The sacred and the profane in early childhood: an Englishman's guide to context and policy

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Summary

The change in family structures throughout the post-natural world* is briefly discussed together with some pressures that now inhibit, inform or constrain modern child-rearing. The decline in the birth-rate throughout Europe, Scandinavia, North America and Australasia (now averaging 1.8 to 1.9 children per family) and the accelerating divorce rate (approx 51% in South Australia, nearing 40% in UK) are also seen as part of this changing context.

Within these broad social changes comes the recent research on brain development during the early years of childhood. The extreme plasticity of the brain is discussed, as is the paradoxical and now somewhat archaic tendency for formal systems of education to invest in childhood AFTER much of the formative learning is over. Many longitudinal studies testify to the critical and social nature of early learning. Some criminologists and psychiatrists suggest that reliable predictors of long-term delinquency can be apparent as early as age three years. The power of the media is also briefly considered, together with its possible implication in violent behaviour.

The paper proposes that for 'fitness of purpose' we need educators and carers of vision and compassion, yet articulate and well-read. It sees early childhood care and education as indivisible. In passing, it notes the current tendency to depict teachers as operatives and emphasises that research exists which, despite current fashions for accountability, competition and testing, suggest that formal curricula and instrumental 'delivery' are neither the only, nor always the best ways forward. The ‘package’ is somewhat more complicated than that. The paper notes that both policies and commercial interests may sometimes cause tension between indoctrination and education and between 'accountability' and professionalism. It sees professionalism as inherently 'problematic' and rightly about judgement, not about certainty. It insists that teachers and carers should be well educated, not merely trained and suggests that, without the intervention of effective, knowledgeable early years professionals, societies may increasingly lack a collective identity, unity and, perhaps, actual humanity. It builds upon this to suggest that integration of the prime services is best clustered around that of effective child-care and early education and that a professional, yet 'seamless approach' to families, especially those in poverty, will handsomely repay child achievement AND societal and family cohesion in the long-term.

* 'Post-natural' is used in the way that Anthony Giddens (BBC Reith lectures, 1999) uses the term, ie when even child-rearing is largely no longer 'natural' and when institutions, technology and commerce have increasing sway over all dimensions of life.
Introduction and context

Throughout the modern world certain commonalities of culture can be readily observed. Birth, copulation and death are prime markers in our lives and normally still have certain important rituals attached to them that mark our aspirations and our vulnerability as human beings. Values, ideologies and religions still fundamentally affect our belief systems, our attitudes and lives; and even in an increasingly secular and non-committed society like that of Britain, there are crucial times when both the state and the individual ‘rally’ to the comforting rituals of religion. Increasingly, however, our children are socialised by the all-pervasive media; and in some cases it might be averred that the media appear to have more power in this process than do the parents, care-takers, or religious belief. Behind the media lies the commercial world and sometimes a seductive vulgarity in that which is communicated as our ‘common culture’. Trends are sometimes made, pushed and ‘sold’ to our children. No child escapes, even in the most impoverished nations and the combination of media-plus-peers is recognised as a potent and heady mix in this post-natural world, even if the relative weight assigned to it is some matter of debate.

Childhood is, of course, a social construct and what societies 'do' with their children and how they describe their versions of the appropriate attributes of childhood have varied from century to century and culture to culture. But, with globalisation of economies, with the power of commercial exploitation, the speed of media contact everywhere, with the availability and rapidity of transport, come increasing features remarkably akin to homogeneity. Whether we like it or not there is a surprising commonality of experience, if not of focus. For instance, many of us in different countries share largely the same media experiences, from CN News to certain English language 'soap operas'. 'The Simpsons' TV programme is watched by the young (and not so young) in a large number of the 31 countries of OECD ...and. presumably, the values typified are observed and sometimes absorbed as readily as the ubiquitous MacDonalds' hamburgers or Kentucky Fries!

In this world of the 21st century families are frequently quite different from those of a century ago. In the early 1900s the industrial world economies had relatively high employment to offer to most able-bodied men, no matter how lowly or how unskilled. In the 1900s in England the average family consisted of something approaching six children...and thirteen or fourteen were not uncommon. Women rarely worked outside the home if they had children (unless poor). The division of roles was still regarded by many as of prime importance; and by some as ordained by God (though things were beginning to change with the emancipation of women; and then accelerated during the period of the 1914-18 War). The vast majority of children in Europe, North America and Australia were schooled, if they were lucky, to about the age of twelve or fourteen years or so. At that time in Europe, girls reached menarche at approximately 16/17 years; boys, though physically 'behind' by about two years, typically worked as men from about fourteen years, or earlier. A significant number of children still died from diseases such as tuberculosis, diphtheria and poliomyelitis during their early years and influenza was a serious hazard for all. Hard, physical labour was considered a normal experience for most men and women and accidents at work were fairly common. Radio communication and the automobile had only just been invented and were still not that accessible, though the railways were widely used and relatively cheap. Indeed, there were many who thought in
those early years that steam-driven cars would prevail over those powered by the internal combustion engine! Mobility on any scale was the province of the rich and the migration of rural communities to the city, whilst hastened by the industrial revolution, was still in its relative infancy.

