

4th Edition

EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES

An introduction to the study of children's
lives and children's worlds

EDITED BY

ROD PARKER-REES & CAROLINE LEESON



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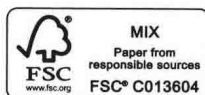
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Dr Caroline Leeson is an associate professor and joint programme leader on the BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies degree at Plymouth University. She has particular interests in the welfare of looked-after children, children's centre leadership and reflective practice. Her research interests include social justice; children with a parent in prison; children who go missing and/or are vulnerable to sexual exploitation; as well as the involvement of children in decision-making processes. Before working in higher education she worked as a social worker in child protection, fostering and adoption.

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Rod Parker-Rees is an associate professor (senior lecturer), coordinator of Early Childhood Studies and joint programme leader for the BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies degree at Plymouth University. He taught three- to five-year-old children in Bristol and was a researcher with the National Primary Centre (South West) before working at Plymouth. His research interests centre on very early communication, playfulness and the role of young children as active social agents. He co-edited *Early Years Education: Major Themes in Education* (2006) and edited *Meeting the Child in Steiner Kindergartens* (2011) and since 1999 he has been a co-editor of *Early Years: An International Research Journal*.

Philip Selbie is a lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at Plymouth University. He is a qualified primary teacher with an MA in Early Childhood Education and has taught young children in international schools as well as schools in the UK. He currently teaches students on BEd, BA and MA programmes as well as students studying to be teachers at universities in Central Eastern Europe. Philip is a school governor and is particularly interested in researching children's spirituality and the contribution of Jan Amos Comenius (1592–1670) to early childhood education and care.

Karen Wickett lectures on the BA and BEd Early Childhood Studies programmes. Originally she qualified as an NNEB and later trained as an early years teacher. Between 2003 and 2012 she worked in a Sure Start Local Programme/Children's Centre. During this period she created learning environments with children, parents and ECEC practitioners. This was a space for all to learn and grow. Motivated by the need to construct a local definition of school readiness she embarked on her Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD). She designed the research so that parents, ECEC practitioners and teachers could share their experiences and understandings of school readiness and the process of transition to school. Her teaching and research interests are transitions, co-constructed curriculum and learning environments.

Preface

The preface to the first edition of this book, by Lesley Abbott (2004), emphasised the excitement associated with rapidly expanding integrated services and the opportunity to develop a new multiprofessional discourse in early years provision. Lesley's preface identified the value of this book in clearly setting out the field to a new lecturer setting out to teach in the rapidly emerging field of Early Childhood Studies. This fourth edition of the book underlines its enduring value to the subject's canon of texts. The book offers students, both experienced and new to the field, a clear and accessible overview of the key topics, debates and attitudes. With each edition, the growing team at Plymouth have taken account of developments in thinking, research and the ever-changing context for those working with young children and their families.

This fourth edition of the book is also forged in exciting times that lend it new weight and purchase. Public services, which had fully acknowledged the value of early development and accepted a greater role in developing integrated family, health, education and play provision through Children's Centres, have been decimated by the austere economic climate and a neoliberal ideology. The number of children involved in preschool activities continues to rise with the increasing offer of two-year-old places but so too do concerns over the impact of poverty and social inequality. While the economic situation may improve, the implications of neoliberal policy are profound. Its impact is not just on the structures of provision but on the way we see ourselves and others. Personal responsibility and personal choice are core values of neoliberalism and while they are also clearly values that are central to young children's development, they may be damaging if taken to extremes. Early childhood studies increasingly document the importance of supportive social structures as the cradle of positive long-term attitudes to self and society. Neoliberal policies, such as offering choice from a range of commercial baseline assessment systems for Reception classes without providing accompanying guidance on what is in the best interests of children, emphasise the importance of having a sound understanding of the field. Graduates from Early Childhood Studies degrees *will* be challenged to do more with fewer resources. Those concerned with the well-being of young children need, more than ever before, to be well informed, thoughtful and smart in their thinking. They will need to be able to defend what they believe to be in the best interests of the children in their care.

The authors continue to offer sound principles and insights into children's development and well-being, as well as encouraging readers to be enquiring and reflective practitioners. If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, then I have had the great

privilege to read students' writing in response to the Plymouth team's teaching, thinking and way of being. The strength of their students' work is the insights that they identify, through enquiry, into how children's development is nurtured and challenged by policy. This book highlights the authors' passion and their understanding of the interplay between these issues and their deep desire to promote social justice for children and families in national and international contexts.

