

## **Early Childhood Education (ECE)**

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### **Introduction**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 29, 1) agreed that all children have a right to education:

*"1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:*

- (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;*
- (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;*
- (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;*
- (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;*
- (e) The development of respect for the natural environment."* (UN, 1989)

The educational component of early years provision has the potential to transform a child's life and set them on a positive learning trajectory for life. A child's education doesn't miraculously begin when they start 'school', it is therefore important to recognise that these principles should extend to all children regardless of age. For many children in their earliest years parents provide a rich educational as well as

physical and social environment in the home. Unfortunately research shows us that this is not the case for all children. For many children from families disadvantaged by poverty and/or a lack of cultural capital the quality of the home learning environment is poor and educational provisions of their nursery or playgroup has a significant and long-term influence upon their abilities, learning and life chances (Schweinhart, et al, 1993; Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004; Sylva *et al*, 2004; Schweinhart *et al.*, 2005). Education begins at birth (some would argue, even earlier) and to understand the nature of education in the first five years of early childhood three concepts are particularly valuable; 'pedagogy', 'curriculum' and 'emergent development'. The first two of these originate in educational theory and the third is more often applied from developmental psychology. It is important for all those who work with young children to understand the transformative potential of good, early education.

### **An emergent curriculum**

While curriculum may be considered to define the content or product of teaching, the word 'pedagogy' is used by educationalists to describe the form that the teaching takes or the processes that are involved. Pedagogy is defined here following Gage (1977, 1985) as 'the science of the art of teaching' and every capable early educator may certainly be considered to be a *practicing artist*. The best early childhood educators creatively draw upon their knowledge of the interests and capabilities of the children in their care, and also a wide range of material, cultural and intellectual resources to provide the children with the most effective and rewarding stimulation and hands-on learning experiences possible on a day-to-day basis. And, just as a kind of scientific 'development' may be seen in the work of a great painter (Cezanne comes to mind as a really good example), the performance of an effective early childhood educator also develops as they continually reflect upon, critically evaluate and moderate their practice to achieve excellence. This requires a very good understanding of how children learn, the content of what they could learn e.g. including a good knowledge of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* in England (DfES, 2007), the *Foundation Phase* in Wales (DCELLS, 2008) or the *Curriculum for Excellence* in Scotland (CRPB, 2006) and the ability to assess, plan and use the child's social, cultural experiences to help them 'access' the curriculum.

In the context of early childhood education, the term curriculum may be defined broadly as; "all of those experiences, activities and events, whether direct or indirect, intended or otherwise, that occur within an environment designed to foster children's

learning and development”<sup>1</sup>. Young children are actively observing and exploring all of the time, they learn from everything that happens in the environment around them. However implicit or *hidden* the curriculum may be in some child care and education settings, the content of this learning (i.e. the ‘curriculum’) is thus always determined by the adults who care for them. The notion of a totally ‘free’ play environment is really a myth. The material resources (toys, furniture, props), that are selected and the activities, the social interactions, and the environments that we offer children, define both the opportunities and the limitations for their learning. The linguistic and cultural context in which children are immersed even more fundamentally influences what it is that they learn.

‘Emergent development’ is actually a philosophical notion that dates back to the very earliest writings in 19<sup>th</sup> Century psychology (Sawyer, 2003). In terms of child development, emergence may be considered to involve processes that occur over time that result in the development of higher order structures of the mind. These may relate to particular intellectual, social and cultural competencies and capabilities, and research has shown that in the early years they are initially developed in social interaction with babies and pre-schoolers, as well as the acquisition of a range of communication and collaboration skills in play (see Siraj-Blatchford, 2008).

But it is important to recognise that there is much more than any simple process of accumulation of skills involved in this. According to the principles of ‘emergent development’, the developmental structures that finally emerge are *irreducible* to their component parts. In fact from the perspective of emergent development, it is considered impossible to deduce the child’s development as a *whole* from any observations of their previously learnt behaviour or behaviours (Sawyer op cit). This does not mean that we should not learn from our observations of children but that we accept there is a whole lot more going on than can be observed. Emergent development requires an emergent curriculum, that is, content which is experienced but not in the main directly or didactically taught.

