Reconceptualising Child-Centred Education: contemporary directions in policy, theory and practice in early childhood

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this article is to examine contemporary transformations in early childhood education, in light of developments in policy, theory and practice, and to chart significant changes and continuities over the last 40 years. The Plowden Report had a significant impact on early childhood education, because it reified developmental theories, and child-centred approaches to learning through discovery, exploration and play, and to planning the curriculum around children's needs and interests. However, these constructs proved to be problematic in theory and in practice, and provoked unprecedented policy interventions in curriculum and pedagogy. It is argued here that the concept of child-centred education has re-emerged within contemporary social policy initiatives that focus provision and multi-professional services on children and their families. Furthermore, theoretical advances have challenged the dominance of developmental theories, and integrate social, cultural and individual perspectives. Children are seen as competent social actors within a complex network of social and cultural influences. This places children and significant adults at the heart of contemporary educational processes.

Introduction

Since the publication of the Plowden Report in 1967, early childhood provision has undergone significant transformations. From being at the margins of government policy in the first half of the twentieth century, early childhood is now central to policy visions and aspirations towards improving the quality of education and care, tackling social exclusion, promoting early intervention, and enhancing life chances for children and their families (Alakeson, 2004; Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2004a). There is consistent international evidence that high-quality provision has positive effects on children's learning and development and their subsequent learning careers, and

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results in positive social and economic outcomes for society (Sylva & Pugh, 2005). Within this broad policy remit, it can be argued that there are significant continuities with the principles and recommendations of the Plowden Report, as well as key conceptual shifts. From being derided in the 1980s by the radical reformist agenda of the New Right, the concept of child-centred education has re-emerged within contemporary policy initiatives, such as the Sure Start Programme, Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004a), Birth to Three Matters (DfES/Sure Start, 2002) and the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA]/Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 2000). Personalised learning, assessment for learning, children's well-being, the voices and rights of the child, are key policy aspirations across different forms of provision and service providers. There have been unprecedented policy interventions in curriculum and pedagogy as successive governments have sought to align pre-school (birth to five) and primary education. Furthermore, major theoretical advances have challenged the dominance of developmental theories, and have moved the field towards integrating social, cultural and individual perspectives on early learning and development (Rogoff, 2003; Anning et al, 2004).

The purpose of this article is to examine continuities and changes in early childhood education from the Plowden Report to contemporary trends in policy, theory and practice. The first section provides a brief historical overview of the ways in which the Plowden Report reflected ideological aspirations and validated developmental theories. This is followed by a critical review of the key theoretical tenets of child-centred education, and how these were expressed in practice, with particular reference to play. The third section examines the case for re-conceptualising child-centred education in the context of social and educational change.

From Past to Present

The commitment to child-centred education, which is central to the Plowden Report, emerged in the nineteenth century, in reaction to growing concerns about the abusive treatment of children, especially in the 'lower' and working classes (Whitbread, 1972; Cunningham, 2006). Prevailing views of childhood, and the lack of educational provision, affected all social groups. As Whitbread (1972) noted, children of middle-class families experienced poor quality or inappropriate education in their early years. Children might be 'emotionally crippled' in materially poor or wealthy homes, and many homes failed to provide sufficient intellectual stimulation to satisfy their natural curiosity and imagination. To this end, nursery provision outside the home was seen increasingly as a benefit to all children, and not just to those in need of care or rescue.

