LEARNING THEORIES FOR EARLY YEARS PRACTICE

SEAN MACBLAIN

3RD EDITION

Sage

1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks
California 91320

Unit No 323-333, Third Floor, F-Block
International Trade Tower
Nehru Place, New Delhi 110 019

8 Marina View Suite 43-053
Asia Square Tower 1
Singapore 049483

Editor: Delayna Spencer
Editorial assistant: Harry Dixon
Production editor: Rabia Barkatulla
Copyeditor: Mary Dalton
Proofreader: Salia Nessa
Indexer: Michael Allerton
Marketing manager: Lorna Patkai
Cover design: Bhairvi Vyas
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in the UK

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024938696

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5296-8055-3
ISBN 978-1-5296-8054-6 (pbk)

DEDICATION

For Jude, Jack and Tessa

CONTENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sean MacBlain is a distinguished author and academic whose publications include: MacBlain, *Children's Learning in Early Childhood* (Sage, 2021); MacBlain, *Child Development for Teachers* (Sage, 2020); MacBlain, Dunn and Luke, *Contemporary Childhood* (Sage, 2017); Gray and MacBlain, *Learning Theories in Childhood* (Sage, 2015); MacBlain, Long and Dunn, *Dyslexia, Literacy and Inclusion: Child-centred Perspectives* (Sage, 2015); MacBlain, *How Children Learn* (Sage, 2014). Sean's publications are used by students, academics and practitioners worldwide and have been widely translated, including into Chinese and Vietnamese. Sean was previously a senior academic at the University of St Mark & St John, Plymouth, where he held the positions of Research Lead for the Centre for Education and Applied Research, Research Lead for the Centre for Professional and Educational Research, Research Coordinator for the School of Education and Deputy Chair of the Ethics Committee. Sean also worked previously as a Senior Lecturer in Education and Developmental Psychology at Stranmillis University College, Queen's University Belfast. In addition to this, Sean has worked as a teacher in primary and post-primary schools, as a lecturer in Further Education, as an educational psychologist, and as a specialist tutor in dyslexia at Millfield independent school. Sean is married to Angela and lives in both Somerset and Devon, England.

FOREWORD

'All this theoretical stuff is such a waste of time – when will I ever use it in practice?'. This is a comment I often hear from Undergraduate students who appear only interested in the everyday practices of the classroom context and fail to appreciate what this book (entitled *Learning Theories for Early Years Practice*) is all about, i.e. we need to look at notable, both past and present, theorists to help us unravel and deconstruct our own understandings of what best practice in the early years entails. An ability to reflect on appropriate theories is essential to equip students to become competent professionals who can engage with complex early years issues (McMillan, 2009) and failing to do so, can result in narrow and shallow perceptions of what constitutes high quality practice in the early years of education, which Walsh (2017) suggests will do little to address the real learning needs and interests of the young child.

As the opening chapter of this book aptly reminds us, 'there can be few jobs that can be as rewarding as working in an early years setting' where 'each day is filled with the wonder of seeing young minds develop and enjoying the challenges of applying one's own knowledge, abilities and skills to finding new and creative ways of facilitating and extending children's thinking and learning'. Such a description of early years practice certainly confirms why 'Being a practitioner in an early years setting is surely one of the most rewarding and satisfying jobs', as the author of *Learning Theories for Early Years Practice* clearly articulates in the final sentence of the book. Yet with such a mental image often comes a misapprehension that no particular skills, understanding or professional knowledge may be needed on the part of the early years teacher to fulfil the requirements of such a role, and on occasions can result in a disparaging attitude towards early years professionalism (McMillan, 2017). It is for this reason that the book in question is so timely. The author makes no excuse for suggesting that working in the early years can be an extremely worthwhile, satisfying experience but he makes it perfectly clear that it is highly complex also, and therefore a rich theoretical understanding of the why and the how is imperative to navigate the everyday challenges of this chosen career, reinforcing the need for a 'professional not an amateur' (McMillan, 2017, p. 204). Tapping into a book which provides students and existing early years practitioners with a plethora of theories, both traditional and modern, alongside a clear application to everyday practice, has not been easy to find on our library shelves and I have no difficulty in saying that *Learning Theories for Early Years Practice* definitely fills this gap.

For some reason, students tend to associate theories with something that happened a long time ago and therefore their relevance to everyday practice can be misunderstood. The author of this book has been particularly clever in identifying modern theorists such as Guy Claxton, Carol Dweck, Barbara Rogoff and Nel Nodding's, (many of whom are still alive today) alongside classical thinkers such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel to name but a few. It is this informed interplay between old and new, past and present, traditional and progressivism that makes Learning Theories for Early Years Practice a must read for early years students and practising educators. Unravelling such opposing perspectives extends the reader's knowledge and understanding of how theory and practice are inextricably linked and reciprocally inform each other as Spouse (2001) stated:

> 'Without theory, it is hard to talk about practice and without practice, a theory has no meaning' (p. 519)

What makes this book stand out is the detailed and rich text which draws together an array of familiar and not so familiar theories on early years education, as well as the clear and coherent structure. The complementary features making the text appropriate for a student audience. The book is divided into three parts, namely 'Early Influences', 'Modern Influences' and 'Challenges for Theorists in a Changing World'. Parts 1 and 2 follow an identical structure where the reader is first introduced to a background synopsis on the theorist and then an attempt is made to help the reader understand the theory more fully. The reader then moves on to address what the theory really looks like in practice, drawing on examples from the early years context. Strengths and weaknesses of the theories

are then considered and links to other theories are highlighted. Complementary features include photographs, selected activities, often online, points for discussion, critical questions, case studies and recommended readings, including video links, making the text a truly interactive experience. In this way, the book is not simply a narrative of theoretical content, but also ensures that theories relevant to early years education are made real for practice in the 21st century.

It is the final section of the book, 'Challenges for Theorists in a Changing World', which really brings this text to life and makes it a must read for all early years students today. Issues which are of particular significance to the early years classroom/setting in the present day are brought to the fore, such as 'The Realities of Childhood Today', in light of the theoretical underpinnings effectively critiqued in the earlier chapters. In this section challenges of poverty and mental health, exacerbated by COVID-19, diet and nutrition, diversity, racism and gender-related issues are carefully considered and their impact on practice appropriately addressed. A suite of further issues relevant to the 21st century early years setting/classroom and beyond such as play and its value for learning, learning and the brain and the emergence of Artificial Intelligence and the associated risk of the unknown are then all effectively unpacked and their application for everyday practice fittingly analysed.

In summary, this is certainly a comprehensive and thought-provoking text, which provides a rich analysis of early and modern theories, informing early childhood education. Yet I would argue that this text does even more, where the final section goes one step further by challenging existing theories in an ever-changing landscape – a complex landscape where the true essence of childhood, and in particular young children's learning and development, have become subservient to the societal challenges and complex world in which they inhabit. In my opinion, this book is a must read for all those interested in early childhood education. Those who never really understood the value of theory for ECE cannot help but do so after reading this book. Enjoy!

Glenda Walsh, Head of Early Years Education, Stranmillis University College

REFERENCES

McMillan, D. (2009) 'Preparing for educare: student perspectives on early years training in Northern Ireland', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, *17*(3): 219–35.

McMillan, D. (2017) 'Towards the playful professional', in G. Walsh, D. McMillan and C. McGuinness (eds), *Playful Teaching and Learning* (pp. 198–212). London: Sage.

