

COMMENT *Anne Meade*

This issue of *Early Childhood Folio* has been finalised at a time when I have been reflecting on the differences between early childhood education in England and New Zealand. I was in the United Kingdom in their spring of 1999 creating my own links between family life and early education—spending time with a new grandson in London at the same time as working on some early childhood projects.

Baby James was working really hard at managing his parents and grandparents, learning through every sense and developing his touch, sight, and hearing, as he cuddled into one of us. He liked to hear familiar music and voices that connected his past world in the womb to the huge spaces outside. By five weeks of age—my departure date from London—he was beginning to “talk back” when spoken to. His life’s journey toward being a competent and confident learner and communicator had started well.

While working on developing Early Childhood Quality Indicators and studying our Desirable Objectives and Practices in New Zealand Early Childhood Services (DOPs) closely, I realised the aims embodied in the five strands in *Te Whāriki*¹ match my dreams for James:

... Children [will] grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society.²

What a stunning covenant this is between society and its children and their families! What an awesome responsibility for New Zealand early educators, who are to provide high quality early education to make that covenant meaningful.

Contrast this with the main purposes of the early childhood curriculum in England and Wales. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in London says one is “to establish expectations for the majority of children by the end of the reception year”. The other is “to provide a basis for long term planning of the curriculum throughout the foundation stage”.³ These aims are not likely to capture British parents’ dreams for their children, or to inspire early childhood teachers, in the way *Te Whāriki* has. In fact, when their draft Early Learning Goals (curriculum) were recently announced,⁴ there was an unprecedented outcry and resistance to them by professional early childhood educators.

I was working on three projects while in the United Kingdom—all focused on teaching and learning in early childhood. In the first, I aired my concerns about early childhood education which hasn’t yet shifted from the hands-off style of teaching based on the main tenets of the child-centred approach.⁵ Put simplistically, this approach is one of teachers creating a play environment, and passively waiting for development to occur without any adult intervention. I promoted the alternative: namely, teachers engaging with children’s choice, play, and discovery to facilitate learning in order to enhance development. Rogoff uses the term “guided participation” to describe the sorts of learning processes involving more capable others.⁶

In another paper, I aired my concerns about the harmfulness of narrow, mindless teaching of young children associated with direct instruction in groups.⁷ This is the experience of many, many four-year-olds in England.⁸ (I think it is also the experience of too many young children in New Zealand centres.) I challenged those who believe in the myth that paying attention means staying focused

on one thing at a time. One of the functions of play is to allow children to pursue fascinations such as schemas, *not* by sitting still and listening to one person but by moving from area to area, learning and memorising knowledge about, say, the properties of free-flowing materials from sand, water, cooking ingredients, and so on. Play in an environment rich with experiences does allow children to grow and develop, rather than to be stunted by a narrow curriculum and/or teacher control. However, my earlier concern persists. Simply creating the physical environment for play is not sufficient for acquiring deep knowledge. For children to flourish, Vygotskian researchers have shown us the need for social interaction with more capable others. Valsiner has summarised the conditions for acquiring knowledge and understanding:

First, . . . children’s actions with objects. . . . Secondly, interactions with others . . . [especially] adults who [educate] the child in a purposeful manner in the process of interaction. [And] finally the child’s own, newly developed reflection upon his [sic] own actions and thinking processes.⁹

It is a pleasure to work with New Zealand documents (DOPs and *Te Whāriki*) that create frameworks to assist early childhood teachers to strike the balance between too little teacher engagement and too much teacher direct instruction. In drafting quality indicators, I have been paying particular attention to educators’ interactions with children that fully engage children’s thinking and foster learning dispositions. There is much on children’s development in the literature, but there is little evidence-based writing on children’s learning and on the effects of different sorts of educators’ interactions on how children learn. Educators need more such literature.

The papers in *Early Childhood Folio 4* help to fill the gaps in the literature. They explore the themes of: curriculum aims; teaching styles and pedagogical practices, and how they can be enhanced and by whom; and parent aspirations for their children. They reflect broadly the sections in DOPs and, in particular, explore aspects of learning and educators’ roles. It is pleasing to read a range of New Zealand and Australian research papers that challenge educators to strive for better practice for infants, toddlers, and young children.

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2. Ministry of Education. (1998). *Quality in action: Te mahi whai hua: Implementing the revised statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices in New Zealand early childhood services*. Wellington: Learning Media.

3. Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. (1999). *The review of the desirable outcomes for children’s learning on entering compulsory schooling*. London: Author.

4. The Early Learning Goals. (1999). *Practical Pre-school, 14*.

5. Meade, A. (1999, April). *If you say it three times, is it true? Critical use of research in early childhood education*. Keynote address to the Third Warwick International Early Years Conference, University of Warwick.

6. Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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8. Pascal, C. (1990). *Under fives in infant classrooms*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Press.

9. Valsiner, J. (1987). *Culture and the development of children’s actions*. Chichester: Wiley.