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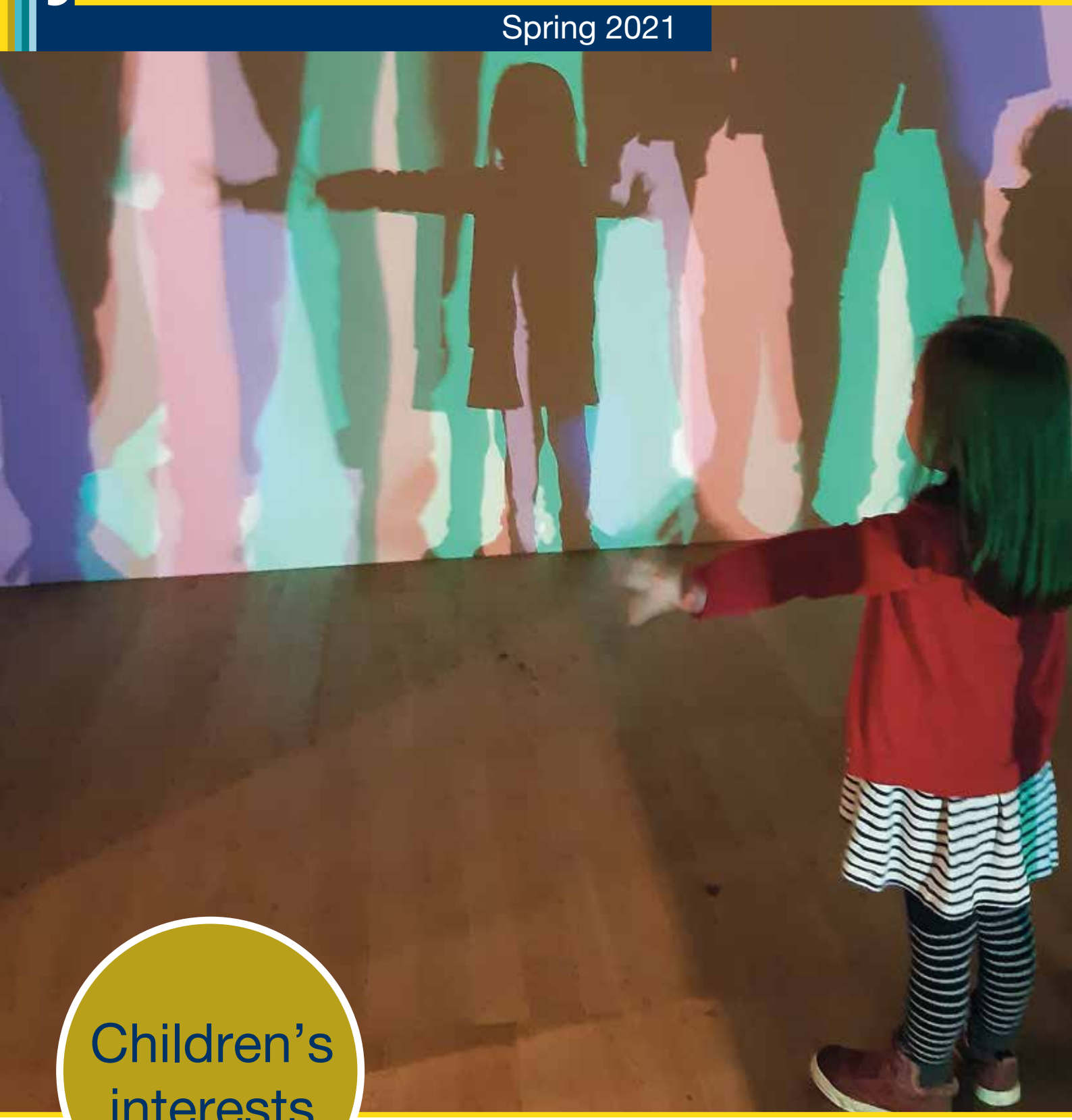

Children's interests

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Editorial
Children's interests
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> Perhaps what one wants to say is formed in childhood and the rest of one's life is spent trying to say it. I know that all I felt during the early years of my life in Yorkshire is dynamic and constant in my life today. (Barbara Hepworth, Sculptor)

Hepworth's words have long encapsulated for me the importance of the early years of life. They serve as a reminder that what children pay attention to really matters to them, and should therefore matter to their adults. In this issue we celebrate children's interests: about the world, the people in it, and themselves. The act of deeply listening, in every sense, to young children informs pedagogical decisions and attunes practitioners to what really matters to each and every child.

Helen Hedges writes of being "intrigued" by children's interests and why she resists imposed, uncritical and shallow responses and interpretations of children's learning. Harnessing the power of children's thinking about their world is a critical ingredient of responsive pedagogy. From a "funds of knowledge" viewpoint, we can see how children's complex play helps them (and us) delve deep to understand children's unique interests and create meaningful learning relationships.

Children are interested in themselves and others, and they pay attention to what is happening in the world. They notice many things, acts of kindness and acts of prejudice. They can be strong advocates of social justice when they perceive unfairness and can also learn and perpetuate stereotypes and prejudice. If the "forming" of ideas happens in childhood we need to be vigilant in how we respond to children's attending. Yuwei Xu discusses using gender sensitive practices to avoid the limitations of stereotyping and open up potential for children to learn about gender in ways which do not confine them to be someone that they are not. As an organisation Early Education responded to the shocking death of George Floyd by publishing its commitment to diversity, anti-racism, inclusion, and social justice within the early years, "where children learn values that will build the society of the future". This commitment informs Early Education's workplan which includes practical support for developing anti-racist practice. Jaclyn Murray opens up the discussion of "race" with young children and the need to think about "race" and how racism negatively impacts lives on "personal stories and professional journeys". Young children are interested in difference, and positively exploring difference is important work in early childhood education and care, taking children's interest in themselves and others and using those interests to teach against prejudice and discrimination.

