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International Perspectives on Early Years Workforce Development

Edited by
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Meet the series editor and book editors

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Acknowledgements

Preface: introduction to critical thinking

What is critical thinking?

This section gives you the opportunity to learn more about critical thinking and the skills you will acquire as you use this series. It will introduce you to the meaning of critical thinking and how you can develop the necessary skills to read and research effectively towards a critical approach to learning and analysis. It is a necessary and wholly beneficial position to be starting with questions and finishing your journey with more questions.

> *Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers*
>
> (François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire))

If you are already a professional within the early years sector, maybe as a teacher in a reception class, or as an early years educator in a private daycare setting, you will no doubt have faced many challenging debates, discussions at training events and your own personal questioning of the policies faced by the sector as a whole. We want you to ask these questions. More importantly we believe it to be an essential and crucial part of your professional development. You will no doubt be required to implement the policies that might at first seem so detached from your day-to-day teaching and practice. It is critical that you question these policies, that you understand their purpose, and moreover that you understand how they have come to being.

Often students are faced with complex definitions of critical thinking that require them to deconstruct the concept before they fully understand just how to *do* critical thinking in the first place. For example,

> *Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.*
>
> (Scriven and Paul, 1989)

Rather than confusing you with expressive academic definitions, it is our hope that as you read further and begin to understand this topic more, you will be encouraged to ask contemplative questions. Alison King emphasises the importance of students acquiring and cultivating '*a habit of inquiry*' (1995, p 13) to enable them to '*learn to ask thoughtful questions*' (King, 1995). Contrary to the standard methods of 'instruction' that leaves students as

passive recipients of information, King argues that where students have developed the skills of critical thinking they become 'autonomous' learners:

> *Such a habit of inquiry learned and practiced in class can be applied also to their everyday lives: to what they see on television, read in the newspaper observe in popular culture and hear during interaction with friends and colleagues, as well as to decisions they make about personal relationships, consumer purchases, political choices, and business transactions.*
>
> (King, 1995, p 13)

Consider the subject matter that you are now researching; you may have been tasked with the question 'How has policy changed over the past 25 years?' This is what King would suggest is a 'factual' question, one that may well have a limited answer. Once you have this answer, there is a tendency to stop there, making the inquiry fact-based rather than critical. If you were to follow this first question up with a critical question, King would argue that you are beginning to '*introduce high level cognitive processes such as analysis of ideas, comparison and contrast, inference, prediction [and] evaluation*' (1995, p 140).

Example:

Factual question	Critical question
How has policy changed over the past 25 years?	What has been the impact of policy change over the past 25 years?
Which policies have been introduced to support childcare and early education initiatives recently?	How has childcare and early education been influenced by recent policy?

Critical thinking has been described by Diane Halpern (1996) as:

> *thinking that is purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed – the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions when the thinker is using skills that are thoughtful and effective.*
>
> (Halpern, 1996)

The emphasis is on 'thinking' that alludes to the student pausing and considering not only the topic or subject in hand, but the questions generated from taking an opportunity to ask those critical rather than factual questions.

To think critically signifies the ability to use 'a higher order skill' that enables professionals to act in a rational and reasonable manner, using empathy and understanding of others in a specific context, such as an early years setting. The rights and needs of others are always the priority, rather than blindly following established procedures.

A critical thinker:

• *raises vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely; gather and assess relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively;*

- *reaches well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards*;

- *thinks open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences;*

- *communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.*

(Taken from Paul and Elder, 2008)

Alec Fisher (2001) examines the description given by John Dewey of what he termed '*reflective thinking as active, persistent and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and further conclusions to which it tends*'. Rather than rushing to discover what you believe to be 'the answer', consider disentangling the question and the 'right answer' before stating your conclusion. Could there be more to find by turning your factual question into a critical question?

Below are examples of a student discussing her recent visit to another early years setting. The first question is what King (1995) describes as a factual question, and you can see we have highlighted exactly where the facts are in the answer. The second question is a critical question (King, 1995), and again we have highlighted in the answer where the critical elements are.

Question (factual)

What did you see in the new setting that is different from your setting?

> *The equipment that was out didn't seem a lot [FCT], in my setting we have everything out [FCT] so the children can access it all, you know like continuous provision. In the other setting they had bare shelves [FC] and they told me that new equipment was only brought out when the children had mastered those already out [FCT]. They didn't seem to be bothered about the EYFS either, like nothing in the planning was linked to the EYFS [FCT].*

(Early childhood studies student, 2013)

Question (critical)

Consider the two different approaches, in your setting and the one that you visited. What impact do you think they have on the children's learning and development?

