Where Angels Fear to Tread

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Abstract

This paper considers education as the fulfilment of a person's overall potential as a human being. It thus concentrates on the multiplicity of factors which interact and interweave to produce fulfilled, caring members of our society. The whole notion of child development can only be understood within a cultural context. As Mead (1932) showed, child rearing practices differ from culture to culture and the role of adults in that culture has a strong influence on the type of activity in which their young offspring engage. For example, playing at mothers and fathers will obviously reflect the different functions that adults are expected to perform in real life.

Culture also has a strong influence on the concept of spirituality and the moral precepts that flow from it which are reflected in the children's play. Harrington (1996), Kohlberg (1987), Piaget (1932) and others have all alluded to the moral dimension of a child's personality. Much of this development can take place through play. Likewise, the whole area of the child's emotions can be analysed and enhanced using play therapy. Psychotherapists such as Freud (1935) and Jung (1966) have written much about the function of play in a cathartic capacity, and experiments such as those of Isaacs (1932) would seem to confirm these findings. Social development, therefore, fits the child for its culture.

Physical development can be seen in the light of social concomitants such as housing, family and legislation or in the medical domain concerning nutrition, anti- and post-natal care and the correction or treatment of abnormalities and, likewise, these facilities are the result of a given culture.

If the social context determines the form that play shall take, the brain has a strong influence on its quality. Without a brain, human beings could not speak, yet speech is
also culturally or socially determined. However, there is a medical and cognitive dimension to speech. In the first case, there can be some abnormality of the vocal organs or the part of the brain that controls speech while, in the second, the person has to think in order to say something sensible. Play enables the child to interact with others and it is only through such social interaction that speech occurs. Socio-dramatic play, however, requires further qualities - those of imagination and creativity. Cognitive functioning can thus be viewed as social in one dimension while at the same time also being egocentric. This paper outlines and analyses many of the theoretical arguments which underpin our current understanding of child development upon which future policy initiatives are contingent.
Introduction

Early Years Education in the Republic of Ireland is considered to range from conception to age six. This theoretical paper proposes to highlight and address the needs of these young children - children who are powerless and vulnerable but children who are intensely curious, active, instinctive and enthusiastic learners. Further, it addresses concerns about the environment and the quality of experiences which we offer these children - concerns about equality of opportunity for all, about respecting and valuing children, about carefully observing them and planning how to meet their needs, thus enabling them to maximise their unique potential as individuals now and in the future.

It is hoped that this paper will result in reflection, discussion and clarification of the often turbid thinking about early childhood services, alerting us to the fact that what happens to children at this stage is of supreme importance, if we really care about educational standards, educational continuity and the spiritual and psychological well-being of future generations. It might then be realised that high quality, admittedly high-cost, early childhood education and care is an investment in the future, rather than an insignificant, yet expensive, drain on economic resources. There are many different conceptualisations of education. However, we have decided to isolate for specific focus the "process" model which views education as development. This, the child-centred approach, is inherent in the philosophy of all the Early Years Providers in this country. This concept of education does not focus primarily on the nature of the knowledge to be transmitted or on the aims and ends to be achieved. Instead, it looks at the nature of the child and tries to discover the best possible way of promoting that individual's development in all areas of growth - intellectual, social, physical, emotional, moral, spiritual and so on.

Child Development - Some Theoretical Underpinnings
In evolving an early years developmental curriculum, cognisance must be taken of all aspects of a child's make-up. In this context, the words of Hannon (1995), quoting a Catholic Bishop giving advice to his newly arrived missionary priests, seem apt:

Our first task on approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy; also, we may find ourselves treading on people's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was there before our arrival.

[1995, p.164]

All early years educators are missionaries - all children have dreams.

It is important to note that the child's level of self-esteem underpins and largely determines the future development of his or her potential in all aspects of life (e.g. spiritual, emotional, cognitive, physical, social, linguistic, creative and moral).

According to Humphreys (1993), the most crucial relationships in a child's life are those with its significant adults. These relationships are the basis upon which the child builds his or her self-esteem. By the time children enter school, they have already established an image of themselves. It is well known that self-esteem impacts critically on future learning (Maslow, 1970) and achievement. Humphreys (1993) defines self-esteem as "the feeling of being loveable" and "the feeling of being capable". Unconditional love - a celebration of each child's uniqueness - in the home and pre-school, encourages behaviours which foster self-esteem by separating the act from the child's person.