‘Emergent Literacy’ was a term first applied in Marie Clay’s doctoral dissertation (1966) and Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) cite Sulzby (1989), Teale and Sulzby (1986) and Sulzby and Teal (1991) in defining the concept as:

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 10

*“...the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing”, as well as; “...the environments that support these developments.” (op cit p849)*

Clearly this definition may be applied much more widely, with ‘Emergent Curriculum’ practices and resources being applied to support young children in learning and experiencing the skills, knowledge and attitudes identified as developmental precursors to a much wider range of curriculum subject areas and communities of practice<sup>2</sup>:

*“Rather than individual development being influenced by (and influencing) culture, from my perspective, people develop as they participate in and contribute to cultural activities that themselves develop with the involvement of people in successive generations. People of each generation, as they engage in sociocultural endeavors with other people, make use of and extend cultural tools and practices inherited from previous generations. As people develop through their shared use of cultural tools and practices, they simultaneously contribute to the transformation of cultural tools, practices, and institutions” (Rogoff, 2003, p52).*

Often this is how young children are learning in the home, in contingent, embedded contexts that they and their family share, often made more explicit through interactions and making meaning with the child.

### **Play and Early Childhood Education**

Rogoff and others (e.g. Maybin and Woodhead, 2003) have shown that a wide range of *playful activities* progressively engage children in the cultural life of adults and their communities (Rogoff *et al.*, 1993; Rogoff, 2003). Play is also widely recognised as a leading context for the child’s acquisition of communication and collaboration skills and if we apply our conception of ‘emergence’, then children’s day to day learning through play may also be seen as contributing towards, but not itself constituting, the achievement of either a series, or continuous process, of irreducible restructurings of the young child’s mind<sup>3</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> While the subject of Science has been studied in depth as a community of practice (Kuhn, 1970), the concept may be applied much more widely to include schools of art and other scholarly communities.

<sup>3</sup> This may be seen as a ‘renaissance’ of the mind, and/or as a gestalt change.

*“A child’s play is not simply a reproduction of what (s)he has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions (s)he has acquired”* (Vygotsky, 2004, p11). For neo-Vygotskians, play is considered to be a ‘leading activity’ (Leontiev, 1981; Oerter, 1993), but it is important to recognise here that this doesn’t mean that play should be considered to predominate in the life of young children, that play is the *only* way that young children learn, or that *all* kinds of play promote development or learning. Play provides an important *context* for learning and development, as Vygotsky (1933) put it: *“Only theories maintaining that a child does not have to satisfy the basic requirements of life, but can live in search of pleasure, could possibly suggest that a child’s world is a play world”* (p1). But: *“The child moves forward essentially through play activity. Only in this sense can play be termed a leading activity that determines the child’s development.”* (op cit)

In terms of empirical progression we know from decades of research that play begins with solitary play and the child goes on to develop the capability to share, then to co-operate, and finally to collaborate in their play (Siraj-Blatchford, 2008). We also know that these developments open up much wider opportunities for learning. But ‘solitary play’, shared play, co-operative and collaborative play are not discrete ‘stages’ that the child works through. Even solitary play serves us well at times throughout our adult learning lives! In most theoretical accounts describing the ways in which these different forms of play open up the possibility of learning, the notion of emergent development is often implicit. For example, when describing play as a ‘leading activity’, it is only being suggested that it should be seen as a driving force in the child’s development of new forms of motivation and action.

### **Effective Pedagogy and Sustained Shared Thinking**

The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) research project (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004) has provided a large scale, longitudinal, mixed method research study that has followed the progress of over 3000 children, from age 3-11. The children started in 141 pre-schools and then entered 800 primary schools across England. The study applied multi-level modelling to investigate the separate effects of personal and social and family background, the quality of the learning support provided in the home, and the quality of the learning environment provided by the children’s pre- and primary schools, as well as the effectiveness of the pre/primary schools. The study has shown that quality preschool education (as assessed by standardised instruments such as the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales*,

Harms et al 1998; Sylva *et al.*, 2006) can ameliorate the effects of disadvantage by increasing children's learning attainment thereby reducing the effects of social exclusion. High quality Early Childhood Education can be a strong equaliser for the most disadvantaged children. While all children benefit from high quality ECE, some only get it through pre-school provision rather than in the home.