> *I suppose I can see that when we put so much toys and materials out, that there are always children who get things out but don't have a clue how to use it. I guess it would be better if there was less and that the things they did get out were right for the developmental level of each child [CRIT]. I suppose this is how we interpret continuous provision [CRIT]. I think as well that the other setting were using the EYFS to measure the development and learning of each child [CRIT], but they knew framework and the children well enough not to have to write it all down all the time [CRIT]. They spend most of their time with the children where as we spend a lot of time sitting writing.*

(Early childhood studies student, 2013)

Another example of how you can become a critical thinker might be in asking yourself critical questions as you read and research a topic.

> *Thought provoking or critical questions require students to go beyond the facts to think about the in ways that are different from what is presented explicitly in class or in the text.*
>
> (King, 1995, p 14*)*

Stella Cottrell (2005) suggests that '*one must know what we think about a subject and then be able to justify why we think in a certain way 'having reasons for what we believe...critically evaluation our own beliefs...[and be] able to present to others the reasons for our beliefs and actions*' (Cottrell, 2005, p 3).

Five questions towards critical thinking

1. Do I understand what I am reading?

2. Can I explain what I have read (factually)? For example, what is this author telling me about this subject?

3. What do I think? For example, what is my standpoint, what do I believe is right?

4. Why do I think that way (critically)? For example, I think that way because I have seen this concept work in practice.

5. Can I justify to another person my way of thinking?

All that we ask is that you take the time to stop, and consider what you are reading:

> *What a sad comment on modern educational systems that most learners neither value nor practise active, critical reflection. They are too busy studying to stop and think.*
>
> (Hammond and Collins, 1991, p 163)

We encourage you to take time to ask yourself, your peers and your tutors inquisitive and exploratory questions about the topic explored herein, and to stop for a while to move on from the surface level factual questioning for which you will no doubt only find factual answers, and to ponder the wider concepts, the implications to practice and to ask the searching questions to which you may not find such a concrete answer.

For as Van Gelder so eloquently suggests, learning about it is not as useful as doing it:

> *For students to improve, they must engage in critical thinking itself. It is not enough to learn about critical thinking. These strategies are about as effective as working on your tennis game by watching Wimbledon. Unless the students are actively doing the thinking themselves, they will never improve.*
>
> (Van Gelder, 2005, p 43)

1 International perspectives on workforce development in early childhood education and care: history, philosophy and politics

VERITY CAMPBELL-BARR, JAN GEORGESON AND PHILIP SELBIE

A global interest in children throughout history

Early childhood education and care pioneers

International perspectives on workforce development in early childhood education and care: history, philosophy and politics