Spouse, J. (2001). Bridging theory and practice in the supervisory relationship: a sociocultural perspective. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 512–522. DOI: 10.1046/j.1365-2648.2001.01683

Walsh, G. (2017) 'Why playful teaching and learning?', in G. Walsh, D. McMillan and C. McGuinness (eds), *Playful Teaching and Learning* (pp. 7–20). London: Sage

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Jude Bowen whose original vision and encouragement allowed for the previous two editions of this book to take shape. My thanks must now go to Delayna Spencer who has supported me throughout, in bringing this third edition through to production; thank you Delayna. My thanks also go to Harry Dixon, editorial assistant at Sage, who has been most helpful and to Rabia Barkatulla and the wider production team at Sage, and to the Copyeditor, Mary Dalton, whose precision and attention to detail have been most greatly appreciated. I would also like to acknowledge the support I received when writing the first edition from the following highly experienced and expert early years practitioners: Alison Blasdale and Lucy Smith, and Holly Bowman and Claire Hooker, and when completing the second edition, from Jessany Cruddace whose expertise in Montessori methods and approaches has been most valuable.

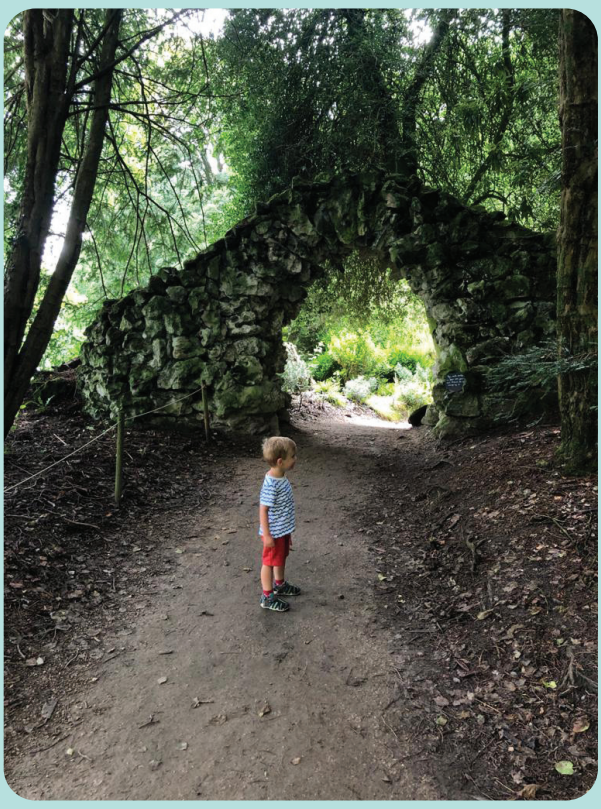
I would also like to acknowledge the support of my dear friend Barbara Hendon, a specialist in the field of early years who, throughout the writing of all three editions, has been a most valuable source of information and inspiration. My thanks go also to Ezra Riley for the time spent in giving me additional insights into how young people view the world. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Angela, for her continued support throughout writing this third edition.

PART III

CHALLENGES FOR THEORISTS IN A CHANGING WORLD

For most children growing up today, early childhood is characterized by a sense of fun, loving relationships, regular meals, warmth, and security. For too many, however, this is sadly not the case.

Writing about the realities of childhood today, Luke et al. (2020) have commented on how, 'Everywhere, one sees examples of social breakdown, childhood excesses in materialism and sexualisation, an over-reliance on social networking and, perhaps most worryingly, obesity and poor physical and mental health' (p. 36). Indeed, a particularly worrying and emerging feature that impacts on the lives of too many children today is poverty; at this point, readers may wish to revisit the work of the McMillan sisters, discussed earlier, who as pioneers in early childhood were dealing with this particular issue and its impact on young children's learning and development over a generation ago.



Childhood needs to be a time of emotional growth, exploration and security

POVERTY

A recent report by The Royal Foundation (2021) cited the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which had estimated that 1.3 million babies and children below five years of age in the UK are now living in poverty, representing around a third of families within this age group. The Report revealed how the, 'majority (70%) of people living in poverty are from working families' with these parents being less able to offer the 'experiences that their babies and young children need', which the Report concluded, can lead in later life to, 'mental and physical health inequalities' (p. 30).

Even more recently in 2023, the Children's Society , which explains poverty as when 'parents can't afford the basics of food, clothing and shelter' reported on how in the UK, millions of children who live in poverty are growing up in households where at least one parent is employed. In addition, the Society drew attention to how low-paid jobs and zero-hours contracts are now resulting in some families living, 'hand to mouth', which accounts for over 4 million children in the UK, or around three in every ten children, representing an increase of 107% of families who are in receipt of emergency food, since 2020 when families were having to adjust to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Worryingly, Rose, Gilbert and Richards (2016) have commented on how 'extreme deprivation leads to a greater risk of developing anxiety, depression and cardiovascular problems in later life and can lead to a compromised ability to learn and to cope with adversity…' (p. 129).

CRITICAL QUESTION 1

Given that poverty today can impact negatively on early cognitive development, what impact might it also have on children's future mental health and well-being?

Seeking to explain the rise in poverty in the UK, Silberfeld (2016) has suggested that the gap between the rich and poor 'continues to widen', and 'will continue to widen unless the causes of poverty are properly addressed' (p. 283). Silberfeld has argued that 'inequities are most clearly seen through infant mortality statistics, childhood obesity and accidents' and that those children who are most affected are 'looked-after children, children with disabilities or children from black and minority ethnic groups' (p. 283).

The impact of poverty on early learning has been well documented. Just over a decade ago, Cullis and Hansen (2009, p. 13), for example, drew attention to how every £100 of additional income in the first nine months of a child's life meant the difference of approximately a month's development by the age of five years. At the same time, Field (2010, p. 28) was also drawing attention to how, 'children from low income families in the UK often grow up to be poor adults … [they] are more likely to have preschool conduct and behavioural problems'. It is probable that the number of children living in poverty will increase significantly in the next years, leading to significant deprivation, which will present early years practitioners and teachers with significant and hidden challenges that will need to be not only properly acknowledged and understood, but managed.

ACTIVITIES AND POINTS FOR DISCUSSION 1

View the YouTube video entitled 'BBC World Debate: Why Poverty?' (published 30.11.2012): www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNIEb3injpc (accessed 31.08.2023), hosted by the BBC and 50 other broadcasters around the world, which examines the 'causes' of and 'cures' for the continuing problems underlying severe poverty throughout the world. Then consider:

- What steps early years practitioners and primary teachers might take to gain a better understanding of how to work with children of different cultural backgrounds where poverty has impacted on their lives
- What challenges are faced by families with very young children entering the UK who have already experienced extreme poverty
- How early years practitioners and primary teachers might support cognitive development in children facing excessive poverty.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

We have in recent decades become increasingly aware of the impact that mental health has on the learning of young children. More recently, early years practitioners and teachers in primary schools have had to respond to the challenges brought about by Covid-19 [For insights into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, see the following links to: the Nuffield Foundation website, 'Educational gaps are growing during lockdown', www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/educational-gaps-are-growing-during-lockdown and the Education Policy Institute, 'Preventing the disadvantage gap from increasing during and after the COVID-19 pandemic', EPI-Policy-paper-Impact-of-Covid-19_docx.pdf]

The social contexts within which young children grow and develop are crucial to their future mental health and well-being. Children need stability and continuity in their early lives as well as emotional nurturing and love. A review undertaken by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC, Cuthbert, Rayns and Stanley, 2011) just over a decade ago, however, estimated that in 2010 some 20,000 children of less than one year of age, within the UK, were living in households with a parent who was a Class A drug user. Around the same time, Walker et al. (2009) reported on how domestic violence had accounted for some 14% of violent incidents across England and Wales. The increase in poverty, discussed earlier, is also leading to many children growing up in families where low incomes can cause great stress and impact negatively on the stability and emotional nurturing they receive; this, in addition to problems arising with inabilities to purchase nutritious food as evidenced in part by the growth in Food Banks.

