societies, nor the complex processes of economic and social change (Cunningham, 2003).

The neglect of work in children's development also applies to young children. Yet a detailed study of children in southern Bolivia found even the youngest children were expected to contribute to household chores, animal care and agriculture. By three or four years old, children were already fetching water, collecting firewood, going on errands, feeding ducks and chickens, scaring birds from crops, picking peas and beans, peeling maize stalks and harvesting peaches. As children got older they progressed onto more complex, physically demanding and responsible tasks:

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

(Punch 2001, p.818)

From a children's rights perspective, working is more often viewed as a potential threat to children's well being than as a core context for development, which has been taken over by the nursery school, day care centre and kindergarten for the youngest children. Child work is frequently labelled 'child labour' with connotations of exploitation and harm. This is entirely justified for those extreme, hazardous situations that rightly make media headlines – intolerable forms of child work according to ILO Convention 182 (Woodhead, 2005). But this reaction is less obviously appropriate to the majority of more moderate child work situations, throughout the world, especially where these do not interfere with children's rights to education. From his research amongst the Abaluyia of Kenya, Weisner (1989) noted that parents consider that working is a valuable element in children's socialisation, preparing children for their adult roles and integrating them into

a family and community network that places high value on interdependence and interconnectedness (see also Invernizzi, 2003).

Another problem is that child work is seen as something that 'other people's children' have to do. The dominant construction of childhood as work-free means that contributions of children in Western societies are relabelled as 'play' or 'learning' or 'taking responsibility'. Yet even the youngest children can be said to make their own contribution, even in the wealthiest countries, as noted in a study of US toddlers helping their mothers carry-out domestic chores:

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

In summary, while universal accounts of normal development offer a powerful basis for realizing rights in early childhood, they also have limitations. Firstly, they tend to overlook the diversities in children's experiences, including differences in the ways children learn, play and communicate, develop personal identity and social understanding, as diversities in the ways they are treated according to circumstances and cultural goals for their development. Secondly, any particular account of young children's development is always partial, and can never encompass the varieties of childhood. Thirdly, specific cultural patterns of early development and care risk being normalised and universalised, especially when studies of development are concentrated mainly on childhoods within societies able to sustain the costs of research. Finally, there is a practical implication. Implementing young children's right to development in context-appropriate ways requires looking beyond dominant, universalised perceptions of normality. We need to recognise a wide range of pathways through early development that are in their own terms consistent with promoting children's well-being (Woodhead, 1996). In short, implementing the UNCRC establishes general principles for children's development, but these are not necessarily best achieved within a standardised image of normal development. Realizing children's rights also requires 'bottom-up' action which engages with the realities of children's lives in context, and accommodates the roles of multiple stakeholders with responsibilities for young children.

## **Child development as natural or cultural?**

I turn now to the second pair of contrasting concepts – development as natural versus development as cultural. Ideas about 'normal' development have been closely linked to beliefs that development is a largely individual process, driven by 'natural' processes of maturation. In the same way the importance of 'context' goes hand in hand with recognising that children's development is a social and a 'cultural' process.

Respecting young children's nature has been one of the ground rules for working with young children. It has roots in Rousseau's philosophical writing and found clear expression in Froebel's vision for kindergarten education, based on natural stages of development:

‘The child...should know no other endeavour but to be at every stage of development wholly what this stage calls for. Then will each successive stage spring like a new shoot from a healthy bud; and, at each successive stage, he will with the same endeavour again accomplish the requirements of this stage...’  
(Froebel, 1885)

Elaboration of these stages and their implications for early years care and education became one of the major goals for developmental research during the twentieth century, finding strongest expression in Jean Piaget’s account of the child’s progress through sensori-motor, pre-operational, concrete-operational, and formal operational stages (Donaldson 1978). Piaget’s developmental stage model was coupled with a vision of individual children’s exploratory play as the process through which they construct an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the world. These theories became the underpinning rationale for child-centred curricula and play based pedagogy as well as being reflected in guidelines on Developmentally Appropriate Practice issued by the US National Association for the Education of Young Children, (Mallory and New, 1994).

Piaget’s paradigm of universal stages in cognitive development offers a persuasive framework for interpreting children’s right to development which - as already noted - strongly resonates with Western images of and goals for young children. But the scientific evidence for the theory is much less robust than is generally assumed (Donaldson 1978). Since the 1970s, increasing numbers of developmental psychologists turned to a different theoretical framework which seems to account much more adequately for the social and cultural dimensions of the developmental process, informed by the work of Lev Vygotsky and his followers. On this view, child 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’. Every child is born into a social/cultural/historical context. Their development is governed by processes of physical and neurological maturation, which are suggestive in general terms about what is normal and desirable for young children, as well as ways in which their well-being can be harmed (e.g. Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). But it would be misleading to conclude that any single pattern of nurturance, care and education is an essential pre-requisites for healthy development.