Cultural perspectives of children and families

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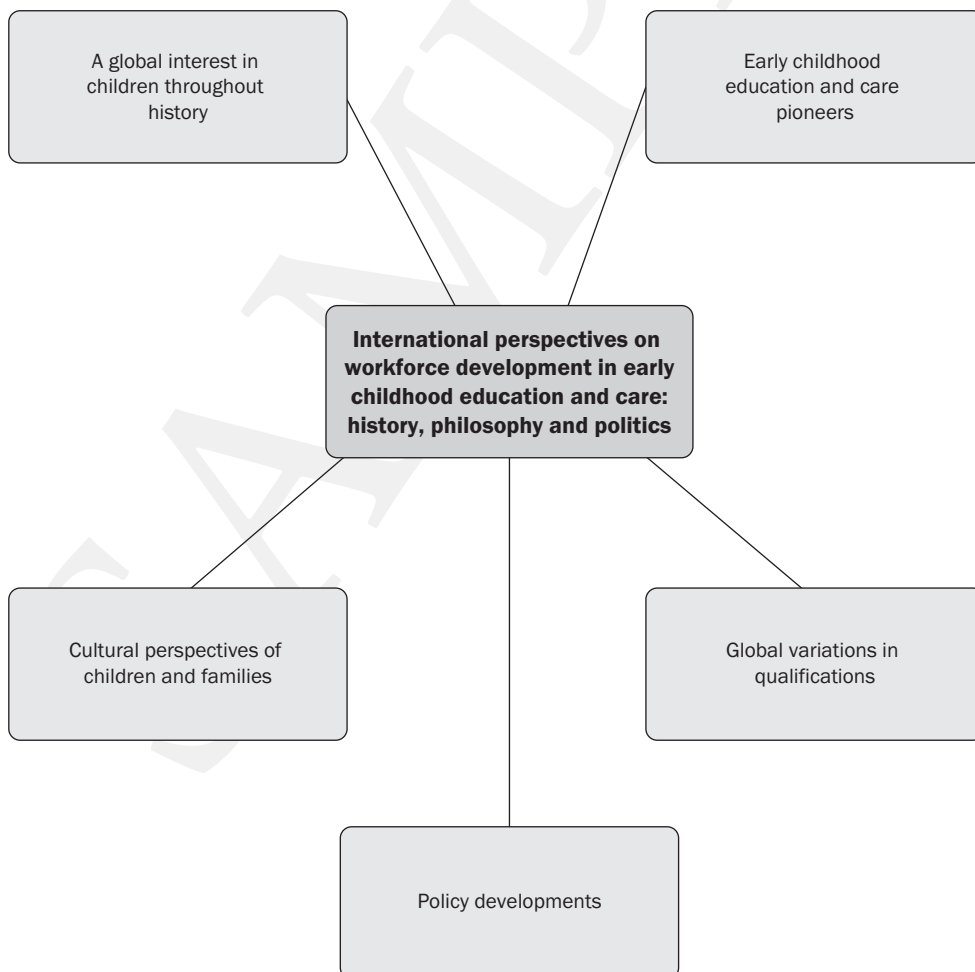
A global interest in children through history

Across the globe there is increased interest and investment in early childhood education and care. International governments (as well as supra national organisations) are increasingly recognising and valuing the role of early childhood education and care in supporting the holistic development of young children, while also acknowledging the role that early childhood education and care services have in supporting families to manage their work–life balance (particularly in relation to parental employment). Key to this interest is a growing recognition that it is not just early childhood education and care that is an important social investment tool, but *quality* early childhood education and care (Sylva et al, 2004; Lindeboom and Buiskool, 2013; Mathers and Smees, 2014). Quality is a complex term that will always be debated (Dahlberg et al, 2007; Penn, 2011), but here we are particularly interested in the role of the workforce in delivering quality early childhood education and care.

When observing an experienced early years practitioner at work with very young children it can appear almost effortless to the untrained eye. The ease with which professional and caring adults interact with the curious and often demanding needs of young children belies the daunting range of personal qualities required to create a stimulating and purposeful learning environment. Questions are often generated as fast as they are answered, emotions are responded to as physical needs are taken care of, and yet the uniqueness of the individual child is always valued amidst the apparent chaos of an often noisy and demanding group of children.

Early childhood education and care pioneers

Beneath this visible surface educating and caring for very young children is a complex process. The work of an early childhood practitioner will be shaped and informed by a range of factors. Some of these factors will be grounded in a sound knowledge of early child development as well as an understanding and experience of learning theory and human relationships. This process is one that has been developed throughout history by pioneering individuals dedicated to ensuring that the very youngest in society have the best possible start to their lives. Some of these men and women held utopian dreams of social reform beginning with the wholesome education of young children, while others have had more pragmatic aims to alleviate the effects of ill health among the poor and most vulnerable. For some, their contribution has arisen out of a fascination with observing young children's learning in order to understand the rapid development that takes place in the first six or seven years of life. The legacy of these pioneers can be seen in the approaches to early childhood education and care that now shape the way in which the workforce engages with young children.

Throughout this book, the work of pioneering educators will be featured to consider their legacy within individual countries in shaping early childhood education and care provision and the workforce within it. Often the same pioneers have influenced practice in more than one country, but what has been interesting in bringing together a collection of chapters that span the globe, is that while individual countries might refer to the same pioneers, their interpretations can be very different. In other instances countries will have their own personal pioneers that are little recognised elsewhere, but yet they are key to the development of early childhood

services within their homeland. What these variations in interpretation of theory and philosophy show us is that in each country a process of interpretation takes place as practitioners work out the best way to work with the youngest members of their particular society.