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the establishment of a distinct phase of nursery-infant education for three to seven year-old children, alongside the struggle to define its principles, aims and purposes. The

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traditional, utilitarian model of primary schooling was concerned with the transmission of content through formal methods, on the assumption that knowledge could be organised and packaged within a subject-centred curriculum, and would be absorbed by learners through direct teaching, leading to defined learning outcomes. In contrast, there was a growing commitment to child-centred education which derived from the work of Froebel, Dewey, Rousseau, and others (Bennett et al, 1997). This was underpinned by child development theory, which became reified in institutional discourses, texts and practices, as evidenced in the dual ethic of care and education, and in the psychoanalytical and therapeutic work of Sigmund Freud, Susan Isaacs and their followers (Hughes & Hughes, 1937). These trends were exemplified by E.R. Boyce, the head teacher of the Raleigh Infant School in 1933, in Stepney, East London. Boyce (1946) wrote a detailed account of the aims, methods and outcomes of their experimental practices, which were based on the work of Susan Isaacs, and the advice of psychologists within the new Child Guidance Clinics. The principles underpinning this 'child-centred' educational experiment reflected growing trends towards greater freedom and activity for young children, and a rejection of traditionalism:

> At the first meeting of the Raleigh Infant School staff, we agreed to work for a 'child-centred' school, the development of the individual being our first concern. We decided that the artificialities of the school machine should invariably give way to the needs of the children. We looked forward to their development socially, but determined to allow this to grow spontaneously in the atmosphere we would provide. Organization of large groups with set purposes was to be avoided. We hoped also that reading, writing and number, with other knowledge of the world around, would arise as interests from problems encountered during play, and from the practical necessities of self-chosen pursuits. (Boyce, 1946, p. 4)

Child-centred education incorporated care, rescue and correction of 'defects', alongside a commitment to free choice and free play within a richly resourced learning environment. There was no distinction between work and play; teachers and adults were 'human resources', as they responded to children's needs, interests, and patterns of learning that emerged during play and other child-initiated activities. There was no 'syllabus of work'; the curriculum was 'activity led', as teachers planned in response to their observations of children's learning and development. Teacher-directed activities included stories, readings, sense and habit training, drama, poetry and music. Notions of developmental readiness underpinned their decisions about when to introduce more structured teaching of reading, writing and number. Otherwise content knowledge was embedded in play activities that reflected their everyday lives, and promoted fantasy and imagination. Boyce portrayed the enduring values and aspirations of child-centred education, many of which were subsequently enshrined in the Plowden Report.

From Experimental to Mainstream Practice

The Plowden Report was significant for early childhood in terms of policy, theory and practice, not least because it attempted to move child-centred education from the experimental to the mainstream of educational practice. At the level of policy, the report endorsed existing trends and recommendations towards expanding provision for three to five year-old children, thereby establishing the viability of early childhood (then nursery-infant) as a distinct stage and not just a preparation for school and adulthood. However, it must be remembered that the report was mainly concerned with primary schools, rather than with wider forms of provision for children under five. The report recommended the expansion of provision for four to five year-old children in Reception classes, with a single intake in September, rather than the established pattern of two or three intakes per year (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, Part IV, chapter 10, para. 350). Thus the report failed to address the difficult structural position of four-year-olds in Reception classes, which remained a problem into the twenty-first century.

At the level of practice, the recommendations were in harmony with an established commitment to informal, play-based methods, to integrated approaches to curriculum planning, and to experiential learning. The 'naturally developing child' was seen as active, exploratory, curious, creative, playful and sociable. As the Plowden Report noted: 'Children should be allowed to be themselves' (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, p. 187). In relation to theory, the main principles of Plowden resonated with established ideologies, and contemporary interpretations of Piagetian developmental theories.

Education as Development

By the 1960s, specific aspects of Piaget's theories were well established in the mainstream educational discourse, building on the work of the early twentieth-century pioneers. Piaget's theories of 'ages and stages' proposed developmental regularities and certainties. Whilst these theories do acknowledge developmental leaps and lags, as well as 'pivotal' or 'significant' periods, the processes of transition through the stages, and consolidation within the stages, are considered to be universal. Although Piaget did not provide any definitive guidelines for educational practice (DeVries, 1997), key aspects of his theories had powerful resonance with the Zeitgeist of the 1960s. Educational 'translations' of his theories underpinned the Plowden Report, and included readiness for learning, the primacy of learning through discovery and exploration, and the child's own efforts to construct meaning and understanding from experience.

