



Images of the child and the unruly practice

Elly Singer

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EDITORIAL

Images of the child and the unruly practice

A little girl tugs at the tablecloth

She's been in this world for over a year,
and in this world not everything's been examined
and taken in hand.

The subject of today's investigation
is things that don't move themselves.

They need to be helped along,
shoved, shifted,
taken from their pace and relocated.

They don't all want to go, e.g., the bookshelf,
the cupboard, the unyielding walls, the table.

But the tablecloth on the stubborn table
– when well-seized by its hems –
manifests a willingness to travel.

And the glasses, plates,
creamer, spoons, bowl,
are fairly shaking with desire.

It's fascinating,
what form of motion will they take,
once they're trembling on the brink:
will they roam across the ceiling?
fly around the lamp?
hop onto the windowsill and from there to a tree?

Mr. Newton still has no say in this.
Let him look down from the heavens and wave his hands.

This experiment must be completed.
And it will.

(Wisława Szymborska 2006, "A Little Girl Tugs at the Tablecloth" from *MONOLOGUE OF A DOG* by Wisława Szymborska. Copyright © 2002 by Wisława Szymborska. Translation copyright © 2006 by Harcourt, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.)

In this poem the Polish Nobel laureate, Wisława Szymborska, vividly pictures the active learning child that most authors and readers of *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal (EECERJ)* will recognize as basic in their work on early childhood education and care. But *EECERJ* also includes cultural

differences in the images of the child (Pramling Samuelsson 2010). As Lee (2010, 271) stated:

By crossing geographical, cultural, or disciplinary borders, we will be better able to reflect upon and learn more deeply about ourselves, and why we do what we do, through the expanded and diversified perspectives of why others do what they do.

Differences about how to respond to children is an everyday experience in early childhood education. The poem about the little girl who tugged at the tablecloth can illustrate this. Confronted with this incidence – or was it accident – some teachers or parents will feel ashamed because the child could have hurt herself. Others will have difficulty suppressing their anger because of the ruined tableware. Some will laugh and see humor in the surprise of the little investigator. Maybe some adults will be struck by the wonder of the innate drive to learn about the young child, and even look for possibilities to enrich the educational value of this experiment with gravity. Who is right and who is wrong? And why?

The history of early childhood education and care shows that studying young children is like studying the open issues of society. The aims and curricula of daycare centers, preschools, and playgroups are deeply related to social policy issues and the struggle for the rights of women, disadvantaged social groups, and young children (Singer 1992). Just think of the ongoing debates about daycare for infants and working mothers. Since the Enlightenment infants have been the ultimate mirror of the hopes and fears within Western culture. Pedagogical reformers believed they could change the world by educating the young. Infants and toddlers were not yet spoiled by their environment and were open to learning the ‘right’ virtues, knowledge, and skills. In the rapidly changing urban and industrialized society of the nineteenth and twentieth century, adults were needed who were free of the traditional rural and hierarchical ways of living.

Recent studies of brain development confirm what enlightened pedagogues have claimed of the power of the first impressions since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the first years of life children develop basic capacities – brain networks – that influence later development and success at school and work. But the ideas about what and how children should learn during the first years of life were and are violently debated in the course of history. For instance, Locke, at the end of the seventeenth century, felt earliest habits to be of crucial importance.

Pray remember, children are not taught by rules, which will be always slipping out of their memories. What you think necessary for them to do, settle in them by an indispensable practice, as often as the occasion returns; and, if it be possible, make occasions. (Locke 1996/1693, 40)

Locke advised us to use children’s natural tendency to imitation, curiosity, and play. And never try to combat the sort of naughty behavior that will, in time, disappear anyway. But he was against spoiling children. Young children should accept their parents’ authority completely. Nowadays young children’s creativity and active learning are emphasized, not only by pedagogues, but also by politicians. For instance, the European Commission not only emphasizes:

...the traditional subjects such as mother tongue, literacy, numeracy and science, but other ‘skills’ such as learning to learn, social and civic competence, initiative taking, entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and self expression. (Cohen 2010, 1)

This plea for the active learning child reflects new scientific insights on child development as well as the demands related to our twenty-first century economic and social circumstances. In a globalized, rapidly developing technological society that highly values enterprising individuals, children have to learn to take initiatives, to verbalize, and imagine possible futures, to be flexible and behave with self-discipline and to be creative in expressing personal emotions. They have to stand up for themselves and to be morally involved with their family, peer groups, and broader social issues. Related notions, such as the whole child, children's voices, democratic participation, responsibility, active learner, diversity and uniqueness, equity and equality, are prominent in many articles published in *EECERJ*.

Since the Enlightenment pedagogues had a different attitude towards children and parents from the upper or middle classes as opposed to the lower social classes. Families of the lower social classes: migrants from rural areas, with little formal education and different cultural backgrounds, were seen as the ones who lacked behind social development and had to be taught how to behave in their new urban environment. Pedagogues and teachers tended to be more restrictive and authoritarian with these families than with middle or upper class families. Programs for migrant families, families at risk, or disadvantaged families must often teach parents and children the right skills and knowledge and social support to alleviate the hardships of life because of blatant economic inequalities. In the nineteenth century, for instance, women, inspired by Froebel, set up charitable kindergartens for streams of newcomers from rural areas in the slums of industrial cities. Community work and the education of mothers were an integral part of the work of the Froebel kindergartens. In the second half of the twentieth century, there was Head Start and twenty-first century programs to empower hard to reach parents and children.