Cultural perspectives of children and families

The process of formulating an understanding of how to engage and work with children will reflect historical conceptions of the child and childhood. At times these conceptual features will interplay with the theoretical ideas of the pioneers, but there will be a number of other cultural forces at play. Key to the process of interpreting the knowledge that exists around early childhood education and care services is recognising that the ways in which children and childhood are viewed within a society will shape and inform what a country sees as good and appropriate experiences for them. There can be a tendency to assume that the 'natural' experience for a child's early years is to be nurtured and cared for by his/her mother, but the study of family structures over time shows that this ideal of a warm, close, intimate relationship between mother and child has not been a constant feature of children's lives (Hays, 1996) and indeed the whole idea of mothering has always been a 'contested terrain' (Glenn, 1994, p 2). The interplay between the roles of mothers, fathers and the extended family and societal structures to support the care and development of children is different in different cultures, and has changed over time. Indeed, the child's very presence in the home or outside the home at particular points in their life can signal different things in different contexts; think of the child cared for at home today by a stay-at-home mother or stay-at-home father, in comparison with the home-schooled child; each case comes with cultural baggage about what is the expected place for the child or parent, and the structures within society to support that expected solution.

In most of the countries in this book, the child's developmental pathway follows a trajectory from home to daycare/nursery/kindergarten and then to school (Hedegaard and Fleer, 2008, p 11) and we can be so familiar with this that it can take on a kind of inevitability, a 'taken-for-grantedness' that masks the fact that it is a societal practice shaped by past history and current pragmatics. We need an early years workforce now (and have done since the onset of the Industrial Revolution) because we want to place young children in settings outside the home for part of the working day. Leaving aside for the moment why we might want to do this, it can be insightful to look at cultures or times in history with different arrangements: children have been sent away from their mothers for basic care (wet nursing); children might stay with their mothers and siblings until they are assigned work roles in the community; children are raised together in kibbutz. Thinking about other ways like these of raising children helps us to understand that present day attendance at day nursery (or other settings) is just the way childcare is arranged. Who gets to work with children outside – or inside – the home `AQ1` is also the result of cultural decision-making over time in the context of the pattern of jobs, qualities, qualifications and remunerations in society at large.

Critical questions

» *Consider the different environments where children are being cared for and educated. Do the adults in these environments require qualifications?*

» *Who has determined whether they require (or not) these qualifications?*

» *Have there been any changes in history as to the requirement for qualifications?*

If we see development as '*the person's evolving conception of the ecological environment, and his [sic] relation to it, as well as the person's growing capacity to discover, sustain, alter its properties*' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p 9), then the environment where children spend their growing years will play an important role in their development. When children are involved in setting-based care, they are acquiring culturally appropriate knowledge by participating in an environment where they can interact with objects and routines from the 'nursery treasure chest' (Georgeson, 2009). Here we understand culture as '*the entire pool of artifacts (including language, norms, customs, tools, values) accumulated by the social group in the course of its historical experience*' (Cole and Hatano, 2007, p 111).

Policy developments

One aspect that will shape what counts as appropriate environments for young children is the history of the country, possibly linked to the individual pioneers who lived or travelled there, but also the historical interest in early childhood services. A key aspect of the historical interest is the extent to which policymakers have taken an interest in early childhood services. This will shape how particular societies see the role of early childhood practitioners, and the differential weights given to the complementary roles of education and caring. Indeed in recent times other roles have accrued: an early childhood practitioner might now also be expected to take the role of supporting and educating parents as well as children, as the governments proclaim the importance of good parenting and seek ways to support those parents whose behaviours do not correspond to ideals.

As we look around the globe we can see some very clear differences in how early childhood services have been supported. Differences lie in the level of funding allocated by individual governments to early childhood services, whether the funding comes from central or local government, the composition of the different types of institutions available (such as preschool, kindergarten, day nursery), the market structure (such as all state provision or a mixed market approach), not to mention the qualification requirements. Increasingly, policymakers have taken an interest in the provision of early childhood education and care services, and often the result is that they become involved in moulding the early childhood education and care provision to fit their ideological position. The development of curriculum documents, qualifications structures and requirements and minimum quality standards will all form a process of shaping early childhood education and care provision. In the chapters that follow we can see the influence of policymakers, but we can also identify that there are different approaches and therefore experiences. For example, Sweden is an example of a country where there has been relatively early policy interest in the role that early childhood education and care services can play in the wider social welfare structure. This is contrasted with a country such as the Philippines that is still in the early stages of developing policy in the field of early childhood education and care. Hungary offers an example of where early childhood education and care providers are offered relatively autonomy in their approach, when contrasted to the heavily regulated systems that are present in the UK.