Emotionally distressed children cope with insecurity and unresolved emotional conflicts by adopting compensatory strategies which inevitably absorb and diffuse their energy and concentration. One such strategy is "apathy and avoidance", a withdrawal from academic and/or other pursuits in an attempt to avoid humiliation and rejection. Yet another
compensatory mechanism is "compensation", where a tense, insecure child, with perfectionist tendencies, feels compelled to achieve, often unrealistic, academic goals, while constantly battling with the prospect of failure, humiliation and defeat. Compensation can also manifest itself in the guise of boastful, aggressive, ruthless and bullying behaviour, or indeed by acting in a condescending, supercilious manner.

Unlike the above-mentioned victims of middle/low self-esteem, the child with high self-esteem is socially well-adjusted and adept, retaining a natural curiosity for learning and facing new or unexpected challenges with enthusiasm. It is imperative, therefore, that parents, carers and educators stress that the effort, not the performance, is paramount, recognising that every attempt on a child's part is in itself an achievement. Indeed, notwithstanding the strength of the family culture, early years education and care can still have a profound impact on the development of young children's self-esteem, the healthy appraisal of new situations and the forming of positive beliefs concerning the world that surrounds them. It is obviously critical that the curriculum, whether overt or hidden, should not elicit such a negative emotional state on behalf of the participants that learning is disrupted. Equally, it is important that emotions such as enthusiasm, interest and, above all, love should be encouraged and nurtured. The spiritual and emotional development of the child impinge upon the general picture of moral behaviour and, consequently, of character.

The precise effect of parents and caregivers on children's moral development has been a source of longstanding controversy and debate. Several modern developmental psychologists (e.g. Piaget, 1932, 1952, 1969; and Kohlberg, 1976, 1987) have minimised the advantages of direct adult teaching and instruction on moral issues while others (e.g.
Hoffman, 1979; Wright, 1971; Wilson, 1973; Dameron, 1977; Peters, 1981; et al) have refuted this stance.

Piaget and Kohlberg proposed that moral development is primarily a function of cognitive development, thereby minimising the role of adult/parental interaction in the child's moral maturation process. Intelligence undoubtedly contributes to moral reasoning. However, it is imperative that cognisance is also taken of other factors such as the strength of the child's identification with adults (particularly parents and caregivers) and the vast range of conflicts which the child confronts, since reasoning is frequently inconsistent across different conflict types. Dameron (1977) articulated this point by stressing that although the stimulation of cognitive development is a significant component of moral reasoning, functioning at any level of intelligence must be tempered by the observation and emulation of others' behaviour. Here, the child who has the intellectual ability for principled moral deliberations still requires a strong identification with significant adults to bring his or her cognitive capacity to fruition in reasoning and behaviour. In essence, this can be described as "inspiration by example", a critical component of moral development (Warnock, 1977; Colby and Dameron, 1992) since moral reasoning in isolation reveals little about a person's actual social behaviour.

Inspiration, however, has to operate in tandem with dialogue and problem-solving between caregivers and children. As Donaldson (1978) has shown, the reasoning ability of pre-school children is constantly underestimated. All that is necessary is that one asks the right questions. This is important because children of this age try to please adults by giving the answer which they think the adult wishes to hear. Only by phrasing the questions from a different vantage point can this problem be overcome. However, in
general, the more that adults explain the reasons for right and wrong to young children the earlier they come to understand for themselves and the easier it is for them to think through the morality of a particular situation.

Many studies on the role of play as an agent of socialisation within the family have been undertaken. Bruner (1972) compared the socialisation of young !kung children with Harlow's studies of young baboons. Both studies emphasised that a devastating disruption in development occurs if there is an interference with the opportunity for peer-group play and social interaction. !kung children, in constant interaction with adults and other children, imitate and internalise rituals and work behaviours of the adult world. Their society is devoid of formal instruction, schooling or training. Most learning is through "showing" and play modelled directly on adult behaviour (e.g. play hunting, play house-making). Eventually, every child in the culture is au fait with the skills which will be required of him or her as an adult.