As the COVID-19 pandemic circles around us all, Georgina Trevor and Amanda Ince argue that its impact demands a more responsive pedagogy which rejects predetermined assessments and imposed decisions about what is important in learning. They offer a more nuanced approach to curriculum and ways of understanding what interests children and how that can inform practice. They point to the important need for a "transformative and contextual" curriculum in the early years, one which focuses on children's own essential living and learning needs so that they can grow, uniquely, in confidence and capability. They argue for an approach which focusses on what cannot be easily measured, but which should be noticed.

When the UK first locked down in March 2020, many of those able to stay at home slowed down, the pace of life changed. In many settings practitioners continued with smaller groups of children, at a different pace. Slowing down, taking time to notice and listen to what children do and say are good pedagogical practices. Keeping groups small, with enough adults to maintain reciprocal relationships with children is essential, now more than ever.

In thanking the contributors of this issue, I hope it stimulates further thinking about the riches of children's minds and how their interests and identities are nourished.

Cathy Nutbrown is President of Early Education and Professor of Education at the University of Sheffield, School of Education.

Children's interests: challenging taken-for-granted understandings

Helen Hedges

Zoe - parents' wedding

I have been intrigued by the power of children's interests to motivate, inspire and strengthen their learning for a long time. This article explains my resistance to surface-level, uncritical interpretations of children's interests, where interests are viewed as being children's choices of play activities. It highlights the important role people, places, experiences and things play in inspiring interests. I offer a model and associated ideas about interests derived from my research programme that connects with the New Zealand curriculum document, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017).

To an outsider like me, the United Kingdom appears to have a somewhat confusing array of curricular policy documents and accompanying practice guides. The latter are problematic as they deny the professional knowledge, experience, wisdom and judgement of educators in interpreting policy and making curricular decisions in specific settings. The term "practitioners" seems to be favoured over "teachers", a term we also shy away from in New Zealand. So it seems that there is an ongoing issue globally around nomenclature and qualifications required to teach children. Professional knowledge and continuing professional learning are needed to understand what curriculum, teaching and pedagogy comprise in the early years that is different to that typically found in schooling.

In the English Early Years Foundation Stage document in particular, both learning and development are mentioned liberally as if they were interchangeable, and observable and measurable rather than subject to deep interpretations of what is meaningful to children. There are few mentions of children's interests without connecting them to academic learning. Tensions are visible between adult-led and child-centred/initiated experiences, perhaps as a result of a focus on school readiness.

What problems do these matters create in relation to longstanding research and practices around children's interests? Early psychological studies were experimental. These defined children's interests as activities children chose from a small number of activities already pre-selected by adults, set up in a strange or new place. Can you spot the obvious issues here? What a huge leap it is to define the activity selected as an interest. Or, conversely, what a narrow interpretation of interest that is. These studies were used, however, to support the longstanding commitment to child-centred practices and curriculum as encompassing a wide range of play activities for children to choose from. These practices were viewed in opposition to teacher-centred or school readiness activities, creating a divide that is still not bridged comfortably.

A range of theories and disciplines allows us to reconsider long-held notions in early education; in this case what comprises children's interests and how these might influence curriculum and pedagogy. A foundational assumption of sociocultural theory is that learning leads development. The vision of children in Te Whāriki is as "competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society." (MoE, 2017: 5) Te Whāriki has 20 holistic outcomes that combine cognitive and affective elements, another principle of sociocultural theory. These outcomes therefore rely on a deep foundation of professional knowledge in order for teachers to enact a local curriculum that is both meaningful to children and meets wider societal goals.

A model of interests' recognition

Interests are one of four sources of curriculum design in Te Whāriki. Children are naturally curious and eager participants in all of their life experiences. Some of what interests children is therefore fleeting, so it is important to have lenses to use to locate and identify interests that are significant to children and motivate their ongoing learning. The following is a model I am working on that brings together interpretations of interests from my research programme.

Play is complex in itself (see Wood, 2013) and fundamental to both recognising interests and looking to analyse the origin of the interest more deeply before considering

ways to extend and expand it. Funds of knowledge were the first effort at what has become known as culturally responsive pedagogy, designed to redress deficit views of linguistically and culturally diverse families. The concept is based on the premise that people have competence from their life experiences.

Funds of knowledge are cultural and historical resources that families build and use from focusing on their own functioning and wellbeing. They are best uncovered through visits to family homes by teachers looking to transform their curriculum and views of families. Funds of knowledge can be utilised in early childhood education in culturally-relevant and meaningful ways that value children's family learning and interests (Chesworth, 2016; Hedges, Cullen & Jordan, 2011).

Three kinds of interests - activity-based interests, continuing interests and fundamental inquiry questions - feed back and forth into each other to foster deeper recognition of children's interests (Hedges & Cooper, 2016). Play and funds of knowledge are central to each kind of interest in this model. Each element of the model needs to be considered together to be more analytical about children's interests and their place in curriculum and pedagogy.

Activity-based interests

When asked about interests in interviews, children, parents and teachers often mentioned favourite activities first: playing with blocks or sand, riding a bike, or reading a book. Play and activities are very important for children's learning and development. They are the tools of curriculum, creating spaces for learning and development.

However, like the original experiments, children can only choose from what is available. Alongside important equity considerations, I argue they are not the full picture of children's interests alone. They sit alongside other concepts that teachers can use to understand what matters for children, and to inspire and create richer interests-based curriculum and pedagogy. Activity choices are representative of deeper interests that are continuing, and/or profoundly meaningful to children, as follows.

Continuing interests

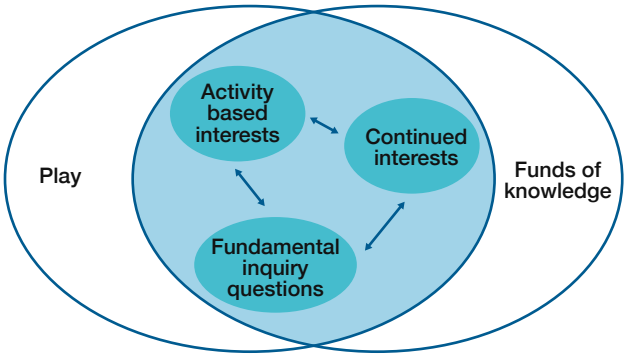
Continuing interests endure, intensify and change over time. They often involve children in some conceptual learning. Strong evidence in my research points to children's deep and continuing interests in the natural, physical and material worlds, in particular, children's interests in people, animals, insects and the physical geography and unique culture of their country.