The notion of early childhood as a stage in its own right was theoretically and philosophically seductive at a time when provision for young children was expanding, and new generations of educators were looking towards new ideas and curriculum models. Supporters of 'developmentalism' claimed to be concerned with principles and processes. Curriculum content and organisation

were framed around four domains of development – physical, intellectual, social and emotional – with an emphasis on educators following children's needs and interests as they emerge through play, choice, and activity:

> the content of any child's education must consist of genuine, first-hand experience, since if it does not, it will have very little meaning and will fail to bring about real development. It is this that lies behind the claim that the curriculum should be based on the needs and interests of pupils, and no amount of conceptual analysis of those terms can counter the claim that, if it is not, then nothing to which the developmentalist would grant the name 'education' will occur. It is developmental needs that are the criteria of curriculum decision-making, since these, as we have seen, are the ultimate values of this educational theory, and those developmental needs ... can only be met by reference to those things the child reveals a genuine interest in. (Blenkin & Kelly, 1987, p. 12)

The established child-centred ideology reinforced the focus on activities rather than outcomes, and less attention was paid to specifying desirable knowledge, skills, understanding, dispositions, and outcomes, within a clearly articulated curriculum framework. The notion that curriculum content arises through needs and interests was one of the key weaknesses of the developmental approach (Darling, 1994). For example, showing an interest in a range of topics or activities is not the same as making meaningful connections in which learners acquire, test, refine and reflect on their knowledge and skills. The concepts of learning and development were often used interchangeably, and there was inadequate engagement in debates about what forms of socially valued knowledge children might usefully engage with, what forms of knowledge they co-construct through their self-chosen activities, and how progression in learning would be achieved. The 'facilitating' role of adults was prioritised, and there was insufficient clarification of proactive pedagogical approaches.

Although Piaget's theories became the focus of increasing scrutiny and critique (Darling, 1994), they continued to be used by educationalists to justify child-centred approaches. When the National Curriculum was introduced from 1988 onwards, the rallying cry of the early childhood community was 'we teach children not subjects', as if subject matter knowledge was a contaminant of young children's innocence, rather than the essential building blocks of their learning, progress and achievements. Blenkin & Kelly (1994) reiterated this continued polarisation in their forthright critique of the impact on early childhood education of instrumental, outcomes-led policy reforms:

> The central concern is with subjects and the subject content children are to assimilate, the targets they are to attain, and the levels of knowledge they are to reach, rather than the contribution such learning or attainment is likely to make to their learning and development as human beings ... these policies do not place the child

first. And this is the central reason for that head-on clash with the traditions of early childhood education. (1994, p. 37)

In spite of these endorsements, there were many shortcomings in developmentally based curricula, and the 'traditions of early childhood education' did not always stand up to theoretical and empirical scrutiny (Bennett et al, 1997). In addition, the commitment to play, which has always been a shibboleth of child-centred education, came under increasing scrutiny.

The Problems with Play

Child-centred education reified the role and value of play in children's learning and development. However, the commitment to play has always been strong on ideology and rhetoric (Bennett et al, 1997; Sutton-Smith, 1997), as evidenced in the persuasive discourse that has generated powerful professional allegiances within the early childhood community. This commitment encompasses play as development, play as education, play-based learning and play-based curriculum. Play allows children to 'be themselves' because they can follow their needs and interests through free choice, discovery and exploration. Therefore the image of the 'naturally developing child' finds its clearest expression within free play activities, to the extent that play can be undermined and disrupted when it is used to achieve academic ends. Whilst international play scholarship provides substantial empirical evidence to support the value of play, there are many areas of debate, and significant challenges to developmental approaches. There is sustained empirical evidence that young children learn through play, which is related to the developmental domains and to the subject disciplines (Frost et al, 2005; Johnson et al, 2005; Wood, 2007). Play is also progressive: play choices and activities change, and children's play skills develop with age and experience, typically resulting in more sustained, complex forms of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Broadhead, 2004; Johnson et al, 2005). Play activities are socially and symbolically complex, and involve social reciprocity which is the core of affective and personality development (De Vries, 1997). Evidence about the role of teachers, and other adults, is more contentious, in terms of what roles (if any) they should take in children's play; whether play can (or should) be used for educational purposes, whose purposes and intentions are paramount, and what are the modes, intentions and outcomes of adult intervention (Wood, 2007).

