

## CHAPTER 1

# RESEARCH CONTEXTS ACROSS CULTURES

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In the first edition of *Early Childhood Education: Society and Culture* we argued that 'early childhood education has been challenged by a theoretical sea change that has seen individualistic developmental explanations of learning and development replaced by theories that foreground the cultural and socially constructed nature of learning'. In 2008 the continuing evolution of theory has increasingly highlighted the significance of cultural-historical explanations of learning and development and accordingly we have altered our theoretical framework of *sociocultural* theory to use the more explicit term of 'sociocultural-historical theory', for the second edition. We argue that foregrounding historical contexts in this revised term represents a natural progression as the early childhood field is now more conversant with sociocultural theory. The book uses sociocultural-historical theory as an umbrella term that incorporates the various theoretical developments that reflect Vygotskian and post-Vygotskian explanations of development and learning. These include: sociocultural, social constructivism, cultural-historical, activity theory, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) as well as aspects of postmodernism/post-structuralism that have highlighted the significance of shared discourses and practices in early childhood education.

This second edition maintains the cross-national focus of the first edition to explore the different ways of constructing learning in early childhood settings in the United Kingdom, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. These analyses are situated in each country against the historical dominance of the play-based, developmental tradition in early childhood education. Variation in each country's response to the challenges posed by sociocultural-historical theory to early childhood practice is itself an indicator of the importance of acknowledging culture and history within societies and educational systems. The cross-national focus further illustrates the embeddedness of

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learning in current early childhood practices and policies; the second edition comments on the development of such influences since 2004.

The following sections introduce sociocultural-historical theory as a framework for the subsequent chapters. We argue that an in-depth understanding of theory is necessary to minimise superficial interpretations of sociocultural-historical theory by practitioners that can serve to maintain the dominance of practices grounded in individualistic developmental perspectives. This analysis is followed by an overview of early childhood policies, research and practice in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, within the four broad themes of the book that are pivotal to understanding early childhood practice from a sociocultural-historical perspective:

- conceptualisation of learning and pedagogy in early years settings;
- the nature of knowledge in early years settings;
- assessment in early years settings;
- evaluation and quality in early years settings.

### **Psychology's legacy in guiding early years education – a sociocultural-historical reading**

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One of the reasons that so many Western psychologists are reading the writings of a long-dead Russian may be that they are seeking to extend the insights of the so-called cognitive revolution and yet are painfully aware of the shortcomings of so many of its products (e.g. Hirst and Manier, 1995; Sampson, 1981). The research practice of experimentation in artificial situations has provided valuable insights but incurred significant costs. Context, however defined, remained under-theorised and its efforts remained under-researched. (Daniels, 2001: 7)

Daniels (2001), in discussing the field of psychology, points directly at problems within the field of early childhood education. Much of our profession is grounded in the research products of the field of psychology. Foundational to our field is the concept of child development. The observational and child study approaches that has been so highly valued and seen to make the field distinct from other areas of education, have been developed and normed by psychologists. Further, these tools have been consistently used in Australia, New Zealand and in the UK for generating knowledge about children so as to inform practice within the field. The theoretical frameworks that have guided our views on how children think, learn and develop also come directly from psychology. How we conceptualise pedagogy, what we look for in terms of expected developmental trajectories or what constitutes knowledge in early years education, have been traditionally framed using the tools and theories from psychology. Similarly, how we measure these is guided by the worldview that has been bequeathed to us from previous early years professionals/researchers who formed their knowledge from their readings of traditional psychology. Importantly, the paradigm in which we work has been built by and maintained through a psychological tradition.

It is timely that we take stock of how we have come to 'know and do' within the field and to critically examine pedagogy, knowledge construction, assessment and evaluation with the 'context lens' in mind. As discussed above 'Context, however

defined, [remains] under-theorised and its efforts [remain] under-researched' (Daniels, 2001: 7). This book seeks to foreground context and to put forward research that has been framed from a sociocultural-historical perspective from *within* the field of early years education. Many prominent researchers from Australia, New Zealand and the UK have contributed to this book, and their writings provide rich examples of how the conceptual base guiding practice is slowly changing.

We can extend Daniel's (2001) argument, and suggest that many early years researchers from Australia, New Zealand and the UK are also reading the writings of a long-dead Russian because they too are looking for insights into dealing with the limitations of the existing theories and practices used in early years education. Much of the discontent has come from the limitations inherent in the interpretations and developments of Piaget's theories. For example, constructivist thinking focuses attention on the individual, and the individual's construction of the world and of knowledge itself. Many researchers and teachers steeped in cross-cultural contexts will argue that learning and knowledge construction is not an individual process. There are many examples within cross-cultural research of how knowledge is collectively and not individually framed and considered (see Rogoff, 2003 for an expansive argument on this with a range of supporting examples). It is interesting to note that in this volume no author claims to be using a constructivist view of learning or has framed their research and writings following the theories of Piaget. This is reflective of the developments in the field of early years education generally.

In the evolution of theory use in the early years, some researchers and practitioners have moved forward and adopted a social-constructivist approach to pedagogy. In many respects this development appears to be a transition away from focusing simply on the individual and in working towards being able to take account of the social and cultural context of the learner. For instance, Tymms and Merrell (Chapter 9), in their presentation and discussion of data gathered across cultural communities in different countries, acknowledge culture as something that researchers and practitioners must pay attention to in their analysis of pedagogical and curriculum planning. However, to simply 'add culture' to the set of variables being explored could universalise complex and diverse cultural communities into a single category, leading to inappropriate conclusions and ultimately to positioning many children and their families into deficit (see Gutierrez and Rogoff, 2003 for a full discussion of this problem). Similarly, MacNaughton (Chapter 4) moves the theory lens beyond constructivism and uses a critical constructivist perspective in order to cast the lens from a simple reading of the individual to engage critically in how the individual has appropriated (or not) the social discourses which surround them. MacNaughton argues that 'Critical theorists reject the idea that meaning, knowledge and, therefore, learning is a uniquely individual, value free cognitive pursuit'.

Researchers and practitioners in the early years interested in capturing 'context' have looked to sociocultural theory (later to become known as cultural-historical theory) in order to help them think and act differently about their work. For example, Flerer and Richardson (Chapter 10) have used sociocultural theory with practitioners in order to document how sociocultural assessment moves away from documenting the individual and captures the dynamic relations between the individual and the social context. Both Podmore (Chapter 12) and Cowie and Carr (Chapter 8) give

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examples of national curriculum and assessment approaches in New Zealand which draw upon sociocultural theory. Hill and Nichols (Chapter 13) and Williams-Kennedy (Chapter 7) provide similar examples of more localised curriculum development in Australia which has been informed by sociocultural theory. Anning (Chapter 5), in using activity theory for shaping the directions of a curriculum for the childcare sector in the UK, demonstrates another important theoretical development. Activity theory, discussed fully in Anning's chapter, treats the context as an activity system, and seeks to understand the motives, goals and needs of the participants as they work towards specific outcomes (agreed or unarticulated).