The historical policy developments around early childhood education and care provision are important as past political decisions will have a bearing on the direction of future policy developments. Path dependency reflects that decisions in the present can often be limited by those of the past. This can be because it is just easier to continue along the same path or that it is more cost effective. While in some cases this may enable robust early childhood education and care services and structures to develop, with a strong sense of tradition, in other cases it can feel like being stuck in a rut, with a lack of innovation. The latter can have implications for the early childhood education and care workforce, since though they might crave change, such as higher level qualifications, they can often be restricted by the political structures around them (see Osgood, 2010). AQ2

Global variations in qualifications

Key to this book we also see a number of contrasting ideas around the nature of the early childhood education and care workforce. One aspect of this is the level of qualifications required to work in early childhood education and care services, with variations existing both across and within countries. Qualification requirements can vary as a result of the type of early childhood education and care setting and the age of the child being cared for. Qualifications will also vary in terms of the level (Further Education, Higher Education, Masters) and the duration of the course, not to mention the content of the course. Increasingly, questions are being asked as to what are the knowledge and skills required of the workforce, what role do attitudinal competences play in the skill set needed to work with young children and how do you 'teach' and/or 'develop' these in early childhood education and care practitioners (CoRe, 2010)? Such questions highlight that the role of an early childhood practitioner is a AQ3
complex one.

Critical questions

» *What do you consider to be the knowledge, skills and attitudinal competences to work with young children?*

» *Where do you feel you learn about these – through training, while in practice, from your family?*

What is also apparent is that there is a complex array of terms used to describe those who work with young children. To some extent the terms used reflect how the purpose of early childhood education and care has been constructed in relation to the needs of the child. At this simplest level this is a difference between education-based terms, such as the Early Years Teacher, care-based terms, such as a Nursery Assistant, and those that look to blend together these two aspects, such as the Early Childhood Pedagogue. However, it is clear that in recent years the terminology to describe those who work with young children has become about a structural process of meeting standards and demonstrating specific areas of knowledge. The decision as to the skill set required of those working in early childhood education and care has become a top-down political process in many countries, embedded in an increasingly bureaucratic process. Our fear is that some of the key features of the philo-sophical approaches that you will see in this book have been reduced to a series of assess-ment criteria. We also have concerns that while it might appear relatively straightforward to

determine the knowledge and skills required, assessing emotional competence is something that is a challenge for policymakers. The result is that emotional indicators can be ignored, despite them often being an important feature for the individuals who choose to enter the early childhood education and care workforce.

Critical reflections

As will be seen in the chapters of this book, being a part of the early childhood education and care workforce is a complex mix of historical ideas around children and childhood and political perspectives on the role and function of early childhood education and care services. As a member of the early childhood education and care workforce you will find yourself negotiating between the historical, philosophical and political perspectives that are present within and beyond your home country. The chapters in this book are designed to enable you to think about what shapes your role as an early childhood practitioner, to consider how your experiences are similar to those of practitioners in other countries, to recognise how your thoughts and beliefs about early childhood education and care service are representative of those in other countries and to maybe even want to travel to see first-hand what working in early childhood education and care is like in another country. Ultimately, considering your experiences and beliefs are about enabling you to critically reflect on your own practice. To ask questions of why you approach your work in the way that you do and to feel confident in feeling that developing an understanding of who you are as a practitioner is always an ongoing process, but one that is shaped by your own history, philosophy and politics.

Further reading

Nutbrown, C, Clough, P and Selbie, P (2008) *Early Childhood Education: History, Philosophy & Experience*. London: Sage.

This is a really valuable book for considering in more detail the history and philosophy of early childhood education and care practices. The authors offer overviews of the pioneers that we will also encounter in this book – and more. Through tracing the pioneers in history, the authors identify common themes that can be seen as guiding the provision of early childhood education and care services, such as play, children's rights and early intervention.

Oberhuemer, P, Schreyer, I, and Neuman, M (2010) *Professionals in Early Childhood Education and Care Systems: European Profiles and Perspectives*. Leverkusen Opladen: Barbra Budich Publishers,.

This is a useful book as it offers chapters that present an overview of the early childhood education and care workforce in several countries. It is a useful reference tool in providing an understanding of what are the requirements that different countries have for their early childhood education and care workforce. There is also some consideration of key changes in history and policy within countries.

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A comprehensive and up-to-date critique of national and international political, economic and social agendas that influence children's lives and early years professional practice.

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