The present issue of *EECERJ* continues this tradition of focusing on young children's potential – the active learning child – and of being aware of the diversity of the images of the child and the cultural contexts in which children grow up.

The first two articles address examples of programs to support families, including those that are traditionally hard to reach, in the UK and Australia (Needham and Jackson) and New Zealand (Clarkin-Phillips and Carr). These programs are based on recent research evidence that supporting and nurturing parents helps to promote positive outcomes for children. The leaders of these programs are well aware of the critique that parents are often silenced, even in programs in which a diversity of family cultures is acknowledged (Vandenbroeck, 2009). They listen to the parents' voices by organizing a flexible supply of activities allied to toddler and playgroups. The children can play and the parents can be themselves and talk about common experiences of parenting; videos and documentation of the children at the play group and at home are shared by parents and teachers. In cooperation with other agencies, services can be offered such as wellness checks for children on site, stopping smoking, and breast cancer screening. These programs provide a theoretical underpinning and practical examples of how tensions between parents' demands and the professional's ideas about what young children need can be solved. Common ground is found in the need of parents and children to socialize and make friends, and their longing for warm parent-child relationships.

The article by Hoogdalem et al. gives a Dutch example of tension between the demands of parents and the needs of young children. Parents need flexible care for one, two, or three days a week because most mothers work part-time. This results in unstable groups, and unstable groups have a negative impact on children's chances

to make friends. Friendship is very important for children. Besides that, friendship among young children is associated with more pro-social behavior such as sharing and helping, taking initiatives towards one another, imitation, and more complex levels of play. This article describes a study of factors that increase or diminish chances of becoming friends. Too much adult-centeredness in early childhood education may blind parents and teachers to these factors.

In the next three articles the concepts of the child that determine the content of curricula are discussed, as are the difficulties of teachers to put these concepts into practice. Turunen and Määttä analyze Finnish pre-school curricula from the early pioneering years to the present (1972–2000). In the curricula of the 1970s and 1980s, childhood was concerned with ‘human becoming’; state and pre-school education was directed by the adult, and there was little or no room for children’s wishes and interests. In 1996, the child began to be seen from a child-centered point of view. The role of the child was to use his/her potential and the adult’s role was to aid the child’s development. In the 2000 curriculum, both concepts of childhood are apparent; the child is still seen as a valuable player, however, the teacher is again given the active role of teaching and guiding. The 2000 curriculum affirms Vygotsky’s idea that all higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals. Korkeamäki and Dreher discuss their study of the implications in the latest Finnish curricula for teachers. The curricula for young children and preschoolers only describe broad principles. Using their professional knowledge, teachers are expected to make decisions rooted in these principles and individualized to fit their specific contexts. A detailed curriculum that maps out exactly what activities and materials teachers are to use would violate the spirit of Finnish curricula. Their study shows that the appeal to their professionalism is very motivating for teachers. It also shows that this curricular approach is very demanding, and that aspects of the core principles are not fully understood by teachers. Therefore, they plea for continued in-service training. Extensive modeling and coaching allows teachers to move from a theoretical understanding to an understanding of how to apply theoretical principles in practice. The discrepancy between theory and practice is also mentioned in the article by Sakellariou and Rentzou about the beliefs and intentions of pre-service kindergarten teachers in Greece and Cyprus. Pre-service teachers are in favor of the teacher’s role as enhancer of children’s learning. But pre-school teachers were observed to interact verbally with children mainly to instruct and control their behavior.

The last three articles go deeper into the teacher’s role in young children’s learning and are focused on mathematics in early childhood classrooms. Again we encounter discussions about traditional direct instruction, unguided discovery learning, and guided discovery learning. Benz shows in her article that in Germany discovery learning and the constructive view of learning is generally accepted by kindergarten teachers. But her study also shows that the kindergarten teachers are more focused on mathematical content than on learning to learn (process) and the application of mathematics to solve problems in daily life (application). The Finnish study by Kaartinen and Kumpulainen and the French study by Matalliotaki contain experiments of how teachers can enrich young children’s mathematical learning. Matalliotaki shows that informal experiences of sharing can plausibly contribute to the formation of mental models or schemes of action to solve division problems (gathering pairs of objects). But with graphical representation offered by the teacher, they could also verbalize the correct mathematical strategy. Thus, scaffolded by the teacher, they were able to function at a higher level. Kaartinen and Kumpulainen report on a study of the role

of collective negotiation among the children to do and learn mathematics in the group, inspired by a sociocultural, theoretical perspective. The analyses of videos made clear that two- to four-year-olds are eager to participate in mathematical practices. However, individual interests of the children, while valued by this pedagogical approach, also raised social conflicts among them. The role of the teacher in guiding the social and mathematical problem solving is crucial and not easy.

All the articles of this *EECERJ* issue relate to our ideals and the unruly practice of teaching and guiding young children and supporting their parents. To return to the poem about the little girl who tugged at the tablecloth, probably many of us will respond with anxiety that the girl has hurt herself; and some will suppress their anger because of the beloved tableware. But the articles in this issue make clear that only very few will have as their primary response: yes, it is an opportunity for the child to learn math and gravity! Early childhood education and care is a living science. Studies are not only focused on analyzing mechanisms and patterns in learning and teaching in specific historical circumstances, there is always the awareness that values, educational goals, and images of the child color our findings. We – young children, parents, teachers and researchers – are all part of history.

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Elly Singer
University of Amsterdam and University of Utrecht