Extending interactions with people, places, experiences and things encouraged children to continue exploration of these interests and build knowledge. These interests were among those usefully supported by project work. In this way, subject areas such as literacy, mathematics, the arts and science were built into children's learning through their interests without pretension or being adult-initiated.

Fundamental inquiry questions as interests

Gordon Wells (1999) wrote about children's real questions – the serious questions children have that lead them to inquire deeply into what is meaningful to them. I have used this idea to interpret what might be driving and underpinning activity-based and continuing interests. I argue these should be the foundation of early childhood curriculum through relational pedagogy.

Model of Interests recognition



The overarching fundamental inquiry question developed across two large projects is:

> How can I build personal, learner, and cultural identities as I participate in interesting, fulfilling, and meaningful activities with my family, community, and culture?

Zoe's future husband.jpg

Seven questions emanate from this fundamental question:

- What can I do now I am bigger, that the older children do?
- What do intelligent, responsible, and caring adults do?
- How can I make special connections with people I know?
- How can I make and communicate meaning?
- How can I understand the world I live in?
- How can I develop my physical and emotional well-being?
- How can I express my creativity?

I wonder how these questions might apply or be viewed from your understandings of children's interests? An example follows to prompt your own analyses.

4-year-old Zoe was an eager participant in all her life experiences with adults (both parents and teachers) and child peers. At an activity level, she enjoyed drawing pictures, playing with dolls and participating in carpentry projects in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) centre. As a continuing interest, Zoe was interested in language, including through initiating learning to write words meaningful to her. She was also aware of the power of language through creating her own imaginary language with her friend Isabella.

In recording a child-friendly interview with a teacher-researcher, Zoe revealed a number of aspects of her interests from her home, including the following:

Zoe's rhyming words

I like drawing and I like playing Mum and Dads… Cos what I like about that is I really want to be a Mum when I grow up! And a police officer... Cos I've been playing with my doll babies a lot and I've got good things to look after babies, bottle, foods and cream and some water and a high chair and a push chair… Did you know when I went to the swimming pool on Friday I saw two cars parked on the yellow lines and you're not allowed and I told them off!… They parked the car there and you're only allowed to park where you can. So I told the people off… And… on Friday, same Friday, we went to fix the windows cos they were breaking windows and burglars usually break windows instead of knocking on doors and that's stealing.

Zoe's mother explained that this excerpt was a mix of experience and imagination. Zoe clearly had good understandings of adult roles and responsibilities related to funds of knowledge. Later, we co-authored a paper with her mother to illustrate the idea of Zoe's real questions as fundamental inquiries that drove her interests. Alongside the interview excerpt earlier, we wrote about Zoe's experience of her parents' wedding and the subsequent drawing of her future husband (Hedges et al., 2017).

The following fundamental inquiry questions explained Zoe's interests across all of the findings in a more analytical way.

- How can I build personal, learner, and cultural identities as I participate in interesting, fulfilling, and meaningful activities with my family, community, and culture?
- What do intelligent, responsible, and caring adults do?
- How can I make special connections with people I know?
- How can I make and communicate meaning?

Teachers could then support these interests differently, and beyond simply providing activities spend time developing deeper relational pedagogies built on analytical knowledge of Zoe's play and funds of knowledge.

Zoe is now aged 11 and plans to become an architect. She still proposes to have a husband and says he will need to be good at cooking as she will be working quite a lot.

In closing, I am currently looking to extend this model to include funds of identity as a subset of funds of knowledge, and to indicate where teachers' interests and relational pedagogy might sit. Meantime, these ideas may help you to rethink tensions that appear to remain in your curricula and practices.

- Offer children sufficient time to engage with a wide range of experiences.
- Be analytical about children's interests beyond their selection of activities.
- Value and appreciate interests more deeply - think about the continuous interplay of the elements of my model.
- Listen to and engage with children at their pace in order to take children's interests seriously. They likely link with fundamental inquiries and identity development.
- Through relational pedagogies, recognise, respond to and extend children's interests and inquiries, in authentic and knowledgeable ways.

Acknowledgements

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Helen Hedges is Professor of Early Childhood Education in the School of Curriculum and Pedagogy in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Auckland.

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Narratives of difference: troubling "race" and discourses of diversity and identity in early childhood education

Jaclyn Murray

The BlackLivesMatter movement founded in 2013 represents a watershed moment calling renewed attention to longstanding struggles against the deeply troubling issues of racial and social injustice globally. Questions of "race" identities and power inequities are central to early childhood education as voices across the sector call for recognition of how we all confront, at some point, who we are as "raced" individuals and how this affects our work with young children, families and colleagues. This is a complex topic for which there are no easy answers. In this article I explore the entanglements of "race" and early childhood by drawing on my work in South Africa and the United Kingdom.

Talking about "race"

Msimang's (2016) powerful words remind us that:

> We can both believe in the need for a just world in which race is meaningless, and accept that in this time and place, "race" is a term that is bursting with meaning.

"Race" is a social construct, yet its psychological, political, economic and social material force in life is embedded in the very fabric of our societies. As such, we need to critically "read" for "race", racisms, anti-racisms and racialization in order to better understand:

> how power operates and how it transforms, and reforms, social relations, through racial categories and consciousness (Lee and Lutz, 2005: 4).

Numerous studies highlight how this plays out in early childhood education globally, albeit in diverse ways.

Talking about "race" identity on its own might appear limiting given that our identities are complex and no one person is a product of their "race" alone. We need to keep present in our minds an understanding that systems of oppression are constructed at the intersections – of "race", gender, class, sexuality, ability, age and a host of other identity notions.