Early childhood settings and practices are culturally constructed, the product of generations of human activity and creativity, mediated by complex belief systems, including about the ‘proper’ way for children to develop. There is nothing fundamentally natural about modern environments for child care, either at home or with in a preschool setting. There is nothing natural about the institution that dominates so much of children’s lives - the school. The most significant features of any child’s environment are the humans with whom they establish close relationships. These individuals (usually family) are themselves cultural beings. They are the product of cultural history and circumstance, which structures their lives and gives meaning and direction to the experiences of their offspring, as they introduce them to cultural practices, and scaffold their acquisition of skills and ways of communicating. The ways parents care for their children are shaped in

part by their cultural beliefs (or ethno-theories) about what is appropriate and desirable, in terms both of the goals of child development and the means to achieve those goals.

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

To date Barbara Rogoff has perhaps gone furthest in elaborating a socio-cultural model with direct applicability to early childhood education (Rogoff, 1990). 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. In one sequence of Rogoff's research video, there is a fine illustration of these mothers' different orientation to communication. In the US context, the dominance of verbal communication is taken for granted. But when a Guatemalan mother wishes her toddler to hand over a toy, she says not a word, but merely touches the toddler's elbow, a simple direct communicative device whose symbolic meaning is already well-understood by the child. 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.

Acceptance of this view - that children's behaviour, thinking, social relationships and adaptation, are culturally as much as biologically constituted - has profound implications for the way children's right to development is understood. 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. Unlike frameworks that emphasise normal and natural 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 are culturally constructed and embedded in the particularities of child development contexts. In due course, human societies may come to share beliefs about what is 'normal' and 'natural' for young children. But universal consensus would not make these beliefs, or the arrangements for their implementation, any less cultural. The implication of accepting that child development has to be understood as a cultural process is that benchmarks are not intrinsic, fixed and prescribed. They are extrinsic, historically-specific and negotiable within a framework of promoting young children's rights.

## **Needs or competencies?**

I now turn to the third pairing of ideas about development, in which children's 'needs' are contrasted with their 'competencies'. Making a claim for children (or any other minority, low status group - the poor, the disabled, etc) in terms of 'meeting needs' emphasizes their dependencies. While children's right to protection from neglect, ill-treatment and abuse is an important principle within the UNCRC, the underlying image of the needy child has been criticised, for its neglect of children's agency. Their innocence and vulnerability is emphasised whilst the power of the adult provider in defining as well as meeting those needs is de-emphasised (Woodhead 1990/97). Respecting children's competencies has been proposed as a more positive image of the young child as a social actor, engaged with their social environment from the beginning of life. Moss et al (2000) make a similar contrast, comparing a discourse of the 'child in need' within British policies on early childhood with a discourse of 'the rich child' associated with early childhood services in Reggio Emilia, inspired by the work of Loris Malaguzzi, who wrote: "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

While an image of the child in need can be linked to protection rights, an image of the competent child is more consistent with participatory rights. One of the four UNCRC general principles referred to at the outset is expressed in Article 12, as follows:

"States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child"  
(UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Article 12)

Article 12 sets one of the strongest challenges for those responsible for early childhood development, and is linked to Articles 13,14,15 and 16 on freedom of expression, thought, conscience and religion and the right to privacy and freedom of association, according to children's evolving capacity. These articles of the UNCRC demand a reappraisal of children's role in shaping their development, influencing those with

responsibilities for their care and education and being listened to in all matters that affect them. It strikes at the heart of conventional authority relationships between children and the adults who regulate their lives, and offers the promise of being a major catalyst for social change towards a more respectful view of children's status as young citizens. Article 12 reminds us that children have their own perspective on the issues that concern parents, teachers, psychologists and child rights' workers. In their own way, even the youngest children are trying to understand about their development, and their own place within it, as they interpret the behaviour, demands and expectations of adults and other children, and as they learn a repertoire of ways of acting and reacting. To put it bluntly, respect for children's rights to participation demands that children be viewed not just as 'subjects of study and concern', but also as 'subjects with concerns' (Prout 2000). Article 12 demands that children's views be respected, not as evidence of their relative competence, but as evidence of their unique experiences of the world they inhabit.

During the past decade, numerous initiatives have translated participatory principles into practice, with every age group from babies through to late teenagers (e.g. Clark and Moss, 2001; Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003; Davie and Galloway 1996; Davie, Upton and Varma 1996; Johnson et al, 1998; Hart, 1992, 1997; Alderson 1995; 2000; Lansdown, 2001; Kirby and Woodhead, 2003). Many of these initiatives have been about effective consultation with children, and increasing opportunities for contributing meaningfully to decision making about issues that affect them. Some participatory initiatives are at risk of being tokenistic. They are founded on conventional power relationships and are 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. This view is illustrated by movements of working children, advocating for respect of their rights (e.g. reviewed by Black, 2004). It is also expressed in the shift from carrying out research on children or with children, to research being carried out by children, as in the Open University's recently established Children's Research Centre <<http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk>> (Kellett et al, 2004).