The flexibility and spontaneity implied within a child-centred, play-based curriculum has always been contentious. There is an assumption that play activities reveal and provoke children's needs and interests, based on their inner impulses and motivations to learn. When children make their own choices, learning is more meaningful and sustained than learning through formal, adult-directed activities. However, the emphasis on 'needs and interests' has not stood up to conceptual analysis. For example, it is not clear whether children's interests are themselves goals, whether children create their own goals through their interests and, if so, what those goals are. A further question focuses on

whether educators recognise and act on those interests as personal and/or social goals. For example, whilst playing with materials in a water tray may enable children to observe that objects behave in different ways, they will not spontaneously learn the concept of floating and sinking, volume and mass without educative encounters with more knowledgeable others. In other words, play activities may stimulate learning-relevant processes, but may be content free, which juxtaposes the developmental against the educational rationale for play.

These questions reflect the tensions in child-centred education between responding to, and provoking children's interests, or in other words, between responsive and proactive pedagogical models, especially in relation to play. DeVries (1997) clarifies this tension by arguing that providing activities that appeal to children's interests shows respect for the child's point of view, and for how they learn and develop. She also distinguishes between general interests, and specific purposes: general interest in an activity gives the teacher an opportunity to challenge children to pursue a specific purpose, and to find their own purposes in activities. A further conceptual point is that children's needs, interests and play activities do not constitute a sufficient basis for curriculum planning and organisation. Revealing personal needs and interests is not the same as creating a problem, enquiry or activity space. Needs and interests may be fleeting or sustained, trivial or purposeful. They may be shared with others in the community, or may be highly individual and idiosyncratic. Individual or group interests may be based on choices that are biased in terms of culture, social class, gender and ability/disability resulting in unequal power relations and potential detrimental power effects of free choice. Child-centred education may therefore militate against equality of opportunity and equal access to curriculum provision (MacNaughton, 2000; Yelland, 2005). Brooker (2002) has shown that free choice and play-based approaches do not benefit all children, especially where these are not consistent with culturally situated child-rearing practices in homes and communities.

Although the value of play is inscribed in policy texts, discourses and strategies, its real value is related to achieving (or at least contributing to) the educational outcomes that are specified in the various curriculum frameworks. Thus it can be argued that in early childhood settings, culturally approved forms of play are validated, along with culturally recognised needs and interests. Sutton-Smith (1997) argues that the emphasis on play as development and progress has tended to obscure the ways in which children use play for their own affairs of power, how they construct personal and shared meaning, and how they establish multiple roles and identities. Similarly, critical theorists propose that educational play disrupts children's choices and autonomy, and reinforces differential power relations between teachers and children (MacNaughton, 2000; Cannella, 2005; Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005). Ryan (2005) notes a key conceptual shift: instead of choice being conceptualised as freedom from adult authority, adults' interactions should focus on helping children to understand the choices offered by different classroom discourses and

the power effects of such choices. Within contemporary socio-cultural orientations, there is substantial evidence that learning through play is dependent on the range of choices that are available and permissible, the contexts in which play occurs, the range of interactions with more, or differently, knowledgeable others (including peers and adults), and the provision of supportive resources (Broadhead, 2004; Wood & Attfield, 2005). In addition to maximising the potential of play to support children's learning, and to provoke new interests and possibilities, educators also need to challenge stereotypical and discriminatory practices. As Ryan (2005) argues, children's play is not a neutral space but rather a political and negotiated terrain, in which children map out multiple discourses, identities and power dynamics.