Yet, there are particular experiences that a person has because they are labelled as belonging to, or representative of, a particular "race" group. A contemporary example of this is the problematic AllLivesMatter slogan in response to the BlackLivesMatter movement. So, we focus on "race" here and the need to think carefully and critically about its impact on our personal stories and professional journeys. This, as MacNaughton and Davis (2009) remind us, makes "race" most assuredly the business of early childhood education.

"Race" and early childhood

> At that very moment, my son, who was two and a half, was learning the colors. I said to him, transmitting the message at last, "You're Black." And he said, "No. I'm brown." And I said, "Wrong referent. Mistaken concreteness, philosophical mistake. I'm not talking about your paintbox, I'm talking about your head." That is something different. The question of learning, learning to be Black. Learning to come into an identification. (Hall, 2000:150).

"Race" remains a powerful identity concept that emerges early in childhood as young children wrestle with discourses of difference that circulate in their respective environments (Aboud, 1988; MacNaughton and Davis, 2009; Murray, 2019; Skattebol, 2003; Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001). Growing up in apartheid South Africa meant that my white skin afforded me privileges that I have since spent many years interrogating. Our personal journeys are unique, however, as educators committed to social and racial justice we need to be constantly aware and critically reflect on our identity positions and the intersection of power and "race" in our daily lives.

As educators we have a responsibility to search for "alternative ways of seeing, understanding and responding" (Ebrahim and Francis, 2008: 286) to racialised scripts and narratives that inform processes of subject formation in early childhood education across diverse contexts. For example, we can engage with the expanding range of theoretical and pedagogical approaches that explore "race" and racism with young children to move discussion beyond "merely embracing difference, to interrogating foundational elements of both systemic racism and white privilege" (Escayg and Daniel, 2019: 1). Reconceptualising ideas about young children, "race", and racism provides the foundation on which to build an activist position to contest and resist "the knowledges and practices that deemphasize the saliency of race and

racism in early childhood" (Escayg and Daniel, 2019).

Children's interests

Engaging young children in complex and often uncomfortable conversations about "race" and racism can be challenging if the ways in which young children are conceptually framed are based on the belief that they attach little meaning to experiences of "race" in their daily lives. My ethnographic research exploring young children's narratives of "race" in South Africa demonstrated that young children are shaping their "race" identities in complex ways that, at times, they used to assert positions of power and/or privilege, as well as to exclude. The following extract from this study (Murray, 2012) describes an incident involving three 5-year-old children: Neesha (Indian), Darlene (mixed heritage) and Josie (white). The educator, Nicola (white), was informed of a troubling incident at the early years setting by a parent who called to report that Josie had told Neesha and Darlene that she could not sit next to brown people.

Nicola: Ok girls, Neesha's mom called me to say that you girls were upset because Josie said to you yesterday that she doesn't want to sit next to brown people. Is this right? Can you tell me what happened?

Darlene: We were sitting down and Josie said "I don't want to sit next to brown people". She hurt our feelings.

Nicola: Josie, is this true?

Josie: [she shakes her head and looks sheepish]

Nicola: Ok. Neesha, tell me what happened.

Neesha: Josie didn't want to move up and make space for us

Nicola: But did she say that she doesn't want to sit next to brown people?

[Neesha nods her head]

Nicola: Josie, why did you say this to them? Do you realise that you hurt their feelings? Why did you say this Josie? You like to play together, so why are you saying mean things?

Josie: I don't know why...

Nicola: Was it just you Josie?

Josie: Teresa was also there and said stuff

Nicola: But Teresa is brown, why would she say stuff like that?

Josie: [lowers her head and is silent]

Darlene: Josie said that her mom said that she can't sit next to brown people

Josie: No, my mom didn't say that...I can't remember why I said that to Darlene and Neesha

Nicola: Josie, how would you feel if they said that they don't want to sit next to you because you are peach, or if someone said to me that they didn't want to sit next to me because I have funny hair...how would that make you feel?

Josie: Sad

Nicola: Yes, you would be hurt and feel sad...so why did you say this? Are you going to say it again?

Josie: I don't know...no, I won't

Nicola: Remember girls, we had this conversation about the past and how brown people weren't allowed to do many things and how this was very, very wrong. Here in South Africa we have so many different colour people and so much diversity and that is what makes here such a special place. We must never be mean or rude to people because they are different

Nicola: Ok, so how are we going to fix this? Are you going to be nice to Darlene and Neesha and not say such things again?

Josie: Yes

Nicola: Ok, so Josie, I am going to have to tell your mom about this incident, and Neesha, I will call your mom and tell her that I have spoken to you girls about this. Josie, now give them each a hug and be friends again, ok?

Josie proceeds to give both Darlene and Neesha a hug and then all three of them leave to go and get their snack.

Later, I join Darlene and Neesha playing on their own in the playground. Darlene informs me that her mom was furious and that Neesha's mom was also very cross.

Darlene: Josie told us that her mom said that white people are allergic to brown people and that if they touch them then they will die! But then in the meeting we had with you and Nicola, Josie said no, her mom hadn't told her to say anything. She was lying! Josie plays with Teresa and she's brown!

Skye (white) comes over and asks what's happening. Darlene explains to her and Skye responds.

Skye: I don't think it's right...we are all the same...even black people.

As Skye says this Darlene looks at the palm of her hand, and then the outside of her hand, perhaps contemplating the dark and light sides.

While overt racism was not common in this setting, children explored questions of "race" on a daily basis through their play, language use in discussions, and activities, but always away from the adult gaze. The educators maintained a powerful discourse of childhood innocence when talking about young children's understanding of "race". As this extract illustrates, caregivers and educators can become troubled, embarrassed or uncomfortable by experiences of racism. The discourse of childhood innocence is very appealing given that children should not have to take responsibility for historical, institutional and systemic practices of injustice and inequality (Skatttebol,2003). However, an activist position requires us to take seriously constructions of "race" and how they affect identity formation processes in early childhood. Racial concepts are not used by children in "imitative or artless ways, with little or no awareness of the broader implications or social meaning" (Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001: 5).