Children in more technologically advanced societies are also influenced by adults. Their play leads to exploration of their environment and adults' work is copied as they play out various adult roles. Many believe that this imitative role play is dominated by the urge to grow up (Freud, 1965). Smilansky (1968) would agree. She believes that the major motivating force in children's dramatic play is an intense desire to resemble adults in their environment as exactly as possible. This manifests itself in a need to model their thoughts, feelings and actions on those of their significant others. Berger (1963) summed this up by saying that social play is socially bestowed, socially sustained and socially transformed - one becomes what one plays at.

On the other hand, Bettleheim (1964) disagreed with the sociological, anthropological
position which sees play as preparation for adult roles. He contended that since adult activities have become too complex and too far removed from the child's comprehension, they can no longer be imitated. He, therefore, sees play as serving another function - enabling children to master self-control. Children who accept the rules of play, while maintaining their own individuality, are on the road to becoming mature adults.

Just as there is not one universal way of treating children, so there is not one universal social world. Each family exists within larger social frameworks and reflects aspects of those frameworks; so, for example, there are differences in families from one country to another and from one social class to another. As the child grows older, he begins to appreciate the multiplexity of society, and becomes able to locate himself within the various social systems. This takes a surprisingly long time, and children make many mistakes. It is only after considerable experience that they begin to establish an accurate awareness of themselves relative to others. Social interaction is thus a critical component of intellectual development.

The brain is always most "plastic" at times when it is growing fastest. Damage during the first few days of pregnancy usually results in spontaneous abortion, of which the mother is probably unaware. From one to eight weeks of gestation, when cells start to move toward their target destinations, foetal death or major abnormalities usually result. After eight weeks, when neurones begin to settle into place, toxic exposure may result in subtle rearrangements of their placement and development. These seemingly minor structural and functional abnormalities have aroused growing concern from a group of scientists in the new field of behavioural teratology - the study of the effects of toxic substances on the developing brain. These researchers are convinced of the potential of teratogens, or
toxins, to cause subtle but pervasive difficulty with learning and behaviour - the type of problems that, even years later, earn some children the label of "learning disabled" (Rapin, 1981; Eskenazi, 1985; Riley, 1986; Needleman, 1986). The mother's nutritional and emotional status also impinges on prenatal development.

However, some children appear to be genetically more resilient than others. Furthermore, because of the young brain's great structural and functional plasticity, it can accommodate learning in a wide variety of styles, depending not only on innate predispositions but also on the way the material is presented. It is, therefore, possible to avoid or indeed compensate for areas of weakness since the potential arrangement and rearrangement of several billions (or hundreds of billions) of nerve cells in the brain provides an infinite number of permutations and combinations. If some kinds of damage happen early enough, this flexibility, teamed with diagnosis and a drive to succeed and the help of a supportive environment, can generate seemingly miraculous results (Rapin, 1981). While the exact effect of teratogenic substances remains undetermined, it could be argued that most of the academically injurious changes observed in today's children are probably much more a function of postnatal mental environments. Fortunately, parents and teachers can actively do something about these influences by exposing children to linguistically and cognitively challenging experiences.

Environmental stimulation in both animal and human brains results in three significant developments. Firstly, dendritic branching occurs which facilitates the reception of new messages and the development of synaptic connections. Secondly, there is an increase in the number of supportive glial cells. These developments appear to respond directly to the nature of environmental stimulation. Thirdly, the axons, or output areas of the neurones,
gradually develop a coating of a waxy insulating substance called myelin, which facilitates rapid and clear transmission. The brain grows best when it is challenged, so a high level of stimulation is critically important (Brierley, 1976, 1980, 1987). Nevertheless, the curriculum needs to be considered in terms of brain-appropriate challenge. Subsequent reorganisation of prematurely and hence, inadequately developed, synapses is a difficult task indeed. "Unlearning" or "re-learning" at any age poses problems which could have been obviated had cognisance been taken of the child's developmental stage. Therefore, the relatively fixed order of myelinisation in different brain areas may provide a real biological basis for "readiness" for certain types of learning. It is of significance that the last areas to be myelinated are the "association" areas responsible for the manipulation of highly-abstract concepts. These later developing regions in the brain are the most plastic, hence the most susceptible of all to environmental influences which, if inadequate, result in an inability to reason, articulate abstractly or "hypothesize".