Running in parallel with the theoretical evolutions that have been adopted and briefly discussed has been a keen interest in the role of the adult in children's learning. Once again, the legacy of child development theory (notably Piaget) has seen the de-emphasising of the role of the adult in children's learning. With a move away from simply studying or observing children's development, and on to studying children's learning, we have seen a focus on researching how adults interact with children (see Jordan, Chapter 3) and how professionals construct knowledge about learning (see Cullen, Chapter 6). Theoretically different ways of framing research and methodologically different approaches were needed for this renewed attention on the practitioner as pedagogue (see Siraj-Blatchford, Chapter 11). In line with this evolution, most researchers and practitioners have adopted a sociocultural-historical approach for informing their work – this is exemplified in this book. Others have blended across theories; for example, Wood (Chapter 2) uses post-structuralist theory to examine the cultural implications of play, but does so with a view to building a new pedagogy of play. Through her interest in pedagogy and culture, she brings together both post-structural theory and element of sociocultural-historical theory in order to deconstruct, understand and re-build new pedagogical approaches.

Sociocultural-historical theory offers one way of addressing the limitations that our profession has inherited because it specifically deals with context. In order to appreciate the complexity of the chapters that follow, the next section will examine Vygotsky's theoretical ideas in relation to foundational knowledge of early years education, with the view to building a new basic framework for pedagogy, knowledge, assessment and evaluation – the four themes that contributing chapter authors have researched from within the field of early years education. The final chapter in this book, takes up this challenge more explicitly. Taken together, the chapters presented here provide the basis for the much-needed theorisation of 'context' as outlined by Daniels (2001), but specifically for the early years of education.

### **Vygotsky's legacy in relation to recent developments in early years education**

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#### **Child development**

The assessment of learning and development, and the evaluation of early years programmes have traditionally been designed on the premise of 'child development'

principles focused on the ages of children and a correspondingly linear set of stages for progression. That is, assessments are benchmarked against the expected norms for children. This has traditionally been framed in relation to the age of a child – as an indicator or point of progression to be expected. In his time Vygotsky (1998) argued against this kind of developmental trajectory which relied upon the child's chronological age. He suggested that age 'cannot serve as a reliable criterion for establishing the actual level' of a child's development (Vygotsky, 1998: 199). This critique is exemplified in the work of Jordan (Chapter 3), who examined teacher interactions with children, noting the differences and the interplay between teacher scaffolding and teacher co-constructing with children in order to determine children's actual level of development for informing the teaching–learning process. The children's chronological age was not discussed, but rather the focus of attention was on how the teacher and the children interacted and what types of intersubjectivity were being built through a focus on children's interests. Although, Jordan's focus of attention was indirectly on the assessment of actual developmental levels, her sociocultural-historical framework represents a significant move away from a traditional view of *child development*, where development is seen as a naturally evolving process. Mapping interactions has also been featured in the work of Podmore (Chapter 12), who nicely shows how evaluation models in early childhood education can be reconceptualised in relation to child-focused questions. That is, teachers projecting their minds to the interests, activities and interactions of the children, through questions such as: Do you engage my mind? Can I trust you? – generating a new framework for evaluation. This approach, they argue, creates a new space for the evaluation of children's learning in relation to teacher programmes. Once again the sociocultural-historical approach that Jordan and Podmore draw upon marks a significant change in teacher thinking and assessment of children's development from that traditionally used in early childhood education.

Vygotsky suggested that the dominant concept of child development sees 'development as nothing other than realisation, modification, and combination of deposits. Nothing new develops here – only a growth, branching, and regrouping of those factors that were already present at the very beginning' (Vygotsky, 1998: 190). A linear path is generated which positions children who do not meet the development expectations in deficit, or as Vygotsky stated, they are viewed as "diseases" of development' (1998: 191). Cullen (Chapter 6), has explored in her research the tension that arises when different theoretical orientations of staff working with children come together. She states that 'it is in this area of professional knowledge that differences in the perspectives of early childhood teachers and EI [Early Intervention] professionals can most clearly be seen. Although they share a common philosophy of authentic assessment, the more specialised professional knowledge of the speech language therapist, physiotherapist or psychologist can be in conflict with the holistic interests-based planning of the early childhood programme' which is reliant upon a more sociocultural-historical framework. Cullen's research demonstrates that whilst a sociocultural-historical curriculum is clearly being promoted and used, teacher professional knowledge needs to move beyond simply *creating a community* of practice to generating a *community for improving* practice. In using sociocultural-historical theory to frame her research, Cullen has been able to identify two significant problems in early years

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education. First is the tensions that are generated when an interest-led practitioner base that focuses on processes and context works together with a group oriented toward content and disembedded context. Cullen's research provides new knowledge on the significance of the theoretical orientation of professionals and how this generates particular sets of expectations which are looked for and measured by the two groups. The second dimension of Cullen's work relates to the difficulty of professionals in appreciating fully the complexity and depth of understandings needed to use sociocultural-historical theory for informing practice. The latter is noteworthy because the profession has not closely examined the challenge for the field in moving from a traditional evolutionary view of development towards a sociocultural-historical framework for thinking and working with children. This point is also taken up by Flear and Richardson (Chapter 10), who show how difficult it is for teachers to change how they undertake their observations of children. It is not surprising that Vygotsky (1998) wrote about the need for a revolutionary approach for moving thinking on 'child development'.

In line with Vygotsky's revolutionary view of development the authors in this book with their focus on 'context' demonstrate the signification of the 'social situation of development'.

The social situation of development represents the initial moment for all dynamic changes that occur in development during the given period. It determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire ever newer personality characteristics, drawing them from the social reality as from the basic source of development, the path along which the social becomes the individual. Thus, the first question we must answer in studying the dynamics of any age is to explain the social situation of development. (Vygotsky, 1998: 198)

This view of development moves away from internalising development as a feature of the child where a particular developmental milestone is not achieved, and towards viewing development as the relations between the social context and the biological child. The social situation of a child is dependent upon the society and cultural context in which the child is embedded. Different cultural contexts foreground particular social situations, which in turn position children to actively engage and take up particular participation structures for learning. Williams-Kennedy (Chapter 7) illustrates how some Indigenous families foreground different ways of reading – such as, reading the land, reading body language and how traditional literacy benchmarks capture Western and not necessarily Indigenous knowledges – particularly, in relation to progression and expectations at particular year levels. Through documenting the everyday practices of Indigenous families, and through family examination of these practices, different views on literacy and learning were ascertained. This sociocultural-historical study further problematises the traditional view of development that has been used to generate knowledge on literacy learning in Australia. This problem is further explored by Hill and Nichols (Chapter 13), who map literacy learning in the home and literacy learning in school. Their work suggests that a complete view of learning in literacy can only be gained when the relations between school and home are built into not just the

teaching–learning process, but also the assessment framework. Through their research, Hill and Nicols show that traditional assessment frameworks have become institutionalised in Australia, and as with Cullen in New Zealand, institutionalised practices require a major paradigm shift for practices in assessment to change.