Not all educators and caregivers will agree with the conceptualisation I have set out here, however it is important to acknowledge the need to examine how we frame young children, families and the wider community. This provokes us to deepen our reflection on how, through everyday practices, we maintain, or

explicitly challenge, the social order or power relations that currently exist in the world (Robinson and Jones-Diaz, 2006). Early childhood educators' perspectives of childhood and of diversity and difference directly impact on their anti-racist approaches with young children and their families. There are some important starting points for reframing our understanding of the place of "race" in early childhood education.

- Critically reflect on one's own racial and cultural identities
- Promote recognition of children as competent social agents by providing resources and materials that discuss "race" and racism
- Proactively centre social justice and equity in pedagogical practice
- Critically engage children in discussions of representation, belonging and identities, and teach them to actively seek other viewpoints
- Provide counter-narratives to white privilege that centre the lived experiences of Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) communities
- Model advocacy and get everyone you can involved!
- Local and global perspectives of childhood

As a researcher interested in questions of "race" and early childhood, I also have the responsibility to teach on these themes. I currently work in the UK higher education sector where I aim to challenge the ways in which knowledges of childhoods are produced and consumed – most notably drawing on experiences of childhood in the Global South. While it is important to interrogate our own conceptualisations of childhood, we also need to recognise the ways in which the cultural and intellectual colonisation of early childhood education continues globally.

All too often diverse childhoods are constructed as lacking, as deficit, and linked to a politics of pity, rather than a politics of social justice (Wells, 2015; Twum Danso Imoh, Bourdillin and Meichsner, 2019). In my teaching I draw on acclaimed Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whose metaphor of the "danger of a single story" (2009) is a powerful tool to challenge the stereotypical ways in which we think about "other" childhoods and trace the unintended consequences of these ideas to notions of "race", identities and representation. Ngozi Adichie challenges the single lens that is often adopted when looking at a certain group of people; a certifiable way to create bias. The students and I critically explore ways to challenge the "single story" narrative by introducing counter-narratives, and to reflect on these in both our personal and professional lives. This is an integral part of my own anti-racist work in early childhood for it centres children's agency, competencies, creativity and identity construction processes in a changing world and reconconceptualises student's perspectives of "other" childhoods.

We need to recognise the privileging and the marginalising of particular stories and truths in educational settings, and through anti-racist work create spaces for more voices to be heard and acted upon. Those who care for, raise and educate young children can resist the knowledges and practices that deemphasise the saliency of "race" and racism. I hope all early childhood educators see themselves as agents of change, hope, and justice. And with Escayg and Daniel (2019: 2) I say:

> May our collective solidarities stir new awakenings in the hearts of those deeply disturbed by the inhumanity of racism, and the heavy toll it exacts on children and adults alike.

Dr Jaclyn Murray is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Education Studies and Liberal Arts at the University of Winchester.

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Challenging gender stereotypes through gender-sensitive practices in early years education and care

Yuwei Xu

Gender stereotypes prevailingly perpetuate in parents' and practitioners' interactions with young children in the early years. Whilst the majority of practitioners recognise the harm gender stereotypes cause to children, many have received limited training on challenging gender stereotypes either during their initial training or in their continuous professional development (The Fawcett Society, 2020). This article draws on my recent research to support early years practitioners and teachers in understanding and challenging gender stereotypes from cross-cultural perspectives (Xu, 2020a, 2020b). Here I consider why and how gender matters in early years education and care (EYEC); and examine gender-sensitive practices in EYEC.

Why and how gender matters in EYEC

On a global level, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 5 are targeted at "ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all" and "ensuring children's full and effective participation at all levels of life, regardless of their gender" (United Nations, 2015). In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) seeks to provide equality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice, ensuring that every child is included and supported (Department for Education, 2017). However, there is no mention in the EYFS of how gender relates to children's inclusion. The non-statutory guidance of Development Matters (2020) more explicitly points to gender-related expectations in the EYFS. For babies, toddlers and young children, they will be learning to: "Notice and ask questions about differences, such as skin colour, types of hair, gender, special needs and disabilities, and so on." This means that practitioners should "be open to what children say about differences and answer their questions straightforwardly. Help children develop positive attitudes towards diversity and inclusion" and "have resources which include materials which confront gender stereotypes."

The lack of sensitivity to gender stereotypes in national EYEC policy documents is found in many countries (Xu et al, 2020). At the same time, EYEC remains an internationally gendered workforce where women outnumber men. In most countries including the UK, around two per cent of staff members in EYEC are men (OECD, 2020). This phenomenon itself is due to gender stereotypes and gendered social expectations that women are "naturally" carers for young children. The lack of men has resulted in worries about "feminisation" in EYEC, with men expected to work in EYEC to provide boys with male role models that support their development and academic achievement in ways suitable to boys. A widely held assumption in the UK is that boys' underachievement in reading and writing is due to the different ways they learn - which are not supported by a "feminised" staff team with few or no men. In China, men are expected to work in kindergartens so that they can teach boys to be "men" (Xu, 2020a). The lack of men working in EYEC and the call for men to join the EYEC workforce are underpinned by gender stereotypes that regard men and women as essentially different, bringing different characteristics to their interactions with young children. Whilst men are to be hugely welcomed to work in EYEC and challenge gender stereotypes that childcare is "women's work", we need to be mindful of the potential reproduction of hegemonic masculinity and gender stereotypes which can arise when men's participation in EYEC is premised upon their different contributions to the sector (Xu, 2018).

Indeed, to challenge gender stereotypes in EYEC, it is important for practitioners to become aware that their gender subjectivities (how individuals understand and interpret gender) are not necessarily confined to individuals' social gender identity of men or women. Individual practitioners discursively construct their gender subjectivities to reflect both cultural patterns and individual experiences. In the past years, my colleagues and I have interviewed more than 100 male and female EYEC practitioners from many countries including China, Scotland, England, Australia, Sweden, Germany (Xu and Waniganayake, 2018; Sullivan et al, 2020; Xu, 2020a; Brody et al, 2021), to explore how they understood the way gender impacts their work with young children. Many practitioners, both men and women, believed that gender differences exist. For example, Philip (pseudonym) a male practitioner from Scotland stated that:

> Men and women are different, so they offer different things to the children. For instance, I suppose, I do like to adopt a bit of a […] disciplinary role. I purposefully make sure the children are receiving the guidance, direction, and limitations that they need. So when I see the child perhaps behaving in a way that I see will not serve them in the future, I think I, obviously all nursery workers have that responsibility for the child to do the right thing. But for me it's very deep within me, I can't let it go. Not in a bad way, I told you, in a good way. […] The males and females always have had different roles.