Therefore, although genes set the parameters of mental ability, the manner in which children utilise their brains determines how their intelligence is expressed. The experiences with which a child interacts determine each brain's synaptic structure as well as the way it functions for different types of learning. The more they are used in a certain pattern of response, the more flexible they appear to become. Nature provides a schedule for neural maturation, and increasingly complex modes of thought emerge from an internal competition for connections at each new phase of mental growth. Hence, undue preoccupation with specific activities will inevitably result in a diminished facility for other forms of mental functioning. Moreover, if the potential of certain latent aptitudes is unrealised during their critical periods, the corresponding neural foundations may atrophy. At this juncture, it is consoling to note that the child of his or her own volition may
indicate through particular proclivities at various stages his or her brain's readiness for stimulation in specific domains. This has serious pedagogical implications since the environments which we provide for children, the stimuli with which we encourage them to interact, and the manner in which we demonstrate for them the uses of a human mind are critical factors not only in their individual intellectual development but also in the future evolution of society. An integral part of intellectual development is creative potential.

At its simplest, cognitive creativity results in the production of novel, useful and relevant ideas when the child is confronted with a problem. When children are being creative they are flexible and inventive. They are involved in the search for a number of solutions to a particular problem and not fixated on one particular answer. They are involved in a heuristic learning experience. No matter how creativity is defined or understood, it is generally agreed that it is a precious element of human intelligence and life. Two criteria have been widely accepted in understanding the creative process; that the product must be novel and must be of value, in the sense that it works or is possible. The former, discovering, involves using the imagination, playing with ideas and exploring, which leads to the discovery of new ideas, answers and solutions. The latter, proving, involves using learned skills, evaluating, testing, judging and analysing which leads to proving satisfactory answers and acceptable ideas.

Bruner (1972) noted that play was a means of learning in a less risky situation which, devoid of functional pressure, was conducive to experimentation. Sutton-Smith (1967, 1979) at a more ideational level, argued that play can enhance behavioural flexibility. He explained how the child tries out new meanings for objects and reverses social roles through the medium of play. Play, and symbolic play in particular, facilitates divergent
thought and role flexibility. According to Guilford (1957, 1959, 1968), the divergent thinker is adept in problems which require the generation of several equally acceptable solutions, where the emphasis is on the originality, variety and quantity of responses. The convergent thinker, on the other hand, has the ability to deal only with problems requiring one conventional correct solution which is easily obtained from available information.

In helping children to develop their creativity, possibly the most important factor is to provide a good role model for the child to emulate. An adult who accepts the thoughts of others and does not believe him/herself to be always correct, who has lots of ideas and the flexibility to allow children to have their own way, and who accepts every child on his/her own worth can help foster similar creativity in children, and keep alive promising creative talent. Never before was the nurturing of latent creative intelligence so critical. The exponential rate of change in today's society necessitates the creative resolution of problems. Since today's knowledge rapidly becomes obsolete due to technological advancement (Raudsepp, 1980), only a strong creative ability will provide the means for coping with future challenges.

Motor development after birth also illustrates the interaction between genetics and environment. In the first instance, the child rolls over before bearing some weight on its legs, and sitting without support. This is followed by standing holding on to furniture, crawling and creeping, walking by holding on to furniture, standing unsupported and finally walking alone. Unless we believe that all parents subject their offspring to the same training regime (an unlikely possibility), we must assume that an innate timetable of maturation determines the normal sequence of behaviour. However, not all children go through these sequences at the same rate, and learning and experience obviously have
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some part to play.

Few would dispute the right and need for vigorous play in childhood. Children respond totally to their experiences with their hearts, heads and bodies. Many would argue that the child's need for exercise is met by his natural play instincts. In past centuries this may have had some validity as children and adults alike laboured in factories, mills and mines.

Today, however, mechanisation and automation have considerably reduced the amount of physical activity in an individual's life. Post-industrial society is characterised by a sedentary life style whose inactivity has been adopted, whether freely or otherwise, by many children.

We appear to be raising a generation of sedentary, physically unfit children. A number of studies have shown that an alarming number of American children fail to pass basic physical tests of endurance, strength and agility. In 1984, for example, only two percent of the 18 million children who took the Presidential Fitness Test received an award.