Together, these studies show how the view of child development as a naturally evolving process is embedded within the institutionalised thinking of early childhood education in Australia, New Zealand and the UK. The construction of childhood and development within the framework of the institution, the society and the individual, has been researched by Hedegaard (2008), who draws extensively upon Vygotsky's (1998) seminal critique of child development, but specifically examines contemporary contexts, where cultural and linguistic diversity feature (Hedegaard, 2008). In line with Vygotsky's work on the dialectical approach to development, and the social situation of development, Hedegaard views development as a relationship between the child and society. Development is not something that exists within the child, but rather takes place when the child participates in the activities of his/her cultural community. When the development of the child within their cultural community does not match what is expected or accepted as the 'normal' developmental trajectory by the institution, conflicts arise. Hedegaard (2008) argues that the *problem lies not within the child, but rather within the institution*. In this situation, the pedagogue is blind to the possibilities of both the diversity among children and the potential for creating different developmental trajectories within the institution. This latter point is also taken up in Cullen (Chapter 6).

### **Institutionalisation based on age**

Rogoff (2003) has argued that learning institutions, such as nursery schools, preschools and schools, are organised in relation to age. Spaces are created and boundaries are formed based on the criterion of 'age'. Age as a 'defining' variable for organising learning is problematic. However, 'age' as a key variable for 'development' is also problematic. Vygotsky (1929a/1998) illustrates the limitations of positioning 'age' as the key variable in development, through the example of expecting 'older children to remember more' because remembering is a psychological function inherent *in* the child: that is, it is an individual act that a child does alone. Vygotsky (1929a/1998) suggested that culture plays a very important part in memory. He states: 'The child who remembers by means of a geographical map or by means of a plan, a scheme or a summary, may serve as an example of such cultural development of memory' (pp. 57–58). The cultural development of memory will vary across families and communities, and this illustrates the significance of the social situation of development in shaping how that development is supported. Memory is not an individual construction held in the mind of the individual. Wertsch (2007) exemplifies this when he asks who is doing the remembering when a child cannot find its jumper and the adult asks the child to recount their day in order to determine when and therefore where the jumper may have been left. Is remembering an individual act? In Chapter 8, Cowie and Carr

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'take the view that learning and development, rather than being primarily about individual achievement, is distributed over, stretched across, people, places and things'. The dynamics of the context – places, people and things – shape how a child responds. Their research into assessment exemplifies the dialectical relations between places, people and things. Podmore (Chapter 12) has also argued that the evaluative framework that she has generated, which involved questions of 'Is this place for *me*?' is enacted in practice, as 'Is this place fair for *us*?', demonstrating a collective rather than an individual orientation to teachers' work. Similarly, Fler and Richardson (Chapter 10) move the assessment lens away from the individual and to the group. This refocusing lies in direct opposition to the traditional practices of observing, documenting and reporting upon individual children in early childhood centres. Cowie and Carr (Chapter 8) and Podmore (Chapter 12) draw upon the theoretical work of Lave and Wenger (communities of practice), and Fler and Richardson (Chapter 10) use Rogoff's three planes of analysis for informing the paradigm shift needed in assessment for professionals who are currently working in early childhood education. Podmore also draws upon Rogoff's work, but specifically makes use of her writings on the 'transformation of understanding through participation'. Significantly, Fler and Richardson show through their research that a paradigm shift from the individual to the collective is exceedingly difficult for practitioners and requires a great deal of reorientation and intellectual effort to move thinking. Anning (Chapter 5) thoughtfully summarises the growing conflict between a traditionally oriented developmental trajectory, the government agenda for standards and measurements of quality, and a sociocultural-historical 'paradigm shift to the social (Vygotskian) and situated nature of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Resnick et al., 1991), and to the central importance of reciprocity in learning episodes between adults and young children (Schaffer, 1992)' (also see Jordan, Chapter 3).

### A sociocultural-historical research orientation

In this book there are significantly different approaches to taking account of the social situation of development or the cultural context being investigated. Tymms and Merrell (Chapter 9) describe a baseline assessment approach known as Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS), which was originally developed to measure performance in literacy and numeracy, but which has been used in practice as an opportunity for teachers to come to know their children in these areas, but also in social, emotional and physical development.

However, development towards more qualitative research designs has been noted in some areas of psychology, with this approach dominating early years education research. Sakharov (1930/1998: 75) suggests that 'the main flaws in the [quantitative] method ... [are that] it fails completely to take into account the process of concept generation in children and works only with finished concepts'. This approach to research 'cannot tell us how the child uses concepts in solving different life tasks. Indeed, an index of the qualitative characteristics of a concept is, in the particular case, not the child's practical use of this concept in his responses to objects in the



world around him, but the verbal description of the content or the scope of the concept. We obtain this description under experimental or test conditions. However, this index is not only incomplete: it is not even clear' (Sakharov, 1930/1998: 74). In this book most researchers have sought to study early childhood policy and practice from within a dynamic and dialectical framework. In their writings authors have foregrounded context and worked towards understanding the cultural-historical context of their research through exploring a range of dimensions at the one time. Those researchers who have drawn upon Rogoff's (2003) three foci of analysis have concentrated on the child, but in relation to interactions (see Jordan for a nice example of this). They have also concentrated upon the broader context, such as the theoretical perspectives different groups bring to the research context (see both Cullen, and Fleer and Richardson for examples), or the cultural nature of learning (see Williams-Kennedy for a rich example of this).

In this book a dynamic rather than a static view of research is considered. For example, Fleer and Richardson specifically seek to capture the dynamics of the research context and work towards supporting staff in early childhood centres to move beyond a traditional view of development, but also an individualised and static documentation of children. Through mapping the transformation of understanding, rather focusing only on an end point, their work operationalises how early childhood professionals can move outside of the constraints portrayed by Vygotsky (1997):

An exceptionally important methodological problem arises that consists, naturally, of basic points of formulating the problem we are interested in: how can we in the process of research differentiate cultural from biological development and isolate cultural development which, in fact, cannot be found in a pure and isolated form? Does not the requirement of differentiating both processes contradict recognizing their merging as a basic form of mental development of the child and is not their merging an obstacle that makes comprehending unique features of cultural development of the child impossible? (p. 22)

Through the sociocultural-historically framed studies presented in this volume, we gain insights into the cultural nature of development, with all of the complexities of policy, practice, institutional frameworks and the movement from traditional to a revolutionary theoretical orientation.