Although pointing out that she tended to be more disciplinary, a female kindergarten teacher Mrs Woo, reflects a typical division of gendered roles in Chinese society:

> I am stricter and more disciplinary, and Mr Cheung is looser. It's just like how children interact with their parents at home - one will be strict and one will be loose. Usually it's the father who is strict. So in our

case, it's nothing to do with gender, but it's more down to experience. If he lacks experiences in disciplining, he might overdo it. […] That's why I become the one who is strict.

Mr Hu, a male kindergarten teacher from Mainland China revealed how his gendered expectations shaped his different interactions with boys and girls:

I would treat boys and girls differently. For girls, I think they are more sensitive, and have stronger self-esteem. [Therefore, I will be careful in the way I speak to them.] But I wish girls to be less strong and more delicate, girls should have girls' traits. […] Girls will depend on men in the future, so it will not do good to her if she is too strong. […] And I think I should influence girls in this regard. […] For boys, if they make any mistakes, I will not let them go and will definitely blame them hard. There are many suicides among boys now in primary or secondary schools, after their teachers censured them. I would rather give them hard time now, to make them stronger and more resilient. Men suffered more pressures in our society, and I want my boys to be strong enough to cope with those pressures.

Those gendered subjectivities were common to practitioners in many countries, demonstrating how gender stereotypes are reproduced in early years settings. However, some practitioners expressed non-gender-stereotypical views and talked about how they challenged gender stereotypes. Kyle, a Scottish practitioner challenged the gendered conceptualisation of male role models in EYEC:

I try to be a positive male role model for the children, I have to show them that they can find me, be confident, feel safe around me because some of these children maybe come from a violent background if there has been a male present. […] So it's nice for the children to grow up with another male role model, realising that not everybody is the same. […] It will benefit them when they grow up, rather than having a male as a negative experience. I want to be a positive experience for the child, respect male and female.

For him, a male role model is not one that brings boys stereotypically "male" influences on how they behave - as is the case for male kindergarten teachers from China frequently cited as their unique contribution to EYEC. Recognising that male and female practitioners hold diverse understandings of gender, I argue that promoting gender diversity in ECEC would need practitioners to reflect on their own gendered subjectivities that influence their pedagogies and practices in working with young children.

Practitioners also need to acknowledge young children as active gender "players", who agentically construct their gender subjectivities in response to the social world surrounding them; who may reproduce and/or challenge gender stereotypes and norms in early years settings. My research with 280 2- to 6-year-old children from Scotland, Mainland China and Hong Kong (Xu, 2020b) shows that children actively reproduce gender stereotypes. For example, in Hong Kong I observed a boy who sat on a pink chair. Immediately all other boys laughed at him and told him to stand up, because "boys should not sit on pink chairs, they are for girls". Similarly in a Scottish nursery, when children were sitting on the floor waiting to be picked up, a boy asked another boy to sit near him: "Can you come over here? This [where the boy sat] is a boy thing and that [where the girls sat] is a girl thing". Through such peer interactions, young children reinforce gender norms and normalise their own behaviours as boys or girls in ways they perceive are expected by the societies they live in.

Whilst having their own gendered behaviours and subjectivities, children also respond to practitioners' gendered interactions. My research highlights that, practitioners' gender becomes salient in children's eyes when practitioners hold gender-stereotypical views and interact with children according to gender stereotypes. The words of a boy and a girl in Mr Hu's class, illustrate how they interacted with Mr Hu in ways that echo his strongly gendered subjectivities:

I like Mr Hu most. He is not as fierce as other teachers [……] Miss He is more fierce and she often tells us off. (Girl, age 6)

I don't like Mr Hu, so I don't do ANYTHING with him. [Why?] I am feeling vengeful to him. […] Because he is often angry with me, because I do not listen to him. [You can tell him not to be angry, and promise that you will listen?] No, I will never surrender. I am very grumpy. [I don't think you are grumpy.] I am the grumpiest one in our kindergarten. […] (Boy, age 6)

Gender-sensitive practices in EYEC

As practitioners and children hold diverse and dynamic views of gender and may reproduce gender stereotypes through their interactions in early years settings, I propose that practitioners need training in gender-sensitive practices which includes:

- developing awareness and understanding about ways in which gender matters in EYEC, including understanding that practitioners bring gendered subjectivities into their pedagogies and practices. They need to understand too, that children actively "play" with gender and construct their gendered selves, and that there are power dynamics and relationships in gendered interactions between children and practitioners;
- reflection on gendered practices and how to sensitively challenge gender stereotypes. This includes allowing children more freedom and agency as they construct and explore their gender subjectivities, and adopting an interactive approach to engage children in open discussions around gender and in subverting gendered norms.

Gender-sensitive practices can be adopted in all aspects of EYEC curriculum, as can be seen in the following examples from practitioners in England, Sweden, Germany, and China:

1. Environment - England
Jess noticed that children's coat pegs in the cloakroom area were segregated into boys and girls and the nursery children had male and female icons on their registration name cards. She did not regard this as an issue until children queried whether a boy with longer hair was hanging his coat in the correct place - the children presumed he was a girl. Reflecting on this situation, Jess planned to redesign the cloakroom and name cards to remove gender segregation. The coat pegs would be alphabetical regardless of gender with Reception children on one side of the cloakroom and Nursery children on the other. The name cards would also have the male and female icons removed and replaced with non-stereotypical icons.