A report by the ONS (2015), which focused on children's mental health and well-being in the UK, emphasized how children who spend over three hours each day on social media sites are over twice as likely to experience poor mental health. And there are of course hidden risks such as cyber-bullying and child pornography that can have a devastating impact on children (Binford, 2015).

For good mental health and well-being to occur, it is important that children, even from their earliest years, learn to understand and manage their own emotions as well as those of others (MacBlain, 2014; MacBlain, Dunn and Luke, 2017). By doing so, they come to develop their abilities and skills at engaging purposefully and meaningfully with the world around them and so come to enhance their own learning. This has been referred to as *emotional intelligence* and, in some cases, *emotional literacy* (Goleman, 1996; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Salovey and Mayer (1990) originally defined emotional intelligence as that 'subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions' (p. 189).

They proposed four factors that are central to how children develop their emotional intelligence, namely: *perceiving, reasoning, understanding* and *managing emotions*. Children come to understand their own emotions through attaching meaning to them and forming increasingly accurate interpretations of them. They then learn to regulate their emotions and, in doing so, learn how to manage them. This is important for young children entering early years settings where they are expected to collaborate with others through, for example, taking turns, listening selectively to adults, following instructions and directions, and engaging in directed activities that might not appeal to them, and of course, through different types of play. Drawing on the original work of Mayer (co-author with Salovey, 1990), Goleman (1996, p. 48) commented on how Mayer had originally suggested that individuals fall into three distinctive styles when it comes to dealing with their emotions:

Forming secure relationships in the early years enhances future learning

- *Self-aware*: here, children, for example, become aware of their own feelings and moods as they occur and don't ruminate or obsess over them.
- *Engulfed*: here, children may be observed typically to feel 'swamped' by their emotions and even 'helpless' in trying to overcome their emotions, with the result that they do little, if anything, to escape their feelings when they feel upset or in a bad mood.
- *Accepting*: here, children typically present as being clear about and accepting of their feelings and don't try to alter them.

Such styles of attending to emotions clearly impact on how children learn to view themselves and, importantly, how in control they feel of their own learning, or what Albert Bandura referred to as 'self-efficacy'.

Claxton, author of the report *An Intelligent Look at Emotional Intelligence* (ATL, 2005, p. 20), commissioned by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, has spoken of very young children having an 'emotional apprenticeship', whereby they observe how those around them manage their emotions. Claxton also drew an important connection between these observations and learning, suggesting that when infants or toddlers are unsure how to respond emotionally to someone they have not met before, they 'take their cue from the facial expression and tone of voice of the people they trust – parents obviously, but also … older brothers and sisters'. Claxton went on to stress how members of a child's family play a significant role in terms of modelling behaviours that steer and direct the child's emotional development, emphasizing how poor modelling can have adverse effects on children: being around an adult who continually 'loses it' is bad for a child's own emotional development.

DIET AND NUTRITION

Whilst many children today are growing up in families where poverty impacts on nutrition, there are also those who have unhealthy diets that are causing concern, which is a growing global phenomenon. The number of children under the age of five who are overweight, for example, increased from 32 million across the globe in 1990 to 42 million in 2013. A particularly worrying trend is that most children who are overweight or obese are growing up in 'developed' and 'developing' countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that if this trend continues, the number of overweight or obese infants and young children across the globe will increase to 70 million by 2025. The Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) (2015) reported how in England the number of four- to five-year-olds in their Reception Year in 2013/14 who were obese was over 9%. Such statistics are concerning. Overweight and obesity often lead to ill health and too often to bullying and teasing, which can impact on children's emotional and social development and therefore, their learning. Poor diet can also impact adversely on cognitive development.

DIVERSITY

We are becoming more aware than ever of the wide diversity of needs amongst young children and importantly, the impact that diversity has on the individual learning needs of children (Cloughessy and Waniganayake, 2012; Hegde et al., 2014). The cultures of most early years settings and schools in the UK are now significantly more diverse than those of even a few decades ago and will require greater understanding on the part of practitioners and teachers and arguably, higher levels of skill. Ehiyazaryan-White (2024) has, for example, drawn attention to current government statistics, which have indicated that '29% of children in nurseries in England were recorded as having a first language other than English' and that the percentage for primary schools in the year 2022 was 21% (p. 239).

In regard to diversity, equity and inclusion, Devarakonda and Maconochie (2024, p. 141) have drawn attention to what is an important point that needs to be acknowledged and understood by practitioners and teachers, as follows:

> Equity is a concept often used interchangeably with equality, but it does not mean the same thing… Equity relates to the support and opportunities provided to all children to overcome barriers and to achieve to the best of their potential. Equality, on the other hand, may focus on providing similar resources to all children and may overlook the unique needs of individuals.

Readers might now wish to read the following article: Tang, F. (2020) 'Nurturing children's spiritual development in early childhood context', *Tapestry Online Journal*. Available at: https://eyfs.info/articles.html/personal-social-and-emotional-

development/nurturing-children%E2%80%99s-spiritual-development-in-early-childhood-context-r403/ (accessed 11.04.2024), which discusses spirituality in young children and the impact of Covid-19 on young children's emotional and social development, and the relevance that spirituality has for practitioners and teachers working across diverse settings in early education.

CRITICAL QUESTION 2

Why is it important for students who wish to work in the Early Years to have a good understanding of diversity and how, within diverse contexts, the unique needs of every individual child can be met as, for example, in the case of children presenting with an autistic spectrum disorder?

RACISM

The subject of racism is now receiving significantly greater attention than ever before and the bearing this has on the lives of children as they grow, develop and learn is considerable. Daniel (2023) has recently commented on how 'it seems that we can't escape news about racism' (p. x) and has gone on to emhasize how important it is for practitioners and teachers in the early years to 'see and acknowledge diversity' (p. 126). In more recent years, the cultural make-up of early years settings and schools in the UK has been further altered with 'new arrivals', as in the case of asylum seekers and refugees entering the education system.

The importance of identifying and acknowledging diversity within early years settings has been further emphasized by Devarakonda and Powlay (2016) who reported on how an increase in diversity is challenging practitioners and teachers to not only be aware of difference but, crucially, to 'provide appropriate opportunities and experiences' for all of their children (p. 186). They also alert us to how stereotypes that exist around children from some ethnic minority groups may result in adults mistakenly identifying some of these children as having special educational needs. Importantly, Devarakonda and Powlay (2016) also ask if teachers are 'equipped with the knowledge and understanding and skills to teach and assess diverse groups of children?' (p. 195). Crucially, educators, Lewis (2022) advises, 'need to be aware of their own barriers and their own bias, unconscious or otherwise' (p. 391). One example of how this might be done has been offered by Lewis who emphasized the importance of young children viewing themselves and others in a positive way within books and on visual displays in their own learning centres and schools (p. 393).