One could continue with the litany of conditions and values, of inventions and social circumstances. The change from button to zip, from handkerchief to tissue, the creation of 'man-made' fibres, have all largely occurred within a half century and are just three of the advances which have transformed the management of children's clothes especially. Fast food, global crop markets and super-market presentation and packaging have changed the way many of us eat well within a lifetime. The cobbler working in leather repairs is rare in an age of factory-produced footwear; and in technologically advanced societies individual transport (the motor car) is almost every person's normal expectation. Far fewer children walk to school (or walk much at all) compared with the past and density of traffic often makes for fearful cycling. These are simply some of those features that make the context of childhood and the routines of the family today genuinely very different from that of a century or so ago.

In the 'developed' world of today the birth rate is now approximating 1.8 children per family (notably lower in Portugal, approx 1.46, OECD, 2001; and apparently dropping fast in Italy). The divorce rate is approaching 40% in UK and in North America and Australia (indeed, in South Australia the most recent figures from the 1998 federal report showed a divorce rate of some 51%, though this may have lessened slightly of late). Moreover, as Charles Handy said, it would appear that the economic maps of the world are not only re-drawn by the multi-national companies, but are being slowly re-drawn by women, too. Throughout the world women are accessing the work force in significant numbers. In fact there is evidence to show that more women are likely to be in some sort of employment than are men in some of those 'traditional' and now defunct heavy industrial areas of England, though not all of that work will be full-time, nor as 'costly' as the employment of men.

We should note that almost all measures of human development and social change can usually be plotted as gradients showing a close rectilinear relationship to socioeconomic developments and fluctuations. Income and cognitive performance usually show a strong relationship in many measures taken; lower than average income and chronic illness show a similar close relationship. Indeed, one could assert with some confidence that much chronic disease appears actually to be set by the conditions experienced during early childhood; and longevity itself increases with wealth. The increase in female deaths from lung cancer in Europe directly parallels the uptake into the work force during the last thirty years. Of course, it also parallels the growth of cigarette smoking among the female population. However, whatever the dangers of thrombosis (and perhaps of cancer) associated with the introduction of the female contraceptive pill, widely available from the early 1960s, (and that is probably the single most important factor linking choice and life-style for women) pregnancy itself is still likely be somewhat more dangerous for the mother herself.
Care, education and the economy

There are many complications about which people argue. For instance is there a clear relationship between the economic performance of a country and the quality of its educational system? The answer is both yes and no! Yes, in the sense that the sophistication of the educational service and its adaptability and coverage relate clearly to the successes of advanced economies. No, if one simply takes measures of academic level or comparative performance levels in tests in selected subjects. For instance, probably the most successful world economy is that of the United States of America, yet it is by NO means the highest performer when its children are compared at stratified ages in measures of mathematics or literacy. Its sheer volume of educational opportunities, its large proportions of people receiving further or higher education, however, may be important factors. This is a long and complicated debate and one not fundamentally germane to this paper, but it is certain that far more sophisticated measures of 'educational quality' are needed if we are to demonstrate important relationships between education and social and psychological capital. The accuracy of such measures (and professional acceptability) might be better if they included, say, types of provisions for the very early years, pedagogic styles, levels of teacher education and in-service commitment, or indices of creativity and flexibility of learning locations during adulthood. School achievement tests and so-called 'standards' are very crude measures indeed (Vide Bracey's articles in Phi Delta Kappan, during the last decade or so; especially, 1998, Sept, p32 and 1999, March, p548). Nevertheless, many politicians seem convinced that education in literacy (and the boring emphasis, probably misplaced, on phonics), in numeracy and in technology correlate highly with economic success. One suspects that they (and we) have only half the story! (Strauss, 2003)

Whilst one may discern that the adaptability of the population and its overall competence have a marked effect on long term prosperity, one might also ask about the values thus espoused, the possible disruption caused by too narrow an application of an academic curriculum and about the nature of the human development envisaged. Presumably, education (formal or informal) is not just about getting the person or state richer; it is about the whole quality of the culture and of the person herself. As Seligman has recently said, "it becomes our life task to employ our strengths and virtues in the major realms of living: work, love, parenting." (Seligman, 2003, p127). Whilst acknowledging the vital role of 'flexibility' and certain types of literacy in the work-force and the increasing importance of women in employment, long-term quality nowadays is more likely to be portrayed by OECD and the World Bank in terms of social cohesion and cultural tolerance. (World Bank, 2000). The meaningful life needs to be far higher on the politician's agenda.