*Sustained Shared Thinking* (SST) was first identified in a qualitative analysis carried out in the *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years* (REPEY) project undertaken in association with the EPPE project (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2002; 2003). The REPEY project was developed to identify the most effective pedagogical strategies that are applied in the early years settings to support the development of young children's skills, knowledge and attitudes, and ensure they made a good start at school. The qualitative case studies provided detailed accounts of the learning and teaching that was observed (400 hours of adult observations and 254 episodes of child observations) in 12 of the most effective settings identified by EPPE (from a national sample of 141 settings).

The transcriptions of episodes of SST were subsequently found to provide valuable (concrete) examples of the kind of effective pedagogy that were needed to develop practice. *Sustained Shared Thinking* thus featured in the *Key Elements of Effective Practice* (KEEP) (DfES, 2005) that was distributed to all English pre-schools settings, and it has now been included in the national *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) a curriculum framework and guidance for England (DfES, 2007).

The REPEY findings may be summarised as follows:

**1. Adult initiated activity** - *effective pedagogues model appropriate language, values and practices, they also encourage socio-dramatic play, praise, encourage, ask questions, and interact verbally with children. Excellent settings tended to achieve a good balance between teacher-led and child-initiated interactions, play and activities. Two thirds of activities were child led but in excellent settings half of these were extended with appropriate, guided, cognitive challenge by the adults.*

**2. Child initiated but adult extended activities** – *this is a particular form of teacher/practitioner initiation that may also be applied in cases where the child initiated. The most effective settings were found to provide both teacher-initiated group work and freely chosen, yet potentially instructive play activities. 'Extension'*

*was included in the definition of 'sustained shared thinking' (see below), and one of the implications clearly identified in the research was that effective pedagogues require a good knowledge and understanding of the curriculum, and of how child learn.*

**3. The provisions of differentiation and formative assessment - effective pedagogues assessed children's performance to ensure the provision of challenging yet achievable experiences (i.e. within the Zone of Proximal Development, Vygotsky, 1978) and provide formative feedback. The most effective settings seemed to have shared educational aims with parents supported by regular communication, weekly or monthly dialogues were more effective than termly or annual meetings.**

**4. Attention to the relationships between children - Effective settings viewed cognitive and social development as complementary and they supported children in rationalising and talking through their conflicts and resolving problems for themselves with the help of adults. This was not the case where the adults dominated and told the children what to do.**

**5. Sustained shared thinking and open-ended questions - Adults and children in the excellent settings were more likely to engage at times in 'sustained shared thinking': episodes in which two or more individuals 'worked together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities or extend narratives etc. During periods of sustained shared thinking (SST) both parties contributed to the thinking and developed and extended the discourse. Associated with SST was also the adult's skilled use of open-ended questioning, these are questions that could genuinely have more than one answer e.g. "What do you think?" "What would you do?" (See Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2008 for the analysis of around 6,000 questions asked of children in 12 pre-schools).**

In the UK context, such findings also challenge entrenched beliefs about the value of exclusively encouraging free play, and promoting a solely non-interventionist role for early childhood practitioners.

### **International Early Childhood Education (ECE) MODELS**

An 'ECE model' is an educational system that combines theory with practice. A number of such models may be identified in the UK and overseas that combine a

theoretical knowledge base (that may reflect a particular philosophical orientation). The ‘qualities’ of several particularly popular and ‘successful’ international ECE models were identified in the *Start Strong Report* (OECD, 2004) and as Pramling *et al.* (2004) (and Siraj-Blatchford, 1999) have observed, a number of interesting commonalities can be found between the most successful (widely replicated) ECE models developed in different countries. Similarly, if we consider the accounts of the three ECE models most clearly identifying their pedagogy in the Starting Strong Report (OECD, 2004), we can see that the particular strategies applied according to these accounts of the models (by Ferre Leavers, David Weikart and Carla Rinaldi) match very closely with the REPEY findings, and with additional evidence from the EPPE study (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004) that show positive correlations as follows:

	<b>Teacher’s initiating activities</b>	<b>Teacher’s extending activities</b>	<b>Differentiation and Formative Assessment</b>	<b>Relationships and conflict between children</b>	<b>Sustained Shared Thinking</b>
<b>EEL<sup>4</sup></b>	“Introducing new activities”	“Enriching interventions”	“Observe children”	“Work out sustaining relations”	“Engagement”
<b>High Scope</b>	“Sharing Control”	“Participation as partners”	“Plan - Do - Review”	“Adopt a problem solving approach”	“Authentic dialogue”
<b>Reggio Emilia</b>	“Development of short and long-term projects”	“Sustaining the cognitive and social dynamics”	“Teachers first listen don’t talk”	“Warm reciprocal relationships”	“Reciprocity of interactions”
<b>EPPE/ REPEY</b>	<b><i>Correlations found with effective practice</i></b>	<b><i>Correlations found with effective practice</i></b>	<b><i>Correlations found with effective practice</i></b>	<b><i>Correlations found with effective practice</i></b>	<b><i>Correlations found with effective practice</i></b>

Note: “Teacher” also refers to any other adult in early years settings

<sup>4</sup> ‘Effective Early Learning’ (EEL) (Pascal & Bertram, 1995), referred to as ‘Experiential Education’ (EXE) in Pramling *et al* (2004) taken from the work of Ferre Leavers.

In the UK, the Effective Early Learning (EEL) project has drawing upon work carried out by Ferre Laevers (1995) in Belgium to provide a professional development programme that is intended to evaluate and develop quality in early childhood settings (Pascal and Bertram, 1995, 1997). In EEL, effective learning is considered to involve an essentially symbiotic relationship characterized by the 'involvement' of the child and the 'engagement' of the teacher. An involved child is one who has focused their attention and is persistent, is intrinsically motivated, rarely distracted, fascinated and absorbed by their activity. An engaged adult is one who shows sensitivity, stimulation and yet grants enough autonomy for the child to make their own judgements and express their ideas.

Reggio Emilia is a district in Northern Italy where over the last 35 years, the municipality has developed an extensive network of early childhood services for children from birth to 6, providing for over a third of children under 3 and nearly all children aged 3 to 6. The city has become world-famous for the pedagogical work in these services, attracting many visitors from all over the world (for further reading see Edwards *et al.*, 1993). The early childhood services in Reggio understand the young child to be a co-constructor of knowledge and identity, a unique, complex and individual subject, engaging with and making sense of the world from birth, but always doing this in relationship with others, both adults and other children. Reggio pre-schools employ specialist staff such as atelierista, person who runs the atelier, the school's art studio, and a pedagoga, who acts as a key worker providing support with documentation and individual planning for a group of children (often across a group of settings) and their families.

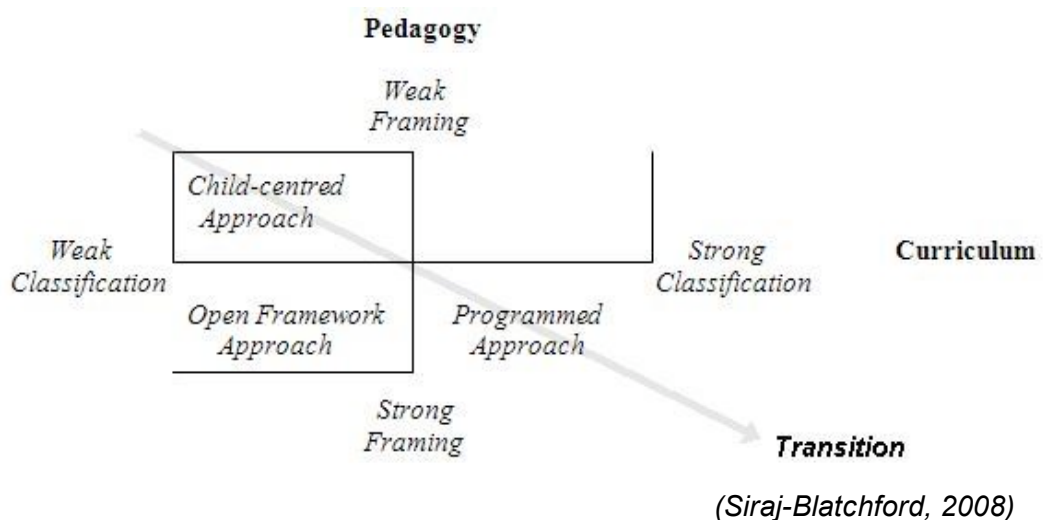
The High/Scope approach (Weikart, *et al.*, 1971, Schweinhart *et al.*, 2005), which has also gained considerable popularity in the UK, is based upon an approach originally developed from the practice of Sara Smilansky. The High/Scope daily routine consist of a cycle of a 'planning', 'doing' and 'reviewing'. During planning, children decide what activity they will engage in for the session. Once the 'do' part of the routine is complete, the children recall what they have done during review time. A setting organised to provide the High/Scope experience is divided into interest areas to promote active learning and specific kinds of play and the materials are accessible to the children to allow independence. The adult's role is to participate as a partner in the children's activities and there is an emphasis on positive interaction strategies, allowing children to share control and form authentic relationships with other children.