Citing the Millennium Cohort Study in their recent report, The Royal Foundation (2021) has highlighted continuing and significant ethnic gaps amongst children in the early years; across England, for example, children growing up in Asian and Black households 'are twice as likely to live in persistent low-income conditions as children in White households' and, 'more likely to have had lower birth weights' (p. 30). The Millennium Cohort Study has identified how significant ethnic gaps in early child development reflect broader inequalities in society. Worryingly, The Royal Foundation (2021) has also reported on how further disparities have been recognized in rates of depression amongst mothers during the child's first year, reflecting wider mental health disparities. Depression amongst mothers may impact detrimentally on their children's emotional and social development and, therefore, their children's early, as well as future, learning (MacBlain et al., 2017, pp. 47–64). Addressing disparities across communities can present significant opportunities for improvement in children's learning and development.

ACTIVITIES AND POINTS FOR DISCUSSION 2

With others, consider the following activities designed to promote diversity in settings for young children, and rank these in what you agree might have the most impact and explain why, then add three more activities that you feel will celebrate cultural difference.

1. Reading stories that promote diversity.
2. Creating wall-art displays that represent diversity.
3. Teaching children songs from different cultures.
4. Teaching children how to play games from other cultures.
5. Introducing children to foods from different world cultures.

GENDER

Issues relating to gender have become more apparent in recent decades as practitioners and teachers have sought to adapt their practice to meet the individual needs of children (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Gov.UK, 2011; Knowles and Holmström, 2013). It is worth reflecting on the relevance of different theorists, throughout this book, to issues surrounding gender and how their explanations of children's learning and development might support practitioners and teachers with understanding and addressing issues relating to gender. Indeed, Warin (2023, p. 3) has, for example, argued that:

> The identification of, and promotion of, a gender flexible pedagogy is based on an understanding of sociological gender-focused theory that relies on interweaving several older, deeper and more basic theories.

Importantly, early years settings and schools across the UK now have in place policies intended to address the diversity of needs amongst their children (Tembo and Benham, 2023), with these policies being required to be transparent and subject to scrutiny by, for example, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in England, as well as parents. [For a further discussion of gender, read Fitzgerald, D. (2024) 'Young children, childhood and gender', in D. Fitzgerald and H. Maconochie, *Early Childhood Studies: A Student's Guide* (2nd edn). London: Sage.]

ACTIVITIES AND POINTS FOR DISCUSSION 3

With others, identify two theoretical perspectives on young children's learning and discuss how, if at all, these could support practitioners and teachers in understanding and implementing a 'gender flexible pedagogy'.

SPECIAL NEEDS AND/OR DISABILITY

Our understanding of the additional needs of children has increased significantly over past decades and especially as many children with complex learning needs have come to be educated within mainstream settings (Borkett, 2024; Ofsted, 2010). It remains the case, however, that too many young children fail to have their special educational needs identified and properly assessed and appropriate interventions put in place as, for example, in the case of young children with the specific learning difficulties of dyspraxia and/or dyslexia (MacBlain et al., 2015).

The government in England has passed the Children and Families Act (2014) and followed this with a Code of Practice, which introduced significant changes in how children with special educational needs were to be identified and then supported. Of particular note is how both the Act and Code highlighted the need to integrate education with health and social services, which sought to increase multi-agency approaches to working with children with special needs and/or disability.

More recently, the nature of SEND and how it is managed within the UK has been undergoing scrutiny with potentially significant changes within this area being identified in a government publication (Gov. UK, 2023) entitled '*Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan Right Support, Right Place, Right Time*' (available online, see References). This publication acknowledged that despite intended positive change over recent decades, 'significant issues remain' (p. 3) and that the then government's intention was to 'improve early identification of needs and intervention, and set out clear expectations for the types of support that should be ordinarily available in mainstream settings'. Interestingly, the publication also announced that, 'we [the government] are approving a tranche of applications from local authorities to open new special free schools in their area', which is 'in addition to 92 open special free schools and a further 49 which are in the delivery pipeline' (p. 6) enabling a greater number of children to have 'timely access to sufficient local special school places' (p. 6). The then government also set out its vision to 'create a more inclusive society that celebrates and enables success in all forms, with the cultures, attitudes and environments to offer every child and young person the support that they need to participate fully, thrive and fulfil their potential' (p. 7). This may now change with the new government coming to power in July 2024.

CRITICAL QUESTION 3

Take time to look at the following entry entitled 'New free schools to open in 2025' on the National Association for Special Educational Needs (NASEN) website: https://nasen.org.uk/news/new-free-schools-open-2025 (accessed 18.07.2023), then consider if the opening of new 'special free schools' will impact the rights of all children to be educated within mainstream settings.

VALUING OUR ENVIRONMENTS

Addressing the importance of sustainability for the future and how our children will care for their physical environments is now well embedded in the consciousness of almost everyone. Crucially, Henderson, et al. (2023) have emphasized how all of us involved in working with young children need to recognize that, 'before we can ask children to protect their environment, they must come to love it first' (p. 57).

ACTIVITIES AND POINTS FOR DISCUSSION 4

Along with others, identify two theorists discussed in Part I and Part II who have emphasised the role of nature in children's learning and discuss how relevant their theories are for children today. How can young children learn to love their environments and then protect them and importantly, how can adults support them in doing so?

Whilst parents have a role in guiding their children to protect their environments (Borg et al., 2017) it must also be recognized that early years practitioners and teachers need to play a crucial role as we increasingly recognise the impact of climate change and how extreme weather conditions are affecting communities across the globe. The means by which young children can develop their understanding of sustainability by learning outdoors is now better understood (Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013) and importantly, acknowledged by governments (DfE, 2021). Where young children's learning activities out of doors are carefully planned and thought through then much can be gained not only in terms of social learning but importantly, emotional and cognitive development (MacBlain and Bowman, 2016).

For many children today, their experience of play out of doors can be limited; indeed, it is not unusual, for example, to hear practitioners and teachers talking of the lack of physical play in the lives of some children. This has led many to consider the benefits of outdoor play where young children can be introduced to new activities that support learning and develop confidence. This is an area that has been at the centre of many research studies over recent decades.

The growing recognition of the positive aspects offered by 'Forest School' has added significantly to the opportunities that early years practitioners and teachers can now provide for young children (Sackfield-Ford and Davenport, 2019). Importantly, McCree (2019, p. 4) has emphasized how Forest School is, 'a distinct pedagogical approach' with 'four key ingredients, being learner-centred, play-based, long term and within a wooded area' (McCree and Cree, 2017). McCree has gone on to emphasize how, 'A different, diluted or tokenistic approach affects how Forest School is understood by the participants and all the other adults who support and resource the programme, or not' (p. 5). This is an important point and here one is drawn to the importance of definitions that are shared and that are validated by research and theoretical rigour; practitioners need to be clear about their intentions and the underlying pedagogical outcomes when referring to and applying principles they nominate as those of 'Forest School'. Here, McCree's four key ingredients can offer a most useful entry point for reflection by practitioners and teachers.