These theoretical shifts present considerable challenges to traditional notions of child-centred education. The child is not seen as the 'individually developing child', but rather as a competent social actor, within a complex network of social and cultural influences (Rogoff, 2003; Fleer, 2006). As the following section demonstrates, developments in the early childhood policy context as well as advances in theory and research are provoking new interpretations of child-centred education.

Policy Directions

Significant policy shifts in early childhood education emerged during the 1980s, with the advent of the National Curriculum for 5-16 year-olds, and the subsequent recognition of wide variations in the quality and quantity of pre-school provision. The influential Committee of Enquiry which was chaired by Angela Rumbold (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1990) outlined a general approach to the early childhood curriculum, based on six areas of learning and experience (DES, 1989), and key principles regarding curriculum planning and implementation; approaches to learning; continuity and progression; assessment, recording and reporting; and education and training. Whilst flexible approaches were recognised as essential, the report made significant recommendations regarding intentional planning in relation to curriculum objectives, alongside a more proactive role for adults in working and playing alongside children. Play received clear validation as an integral part of the curriculum, but with more emphasis on planning and organisation, and involvement and intervention by 'sensitive, knowledgeable and informed' adults (DES, 1990, p. 11).

The Rumbold Report arguably set a new agenda for curriculum development, which was subsequently refined during a period of unprecedented intensification of government policy initiatives (Wood & Bennett, 2006). These initiatives have been part of a wider policy remit to develop a modern childcare and education system which reflects significant changes in pre-school provision, and responds to the needs and priorities of different policy players and stakeholders. This expansion was driven by four key aspirations: to provide choice and flexibility for parents, to increase the availability of high-quality

childcare, to improve the quality of provision and the workforce, and to ensure affordability (Her Majesty's Treasury, 2004). Within this broad policy remit, there was a specific focus on developing curriculum frameworks for children under five, which would improve continuity and progression to Key Stage 1.

The need to measure children's progress from the end of Reception (now known as Year R) into Key Stage 1 (ages 5-7) was a key policy driver in extending reforms to the pre-school sector. The first English National Curriculum framework for four to five year-olds was introduced in 1996, but was poorly conceptualised, and was substantially revised in response to feedback and pressure from the early childhood community (Wood & Bennett, 1999). The Foundation Stage was subsequently introduced for three to five year-olds. The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS) (QCA/DfEE, 2000) sets out learning outcomes in six areas which reflect the subject orientation of the English National Curriculum: literacy and language, mathematical development, knowledge and understanding of the world, physical development, creative development and personal, social and emotional education. Within each area, learning goals are definitive and 'stepping stones' or competence indicators identify developmental pathways towards the goals. These define the expectations for what most children will attain by the end of Year R, but can also inform planning in Key Stage 1. The CGFS exemplifies learning opportunities that are appropriate for young children and help them to achieve the goals, alongside detailed guidance on pedagogy. The Foundation Stage Profile (DfES/QCA, 2003) is a centralised, statutory baseline assessment, which enables practitioners to track children's progress, and identify their achievement in relation to the goals. To complement this framework, the government introduced Birth to Three Matters (DfES/Sure Start, 2002) for children from birth to three years old in private and public group settings. This framework is organised around four key aspects: a strong child, a skilful communicator, a competent learner and a healthy child, and emphasises the importance of reciprocity in relationships and interactions between children and their parents and caregivers.