2. Language - Sweden
One morning in Christian's room, a parent brought their child and stayed to interact with other children. The parent pointed to a girl's sweater and said with a light voice: "What a niiiiice sweater you have with cherries." The parent then turned to a boy, lowered the voice and said: "What cooooool letters you have." Christian noticed the different tones and terminology used by the parent, where the boy was spoken to with a deeper tone and that he had a "cool" sweater, and the girl got a lighter tone and had a "nice" sweater. Christian reflected that at the setting they try not to compliment the children according to what they look like or wear, but rather for what they do. Staff also ask if the clothes are comfortable rather than note features of colour or images on them. Christian decided to talk to parents about how they talk at the preschool and why it was important in terms of gender-sensitivity.

3. Organisation - Germany
When organising to move the pallets from one side of the garden to the other, Tim's colleague shouted: "I need a few strong boys." The children all wanted to help, but girls were hesitant to approach. Tim also shouted: "Hey, why can only the boys help?" The colleague laughed and said: "No, clearly no, everyone can help, there were also strong girls." Tim realised how deeply anchored certain stereotypical statements are, even with reflective teachers; and how often gendered social norms shape us in everyday life. Such organisation stereotypically narrows roles of children to certain "strengths and weaknesses". Tim saw the need to discuss gender with children in everyday (pedagogical) life.

4. Planning - China
Pan planned an activity with two roles: the bulldozers that destroy the blocks and the architects who help to build. Children were divided into two groups and took up one of the two roles respectively. Pan expected that boys would like to damage things and girls would like to help others. However, both girls and boys wanted to play to be the bulldozers. Pan had to allow children to take turns to play both roles and persuaded children to try being the builder. Pan reflected that the activity could be differently designed if he let go of his own (unconscious) gender stereotypes.

It seems that looking at practices across different contexts helps to promote reflections on taken-for-granted practices in practitioners' own settings. In particular, we need a cross-cultural approach to EYEC pedagogy that challenges gender stereotypes by:

- raising awareness of how dominant gender discourses shape EYEC values and practices in local cultures
- informing about gender-sensitive practices and the possible consequences, as alternative to gender-masked practices
- encouraging rethinking of pedagogical values and the implications for wider social justice and equity
- facilitating mutual understanding of cultural differences and similarities among nations and prepare children as global citizens.

We owe it to young children to adopt gender sensitive practices which allows them wider opportunity or experience and roles, thus opening up possibilities for wider learning and development.

Yuwei Xu is a Research Fellow and Lecturer in the Centre for Teacher and Early Years Education, University College London, UK

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The need for a transformative and contextual early years curriculum

Georgina Trevor and Amanda Ince

Early childhood education and care became a policy priority in England in 1997. Spending went up considerably, private providers were encouraged to provide childcare and multi-agency Sure Start centres came into being. The aim was to reduce the attainment gap for children with limited resources, help parents to return to work and prepare children for formal schooling at age 5. The Childcare Act in 2006 and implementation of the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) curriculum in 2008 heralded a shift in educational thinking and was praised early on as a holistic and child-centred approach. Despite moves towards comprehensive and integrated early childhood services, a divide formed between education and childcare, which has not been resolved in the intervening twenty years.

The EYFS, within the context of wider early years policy, had the potential to close this gap, but it has increasingly, through several revisions, become more focused on school readiness, whilst the view of the sector remained rooted in "childcare" – with the Government's "15 or 30 hours free childcare", "Tax free childcare" and frequent references to the sector as "childcare providers". Educational economists report that the private childcare market in the UK was, in 2013-2015, worth an estimated £4.9 billion (Lewis and West, 2015). PVI settings often have a competitive pedagogical culture of targets and measurements of school readiness. Within an increasingly narrow system, the desired outcomes can become the focus, meaning "school readiness" leads the learning.

The coronavirus pandemic across the UK in 2020 resulted in early years settings closing in late March for all pupils except children of key workers and those classified as vulnerable, and the subsequent "childcare" arrangements made by parents struggling at home to both work and look after young children. In January 2021, primary schools were instructed that reception provision upwards should remain open only to critical workers and vulnerable children, while all pre-reception early years provision, whether in the maintained sector or PVIs/childminders should remain open to all children. This decision was fuelled by the government view that that "Caring for the youngest age group is not something that can be done remotely" (DfE, 2021: 4).

Whilst many early years settings spent much of 2020 navigating how best to support children's learning and deliver the curriculum in the face of utter uncertainty, the split between childcare and education came sharply into focus. The curriculum, premised on overarching principles of resilient, capable, confident, self-assured, unique children effectively ceased to be a priority during the pandemic, illustrating just how much the curriculum has become one of utility. The need for "childcare" came to the fore with the EYFS, viewed as vehicle for "school readiness" delivering the "knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life" (DfE. 2020: 5) being effectively put on hold.

Conversely, international approaches, such as that of New Zealand, saw staff encouraged by their Ministry of Education to continue developing tailored learning programmes based on the existing goals in each child's individual education plan. The New Zealand

curriculum Te Whāriki, refers to their children as "global citizens in a rapidly changing and increasingly connected world. Children need to be adaptive, creative and resilient, to 'learn how to learn' so that they can engage with new contexts, opportunities and challenges with optimism and resourcefulness" (Ministry of Education, 2017:7).

New Zealand government departments responsible for early education during the pandemic based their approach, in part, on their priorities and beliefs surrounding the purpose of early years education. This contrasted starkly with the purpose of early education as seen by the English government, as a national results-driven approach to early years education, aiming to achieve numerous and often conflicting outcomes as a means of measuring success. The result is the development of the curriculum as technical practice, with goals and outcomes increasingly tightly defined. Seen in this way, education becomes a transfer of knowledge relating to specific measurable competencies, the acquisition of which are observed, assessed and tested at predetermined key stages in a child's life.

This top-down approach is illustrated by the chronology of changes to statutory early years frameworks. The EYFS's most recent update in 2020 followed changes in Ofsted's Early Years inspection Handbook in 2019, proposed changes to the Early Learning Goals in June 2018, and the government's consultation on primary school assessment in 2017. All point to an outcome-oriented agenda with the EYFS end goals and inspection framework revised before the curriculum itself was revisited.