PLAY AND ITS VALUE FOR LEARNING IN THE EARLY YEARS

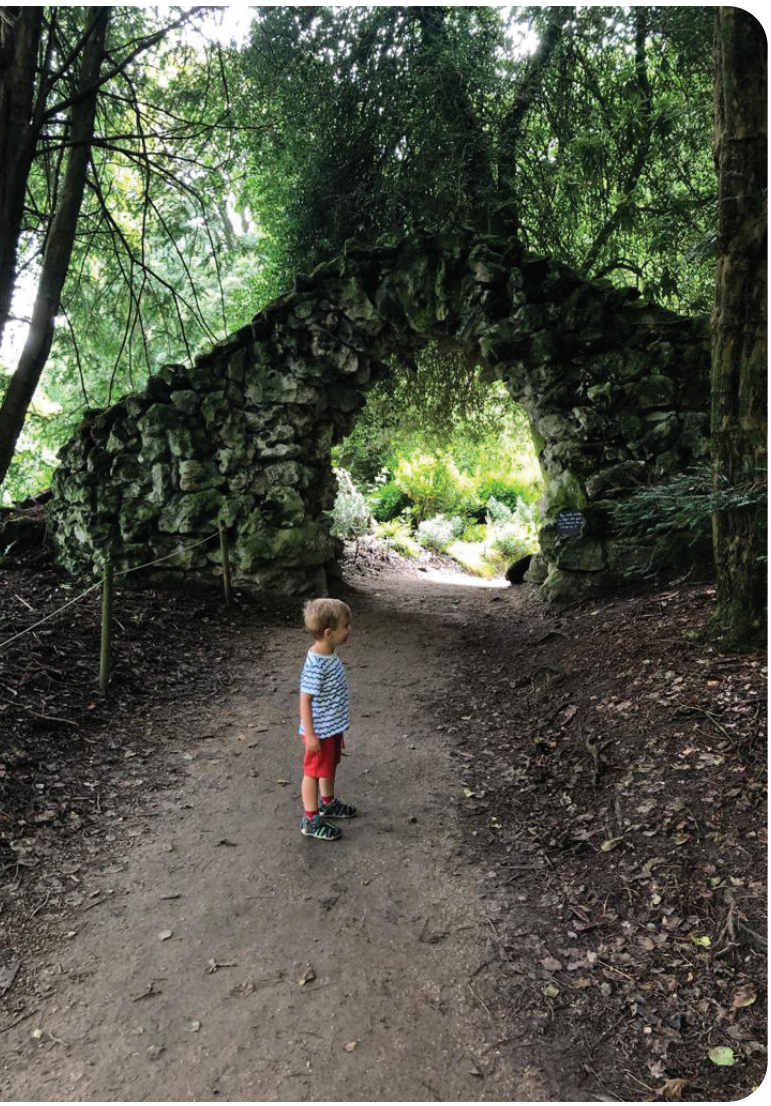
Much of children's play is now so very different to previous decades. Less than a decade ago, McDowall Clark (2010, p. 1) drew attention to what was a concerning trend:

> Children do not play out in the street anymore, they are rarely allowed to travel to school on their own… Children spend an increasing proportion

of their time in specially designated places such as day nurseries, out-of-school clubs and their own bedrooms, frequently fitted out with the latest technology. Childhood is progressively more regulated so that instead of being a natural part of public life, it takes place in private.

In a report by the Children's Commissioner for England entitled *Playing Out* (2018), the commissioner reported, 'Today's children are the least active generation ever… the screen can seem an irresistible way of occupying children – able to absorb them for hours on end in the complete safety of the home'. The commissioner further commented on the fact that, 'Many children told us how they expected to spend most of the summer online playing games, whilst others said that they would be online chatting to their friends'. We know that there are serious consequences of this increasingly sedentary childhood. Reference was also made by the commissioner to research by Ukactive, suggesting that, 'children return to school in September less fit than when they broke up in July, with children from poorer areas worse affected'.

Physical play develops and strengthens sensory neural pathways in the brain



Through play, children learn to form and manage relationships

At the core of much of children's play today is a reliance on technology (Beauchamp, 2006, 2012), which can, if overused, bring its own problems. The nature of many debates central to children's play in the UK was brought to the public's attention over a decade ago by Paton (2012), education editor for the national online UK newspaper *The Telegraph*, when he reported how a number of academics as well as children's authors had written a letter suggesting that controversial education reforms in the UK were 'robbing' children in the early years of 'the ability to play'. In their letter, they also referred to the 'schoolification' of practice in the early years, warning how current revisions of practice were leading to a system that was 'too inflexible' to meet the complex and diverse nature of children's needs in the early years.

The fact that these issues were reported in a national daily newspaper suggests significant concerns

regarding the nature of the curricula that young children have access to and the implied absence of play and creativity in their initial years of education. It is now accepted by most, if not all, practitioners that, through play, children learn to communicate and cooperate with others and learn to manage and sustain positive relationships. It is through play that they learn about and understand the world they live in. Play, therefore, is at the very heart of children's thinking and learning and their social and emotional development. Importantly, we now have a much better understanding of children's play and how it supports learning as well as having a better understanding of how such issues as diversity, equality and inclusion impact on children's play (Thompson, 2024).

Smith, Cowie and Blades (2003, p. 218) have offered a helpful insight into 'play' in young children, suggesting that 'the distinction between exploration and play is difficult to make, as for young infants, all objects are novel'. They suggest, however, that by the pre-school years this distinction is easier to make. Smith et al. have suggested a conceptual framework through which practitioners can explore the nature of play. They have, for example, proposed three kinds of play: *locomotor, sociodramatic* and *language play*. The first involves physical exercise play and what is frequently called rough-and-tumble play. The second refers to play with objects. This might involve fantasy play and/or play of a sociodramatic nature. The final kind of play has, at its core, language.

LOCOMOTOR PLAY

With this type of play, young children can be observed engaging in physical activities such as rough and tumble, crawling, running and jumping.

SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY

Smith et al. (2003) proposed that sociodramatic play may be observed in children as young as 12 months, with the earliest type of pretend play involving behaviours such as children directing actions towards themselves, and their play being at times dependent on the use of objects found in their homes.

LANGUAGE PLAY

This type of play is really 'language' play. Children learn through listening to rhyming poems, riddles, nursery rhymes, and so on, and as they develop, they move on to playing games with rules that are clearly defined structures. Through this final type of play, children learn how to manage relationships and understand the importance of boundaries. Such play offers important opportunities for the developing child to be more active outside of their home and to engage in formal activities and play such as those found at local sports clubs.

LEARNING AND THE BRAIN

It is astonishing how few books written on the subject of teaching and learning contain any significant reference to the importance of the brain, yet it is the brain that controls and regulates learning in all children. Central to our understanding of early brain development is the need to recognize the role that neurons play (Maconochie, 2024; Rose et al., 2016). Whilst it was once believed that children's brains were complete at birth, it is now known that in addition to the billions of neurons present at birth, the brain continues to generate more neurons throughout life (Gray and MacBlain, 2015).

It is whilst the foetus is developing prior to birth that neurons are being formed and form different parts of the brain. As they do so, they establish responses to different chemicals. This process begins with the more primitive areas of the brain such as the brainstem, where those functions that are necessary for bodily development are located. At birth, these functions are fairly well developed, and this allows the newly born infant to take in nourishment through, for example, sucking for their mother's milk, breathing, sleeping, and hearing and, in general, experiencing sensations in the world around them. After birth, it is the turn of the more advanced areas of the brain to develop, such as the cerebral cortex, which deals with higher order functioning, for example language development, thinking and problem solving. It is during the period following birth and in the early years that most brain development occurs. Different areas of the brain, however, develop their own functions and do so by interacting with chemical agents such as hormones and neurotransmitters.

Following birth, learning continues at an accelerating pace and this involves the strengthening of

Following birth, learning accelerates and involves the strengthening of connections between neurons

connections between neurons. Neurons, however, do not make direct contact with each other but have tiny spaces or gaps between them, which are called *synapses*. It is across these spaces or synapses that electrical impulses travel and, as this happens, chemicals known as transmitter substances are released. Hardy and Heyes (1994, pp. 262–263) have drawn attention to the fact that although all messages in the central nervous system are transmitted as nerve impulses, how they are interpreted depends upon that part of the brain that receives them. For example, one part of the brain may interpret the impulse as a sound whilst another part may interpret the impulse as light.