The CGFS describes the principles that underpin good and effective practice (DfEE/QCA, 2000, pp. 11-12), with a focus on the practitioner's role, specifically with regard to teaching, planning and assessing. These principles were subsequently reinforced by the Key Elements of Effective Practice (DfES, 2005), which propose an 'agreed view within and across the sector about the knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes practitioners need to effectively support children's learning' (DfES, 2005, p. 6). In these documents, the emphasis on proactive and intentional pedagogy is a significant shift from the 'responding and facilitating' model that was promoted in developmental approaches. Well-planned and purposeful play is valued and can be both child and adult initiated. Play is seen as a means for facilitating learning, progress and development. The move towards 'mixed' or 'integrated' pedagogies has been validated in research which proposes that the effective pedagogue orchestrates learning through a wide range of appropriate interventions which are sensitive

to the curriculum concept or skills being taught, and to the child's zone of proximal development (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). Thus a key conceptual shift has been towards defining early childhood pedagogy and curriculum content, which was arguably under-emphasised in established child-centred discourses.

This framework has not been without its problems. Although teachers have broadly welcomed the CGFS (Aubrey, 2004), it has been criticised for encouraging water-tight planning for highly specific and standardised outcomes (Adams et al, 2004). A report by the Office for Standards in Education (2004) identified a number of problems with the implementation of the Foundation Stage, the assessment demands of the Profile, and the extent to which Year 1 teachers made effective use of assessment information from Reception teachers. The reform agenda has also focused on raising standards and improving school and teacher effectiveness, as evidenced in the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998) and National Numeracy Strategy (DfEE, 1999), which are introduced in Year R. Research studies have claimed that the focus on content knowledge has led to an erosion of practical first-hand experiences, play-based activities, spontaneity and independence in children's learning (Moyles et al, 2002; Adams et al, 2004). On the basis of this evidence, these policy developments are seen as a challenge to the traditional commitment to child-centred education, and there remain tensions between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' influences on early childhood education. Continuity and progression between the flexible approaches of the Foundation Stage and the more structured approaches of Key Stage 1 have remained problematic.

However, child-centred principles are evident in broader policy frameworks such as the Primary National Strategy (2004) and Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004a). Following widespread critiques of the National Curriculum framework, the Primary National Strategy (2004) 'Excellence and Enjoyment' has arguably reinvented child-centred education albeit within a prevailing discourse of raising standards, target setting, improving teacher effectiveness and enhancing children's motivation, engagement and self-esteem. 'Personalised learning' and 'assessment for learning' require teachers and other practitioners to focus curriculum planning and provision on the individual child or groups of children (DfES, 2004b). Interactive teaching is validated, along with increasing pupil involvement and engagement through shared planning, and responsive assessment practices. Children should be actively involved in planning learning opportunities and activities, and engage in self-assessment as well as peer assessment. Whilst such practices have always been valued within early childhood education, they have not always been systematically used in practice. However, there remain tensions between outcomes-led criteria (what goals children should attain), and performance or process-led criteria (how children achieve those goals).

The policy emphasis on personalised provision can also be seen in the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2004a), which builds on the Sure Start initiative. Community-based Children's Centres (from birth to five) bring

together multi-agency teams of professionals to provide personalised services for the child and the family, through integrated education and family support services, health (from pre-natal through childhood), and parent education programmes. Pre-schools and schools are situated within 'networked learning communities' which involve different stakeholders and multi-agency service providers. The early twentieth-century ethic of rescue and care has shifted towards prevention, multi-professional support, and involvement of the child's primary caregivers in the home, pre-school and school settings. For Boyce (1946), these were the missing social policy support systems: despite the many successes of her experimental school she noted that 'we were powerless against the conditions of their life out of school' (p. 181). Thus it can be argued that contemporary views of child-centred provision place children and significant adults at the heart of wider social and educational processes. As the final section shows, alternative voices within the early childhood community actively support such challenges, and argue for a reconceptualisation of child-centred education.