In addition, the adult must support children’s learning and extend it by helping children to find solutions to problems they encounter.

There is strength to be found in variety and as each of these models are culturally specific it would be a mistake to make any judgment between them. But as suggested above, there are commonalities that may be identified to inform the development of all provisions (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). To take just one other significant example, the ‘documentation’ applied in Reggio Emilia and other ECE models provides a means by which children are encouraged to reflect upon their own work and that of their peers. They therefore; *‘become even more curious, interested, and confident as they contemplate the meaning of what they have achieved’* (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 63). When the children’s efforts, intentions, and ideas are shown so clearly to be taken seriously by the adults this encourages the children to approach their work with greater responsibility, energy and commitment. Documentation also provides a basis for continuous planning based on the evaluation of work as it progresses; it provides a context for communicating with parents which often leads to them to become more involved in their child’s education. High Scope takes the emphasis on continuous planning and review that is found in Reggio a stage further, providing a more structured and institutionalised approach in the daily plan-do-review routines.

**Other common pedagogical models of ECE**

A typology of the most commonly applied models of early childhood education has been adapted from a model first developed by Weikart (2000), and is shown in Figure 1.



The major organising principles applied in the typology are pedagogy and curriculum (Bernstein, 1981) and the different forms of early childhood practice are distinguished by applying Bernstein's formulation of classification and framing. 'Classification' refers to the strength of the boundaries placed between 'curriculum subjects'; in the early years we might refer to these as *domains of learning*. Where the curriculum content is clearly defined in terms of school subjects we refer to that as *strong* classification. Framing is about who is in control; who it is that selects, sequences or paces the learning. When framing is weak the child has more apparent control, and when it is strong it is the adult or educator who is most clearly in control. So for example, a collaborative, progressive and permissive classroom illustrates weak framing and a traditional didactic one strong framing.

In the most extreme applications of the Child-centred approach in ECE, the teacher responds entirely to the individual child's interests and activities. More often, topic or project themes are adopted that have been chosen especially to appeal to the children's interests. The curriculum emphasis is on encouraging children's independence, their social and emotional growth, creativity and self-expression. The classroom or playroom environment is often rich in stimulus, permissive, and provides for open-ended exploration and discovery.

An Open Framework approach provides the educator with a strong pedagogic structure (or framework) that supports the child in their explorations and interactions with, and reflections upon, their learning environment. In this model, the curriculum classification is weaker as the child has a good deal of freedom to make choices between the various learning environments that are on offer. But the optional environments (e.g. sand, water, block play, puzzles etc.) are often provided to achieve particular (usually cognitive or conceptual) curriculum aims, and these aims may be more or less acknowledged by the setting. In some settings children's choices are carefully monitored and a broad and balanced curriculum (including physical, creative, social and academic) is encouraged over the medium or long term.

The Programmed approach is highly teacher directed providing for little initiative on the part of the child. The rationale for this method is drawn significantly from theories of learning. This pedagogy is usually applied where curriculum objectives may be clearly (and objectively) classified and is likely to be most effective where learning involves the development of simple skills or memorisation. The curriculum content in

programmed approaches is often highly structured. This sort of programme has been shown to be detrimental to children's long-term development (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997).