Synapses develop at an extraordinary rate following birth and during the child's first years, and it is because of this that researchers have recognized the importance of stimulating learning in young children during their first months and years. In an infant, the part of the brain known as the cerebral cortex may create over a million synapses each second. Though many synapses become established, there are also many that do not and become abandoned by the infant's brain. This process continues throughout life and by adolescence around 50% of synapses have been shed. It is now generally accepted that the brain works on the basis of 'use it or lose it', with many connections between neurons becoming lost if they are not used. The more children engage in play and physical activities and use language, the stronger these connections will be.

REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY

Now view the YouTube video, 'The Learning Brain', at www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgLYkV689s4 (accessed 16.03.2024), which offers an excellent account of the brain's part in children's learning.

A further important feature of brain development in children is **myelination** where a 'fatty' substance called myelin acts as an insulator, permitting the transmission of impulses across the synapses. The experiences of infants and particularly the extent of the stimulation they receive in their first months and years can affect the development of myelination and future learning. By the age at which young children are attending pre-school, their brains are almost fully grown in size. Yet another feature of brain development is memory; as infants' experiences are repeated in different situations and over time, the sensory neural pathways that are formed in the brain become more established and go on to form the basis of their memories.

CASE STUDY 28.1: BUILDING STRONG CONNECTIONS IS CRUCIAL TO EARLY LEARNING

Faheem is in his pre-school years and is read to every night after having a warm bath and being put to bed. His parents read him a story in a soft and affirming voice whilst he is cuddled up to them. By doing this, Faheem's

(Continued)

parents are unwittingly ensuring that Faheem will form strong connections within his brain; these will be fundamentally different from those of a child who is permitted to remain up late watching television and being spoken to by his parents in monosyllables or in some cases being constantly rebuked and shouted at.

CRITICAL QUESTION 4

What factors in your own life supported you in learning to manage your emotions and how might a greater knowledge of these factors help you to relate to young children who might present with emotional difficulties?

CASE STUDY 28.2: ACTIVE LEARNING STRENGTHENS SENSORY NEURAL PATHWAYS

Adam is three years of age and is given lots of opportunities to engage in physical play and exercise out of doors. His parents encourage him to climb and develop his physical skills through his play and to take risks. Reuben, on the other hand, spends most of his day and evening watching television whilst sitting on a sofa. As Adam grows older, he presents, unlike Reuben, as a child who is active, has a strong sense of initiative and motivation and is very skilled at sport. In contrast, Reuben presents as more passive and less interested in trying new activities, preferring instead to play with his latest digital device.

CRITICAL QUESTION 5

Should early years practitioners and teachers in primary schools address issues where they find themselves in conflict with types of role modelling that a child is experiencing in their home and that they believe to be damaging to the child?

CASE STUDY 28.3: BUILDING GOOD MEMORIES BEGINS AT BIRTH

Jude is a very young child who, every evening, is picked up, hugged and tickled by his father when he arrives home from work. Jude gradually constructs a memory of this activity as he learns that when his father lifts him up, he will be hugged and tickled and 'loved', and that the experience of being picked up will always be a pleasing experience. If, however, the experience of being lifted by his father has led to him being punished in the past, then he will have internalized the experience of being lifted as an unpleasant one. It is in such a way that infants' brains serve to help them adapt to the unique environments they are born into, and to others around them. In this way, infants build their understanding of the world in which they live, which might be a nurturing and loving one or one that is not.

CRITICAL QUESTION 6

Should early years practitioners and teachers in Reception classes have a role in assisting vulnerable children with creating positive memories that they can draw upon when older, and if so, why?

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: CHANGING LANDSCAPES

It is now generally accepted that the digital presence in children's lives commences even before birth when, for example, expectant mothers and fathers show to friends and relatives ultrasound images of their babies and even post these images on social media sites (Leaver, 2015). Children's digital footprints then typically commence following birth (MacBlain et al., 2017; Sakr, 2019), with perhaps the majority of children growing up in homes where they come into daily contact with a whole range of digital devices (Chaudron, 2015; Teichert and Anderson, 2014).

Artificial Intelligence will offer new and exciting ways of learning

> Even before children are born, they have become part of the 'app generation' (Gardner and Davis, 2013).

By the age of two, for example, children can be observed using tablets or computers. It has been estimated (ChildWise, 2015) that over 40% of children in the UK use these every day. Many young children now use tablet computers almost as second nature and can be observed tapping and swiping the screens of these devices with confidence and ease. McTavish (2014, p. 320) emphasized how many adults can find it a challenge to use technology within their lives, whereas for children it has become their normal life experience.

It is also now generally recognized that young children do not limit their game playing to tablet computers but increasingly also use smartphones. Chaudron (2015) has drawn attention to how young children also use smartphones to watch videos, play games, send messages, take pictures and make video calls and phone calls. This is a practice that is often permitted and even encouraged by parents, with very young children typically using smartphones belonging to their parents or older siblings (ChildWise, 2015).

ACTIVITIES AND POINTS FOR DISCUSSION 1

View the YouTube video entitled, 'Katie Davis and the App Generation at Town Hall': www.youtube.com/watch?v=_uRNrGAYEMM (accessed 01.09.2023). Then consider:

- If the overuse of digital technology will lead to a lessening of empathy, which is central to the development of emotional intelligence in children.

Children now enter early childhood settings having already had access to a wide range of digital technology within their homes. Used properly, these devices can offer excellent learning opportunities. Flewitt, Messer

and Kucirkova (2015) have emphasized how the absence of more innovative attempts at using digital technologies in classrooms and early years settings may work against children having important opportunities for learning. Neumann and Neumann (2014), for example, have drawn attention to how tablet computers emulate many of the features of books and provide excellent and exciting opportunities for literacy development. Screens can now look like the pages of books and children can, with the swipe of a finger, turn over pages and enlarge pictures and visual details that capture their interest. A variety of apps geared to helping children create their own stories now even allow children to build in pictures and sounds, which make them more visually appealing and add to their motivation to read and explore ideas in greater detail. In this way, children can be encouraged to be more creative in their literacy activities (Kucirkova and Sakr, 2015).

Technology can offer opportunities for developing independent learning

ACTIVITIES AND POINTS FOR DISCUSSION 2

Consider how early years practitioners and teachers might work with parents to guide and support them in using digital technology as a learning opportunity with their children.

The degree to which Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) is accelerating and influencing all aspects of our lives is as yet not properly understood. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef, 2023) recently posted on its website how A.I. is already impacting children everywhere, as A.I. is now 'embedded in toys, virtual assistants, video games, and adaptive learning software', with algorithms even offering, 'recommendations to children on what videos to watch next, what news to read, what music to listen to and who to be friends with'. Gawdat (2021), a recognized expert in the field of artificial intelligence, has suggested that within the next few decades A.I. will be a billion times cleverer than even the most intelligent person; comparing human intelligence to computers will, in the future, he believes be like comparing the intelligence of a fly to that of Einstein (p. 7).

REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY

Look at the website 'Internet Matters' (www.internetmatters.org) and then consider how early years practitioners and primary teachers can learn to use different internet sources on children's learning to improve their practice.