## **The cultural-historical context of early childhood education in the UK**

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The United Kingdom (UK) includes England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Devolution of power from Westminster since 1999 has resulted in national differences related to new legislation and policies emerging in approaches to curriculum design, implementation, testing and training for service delivery. For example, the Welsh Assembly has developed a distinct and more play-based curriculum for children aged from 3 to 7 years old (Selleck, 2007). In Scotland there has been a discussion about shifting the school starting age to 6 (Macmillan, 2006; Stephen, 2006). Details can be

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found at the respective national government websites: [www.scotland.gov.uk](http://www.scotland.gov.uk) and [www.wales.gov.uk](http://www.wales.gov.uk).

However, a common historical legacy across the UK of uneven and underfunded provision for young children and their families has resulted in children attending a variety of settings before the statutory school starting age of 5. A young child in the UK may spend periods of time (sometimes concurrently) with childminders or in privately funded daycare settings (currently accounting for 80% of daycare provision in England, see Penn, 2007), in Children's Centres combining childcare and education with health services funded and managed by local government children's services directorates, in playgroups run by voluntary agencies, in nursery schools (increasingly becoming Children's Centres with so-called 'wrap-around care' before and after school hours and in school holidays) or in nursery classes and Reception classes in primary schools managed under local authority children's services systems. Yet, despite a raft of government reforms in the past decade, accessibility to and affordability of services for under-5s is still dependent on national and regional historical/cultural/political priorities (Pugh, 2001).

The discourse and infrastructure of UK services for children and families have changed dramatically. Two Green Papers, *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (DfES, 2004a) and *Every Child Matters: The Next Steps* (DfES, 2004b) ([www.everychildmatters.gov.uk](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk)) led to the seminal Children's Act of 2004. In the Act five broad outcomes were defined for all children from birth to the age of 18: being healthy; being protected from harm and neglect; being enabled to enjoy and achieve; making a positive contribution to society; and achieving economic well-being. The Act marked a radical change of direction from single agency service delivery to integrated services. The concept of responding to the 'whole child' within his/her family and community context underpinned the vision of reforming children's services. Traditionally distinct departments of Education, Health and Social Services were charged with working together to deliver the five *Every Child Matters* (ECM) outcomes. At local levels practitioners working with young children and families were also charged with working together, and sometimes reconfigured into multi-agency teams. The shifts in roles and responsibilities and changes in working patterns and practices have been problematic for many early childhood education, health, family support and care workers (Anning et al., 2006).

In 2003 the first Minister for Children, Young People and Families was appointed. As the push for inter-agency collaboration intensified, funding systems and infrastructures have been changed. For example, Children's Trusts, bodies responsible for joint commissioning of local children's services and pooled resources across agencies delivering services, were in place in every region by 2008. The infra-structure of Trusts is underpinned by five key principles: child-centred, outcome-led vision; integrated front-line delivery of services; integrated processes; joint planning and commissioning strategies; and inter-agency governance. Trusts are required to demonstrate effective leadership at every level, including front-line delivery, performance management driving an outcomes focus (from local inspections to rewards and incentives for individual staff), and strategies to listen to children and young people.

In England the Department for Education and Skills became the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) when Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair as

Prime Minister in 2007. The Department published a radical new agenda for re-thinking childhood (DCSF, 2007). Schools will be expected to address many of the new government targets for enhancing the lives of children and their families under an Extended Schools initiative. Extended Schools will offer out-of-school recreation and childcare services, family support programmes, liaison with a range of services for families and career and employment advice for parents as well as young people.

All 3- and 4-year-olds in England are now entitled to a free, good-quality, part-time education place (currently 12.5 hours a week for 38 weeks of the year, but to be increased to 15 hours). Parents can choose to access the free places from the wide range of early years settings listed above, provided the settings are registered and demonstrate that they deliver the Foundation Stage Curriculum. All such settings are inspected by a unified inspection system, under the control of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

Childcare has been expanded rapidly in order to ensure that parents (particularly those on benefits) can get back to work. In 2000 the Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative was launched to increase the supply of daycare in 'poor' neighbourhoods, but with a requirement that their funding be commissioned from the private sector. A *Ten-year Strategy for Childcare* was set out by the government in 2005 (DfES, 2005). But the new Early Years Foundation Stage in England sets standards for *combined learning, development and care* of children from the age of birth to 5 ([www.everychildmatters.gov.uk](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk)). The principles guiding the work of all practitioners charged with delivering services to young children and their families are grouped into four distinct but complementary themes which reflect a sociocultural-historical approach: a unique child, positive relationships, enabling environments and learning and development (DfES, 2007a).

There remains anxiety about the ever-widening gap between the rich and poor in England (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007). Ambitious anti-poverty intervention programmes were modelled in Sure Start Local Programmes set up in 1999 with funding of £1.4 billion over six years. By 2004 Sure Start offered 525 community-based integrated services schemes to support families with under-3s in the most deprived areas of England; but the government decided to rebrand the Sure Start Local Programmes as Sure Start Children's Centres in the face of (perhaps premature?) early anxieties about their effectiveness (Belsky et al., 2007; Anning and Ball, 2008). There was also concern that attention needed to be paid to poor families outside the boundaries of Sure Start Local Programmes. The intention is to roll out services, drawing on lessons learned from the evaluation of Sure Start Local Programmes. By 2010 there will be 3500 Sure Start Children's Centres as hubs of integrated children's services in all areas, not just those deemed to be 'deprived'. There are also major concerns about the relative underachievement of boys and children from so-called ethnic minority communities (often ex-Commonwealth or refugee populations), which the education and care sector are expected to address.

Generic curriculum guidelines and the related assessment system, the *Foundation Stage Early Learning Goals and Profile*, were introduced to all early childhood settings in 2000 (QCA, 2000). In September 2008 this will be combined with the *Birth to Three Matters Curriculum* for under-3s (DfES, 2002), and will form a new Early Years Foundation Stage (DfES, 2007a), which will relate to all children from birth up

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to the age of 5. In many primary schools in England Foundation Stage units for children under 5 have replaced separate nursery (for 3- to 4-year-olds) and reception classes (for 4- to 5-year-olds). The staffing of these units is now a matter of debate in England. As part of the reform of the children's services workforce initiative a new early years professional (EYP) has been developed, a pedagogue of graduate status trained to work across the sectors of care, learning and child development. There will be an EYP in all Children's Centres by 2010, in daycare settings by 2015 and in every Foundation Stage setting in the long term. The blurring of the distinction between a teacher and an EYP raises the possibility of a distinct (and less well paid) category of educators for early childhood settings. So, for example, there is evidence that head-teachers in primary schools are increasingly saving money by using a teacher as the manager of a team of teaching assistants, rather than employing two teachers, to deliver the curriculum in their combined early years units (Anning and Calder, 2008).

