



EARLY CHILDHOOD IN FOCUS

Series edited by Martin Woodhead and John Oates

Early Childhood in Focus is a series of publications produced by the Child and Youth Studies Group at The Open University, United Kingdom, with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

The series provides accessible and clear reviews of the best and most recent available research, information and analysis on key policy and practice issues, spanning all aspects of early childhood care and education, as well as the full age range, from infancy through to the early years of school.

Each publication is developed in consultation with world leaders in research, policy, advocacy and children's rights. Many of these experts have written summaries of key messages from their areas of work especially for the series, and the accuracy of the content has been assured by independent academic assessors, themselves experts in the field of early childhood.

The themes of the series have been chosen to reflect topics of research and knowledge development that address the most significant areas of children's rights, and where a deeper understanding of the issues involved is crucial to the success of policy development programmes and their implementation.

These publications are intended to be of value to advocates for the rights of children and families, to policy makers at all levels, and to anyone working to improve the living conditions, quality of experience and life chances of young children throughout the world.

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First published 2010 by The Open University
Child and Youth Studies Group
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Walton Hall, Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA
United Kingdom

with the support of:
Bernard van Leer Foundation
PO Box 82334
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A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Designed by Agnes Borszeki
Text edited by Margaret Mellor
Printed in the United Kingdom by Cambrian Printers, Aberystwyth
ISBN 978-0-7492-2914-6

Culture and Learning

Editors

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EARLY CHILDHOOD IN FOCUS 6

Young children experience the most rapid period of growth and change during the human lifespan, in terms of their maturing bodies and nervous systems, increasing mobility, communication skills and intellectual capacities, and rapid shifts in their interests and abilities ...

Young children actively make sense of the physical, social and cultural dimensions of the world they inhabit, learning progressively from their activities and their interactions with others, children as well as adults ...

Young children's experiences of growth and development are powerfully shaped by cultural beliefs about their needs and proper treatment, and about their active role in family and community ...

In planning for early childhood, States parties should at all times aim to provide programmes that complement the parents' role and are developed as far as possible in partnership with parents, including through active cooperation between parents, professionals and others in developing 'the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential'.

(United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, Paragraphs 6 and 29)

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Preface

Promoting young children's learning is a major responsibility for professionals and parents, everywhere. It is tied to the broader goal of ensuring 'the development of the child ... to the maximum extent possible', which is part of every child's rights under the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989, Article 6).

One central question is how far development and learning should be understood as cultural processes that vary between communities and societies, and how far as natural processes that are the same for all children, everywhere. On the one hand, cross-cultural research describes diverse developmental niches inhabited by young children, which shape what they learn, how they learn and where they learn. On the other hand, universal features of early childhood, such as the progressive development of physical, motor, cognitive and communicative capacities, are equally well documented. One resolution of these conflicting accounts comes through recognising that learning and development are 'naturally cultural' (Rogoff, 2003). Babies are biologically pre-adapted to engage in social relationships, and to make sense of their surroundings by sharing with others in a process of intersubjectivity which supports joint activity, cooperation and communication. These processes in turn are strongly shaped by the cultural practices of families and communities, including in early childcare settings and schools.

This isn't just an issue for research. There are major policy questions about the place of culture in early childhood programmes and, equally, about the function of early childhood programmes in the daily lives of young children, families and communities. The role of language in early learning highlights the challenges. A child's first language, or 'mother tongue', is the vehicle for their cultural identity, as well as the major tool for learning. Coping with a different language of instruction at preschool and school, or with conflicting values and expectations, can be very challenging for young children, and can have long-term implications for learning.

The lesson is that 'education for all' goals cannot be implemented in a vacuum, without taking account of children's specific circumstances, including caregivers' and professionals' beliefs about their development and learning. At the same time, respecting cultural diversity is not an alternative to ensuring children's basic rights. Asking about the place of 'working and contributing' as well as 'playing and learning' in the daily lives of young children is a salutary reminder that cultural diversities are not disconnected from economic inequalities. This tension is especially evident in contexts of rapid social change and migration, especially for minority-group children growing up in complex, pluralistic societies, where they encounter competing values and expectations, and are at greatest risk of educational exclusion. Fortunately, innovative models are available, demonstrating what can be achieved in promoting development and learning, while respecting cultural diversities.