Indeed, the American Academy of Paediatrics felt compelled to issue a report which highlighted the fact that almost half of the country's school children had insufficient exercise to develop healthy hearts and lungs and an alarming 40 percent of children between the ages of five and eight manifested at least one risk factor for heart disease [Nation's School Report 14(2), 1988].

Although there is, as yet, no substantive research evidence which accurately purports a link between physical fitness and academic achievement, a moderate relationship has been shown between motor performance and school success (Weikart, 1986). Exercise can improve motivation and subsequent ability to concentrate. Fine motor movement is also correlated with academic success. A recent study of children aged five to 13 indicated the
fact that "sensorimotor-perceptual skills" (e.g. putting shapes into shape boards quickly and efficiently) were as closely correlated with academic achievement for the older children as they were for the younger (Miller and Melamed, 1989). Physical activity with objects is a prerequisite to logical functioning (Piaget, 1952). When a child plays and exercises large muscles or indeed engages in games and pursuits which develop fine motor skills, motor synapses (which are closely linked to the neurones that control mental functioning, including attention) are being refined and strengthened and although it is unclear whether or not specific neural connections for attention, problem-solving and more abstract forms of learning are also being forged, much speculation exists.

Increasingly, physical therapists and those who work with children with learning disabilities are becoming convinced of the fact that movement and its concomitant development of visual and auditory attention and body co-ordination is the foundation of much learning, arguing that lack of play and body movement is jeopardising children's potential learning abilities (Weikart, 1986). Indeed, Weikart has suggested that physical activity enables children to acquire an internal rhythmic appreciation of 'beat' which appears to correlate significantly with the mastery of literacy. However, the process of movement skill development is age related but not age dependent. Movement skill acquisition is highly individualised because of the unique hereditary and experiential background of each child. Therefore, it is inappropriate to classify movement activities solely by age or by grade level. Care should be taken to select movement experiences based on the ability levels of the "real" children being cared for and taught, not the mythical "average" children of textbooks.

Finally, movement is central to the lives of young children, playing an integral role in all aspects of their development, whether in the motor, affective or cognitive domains of their
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growth. Failure to provide children with the opportunities for boisterous, physical
activity, deprives them of the many concomitant benefits.

The development of speech provides yet another example of the interaction between
genetically determined characteristics and the experiences provided by the environment.
Almost all human infants are born with the ability to learn a spoken language; yet they are
not able to do so until they have attained a certain level of neurological development (no
infant less than a year old speaks in sentences). Language shapes culture, influences
thought - and, ultimately, impacts on brain development. The verbal milieu in which a
society immerses its children significantly effects the development of their synapses and
their intellects, facilitating their adaptation to the world through reasoning and reflection.
The brain is ravenous for language stimulation in early childhood and severe deprivation
of language during these early years guarantees lasting neural changes that noticeably
affect speech and understanding. More subtle forms of language deprivation do not
manifest themselves in such dramatic ways, but may ultimately affect abilities to think
abstractly, plan ahead, defer gratification, control attention, and perform higher-order
analysis and problem-solving.

Postman (1985) argues that the content of much public discourse has become "dangerous
nonsense" due to technological advances, which have resulted in the substitution of iconic
forms of representation for the symbolic. This departure from the use of the written word
is, in his opinion, destroying society's ability to reason intelligently. Today's addictive
technological environment, which reduces children to passive, robotic-like observers in
front of televisions and computer screens, is anathema to language acquisition and
development (Mills, 1975). Arguably, even if the linguistic quality of television were
improved, the lack of interactive language impacts upon the brain's development. Luria
(1982), for example, maintains that without language, humans would not have developed
abstract, categorical thinking and consequently that the refinement of the brains' higherreasoning centre is dependent upon the quality of language received.

Passive "listening" does not build either language or effective listening skills. Our children today spend a great deal of time "listening" (to audio-visual equipment and, indeed, to the teacher) but they need to listen more effectively, not merely listen more.

Real listening is an active mental process that serves understanding and memory. Consequently, Holt (1965) and Wells (1985) claim that excessive teacher talk, low-level questioning in the home and school, and an undue emphasis on convergent thought, all interact to the detriment of cognitive and linguistic development. Children reared in an environment in which people talk to them and reward them for making speech like sounds will speak earlier than children who do not receive such attention. For example, children reared in middle-class American homes begin to speak at about one year of age. Children reared in San Marcos, a remote village in Guatemala, have little verbal interaction with adults and do not utter their first words until they are over two years old (Kagan, 1979).