Theoretical Directions

Contemporary studies have contested child-centred education from different theoretical positions, and present early childhood as a site for social, educational, political and cultural engagement. Considerable effort has been focused on linking theoretical principles with educational frameworks, and recent trends (both national and international) towards socio-cultural and postmodern theories are challenging the ethnocentric assertions of developmental theories and practices (MacNaughton, 2005; Yelland, 2005; Fleer, 2006). Predominantly Western, individually centred notions of child development are no longer acceptable within culturally diverse communities. Contemporary perspectives view development as inherently socially and culturally situated within complex cultural practices and belief systems, and complex relationships between the child, the home, early childhood institutions, and wider society (Rogoff, 2003; Fleer, 2006). The image of the child has shifted from the Plowden era: children are considered to be social actors, and active agents in their learning and development. Socio-cultural theories emphasise that children's motivations are driven by the need to master, and have some agency in their social and cultural worlds. Rather than waiting for developmental readiness, culturally situated teaching and learning processes can lead children beyond their current capabilities, thus enabling them to participate with increasing competence in the activities of their communities, whether these are classified as work, play or formal education. Interactions with the tools and symbol systems of their cultures, and with more or differently knowledgeable others, provoke further possibilities, enquiries, problems and connections. Such provocations help children to develop a repertoire of metacognitive capabilities – knowing how to learn, knowing that they know, and being able to articulate their knowledge to others.

A further challenge to traditional child-centred approaches is to understand how educators can combine responsive and proactive curriculum and pedagogical approaches (Wood & Attfield, 2005). What constitutes an appropriate curriculum raises fundamental epistemological issues about curriculum goals and content, whose knowledge is prioritised, what knowledge is selected, and how that is represented by young children, and for young children. The validation of mixed or integrated pedagogies places greater emphasis on the role of the educator in choosing appropriate strategies in different contexts, and in reconceptualising their roles in play. Contemporary play scholars propose a bi-directional relationship between play and the curriculum, with educators developing mixed or integrated pedagogies (Van Hoorn et al, 2002; Johnson et al, 2005; Wood, 2007). Curriculum-generated play experiences can be planned intentionally to help children learn specific skills and concepts, and play-generated curriculum activities can emerge from children's spontaneous interests and activities. This integrated approach arguably avoids the work/play dichotomy, and the parallel subject-centred/child-centred dichotomy.

In terms of the early childhood workforce, the challenges of the twentieth century indicate a key continuity with the Plowden Report: 'Similarly, as we have surveyed the way children learn, the demands made on teachers have appeared frighteningly high' (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, para. 875). Directions in policy and practice in the UK place considerable emphasis on the professional knowledge of teachers and practitioners to formulate educational aims and goals on the basis of their observations and documentation of children's interests and activities, to connect children with substantive curriculum content, and to address diversity and equity issues. To achieve this successfully requires an extensive repertoire of pedagogical content knowledge, the ability to transform or represent that knowledge in ways that will be accessible to young learners, and to provide opportunities for children to use, apply and transfer their knowledge across similar and different contexts. Practitioners also need to understand how children construct and convey their own meanings through different forms of activity and representation, and to recognise their emergent understandings and misconceptions. Early childhood educators need a sophisticated theoretical knowledge base and pedagogical repertoire to reconceptualise child-centred principles and practices, especially where these are embedded in wider social policy agendas and aspirations.

These challenges are particularly relevant in the pre-school sector, where current policy trends aim towards improving the levels of qualifications for all practitioners, as part of the wider endeavour to improve the quality of provision and of children's outcomes. In addition, there are proposals to integrate Birth to Three Matters with the current CGFS, thereby creating a birth to five Foundation Stage. Whilst the commitment to child-centred education remains achievable in this sector, there remain tensions with the transition to more intensive policy frameworks that are introduced in the Reception Year. A key conceptual shift from the Plowden era has been to place both children and their

educators at the heart of educational processes, and to see children as active participants and stakeholders in these processes. Considerable professional commitment will be required across the early childhood community to ensure that such aspirations become a reality.

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