When learning is mapped backwards from intended outcomes, it becomes independent from any meaningful context, with a child's skills or knowledge merely summed up using predetermined checklists as part of convergent assessment. This approach relies on assumptions regarding competence, deficit and the achievement of a hierarchy of skills, and objective observation for the purposes of obtaining approval of external agencies. Rigid frameworks born of the notion that a single construction and measure of learning exists, result in teaching to tests and will not suffice in an increasingly unpredictable and changeable present and future. The use of fixed measurements to calculate progress seems to have led to recent suggestions that young children are "falling behind" their expected stage of development and attainment.

In a busy setting, within a measurement culture, the focus is on what can be measured, making what is the measurable most important while that which cannot be measured or does not align neatly with tick-boxes or baselines is disregarded and overlooked.

> There is no room for the unexpected because it does not fit the predefined script. But engaging with young children is "full of the unexpected. (Clark, 2020: 137)

The McNamara fallacy (coined by the sociologist Daniel Yankelovich) describes this in four stages: measure whatever can be easily measured; disregard that which cannot be measured easily; presume that which cannot be measured easily is not important; presume that which cannot be measured easily does not exist.

In order to navigate the coronavirus pandemic, and its effect on young children, the desire to revert to measurable outcomes to fill so called gaps in children's knowledge must be avoided. Instead, time should be spent in partnership with parents and children to develop skillsets and approaches that help them find a way through this new landscape. It has been widely reported in the media and on social media discussion fora that some practitioners and teachers have noticed changes in children's behaviour over the past year. Terms like "falling behind" and "catching up" are used by politicians to indicate a level of concern around children's development. Children's charities have also highlighted concerns; for example, in November 2020 Home-Start drew attention to increased numbers of young children's mental health and development. Whilst not the case for all children, it is an acknowledged phenomenon that some children are not thriving in the context of their own progress, and instead are returning to behaviours they displayed at a former stage of their development.

The uncertainty that came with the first lockdown in England in March 2020 was difficult to navigate; many parents shielded young children from the realities of the pandemic, leading to often fragmented understandings. Everything children knew changed overnight. Children were collected from nursery or school one day and told they were not going back, and no-one was sure for how long. The difficulties this gave rise to became apparent for some children on their return to their setting, with providers reporting "some children's behaviour had deteriorated", whilst others suggested experiences during lockdown may have led to some children now "struggling to engage in play and activities" (Ofsted, 2020:2).

Whilst regressions are not unusual in the course of early childhood development (development is, of course, not linear), the frequency with which regression has occurred post lockdown has been reported to have increased sharply with worries over sleep (children finding it harder to settle or frequently waking), eating (children becoming fussier with food), toileting (children having accidents or wanting to wear nappies) and speaking (children using "baby" noises, becoming quieter or in some cases, selectively mute). Separation anxiety has increased, and transitions are harder; even simple transitions have triggered strong emotional responses in children or changes in their behaviour. Less time spent outside during lockdowns has led to fewer opportunities for open-ended outdoor play and much needed physical development, meaning that many children found it harder to cope and make sense of how they felt physically.

In this context, a creative curriculum with freedom and support to play without limitations of imposed curriculum is essential. How the content of the curriculum is unpacked by the practitioner and co-constructed with children is influenced by the children's diversities and interests, practitioner training, academic and pedagogical knowledge, practical experience and "funds of knowledge": a knowledge base of experience, social practices and social and emotional experiences of all parties (Wood, 2013). The importance of context, and in particular children's lived experiences, transforms the interpretation of an immovable curriculum as "universal truth" into adaptable and reflexive approaches. We unpack this idea in a recent chapter (Trevor, Ince and Ang, 2020).

All early years practitioners and children must be afforded considerable pedagogical space to allow for complex interpretations to unfold and refold, establishing an interwoven web of relations that form the "fabric of meaning" (Carr, 2001: 82). When integrating/re-integrating a curriculum such as the EYFS into early years settings, pedagogical approaches must constantly adjust themselves, through a culture of listening to the perspectives of the children, to create relevant and meaningful understandings of children's learning experiences.

The EYFS, used in conjunction with guidance documents such as *Development Matters* (Early Education, 2012), and the much anticipated *Birth to 5 Matters* (Early Years Coalition, 2020) relies on observation and interpretation embedded in participatory practice to deliver meaningful learning experiences, with practitioners continuously reviewing and evaluating the impact of the curriculum.

Action research offers a process of democratic "meaning making" as a way to instigate positive and lasting change, and address issues faced by practitioners in a variety of early childhood settings. Ince and Kitto (2020) offer a practical guide to practitioner enquiry and action research as a way to instigate positive and lasting change and bridge the theory/practice divide. It can support "a collaborative, positive learning culture – providing time and space for sharing knowledge and support for continuous professional development for all practitioners" (Early Years Coalition, 2020: 7).

We know that one single curriculum does not exist; in the United Kingdom alone the four nations (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) each have their own distinctive early years policies and curricula. Curricula frameworks thus reflect areas of knowledge deemed of value in the context of the wider society within which they operate and should be approached as a tool to be used in conjunction with skilled practitioners and their judgements.

The EYFS does not contain all the "skills, knowledge and attitudes children need as foundations for good future progress" (DfE, 2020: 7). Instead, with alternative approaches, the EYFS has the potential starting points upon which a complex and diverse curriculum may be built. One which recognises children's capacity to actively participate in the construction of a rich curriculum and re-imagine the skills and knowledge that such a curriculum has the potential to develop.

"There is a constant relational reciprocity between those who educate and those who are educated" (Rinaldi, 2006: 141) and the process of learning is not neutral. Everyday practice needs to recognise that curriculum should be experiential and practitioners must actively listen to better understand the perspectives of children. An innovative and adaptable curriculum that recognises the rights of all children, and that permits skilled, well-paid and trusted practitioners to engage in local democratic experimentations, should be a high priority. Now, more than ever, children must lead their learning, and their learning must lead our practice.

Georgina Trevor is a member of the leadership and management team across a group of two family run North London nurseries. Amanda Ince is a Principle Teaching Fellow at UCL Institute of Education.

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