### Conceptualisations of learning and pedagogy in the UK

As outlined in the earlier sections of this chapter, the distinct discourse of early childhood education, drawing on the discipline of developmental psychology, emphasises the importance of young children learning through first-hand experiences within a 'child-centred' learning environment. In the UK this discourse exists in tension with statutory schooling discourse which emphasises the preparation of children for 'real' school, in particular their induction into and achievements in the 'basics' of literacy and numeracy, and preparation for the world of work. There are additional tensions from the policy shift to combine staff teams from education and care sectors as their constructs of childhood collide, and from the radical plans to change children's services into multi-agency teams (Anning and Edwards, 2006).

The government commitment to 'evidence-based' policy development was demonstrated in funding a large-scale, longitudinal study, the Effective Provision of preschool Education (EPPE) project (1997–2003) (Sylva et al., 2003). It was designed to investigate the development and attainment of 3000 children between the ages of 3 and 7, initially in their progress through 141 preschool settings (of six main types of provision) in six English local authorities. The project has influenced policy decisions on the future of educating children under 5 in the UK.

In order to pursue evidence of effective pedagogy, two more studies were funded by the government. One was based on case studies in settings in the EPPE study shown to be particularly effective in promoting young children's learning (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Taggart et al., 2002). Their findings were that effective pedagogy was characterised by:

- a judicious mix of adult-initiated group work and freely chosen child-initiated activities;
- the quality of shared, sustained thinking and dialogue between adults/children and children/peers;

- skilful diagnostic assessment of children's learning and strategic planning for a wide range of curriculum experiences;
- practitioners' knowledge of child development and curriculum;
- encouragement for children to represent their understanding in a range of modes.

A second project was based on investigating the perspectives of effective practitioners on pedagogy in early years settings (Moyles et al., 2002). Their findings were that:

- quality teaching and learning is characterised by practitioners' ability to apply knowledge of young children's learning and curriculum knowledge to the planning, implementing and evaluation of children's progression across a range of curriculum areas;
- effectiveness can be identified and measured against agreed criteria.

In English primary schools, where many 4-year-olds receive a version of 'nursery' education, the impact of the National Curriculum (1988) and introduction of Literacy (1999) and Numeracy (2000) Hours resulted in more whole-class teaching, ability grouping, direct instruction and subject-based teaching for 4- to 7-year-olds (Pollard et al., 1994). Currently all registered providers of 'preschool' education must deliver a synthetic phonics scheme to children from birth to 5 (DfES 2007b). Reception class teachers remain confused about pedagogy appropriate to the Foundation Stage within the above constraints (Taylor Nelson Sobres with Aubrey, 2002) and how to use play for learning (see Chapter 2 for a full discussion). Furthermore, the task of training a range of early years practitioners (many of whom have low-level qualifications) to deliver the Foundation Stage and Letters and Sounds curricula remains daunting.

### **The nature of knowledge in early years settings in the UK**

The folklore and practice of designing a curriculum for young children in the UK has been to 'follow the interests of children', though in reality it has reflected the adults' constructs of childhood (Anning, 2007). For practitioners accustomed to plan by themes or projects, the introduction of a subject-based National Curriculum at Key Stage 1 (for 4- to 7-year-olds) was traumatic. Targets set by government for attainments in Literacy and Numeracy, measured by standardised tests for all 7- and 11-year-olds, exacerbated pressures in primary schools to narrow a 'broad and balanced curriculum'. Concerns about the stress levels of young children in primary schools have resulted in a call for a radical review of the primary school curriculum and related systems of assessment (Alexander, 2007).

The English Foundation Stage curriculum outlines six areas of learning: personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; problem solving, reasoning and numeracy; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development and creative development. In response to repeated concerns about the negative effects of

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young children being exposed to too formal a curriculum too soon, guidance notes for the new Foundation Stage Curriculum for 2008 emphasise the importance of learning through play, reciprocity in partnerships with parents, working with other professionals and responding to the diverse needs of children and their families.

### Assessment in early years settings in the UK

In England policy and practice in assessment has been driven by the Standards Agenda. Alongside the National Curriculum are related Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) for 7-year-olds, focused on attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic. Individual child attainments must be reported annually to parents. SATs results are aggregated for schools and reported in league tables. There is pressure on practitioners to teach to the tests. In Scotland and Northern Ireland there are no league tables (though Northern Ireland retains selection tests at 11) and in Wales SATs for 7-year-olds have been discontinued. There is mounting pressure in England to do so.

Baseline assessment for children as they enter school (sometimes at 4) was made compulsory in 1999 (see Chapter 9). Ninety schemes were accredited against criteria prescribed by the government. The results of these disparate schemes were seen to be unreliable for measuring the 'value-added' of Key Stage 1 schooling. In 2002 a single, centralised statutory assessment of children's progression through the Foundation Stage was introduced based on profiling against 'stepping stones'. Summative scores in personal, social and emotional development, language and literacy and mathematics were returned via local authority systems to central government. The introduction of the detailed, centrally imposed profile for each child has met with some resistance from practitioners. An updated version of the profile for the 2008 Foundation Stage Curriculum includes a set of 13 assessment scales, each of which has nine points. Judgements on each child's attainment must be based on observations over time, and it will mainly be the task of teachers in reception classes to complete the profiles by the time children transfer at age 5 to Key Stage 1.

A Common Assessment Framework (CAF) has been introduced as a standardised tool for assessing the need of children for services ([www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/delivering\\_services/caf](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/delivering_services/caf)). It consists of a pre-assessment checklist to identify if a child needs a CAF; a protocol for collecting the views of parents/carers and relevant professionals on the strengths and needs of the child; and where deemed appropriate, a proforma for recording and sharing information across agencies about assessments and treatments. A key professional, probably the child's teacher or social worker, will manage each case.

Alongside these centralised systems, practitioners in a range of early years settings continue to operate a variety of detailed profiles, often shared regularly with parents and carers, based on their daily observations of and interactions with children and their grounding in child development.

### Evaluation and quality in early years settings in the UK

Moss and Pence (1994) identify two approaches to defining and measuring quality in early childhood settings: one descriptive and relative, the other evaluative and

quasi-objective. They describe the former as an 'inclusionary paradigm' in which the processes of reaching a common understanding of quality among the various stakeholders are central. Practitioners and users (ideally children and their parents/carers) negotiate for services that are mutually agreed as worthwhile and of good quality. For example, community-led decision-making about services underpinned the vision of the Sure Start intervention programme (Anning and Ball, 2008).

The second approach identified by Moss and Pence stipulates benchmarks of quality for services as measured by 'outsiders'. Instruments may be:

- defined locally by local authority systems;
- marketed by independent agencies (such as the voluntary sector preschool Learning Alliance with responsibility for playgroups);
- standardised for research purposes (such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale [ECERS] instruments used in the EPPE and National Evaluation of Sure Start projects [Harms et al., 1998]);
- regulatory (such as the Office for Standards in Education system).