Good language, therefore, like the synapses that make it possible, is gained only from interactive engagement: children need to talk as well as to hear. They need to play with words and reason with them. They need to practise talking about problems to learn to plan and organise their behaviour. They need to respond to new words and stories to build a broad personal base of semantic meaning. They need personal adult guides to provide good examples of grammar - not primarily so they will sound "intelligent", but because word order, or syntax, is the means by which they will learn to analyse ideas and reason about abstract relationships. They need to hear and speak the tiny units of language - such as ed, ing, - that convey fine-grained differences between what happened yesterday and what will happen tomorrow, between actions and things, between the shades of meaning that give clarity to mental operations (Donaldson, 1978).
The feature of children's thinking which emerges again and again in recent research studies is the extent to which it is context dependent. If the context makes sense to the child, and if the tasks which present themselves in that context enable him or her to use existing intellectual skills, then he or she will display not only a high level of competence but also the ability to extend those existing skills to meet new challenges. (In Vygotsky's words, the child is functioning in the "zone of proximal development"). However, a major problem that is raised by this feature of the child's thinking is that much of the learning necessary in schooling requires what Donaldson (1978) has called "disembedded" thinking - thought which is independent of context and which thus requires the child to ignore the contextual clues and concentrate on the language which is being used. This is especially evident in the teaching of mathematics and it has been offered as one explanation of the apparent paradox of the mathematical knowledge most children seem to bring to school with them and the difficulties so many of them experience with school mathematics (Hughes, 1981; Blenkin and Kelly, 1988).

Wells concluded that books and stories helped children ignore the immediate context and allowed words to create imaginary worlds (Wells, 1985a, 1985b, 1985c; Wells and Nicholls, 1985). He found that stories were used as bridges to abstraction and hypothesising in children as young as twenty-five months. However, not all children have parents or caregivers who show them how to use words effectively, but these habits strongly influence the child's "possible worlds" when he or she gets to school. Wells has studied variations in the types of language training children get at home. He argues that everything that happens in a child's daily life is a potential subject for the sort of talk that facilitates attention, interpretation, and evaluation, but parents differ in the use they make of these opportunities.
Language is not the sole route to thought. It is, of course, possible to reason non-verbally, and a lively human mental life also uses visual imagery and non-verbal symbols to interpret and remember experience. Painters, sculptors, and architects do not rely heavily on language to develop their artistic ideas. Likewise, highly abstract mathematical reasoning may ultimately call on systems in the brain other than, or in addition to, those used for language processing, even though the learner must master the basic language of adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing.

Despite the obvious importance of non-verbal forms of intelligence, there is as yet no substitute for language, used in tandem with visual reasoning, to hone precision of expression and analysis. In the schools to which we consign young children for so many hours of their lives, written language is the coin of the realm. Allowing children to enter with shallow linguistic resources puts them in intellectual jeopardy and creates dangerous tensions within education.
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Conclusion

Although it is common to think of biological and environmental influences on psychological development as separate and distinct, this is an over-simplistic classification. Environmental events can affect the biological system and sometimes biological effects only take place under particular environmental conditions. The obvious cases in which the environment can be seen to affect biological aspects of development are those in which something goes wrong, though the effects can in fact be beneficial as well. Children are "disadvantaged" to the degree they do not receive adequate physical, social-emotional, or intellectual nurturing. Longstanding deprivation in any of these domains puts children at risk; when factors overlap and accumulate, learning, lives, and society are proportionately endangered.

In a pluralist society, irrespective of one's religious affiliations or tendencies or indeed lack of them, the virtues of tolerance, understanding, respect and love of one's fellow human being are worthy aims. A concept of education as development, which concerns itself with bringing to fruition the potential of every child to function as a human being, that is, as a creature with the greatest possible control over his or her own destiny and thus with the widest possible range of options and possibilities open to him or her is surely one to be embraced. If Early Years educators and carers are to move beyond a reliance on traditional work practices, they will be required to enhance their knowledge, control and action (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). In this respect their attitudes and practices must become more firmly grounded in educational theory and research and their professional autonomy must be developed.
References


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