THE POTENTIAL FOR AI TO IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S LEARNING IS AS YET POORLY UNDERSTOOD

The tools that are central to A.I. are being employed more and more within the field of early years as a means of enhancing development and learning in children (Su and Yang, 2022, p. 1). Following their 'scoping review' of the literature, Su and Yang (2022, p. 9) have acknowledged that whilst there is a need for greater research in this area, studies already undertaken have indicated that A.I. has the potential to not only enhance educational systems, but perhaps

A.I. can assess aspects of language and cognitive development

more importantly, enhance the learning of children by providing individual learning goals and using 'big data to evaluate and monitor children's cognitive, emotional and behavioral states' (p. 9). Su and Yang go on to emphasize how A.I. can 'consider more comprehensive data' in assessments of weaknesses that present in individual children as, for example, in aspects of their language and cognitive development and crucially, point towards appropriate and effective interventions in much less time than might be done by the adults working with children. They conclude that, 'AI educational robots can integrate different disciplines of knowledge and multiple technologies simultaneously to greatly enrich children's learning experiences' (p. 9).

ACTIVITIES AND POINTS FOR DISCUSSION 3

Consider the challenges that will face early years practitioners and primary school teachers in the future when adopting A.I. systems to support children's learning.

EXTENDED AND RECOMMENDED READING

Borg, F., Winberg, M. and Vinterek, M. (2017) 'Children's Learning for a Sustainable Society: Influences from Home and Preschool', *Education Enquiry*, 8(2): 151–172. Available at: Children's Learning for a Sustainable Society: Influences from Home and Preschool (tandfonline.com). (This article examines how parents as well as practitioners and teachers can develop children's understanding of sustainability within the societies in which they live with a particular focus on Sweden. The methodological design of their study should be of particular use to students.)

Boyd, D., Hirst, N. and Siraj-Blatchford (2018) (eds) *Understanding Sustainability in Early Childhood Education: Case Studies and Approaches from Across the UK*. London: Routledge. (A comprehensive text that offers case studies and insights into practice surrounding sustainability in England, Scotland, Nr. Ireland and Wales.)

Fitzgerald, D. (2024) 'Young children, childhood and gender', in D. Fitzgerald and H. Maconochie, *Early Childhood Studies: A Student's Guide* (2nd edn). London: Sage. (A detailed account of key issues relating to gender in childhood and differing theoretical approaches.)

Flewitt, R., Messer, D. and Kucirkova, N. (2015) 'New directions for early literacy in a digital age: the iPad', *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 15(3): 289–310. (An interesting and informative account regarding the use of iPads by children in their acquisition of early literacy.)

Forest School Association: www.forestschoolassociation.org/the-forest-school-association (accessed 06.09.2023) – a link providing a great deal of useful information as well as giving an excellent overview of the Forest School concept.

Louis, S., Cave, S. and Meah, N. (2023) 'Race, anti-discrimination and work to combat the effects of discrimination on practitioners and children', in C. Nutbrown (ed.), *Early Childhood Education: Current Realities and Future Priorities*. London: Sage, pp. 95–105. (A very interesting chapter, which addresses key issues relating to race and anti-discrimination that have relevance for early years practitioners and teachers with a range of case studies.)

Raleigh, V. and Holmes, J. (2021) *The Health of People from Ethnic Minority Groups in England*. The King's Fund. Available at: The health of people from ethnic minority groups in England | The King's Fund (kingsfund.org.uk) (accessed 31.08.2023). (A useful source for statistics relevant to life in the UK today.)

Rose, J., Gilbert, L. and Richards, V. (2016) *Health and Well-being in Early Childhood*. London: Sage.

(An accessible and informative text, which offers a comprehensive account of children's health and well-being.)

Su, J. and Yang, W. (2022, January) 'Artificial intelligence in early childhood education: A scoping review', *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence* (Vol. 3). Available at: SuYang_2022_ Artificialintelligenceinearlychildhoodeducation Ascopingreview.pdf (accessed 17th May 2024).

Tembo, S. and Benham, F. (2023) Gender and LGBTQ + Inclusive Practice in Early Childhood. In C. Nutbrown (ed.), *Early Childhood Education: Current Realities and Future Priorities*. London: Sage, pp. 108–117. (An accessible chapter that explores relevant research and policy in regard to gender.)

The Royal Foundation (2021) *Big Change Starts Small*. Available at: RFCEC_BCCS_Report_and_Appendices.pdf (ctfassets.net). (A comprehensive look at the realities for children growing up today in the UK.)

REFERENCES

Adewoye, M., Porter, S. and Donnelly, L. (2014) *Newly Qualified Teachers: Annual Survey 2014 – Research Report NCTL*. London: DfE.

Beauchamp, G. (2006) 'New technologies and "new teaching": a process of evolution?', in R. Webb (ed.), *Changing Teaching and Learning in the Primary School*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Beauchamp, G. (2012) *ICT in the Primary School: From Pedagogy to Practice*. London: Pearson.

Binford, W. (2015) *The Digital Child*. Social Science Research Network. Available at: http://ssrn.com/abstract=2563874 (accessed 06.11.16).

Borkett, P. (2024) 'Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)', in D. Fitzgerald and H. Maconochie *Early Childhood Studies* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

Borg, F., Winberg, M. and Vinterek, M. (2017) 'Children's learning for a sustainable society: Influences from home and preschool', *Education Enquiry*, *8*(2): 151–172 (accessed 15.07.2023).

Chaudron, S. (2015) *Young Children (0–8) and Digital Technology: A Qualitative Exploratory Study across Seven Countries*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Children's Commissioner (2018) *Playing Out: A Children's Commissioner's Report on the Importance to Children of Play and Physical Activity*. Available at: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Play-final-report.pdf (accessed 29.10.16).

ChildWise (2015) *The Monitor Pre-School Report: Key Behaviour Patterns Among 0–4 Year Olds*. London: ChildWise.

Cloughessy, K. and Waniganayake, M. (2014) 'Early childhood educators working with children who have lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents: what does the literature tell us?', *Early Child Development and Care*, *184*(8): 1267–1280.

Cullis, A. and Hansen, K. (2009) *Child Development in the First Three Sweeps of the Millennium Cohort Study*. DCSF Research Report RW-007. London: DCSF.

Cuthbert, C., Rayns, G. and Stanley, K. (2011) *All Babies Count, Prevention and Protection for Vulnerable Babies: A Review of the Evidence*. London: NSPCC.

Daniel, V. (2023) *Anti-Racist Practice in the Early Years: A Holistic Framework for the Wellbeing of All Children*. London: Routledge.

Department for Education (DfE) (2021) *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage*. Available at: Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework — GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) (accessed 18.07.2023).

Devarakonda, C. and Maconochie, H. (2024) 'Diversity, equity and inclusion', in D.D. Fitzgerald and H. Maconochie, *Early Childhood Studies* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

Devarakonda, C. and Powlay, L. (2016) 'Diversity and inclusion', in D. Wyse and S. Rogers (eds), *A Guide to Early Years & Primary Teaching*. London: Sage.

Edwards, S. and Cutter-Mackenzie, A. (2013) 'Pedagogical play types: What do they suggest for learning about sustainability', *International Journal of Early Childhood Education*, *44*: 327–346.

Ehiyazaryan-White, E. (2024) 'Working with multilingual children and families in the early years', in D. Fitzgerald and H. Maconochie (eds), *Early Childhood Studies* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000) *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books.

Field, F. (2010) *The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults – Report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances*. London: Cabinet Office.

Flewitt, R., Messer, D. and Kucirkova, N. (2015) 'New directions for early literacy in a digital age: the iPad', *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, *15*(3): 289–310.