It is the Ofsted machinery in particular that has impacted on early childhood education. Ofsted is nominally independent of the government. However, the emphasis placed in their inspections on attainments in literacy and numeracy reflects the government's standards agenda. Ofsted procedures are based on the notion that there is a universal definition of quality without acknowledging the significance of a particular cultural context at a particular point in its history of a setting. The protocols and procedures have been simplified in recent inspections, but the principles of Ofsted-type accountability sit uneasily alongside those of a self-regulating, professionally driven approach to maintaining high standards in education and care.

## **The cultural-historical context of early childhood education in the Australian context**

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Early childhood education in Australia is the responsibility of each of the states and territories. The Commonwealth provides additional funding to support the sector, but only for specific purposes, such as Indigenous early childhood education programmes. As a result, each state and territory has different ways of structuring education and care provision for children from birth to 8 years. Each state and territory has different nomenclature, school starting age, curricula, approaches to testing and evaluation, support services, policies and mix of private and public funded early childhood education and care programmes (Fleer and Udy, 2002).

Although early childhood education is generally viewed as focusing on children from birth to age 8 in Australia, there has been a tradition for states and territories to place children who are in preschool and childcare under the policy and funding regime of the health sector and children aged approximately 5–8 years into the school sector. However, recent government changes have resulted in the merging of childcare policy and provision from the health sector to the education sector. For example, staff from

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Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs with responsibility for childcare have physically moved portfolios and are now under the Department of Education and Work Relations. In the state of Victoria, childcare has moved from the Department of Human Services to a newly formed Department of Early Childhood Education and Development within the Victorian Department of Education. These changes are most recent and the flow on effects to centres is yet to be realised.

Most states and territories provide one year of free preschool education. The full cost of childcare resides with the families, although partial subsidies are provided for some disadvantaged groups. The cost of public school education for children aged 6–8 years (and beyond) is provided by states and territories. Private schools receive some funding from the government.

Australia is a multicultural society with a 2% Indigenous community. Indigenous children live all over Australia – urban to remote rural – and have a range of languages and cultures. Most schools and centres in Australia use English as their language of instruction. However, in some remote communities bilingual programmes operate.

### Conceptualisation of learning and pedagogy in Australia

As in the UK, in Australia learning and pedagogy have been framed from within a developmental paradigm, mostly influenced by developmental psychology. The enactment of this theoretical perspective in early childhood centres has been mostly shaped by the United States of America through their construction and discourses of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). The influence of DAP has been strong and this language has found its way into all departmental documentation throughout Australia.

In recent years there has been a growing re-conceptualisation of early childhood pedagogy through the influence of Reggio Emilia. The principles of Reggio Emilia have found their way into some early childhood long daycare centres and preschools, but also into the school sector – mostly private schools. Historically, the school sector has principally adopted a discipline focus alongside a child-centred approach to learning and pedagogy. However, it is mostly the preschool and childcare sector which has followed the interest of the child, while the school sector has followed the interest of the curriculum.

Evidence-based policy imperatives set by the Australian government have principally focused on literacy and numeracy. The government's national literacy and numeracy plan has strongly influenced how learning and pedagogy are enacted in Australian schools and centres, the latter being least influenced by this perspective due to the childcare sector largely being federally funded, and education being funded at the state level. However, the Australian government has recently invested in innovative practices through directing money to research in preschools and childcare centres on how best to support literacy and numeracy in centres. For example, a one million dollar research and development project was funded by the government to support the birth to age 5 sector in adopting a sociocultural-historical approach to literacy and numeracy learning in families and centres. Funding has also been directed towards the research and development of early childhood science programmes through funding informal



learning centres, but also through investigating the possibility of developing a national preschool science resource and curriculum programme. However, with a change of government in 2007, it is difficult to know if this new imperative will be maintained.

Generally speaking, government research to support the re-conceptualisation of learning and pedagogy for the early childhood sector has only emerged since 2005. Although the Australian government has targeted early childhood education (Fleer, 2000; Press and Hayes, 2000; Raban, 2000; Yelland, 2000) as a priority area, historically limited funds have been directed towards this sector of education. Consequently, the early childhood profession has tended to look elsewhere – mostly to local small-scale studies (Hill et al., 1998) or to larger research from the UK (e.g. Sylva and Sammons, 2000) and the United States (e.g. Schweinhart and Weikart, 1999) to support its pedagogical practices. The EPPE project and the follow-up effective pedagogical study (Siraj-Blatchford, Chapter 11), and the Sure Start studies ([www.surestart.gov.uk](http://www.surestart.gov.uk) at Department for Education and Employment, 1999) are important documents for informing policy and practice in Australia.

### **The nature of knowledge in early years settings in Australia**

Early childhood programmes in Australia in the before-school sector principally operate a domains-based approach, drawing upon developmentally appropriate practice to inform programming. There is no national early childhood curriculum. However, most states and territories now have some form of curriculum. Most have developed an early childhood curriculum for the birth to 8 sector. In this documentation a mix of domains and key learning areas, such as the arts, science and technology, mathematics, literacy, and health and physical education, are evident. In the school sector, each state and territory has developed a curriculum that is centred around the key learning areas. However, most states are now moving away from key learning areas and are beginning to construct curricula that foreground an integrated view of knowledge. For example, Queensland has adopted a ‘new basics’ view of education, and Tasmania has designed its curriculum in relation to ‘essential learnings’. New curricula tends to focus mostly on life-long learning skills, citizenship and a form of futures education. In the past, sociocultural-historical theory has not been influential in informing the early childhood curriculum in Australia. However, some states and territories have examined the New Zealand curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996a) with a view to framing their documents around principles. The curriculum in Australia is evolving, and research in some states and territories around observations and planning (see Horner and Topfer, 2003; Fleer and Richardson, 2003; Fleer and Robbins, 2004a) is acting as a catalyst for change from domains to a broader more sociocultural-historical framing of knowledge.