Some longitudinal studies have shown us that young children provided with programmed instruction sometimes do better than those provided with other forms of pedagogy in the short term (e.g. Millar and Bizzell, 1983; Karnes *et al.*, 1983). But the studies also suggest that even when these effects are apparent, the gains are short lived, with all the significant differences having 'washed out' within a year of the provision ending. Programmed Instruction has also been found to result in children showing significantly increased stress/anxiety behaviours (Burts *et al.*, 1990). A more recent and rigorous longitudinal study conducted by Schweinhart and Weikart (1997) showed little difference in the academic performance of young children provided with Programmed Instruction but significantly more emotional impairment and disturbance leading to special educational provision. More importantly, the Schweinhart and Weikart study showed that in later years the Programmed Instruction group experienced more suspensions from work and more than double the rate of arrests as either of the other two groups. In terms of serious crimes requiring a custodial sentence, 43% of the Programmed Instruction group gained a criminal record, compared with only 17% of the child-centred group and only 10% of the open framework group by the age of 25. Both the Schweinhart and Weikart (1997) study and the High/Scope Perry Pre-school (ref?) study showed a significant difference in the percentage of young adults married and living with their spouses: While 31% of the Open Framework group and 18 % of the Child-centred group were married at age 23, none of those experiencing Programmed Instruction were (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997). The England and Northern Ireland EPPE 3-11 (ref) has now identified similar patterns: children who attended medium and high quality pre-schools were found to have higher levels of 'Self-regulation' in Year 6 (age 11, end of primary school) than others. Children who attended high quality pre-schools were also found to display more 'Pro-social' behaviour and were less likely to display 'Hyperactivity' in Year 6 than children who had attended low and medium quality pre-schools (Sammons *et al.*, 2007). EPPE also shows the importance of having professionals trained specifically in the teaching of young children; graduate teachers as managers of centres or higher proportions of graduate teachers were associated with better outcomes for children. Mixed teams of professionals which included teachers seem to work well (Sylva *et al.*, 2004)

## **Conclusions**

Of course, each of the approaches that are described here, and in the *Starting Strong* Report remain 'ideal types' and the practices in many settings will involve a combination of all of them. The challenge for early childhood educators is to provide a gradual and supportive transition as the children become more capable, that stimulates learning and development while avoiding any risk of regression or failure. This transition is often reflected in changes in the strength of the classification and framing offered to children as they get older (as shown by the arrow in Fig. 1). The EYFS guidance (DfES, 2007) and the Foundation Phase (DCELLS, 2008) promote a pedagogy which involves negotiating and co-constructing the curriculum through playful processes of 'sustained shared thinking' (SST) that may be initiated by either the adult or the child. The question of who initiates this SST is actually less relevant as long as both parties are committed to playing an equal part in determining its focus and direction (its co-construction) in 'collaborative free flow'. In a sense, 'initiation' is taken in turns as different material and symbolic resources are drawn upon, and each play is extended as a more or less unique improvisation. As children develop the capability and are motivated to play with peers, the curriculum guidance in the UK encourages us to continue to provide children with a rich range of experiences and resources to draw upon in collaborative play and to support them in developing a greater awareness of their development and learning. Ultimately, in school, young children take pleasure in learning for its own sake and restrict their play to scheduled playtimes, more disciplined creative activities, and their involvement in a variety of games with more formal rules.

Longitudinal studies from America provided early evidence of the effectiveness of pre-school education. The High/Scope Perry Pre-school evaluation showed the substantial benefits that were to be gained through pre-schooling for children brought up in low-income households and at high risk of school failure. Many studies have also shown that social and motivational elements of pre-school programmes are as important as academic outcomes. Early childhood education really matters.

Questions and exercises

**Why is ECE important in the quest for equality of opportunity?**

**What are the key components of quality programmes?**

**What kinds of professionals are required to support the best outcomes for children? What are the obstacles to this being achieved?**

**What do we know from research about the benefits of ECE?**

## Reading

Two publications provide the most comprehensive synthesis of the theory and evidence related to early childhood education currently available. Both of these are US publications, the first comes from the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine; ***From neurons to neighbourhoods: The science of early childhood development*** (2000), and the second is Bowman *et al* (2001) ***Eager to learn***. The ***Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE)*** has had a considerable impact on Government policy and provided the first robust evidence of the positive effects of preschool education in the UK. EPPE has shown that high quality pre-school education can help reduce social exclusion and has the potential to break cycles of educational disadvantage. ***EPPE Technical paper 10*** (Siraj-Blatchford *et al*, 2003) provides case study illustrations of good pre-school practices identified through EPPE. In the ***Team Around the Child: Multi-agency Working in the Early Years***, I have a chapter that makes the case for integrating education with care in the early years (Siraj-Blatchford, *et al*, 2007), and my paper, ***Creativity, Communication and Collaboration: The Identification of Pedagogic Progression in Sustained Shared Thinking*** (Siraj-Blatchford, 2007) presents a conceptual model to support further development of good practice in early childhood education.

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