But respecting children's competence is not an alternative to protecting their vulnerability, 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's gradually developing competence. It is closely linked to another developmental concept within the UNCRC – 'evolving capacity'. For example, Article 6 (on parental responsibilities) refers to respect for the responsibilities and duties of parents and others to provide '...in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance'. 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...'

This balance between respecting the competent child and acknowledge children's need for guidance in the realization of their rights is crucial to the practical implementation of participatory principles. How the balance is struck in turn depends on which theories about developing competence are given strongest weight. In earlier sections of this paper, I contrasted two very different views of development. One view, associated with developmental stage theories, might argue as follows:

“Article 12 demands that the views of the child be given due weight in accordance with their ‘age and maturity’. Stage theories of intellectual development can be used to predict when children have sufficient capacities for understanding, such that their views should be listened to and taken seriously. Stage theories can also guide judgements about when children's capacities have evolved sufficiently that they no longer require so much direction and guidance from parents. According to this line of thought, the key question would be: “At what stage does the child become competent to participate?” The role of adults would be to monitor children's growing capacities and make judgements about whether they are ready to participate”.

An alternative way to think about children's capacities to participate in relation to age and maturity would be more closely associated with Vygotskian socio-cultural theory, and might argue as follows:

“The stage theorists are asking the wrong question! Respecting children's growing competence isn't about measuring the progress of their development, like you might measure the height of a growing tree in order to decide when it should be felled. The more useful question is “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 competence can be guided and supported, or ‘scaffolded’ by adults and more competent peers in ways that are sensitive to their ‘zone of proximal development’”.

Different views on maturity, evolving capacities and developing competencies, are not exhaustive, nor necessarily in opposition. Lansdown (2005) 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 general UNCRC principle – that ‘the best interests of the child are a primary consideration’ (Article 3).

Decisions about how best to respect and support young children's expressions of competence as rights bearing citizens places new responsibilities on the adult community to structure children's environments, guide their learning and enable their social

participation in ways consistent with their understanding, interest and ways of communicating, especially about the issues that most directly affect their lives. (For further discussion of theoretical perspectives that support participatory rights, see Smith, 2002).

## **Conclusion**

This discussion began by asking about the meanings attaching to the concept of development, when viewed as one of children's fundamental rights. I have offered two contrasting paradigms for understanding development, summarised as 3 Ns versus 3 Cs. Polarising these paradigms is of course an oversimplification designed to draw attention to the diversity of ways that a 'right to development' can be interpreted in practice. I have juxtaposed a normative, maturational, stage based model of development against a socio-cultural perspective on development which emphasizes the ways context shapes development. While it is important to draw on evidence of universal features of development, risks attach to their generalization, especially to societies and settings far removed from where research originates. My own view is that a combination of social constructionist and socio-cultural perspectives offers the most promising ways forward. Social constructionism draws attention to the ways child development knowledge is generated and applied and offers a critical framework for evaluating research and theory, which does not necessarily undermine the power of scientific knowledge to inform policy and practice. Socio-cultural approaches to development are more consistent with the global goals and application of the UNCRC. This is partly because of need to account for diversities in the way early development is understood and experienced. But it is especially because of the recognition of young children as social actors, whose development is facilitated through social relationships, and active participation under the guidance of sensitive and listening adults.

Recognising the interdependencies between children and adults, sets a further challenge. Realizing children's rights requires close attention, not only to children but also to the concept and status of 'the adults' children are destined to become. Conventional images of childhood view individual, adult maturity as a developmental endpoint; of having achieved independence, autonomy, competence etc. Against this standard, children are marked off as dependent, needy and incompetent. Promotion of children's participatory rights would be better served by recognising that the process of 'growing-up' is relative not absolute. Adults can also be dependent, albeit in more subtle and sophisticated ways, surrounded by elaborate systems of biological, social, emotional and informational support. These patterns of interdependency are prerequisites for 'mature' psychological functioning and social adjustment, enabling adults (most of the time) to convey the impression of autonomy that Western societies have so much valued as a 'developed status'. Arguably, a lifespan perspective (addressing the shifting patterns of participation and dependency from birth to old age) is a more appropriate basis for addressing these issues (Hockey and James 1993; Greene 1998). In short, implementing the Convention doesn't just alter the status of children. It also alters the status of adults. Respecting the rights of young children changes the way we think about ourselves!

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