Liz Brooker

Martin Woodhead

Editors

Cultures of caregiving – mothers and others

Cultural differences in caring for the young include who cares for children, their availability, and the kinds of interactions, communication, and activities in which care is provided. Mothers are the primary caregivers in most societies. They provide nurturance and support in raising the young and shaping their development and learning. However, caregiving in mother–child relationships takes place in different kinds of attachment relationships depending on cultural priorities. When it is necessary to share caregiving with others, mothers play a significant role in determining the division of labour within the constraints of their communities.

Cultural traditions as well as economic and political factors shape structural differences in children’s living arrangements. These differences determine the availability of caregivers and the kind of care children receive (Whiting and Edwards, 1988; Rogoff, 2003). For example, children in most industrialised communities have traditionally grown up in nuclear families where caregiving was shared between parents and siblings, although such traditions have been transformed in recent years by the influx of new cultural communities through migration. Equally, children in the non-Western world have traditionally grown up either in extended families with relatives or in close proximity to their relatives, although these traditions too are changing with increasing globalisation. Where extended family patterns persist, in both industrialised and developing societies, other adults (such as grandparents) and other children (such as cousins) also participate in the care of young children. Also, it is common in many non-Western communities for non-kin to participate in caregiving, being available as potential attachment figures.

Traditional patterns of caregiving are changing in most societies, as internal migration, industrialisation, and new patterns of employment promote the introduction of out-of-home care (‘childcare’) for many young children. Different caregiving arrangements shape children’s relationships and their opportunities for learning.

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- *Children’s earliest experiences of caregiving are influenced by the social and economic as well as the cultural aspects of their environment.*
- *Traditional comparisons between ‘individual’ (maternal) and ‘collective’ (extended family) caregiving are being eroded as geographical and demographic factors re-shape the ways in which families organise their lives and communities.*

Children’s experiences of caregiving are shaped by economic circumstances as well as cultural traditions



Caregiving interactions

In traditional communities dependent on a subsistence economy, caregiving has often been embedded in the communal/group activity and shared among adults and other children, enabling multiple interactions (Tronick *et al.*, 1987). In contrast, in most industrialised societies adult and child lives have become more segregated, with adult work life and children's schooling taking place in different places away from home and without shared experience most of the day. In these situations, caregiving often becomes a more specialised role with an emphasis on dyadic interactions between caregiver and child (unless specific arrangements such as day care are made).

For example, in studying the cultural practices of urban and schooled communities in both the USA and Turkey, we found that caregiving often occurred between the mother and her toddler in dyadic interactions in the contexts of exploring novel objects, dressing and playing (Rogoff *et al.*, 1993). However, similar studies in rural communities in India and Guatemala showed that caregiving in these activities was embedded in the group.

In the communities in India and Guatemala, which relied on a subsistence economy and in which children were not segregated from adult activities, children appropriated the skills necessary for their functioning through active observation and participation in community activities, with the caregivers supporting children's efforts by responsive assistance. However, in urban, middle-income communities such as Keçiören (Ankara, Turkey) and Salt Lake City (USA) where parents were schooled and their activities were segregated from those of children, adults took the responsibility for managing learning through organised instruction.

With the rapid pace of change in the last two decades, however, including modernisation, migration, childcare and near-universal schooling, it is likely that children's experiences of caregiving have become more varied and more complex, even within a single community.

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- *The extent to which young children share in the lives of adults, or experience a child-focused world, has consequences for the ways in which they develop and learn.*
- *Changes in the organisation of family and community life, as the result of migration and globalisation, are changing the opportunities given to children to learn, through participation or through instruction.*

In modern societies, caregiving roles have become more specialised