### **Assessment in early years settings in Australia**

Another major issue that has been raised across all states and territories in recent years has been the policy imperative of literacy and numeracy. It has been argued that

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the focus on these areas has been at the expense of other curriculum areas. Similarly, concerns have also been voiced about outcomes-based education, with some states linking outcomes directly to ages (contrary to the original philosophy of outcomes-based education). For some other states, outcomes-based education has been adopted alongside of accountability measures such as testing, benchmarking and reporting. Some educators have reported a negative impact on the quality of child-centred curriculum programmes (Fleer, 2000). However, more recently, some sectors in government and two states have researched and implemented a sociocultural-historical approach to assessment. For example, the Australian government uses an instrument known as the preschool profile to map the literacy, numeracy and social context of all Indigenous preschool children. This tool was developed specifically on sociocultural-historical theory and seeks to capture a dynamic image of children working in collaboration with others. This model has been used by the Western Australian Education system for all preschool children in that state, and preliminary findings indicate that early childhood professionals find the tool to be effective for assessment, but also for changing their own pedagogical practices. In South Australia and in some parts of Victoria teachers are drawing upon Learning Stories (see Carr, 2001a; Cowie and Carr, Chapter 8) to inform their assessment practices. These assessment tools have been developed from a sociocultural-historical theoretical framework by early childhood researchers and are proving to be most effective for generating change. However, there is a real concern for the development and implementation of assessment tools designed from outside of the field of early childhood education. Recently, there has been a real push by pediatricians and epidemiologists to make use of a Canadian-based Early Education Index. This Index has been trialled in Western Australia and modified for use in Australian preschool children. It is the intention of the new Labor government to roll out this assessment tool so that a picture of how Australia's early childhood children can be gained.

### **Evaluation and quality in early years settings in Australia**

A significant initiative by the Australian government in 2004 was the release of a paper entitled *A National Early Childhood Agenda*, a series of national consultations in each state and territory, and the release of the consultation paper that resulted from discussions by professionals across the care and education sector. The government brought together health and education professionals from each state and territory, and took an active leadership role in generating evidence-based policy across portfolios and political groups. This document signalled the need for disbanding the division between care and education. It also suggested communication across jurisdictions (Federal and state) and across structural levels (different departments). The traditional divide between sectors has become further entrenched as a result of differing industrial awards, conditions of service and corresponding salaries/wages. Whilst divisions in government jurisdictions are currently being addressed, the industrial awards and conditions, including unions, will continue to be a major issue for Australian early childhood professionals.

Although the concerns regarding the clear divisions between care and education in Australia have been noted in official publications (see Press and Hayes, 2000; OECD, 2001) and roundtable sessions organised through the Commonwealth Child Care Advisory Council, we have also seen similar concerns on the international front, as evidenced by reports and initiatives in the UK and New Zealand.

Research evidence (see Farquhar, 1999a) suggests that the salary paid (and therefore an assumed increase in qualifications and experience of staff) has been shown to be a significant contributor to outcomes for children. Anecdotal evidence from academic staff across universities in Australia suggests that students who have completed four years of a degree in early childhood education would generally demonstrate greater knowledge and higher interactional patterns with young children than those who had completed only three or two years of a degree. Confirmation of this view has been noted in the international literature (see Sylva, 1999). In New Zealand there is general agreement that further education results in higher quality interactional patterns and the implementation of higher quality programmes for young children (Smith et al., 2000). However, extensive research into qualifications has not been conducted in Australia. Over the past five years there has been a general push in some states to reduce the level of staff qualifications in early childhood programmes as one way of reducing costs in the bid for centres to stay financially viable. While the national quality assurance system has been most effective for measuring minimum standards relating to the safety and care of young children, the system was not designed as a tool for making fine-grained judgements on outcomes for children as a result of staff qualifications. The introduction of national professional standards for early childhood teachers has been suggested as one option for raising the quality and status of teaching and the early childhood profession.

## **The cultural-historical context of early childhood education in New Zealand**

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Early childhood services in Aotearoa New Zealand are primarily community-based and cater for children from infancy to school entry, usually at age 5. With separate curricula, qualifications and histories, there are few links between the early childhood and primary sectors. Currently, licensed and chartered early childhood services are responsible to the Ministry of Education. These services include sessional kindergartens, play-centres (parent co-operatives), childcare, Nga Kohanga Reo (Maori immersion centres), Pacific early childhood centres, co-ordinated family daycare and the correspondence school early childhood service.

The integration of care and education occurred when responsibility for childcare services was transferred from the Department of Social Welfare to the Department of Education in 1986. In 1988, the Working Group on Early Childhood Care and Education (Department of Education, 1988) proposed that the early childhood sector would have equal status with other education sectors. A change of government interfered substantially with this goal and the 1990s witnessed a 'marginalized and often divided early

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childhood sector' (May, 1999: 19) as the national government's market-led policies influenced developments in the sector.

Despite tensions resulting from the downsizing of the proposed reforms, the 1990s were marked by a growing sense of professionalism, associated with the implementation of an early childhood curriculum and the growth of a postgraduate research culture. While tensions between market-driven policies and the new professionalism remained, the growth of academic and professional debate generated a culture of inquiry that promoted a focus on quality. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a change of government provided the policy context to support the focus on quality early childhood education (ECE). The most visible indicator of this emphasis is the ten-year Strategic Plan for Early Childhood, *Pathways to the Future: Nga huarahi aratiki* (Ministry of Education, 2002), which establishes core goals and strategies for the sector. Three core goals are identified:

- to increase participation in quality ECE services;
- to improve quality of ECE services;
- to promote collaborative relationships.

Policy directions associated with these goals include: increased qualification requirements, the implementation of teacher registration, the provision of 20 'free' hours ECE, provision of equity funding and the establishment of research-based Centres of Innovation. Strategies include a specific focus on building a sector that is responsive to the needs of Maori (indigenous New Zealanders) and Pasifika (Pacific Island) peoples.

A consultative approach has characterised development of both the early childhood curriculum and the strategic plan. Widespread consultation with the sector culminated in an innovative bicultural curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996a) that has received strong support from practitioners. An anomaly in the current Labour government's goals for early childhood seems likely to maintain tensions in the sector for the foreseeable future, despite government support for quality education. On one hand, there is a liberal, inclusive view of education, encapsulated in the statements regarding quality and diversity; on the other hand, there is a tighter outcomes-focused view of policy analysis and implementation (Scrivens, 2002).

### Conceptualisations of learning and pedagogy in New Zealand

A long-standing tradition of informal play-based programmes has influenced the implementation of *Te Whāriki*. In this context, it has not been easy for educators to appreciate the complexity of the *Te Whāriki* curriculum, or to take the more proactive teaching role envisaged by its sociocultural philosophy.

*Te Whāriki* draws upon a variety of theoretical perspectives but increasingly its sociocultural underpinnings have been stressed in academic debate. Anne Smith (1998), in the fourth edition of her highly influential textbook *Understanding Children's Development: A New Zealand Perspective*, introduced student teachers and practitioners to the principles and language of sociocultural theory, with particular attention to the roles of adults

and learners within a relationships model. Other influences were congruence with relationships-based Maori pedagogy (Bishop and Glynn, 1999), and interest in the Italian Reggio Emilia programmes and project learning.

Most contemporary research on learning and pedagogy in New Zealand has adopted small-scale qualitative methodologies that accord with sociocultural perspectives. An exception is the longitudinal Competent Children project, conducted by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, which has tracked the effects of families and early childhood education on children's competencies at school. Wylie (2001) identified the ECE quality factors that were most clearly associated with competencies as:

- the environment is print-saturated;
- ECE staff are responsive to children;
- ECE staff join children's play;
- ECE staff ask open-ended questions.