Martin Needham

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Introduction

Rod Parker-Rees

Early Childhood Studies (ECS) occupies a particularly interesting boundary space among other areas of study. It has obvious links with Childhood Studies programmes, some of which may include opportunities to focus on early childhood, but it is more than just a sub-section of this broader area. What sets it apart is the breadth of its scope, including the areas addressed in Childhood Studies programmes, such as history, sociology, philosophy and the arts, but also addressing the practical knowledge required for working with young children and their families. Many ECS programmes are located in education departments where they may sit alongside Initial Teacher Education programmes such as a BEd and PGCE Primary Education (Early Years) and Early Years Initial Teacher Training (EYITT) which focus on preparing students to take on a particular professional role and which confer a practice qualification; others sit in social science departments alongside programmes in social work and health care. What is distinctive about ECS is that it provides rich opportunities for students to explore the border areas between thinking and doing, between examining how and why *communities* come to do things as they do and reflecting on how and why we do what we do when we actively engage with children and their families. The Childhood Studies elements of an ECS programme enrich our learning about the 'how' and 'what' of practical work with children by adding a focus on 'why' and the Early Childhood elements ground these wider reflections in the embodied and felt experience of engaging directly with other people and with our own responses.

This book has been written by members of the ECS team at Plymouth University, where we introduced an Early Childhood Studies degree in 2000. The first edition was published in 2004 and much has changed since then, both in the worlds and lives of young children and in the worlds and lives of students. Our thinking about the scope and purpose of our ECS degree has been informed by what we describe as a 'core of care', reflecting our aim of encouraging students to become passionate advocates for children; professionals who care about policies and processes as well as practitioners who are able to provide sensitive care for children. We also believe that studying for an ECS degree provides valuable opportunities for students to play an active role in extending the core of care beyond what they are learning and the way they are treated by tutors to include the way they support and encourage each other. Engaging with other students, working in groups, studying together and contributing to a learning community will require students to deal with disagreements, cope with clashes of personalities and notice when others may need a bit of care and encouragement. In several of the chapters in this book we have written about the benefits of difference, how children's worlds and lives are enriched by opportunities to engage with different experiences, different ways of doing things, different people and different cultures. We believe that it is particularly important that people who will be working with young children and their families should develop a core of care which will enable them to engage respectfully with people who do not share their own background, experiences

and assumptions. This core of care will also encompass a strong and principled ethical stance – engaging respectfully with people who hold different views does not mean agreeing with everything they say!

We hope to show, in this book, how ECS can lead you into fascinating areas of social and cultural enquiry which will help you to develop your own critical capabilities as you learn to challenge and question what you care most about and why this may be. Developing a critical perspective involves more than just challenging everything (though this is a good start!); it requires a willingness and ability to subject other people's ideas to careful scrutiny, matching them against our own developing values, beliefs and principles and following up on any interesting discrepancies. Developing a personal understanding of complex issues also requires much more than just accumulating knowledge (though, again, this is a good start). Knowledge can only be woven into personal understanding when the common framework of 'what everyone knows' is 'coloured in' with the complex significance and unique richness of our own personal experience.

The study of early childhood presents us with frequent opportunities to reflect on how our own feelings and concerns relate to those experienced by young children: How would I feel if someone treated *me* like that? Would I talk like that to another adult? What would it be like if we, as adults, could only study alongside others of our own year group or if we had no say in what we had to study? How do I feel when I enter a situation in which I don't know anyone and I don't know how I'm supposed to behave?

This introduction cannot hope to represent the full range of ideas which this book will address but it should give you a feel for what you will find in each chapter by showing how the different themes and topics which make up the rich mix of Early Childhood Studies can provide opportunities to learn about yourself as well as about the lives and worlds of young children.

Part 1 – What can children do? Sociocultural factors in development

The title of this section – 'What can children do?' – addresses the question of what children are *able* to do, acknowledging and respecting their capabilities, but it also touches on what children are *allowed* to do. Whenever we talk about children's developing abilities we must recognise that what they can do is influenced by the tools, opportunities and support which we provide for them. While it has always been tempting to look for ways to accelerate children's development, to hurry them along in particular areas, we must also recognise that encouraging children to devote more time to improving one skill may limit their opportunities to grow in other ways. The fact that children *could* do something, given a particular set of environmental factors, does not mean that they *should* be expected to do this. We have to be prepared to question and challenge assumptions about what children need and what is best for them.