Gardner, H. and Davis, K. (2013) *The App Generation*. London: Yale University Press.

Gawdat, M. (2021) *Scary Smart: The Future of Artificial Intelligence and How You Can Save Our World*. London: Bluebird.

Goleman, D. (1996) *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*. London: Bloomsbury.

Gov.UK (2011) *Advancing Transgender Equality: A Plan for Action* [online]. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/85498/transgender-action-plan.pdf (accessed 28.06.2023).

Gov.UK (2023) *Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time* [online]. Available at: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan (publishing.service.gov.uk) (accessed 10.07.2023).

Gray, C. and MacBlain, S.F. (2015) *Learning Theories in Childhood* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

Hardy, M. and Heyes, S. (1994) *Beginning Psychology: A Comprehensive Introduction to Psychology* (4th edn). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hegde, A.V., Averett, P., White, C.P. and Deese, S. (2014) 'Examining preschool teachers' attitudes, comfort, action orientation and preparation to work with children reared by gay and lesbian parents', *Early Child Development and Care*, *184*(7): 963–976.

Henderson, E., Gordon, E., McKinnon, H., Bremner, J. and MacDonald, M. (2023) 'A grassroots approach to developing early years outdoor experiences: building a community of practice', in C. Nutbrown (ed.), *Early Childhood Education: Current Realities and Future Priorities*. London: Sage, pp. 50–58.

HSCIC (Health and Social Care Information Centre) (2015) *Statistics on Obesity, Physical Activity and Diet: England 2015*. Available at: https://digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB16988 (accessed 20.10.16).

Knowles, G. and Holmström, R. (2013) *Understanding Family Diversity and Home-School Relations*. London: Routledge.

Kucirkova, N. and Sakr, M. (2015) 'Child–father creative text-making at home with crayons, iPad collage and PC', *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, *17*: 59–73.

Leaver, T. (2015) 'Researching the ends of identity: birth and death on social media', *Social Media + Society*, May [online]. Available at: http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305115578877 (accessed 13.10.16).

Lewis, A. (2022) 'How can teachers diversify the curriculum to ensure it reflects all of our children?', in C. Carden (ed.), *Primary Teaching* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

Luke, I., MacBlain, S.F. and Golder, G. (2020) 'Children, young people and physical education', in S. Capel and R. Blair (eds), *Debates in Physical Education* (2nd edn). London: Routledge.

MacBlain, S.F. (2014) *How Children Learn*. London: Sage.

MacBlain, S.F., Long, L. and Dunn, J. (2015) *Dyslexia, Literacy and Inclusion: Child-centred Perspectives*. London: Sage.

MacBlain, S.F. and Bowman, H. (2016) 'Teaching and learning', in D. Wyse and S. Rogers (eds), *A Guide to Early Years and Primary Teaching*. London Sage.

MacBlain, S.F., Dunn, J. and Luke, I. (2017) *Contemporary Childhood*. London: Sage.

MacBlain, S.F. (2024) 'How young children learn', in D. Fitzgerald and H. Maconochie (eds), *Early Childhood Studies* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

Maconochie, H. (2024) 'The brain and children's early development', in D. Fitzgerald and H. Maconochie, *Early Childhood Studies* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

McCree, M. (2019) 'When forest school isn't forest school', in M. Sackfield-Ford and H. Davenport (eds), *Critical Issues in Forest Schools*. London: Sage.

McCree, M. and Cree, J. (2017) 'Forest school', in S. Waite (ed.), *Children's Learning Outside the Classroom: From Birth to Eleven* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

McDowall Clark, R. (2010) *Childhood in Society: For Early Childhood Studies*. Exeter: Learning Matters.

McTavish, M. (2014) '"I'll do it my way!": a young child's appropriation and recontextualization of school literacy practices in out-of-school spaces', *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, *14*(3): 319–344.

Neumann, M. and Neumann, D. (2014) 'Touch screen tablets and emergent literacy', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *42*: 231–239.

Ofsted (2010) *The Special Educational Needs and Disability Review*, ref. 090221. London: Ofsted.

ONS (Office for National Statistics) (2015) *Measuring National Well-being: Insights into Children's Mental Health and Well-being*. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/measuringnationalwellbeing/2015-10-20 (accessed 03.01.16).

Paton, G. (2012) 'New-style "nappy curriculum" will damage childhood', *The Telegraph*, 6 February. Available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/9064870/New-style-nappy-curriculum-will-damage-childhood.html (accessed 28.01.16).

Rose, J., Gilbert, L. and Richards, V. (2016) *Health and Well-being in Early Childhood*. London: Sage.

Sackfield-Ford, M. and Davenport, H. (eds) (2019) *Critical Issues in Forest Schools*. London: Sage.

Sakr, M. (2019) *Digital Play in Early Childhood*. London: Sage.

Salovey, P. and Mayer, J.D. (1990) 'Emotional intelligence', *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality*, *9*: 185–211.

Silberfeld, C. (2016) 'Children's health and wellbeing', in I. Palaiologou (ed.), The *Early Years Foundation Stage: Theory and Practice*. London: Sage.

Smith, K.S., Cowie, H. and Blades, M. (2003) *Understanding Children's Development* (4th edn). Oxford: Blackwell.

Su, J. and Yang, W. (2022) 'Artificial intelligence in early childhood education: A scoping review', *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence* (Vol. 3) (accessed 04.07.2023).

Teichert, L. and Anderson, A. (2014) '"I don't even know what blogging is": the role of digital media in a five-year-old girl's life', *Early Child Development and Care*, *184*(11): 1677–1691.

Tempo, S. (2020) 'Black educators in (white) settings: Making racial identity visible in Early Childhood Education and Care in England, UK', *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, *19*(1) [online]. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1476718X20948927 (accessed 11.04.2024).

The Children's Society (2020) *What Is Child Poverty*? Available at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/ending-child-poverty/what-is-child-poverty (accessed 06.09.23).

The Millennium Cohort Study (2024) *Millennium Cohort Study: Centre for Longitudinal Studies*. London: UCL Social Research Institute. CLS | Millennium Cohort Study (ucl.ac.uk) (accessed 29.06.2023).

The Royal Foundation (2021) *Big Change Starts Small*. Available at: RFCEC_BCCS_Report_and_Appendices.pdf (ctfassets.net) (accessed 21.06.2023).

Thompson, P. (2024) 'Play in early childhood', in D. Fitzgerald and H. Maconochie, *Early Childhood Studies* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef) (2023) 'AI for children: Featured project Exploring how to embed child rights in the governing policies of artificial intelligence', AI for children | UNICEF Office of Global Insight & Policy. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/projects/ai-for-children (accessed 04.09.2023).

Walker, A., Flatley, J. and Kershaw, C. (2009) (eds) *Crime in England and Wales 2008/09. Vol. 1, Findings from the British Crime Survey and Police Recorded Crime*. London: HMSO.

Warin, J. (2023) *Gender in Early Childhood Education: Implementing a Gender Flexible Pedagogy*. London: Sage.

PART SUMMARY

Most children today have positive and rewarding experiences in early childhood. There are many, however, who, sadly, do not and require much greater support from adults outside of their homes. Early years practitioners are in a unique position to play a key role in supporting children, not only with their learning but also with their social and emotional development, not to mention their physical growth. Practitioners who work to fully understand their children's individual needs daily enjoy the rewards of seeing children develop. They are also there at times when children need emotional support and security, where, for example, they are experiencing situations and problems they may not even begin to comprehend. Being a practitioner in an early years setting is surely one of the most rewarding and satisfying jobs.