The most recent report on the cohort at age 16 points to the lasting effect of quality early childhood education (Hodgen, 2007). The visibility of adult-child interactions in the ECE quality factors is consistent with sociocultural principles. However, the sector cannot be overly complacent about the Competent Children findings. The sample was slanted towards upper socioeconomic levels, did not include Kohanga Reo and only a few Pasifika centres participated. This qualification suggests there could still be much to learn about a pedagogy that is responsive to social and cultural contexts.

### The nature of knowledge in early years settings in New Zealand

*Te Whāriki's* view of the child as a 'competent learner and communicator' reflects a credit view of the child that is guiding current approaches to programming and assessment. The four central principles of *Te Whāriki* support a holistic curriculum philosophy:

Empowerment	<i>Wbakamana</i>
Holistic development	<i>Kotahitanga</i>
Family and community	<i>Whanau tangata</i>
Relationships	<i>Nga bononga</i>

*Whāriki* or 'mat' signifies the weaving of the principles, strands and goals that comprise the curriculum. The five strands – well-being, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration – are considered essential areas for learning and development. The goals within each strand highlight ways in which educators can support children rather than specific skills or content areas. The *whāriki* metaphor also encompasses the diverse peoples, philosophies and services that participate in early education.

The holistic approach to curriculum planning has melded with sociocultural principles and the project approach to promote interests-based programming. However, the strong free-play tradition of New Zealand's early childhood programmes has meant

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that practitioners have been slow to move away from a narrow interpretation of 'interests' as children's self-selection of activities to the stronger sense of interests reflected in project approaches. Projects involve collaborative planning for sustained learning experiences around shared interests in the sociocultural contexts of home, community and centre. Theoretically, project learning should fit well with the *Tē Whāriki* principles, but without this deeper understanding of sociocultural principles a *Tē Whāriki* programme may look little different from programmes planned under a developmental philosophy (Meade, 2000).

A further issue relates to the place of content learning in the early childhood curriculum and links with the learning areas of the New Zealand Curriculum in primary schools. Concern about downward pressure from primary schools has created nervousness in the sector about acknowledging content learning in an early childhood curriculum. An official pressure for greater continuity between sectors was signalled when the Ministry of Education highlighted literacy and numeracy in the early years through a multi-media campaign aimed at families, and early childhood centres. Promising results from a literacy professional development programme have strengthened interest in the significance of literacy learning prior to school entry for literacy instruction at school. Based on the sociocultural premise that children's early literacy meanings are embedded in the literacy practices of homes and communities, the *Picking Up the Pace* programme (Phillips et al., 2001) worked with early childhood and primary teachers to promote understanding of a co-constructive model of literacy learning.

Postgraduate research from a sociocultural perspective has brought a new dimension to the subject content debate. Jordan (see Chapter 3), Hedges (2002) and Prince (2007) have identified children's interest in content learning, which has challenged their teachers both to upskill their own subject content knowledge and to value community-based 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez et al., 2005). The increasing understanding of this sociocultural conception of knowledge in the early childhood sector, together with the 2007 launch of the revised New Zealand Curriculum for schools which proposes key competencies that align more clearly with *Tē Whāriki* strands, may help to alleviate early childhood concerns about the prescriptive nature of content learning (see also Chapter 8).

### Assessment in early years settings in New Zealand

There has been a limited tradition of assessment in ECE and a 1993 survey of assessment practices found that assessment procedures tended to be problem-oriented (Wilks, 1993). This deficit approach to assessment has been challenged by learning story assessment (Carr, 2001a) which focuses on the child as a learner in specific contexts rather than on achievement objectives and skills. Other practices include the use of portfolios and documentation of children's experiences. These credit approaches are consistent with *Tē Whāriki*'s focus on the 'rich child'. The release of early childhood assessment exemplars (developed by Carr and her team) (Ministry of Education, 2005) and associated Ministry-funded professional development has promoted learning stories as a dominant assessment approach in centres.

At school entry, usually at age 5, children are assessed with the School Entry Assessment (SEA) kit (Ministry of Education, 1997). The SEA comprises three performance-based tasks designed to assess concepts about print, story retelling skills, and numeracy skills and concepts. At six years a diagnostic net for literacy skills is used to identify children requiring Reading Recovery tuition. To date there has been no move to establish mandatory standards-based assessment for the first years of school, as occurs with older children. Despite this greater flexibility in the early school years, there is little consistency between early childhood and primary assessment approaches.

### Evaluation and quality in early years settings in New Zealand

The Education Review Office (ERO) has responsibility for monitoring the standards of early childhood services. Licensing regulations and the Statement of Desirable Principles and Practices (DOPS) are two mechanisms for monitoring quality assurance, but these are usually assumed to constitute minimum standards. Programme evaluation within the holistic curriculum framework of *Te Whāriki* has created considerable challenges for practitioners. The flexibility of *Te Whāriki* can lead to interpretations of quality that are incompatible with its principles (Cullen, 1996).

To assist practitioners to engage in reflective practice, *The Quality Journey* (Ministry of Education, 1997) was developed as a resource for all services. *The Quality Journey* extends concepts and ideas in the DOPS and *Te Whāriki*, and provides a framework for a self-review process. A further publication, *Quality in Action*, has the 'objective of encouraging management and educators to use their professional judgement about the best way to implement the DOPS' (Ministry of Education, 1998: 6). *Ngā Arohaehae Whai Hua. Self-review Guidelines for Early Childhood Education* (Ministry of Education, 2006) provides guidelines for internal reviews by teachers and services that incorporate NZ pedagogical research. As with *Te Whāriki*, these directions, while encouraging professionalism and diversity, place heavy demands on the knowledge base and professional skills of practitioners.

The teacher-researchers in the Ministry-funded Centres of Innovation have documented innovative teaching and learning using the *Te Whāriki* curriculum (see Meade, 2007), however there is still a need for research that considers macro and micro factors that influence teachers' implementation of *Te Whāriki* (Hedges and Nuttall, 2008).

Against this cross-national background, the country authors in Chapters 2–13 explore issues that are grounded in specific contexts, but which raise theoretical and practical issues at a cross-national level. The theoretical terms used by country authors (e.g. 'activity theory', 'sociocultural theory') have been retained, reflecting the diverse theoretical strands of post-Vygotskian and post-structuralist research. In the concluding chapter the editors use the umbrella term 'sociocultural-historical' to consider outcomes of sociocultural-historical research in the early years, synthesise debate surrounding the four main themes, and highlight future directions for policy, research and practice. The chapter concludes with a set of propositions for quality early years education derived from the research evidence debated by contributing authors.