In Chapter 1, 'An introduction to child development', Rebecca McKenzie outlines the relationships between what children's bodies and brains enable them to do and how other people, cultures and artefacts open or close off opportunities for particular kinds of development. This complex interaction is sometimes reduced to a simple question: Which is most important in human development, nature or nurture? Behind this simplification, however, there are many fascinating issues which we are still only just beginning to explore. We can clearly recognise the signs of neglect in children who have been deprived of the attentive, loving relationships which we know children need but it is much more difficult to imagine how children's lives might be further enriched if we were to provide for them in ways which we currently do not consider. Our cultures support and enable the development of children but they can also create the conditions, such as Early Childhood Studies degree programmes, which allow us to study and develop our understanding of development itself.

In Chapter 2, 'Children at play: evolution, playfulness and creativity', Mandy Andrews examines ethological, psychological and sociocultural accounts of the role and importance of play, not only in childhood but also in the shaping of human societies. Play is one of several key concepts in early childhood studies which appear straightforward and 'obvious' until we subject them to careful scrutiny, when they slip through our fingers and defy definition. Mandy argues that free-flow play, when children (or adults) are able to pursue their own interests in a rich environment with a wide variety of flexible materials and without externally imposed goals or restrictive time constraints, nurtures and develops our 'play instinct' in a way which cannot be matched by adult-led 'learning activities' however much we try to make these look 'playful'. Although we tend to associate play with young children (and other young animals), playfulness continues to have an important function in professional decision making and behaviour. We have to be prepared to be creative when we explore ways of adapting policy requirements to make them appropriate for different settings, families and children.

In Chapter 3, 'Developing communication: getting to know each other', I argue that a narrow focus on the importance of language development risks distracting us from careful examination of the earliest stages of communication. The special pleasure derived from sharing attention with other people may be more important than we realise. While gossip and idle chat may appear 'unprofessional', this kind of unstructured, social interaction is what allows us to get to know other people as individuals, with their own interests, perspectives and priorities. You will have experienced the difference in 'feel' between conversations with tutors who engage with students and lectures from tutors who are 'delivering' information. You will also be aware of the very different *feel* of settings where practitioners talk *with* colleagues, parents and children rather than *to* them or *at* them (see Chapter 11).

In Chapter 4, 'Spirituality and young children's well-being', Philip Selbie argues that our understanding of well-being as a broad, holistic term may be diminished if we fail to acknowledge its spiritual component. Philip outlines the history of interest in aspects of education which go beyond the simple transmission of knowledge and skills to consider how children can be helped to develop as whole, rounded and caring people. It is particularly difficult to put into words what we mean by 'spirituality'

because this concept encompasses modes of being and relating to the world and other people which are intangible and which resist definition. The long history of associations between spirituality and religion may also make it difficult for some people, in an increasingly secular society, to recognise that they have a responsibility to nurture the spiritual life as well as the physical and emotional well-being of the children with whom they work. The increasingly critical engagement with personal values, principles and beliefs which is encouraged in higher education may also remind us of the need to engage with our own spirituality, to explore and question why we care passionately about certain aspects of our work with children. Spending time with children and engaging fully with their interests and questions often presents us with rich opportunities to further our own spiritual development.

Part 2 – Working with children: extending opportunities for participation

Any study of early childhood must include substantial experience of spending time with children, both working with them in a professional capacity and enjoying their company. Direct, experiential learning offers special opportunities and challenges. Learners must always acknowledge their responsibility for the effects of their actions on the children and while they tiptoe among the eggshells of professional sensitivities (see Part 3) they also have to become increasingly aware of how their own assumptions, preconceptions and prejudices may affect the way they engage with different children and families. When we are dealing with people our mistakes have real consequences which can be difficult to put right. On the other hand, when we spend time in the company of young children we are forced to refine our ability to 'read' subtle cues which can tell us what matters to a particular child at a particular time. The kinds of learning which are available to us in our interactions with children (and with members of their families) are importantly different from the learning which can be expressed in words, talked *about*, written *about* and read *about* outside any particular context.

In Chapter 5, 'Observing children: the importance of personal insight and reflective action', Mandy Andrews and Karen Wickett encourage you to think carefully about *why* we observe children. After charting the history of approaches to observing children, from Darwin, Montessori, Steiner, MacMillan and Isaacs to Carr, Malaguzzi and Deleuze and Guattari, they set out six key principles which can inform a critical, reflective and, above all, respectful approach to observation. It is important to remember that what we notice is shaped as much by our own interests and priorities (including policy guidelines and schedules of developmental goals) as by what is 'out there'. It is too easy to put on observational blinkers and see only what we are looking for but Karen and Mandy argue that an extended form of documentation, involving dialogue with colleagues and family members as well as the children themselves, can help us to become aware of the lenses through which we see children and to recognise that other lenses are available. Karen and Mandy remind us that we should *enjoy* our observation of children's play and work, not just because this