The long march of women has a major part to play in the whole equation. The slow movement towards social justice and equality among the sexes (and sometimes, from a British perspective, it still seems far too slow) moves us inexorably to the position whereby women make choices which were largely denied them in the past: choices about marriage, family and work. In Australia, for instance, the percentage of never married women tripled between 1976 and 1998; and is now approaching 25%; and 15% of all families are single-parent ones, with 26.6% of children now born to unwed mothers. Moreover there is a trend (not as marked as is the case in Finland or in Sweden) towards 'de facto' marriages and an obvious re-negotiation of the meaning of the contract between
a man and a woman who are cohabiting and all that it implies. It was recently estimated that in Australia, by the beginning of 21st century, almost a quarter of all women age 35 would not be married (22%). Somewhat similar figures obtain in England too. These are not the same circumstances as obtained after World-War One, when the flower of male youth had been cut down, such that women could not so easily marry in that specific generation. The evidence now is that women are frequently making deliberate choices not to marry. Marriage is no longer one of the only avenues to female success or happiness, despite the biological imperatives of child-bearing. The position of women is getting closer, therefore, to that traditionally associated with that of men.

Thus, in a whole variety of ways families and, perhaps, our concepts of childhood, are changing. What Giddens calls 'coupledom' means that contracts and understandings vary, that marriage is not the only way for heterosexuals to live together and breed. Different expectations have become commonplace and romantic love and the quality of the companionship perhaps becoming more important than the nature of the contract, or, indeed its often heavy sexual 'loading', in our modern societies. Efficient, simple methods of contraception are cheaply available, reliable and ever more easy to use. The tendency for professional women to delay childbirth has also been noted throughout the developed world and there are some serious features relating to the care and education of the very young which need to be taken into account. If the 'average' English professional woman now has two children (in actual fact slightly less than two statistically!) and she has the first in her late twenties, about 29+ years of age (circa 2,000), and the second in her early thirties, certain consequences may follow. For instance, there may be quite common 'uneven-ness' in the child-care arrangements, often of necessity, such that 'turbulence' is experienced by the child. (This is when the child has had varied experience of multiple carers before the age of three years or so.) And, since such an 'average professional' appears to be back at work within 12 or 13 months of the birth of her child, then clearly that child HAS to be cared for by someone. In countries without good, available, means-tested or affordable state care (and few are as good as are the Scandinavian countries in this respect), then the child may experience haphazard and varied circumstances; so much so that by about three years she may well have had some ten or twelve carers, not knowing when one might change and sometimes not even whom it will be on a particular occasion. Within all that lie the possible effects on the brain and upon early socialisation, the impact of different and perhaps inconsistent attitudes and behaviour of the carers. Hence I have used the term 'turbulence' to imply a putative inconsistency of attitudes and modes of interaction and a possible lack of stability or predictability in the process of caring itself. This issue is now seriously discussed by paediatricians, psychiatrists and others in several countries; and research studies into it already exist in Canada and North America. Experience of turbulence may already be the lot of many children in the United Kingdom, in Canada and USA, in Australia, in Portugal and Italy and especially wherever 'market forces' and informal care are largely employed to cater for those very young children of the increasing female workforce. It is especially clear in England that the Blair Government's targeted initiatives in poorer areas of the country (such as Early Excellence and Sure Start from 1998 and 2000 onwards) have much to do with providing easy access to high quality child-care and knowing something of its impact on raising aspirations, releasing people to work and helping them lever themselves and their children out of poverty. (See also the paper by the Australian Labor Party, Crean and Roxon, 2003)
There is, however, a possibly minor point to make, a different and perhaps more constructive way of looking at this 'turbulence'. Perhaps, if most children are 'only, lonely children' with parents at work and no extended family available, no siblings, no nearby grandparents or aunts and uncles, then the different experiences with different carers might be welcome changes in patterns of interaction, perhaps creating greater social awareness and learning in the child. Individual circumstances and reactions would no doubt vary, but there are some who suggest that variety and transitions can actually be good for a child, given the right amount of basic security.

**Brain development**

There are somewhat contradictory views taken about the importance of what McCain and Mustard (1999) referred to as 'critical periods' in the development of the brain. Research with children is extremely difficult in this domain; and, whereas there is some evidence of critical periods of development for some animals other than humankind, there is little which is that specific to our children.

"It is the consensus of the participants that a 'critical' period exists during which the synapses of the dendrites are most ready for appropriate stimulation, be it through words, music, love, touch, or caring. If these synapses are not so stimulated early, they may never fully develop." (Wynder, 1998, p 166) "I suggest that the importance of timing lies not within a set of age parameters but rather in the match between experiences provided, the child's developmental status, and the child's need or readiness to learn a particular skill or concept." (Bailey, 2002, p 293)

What we do know is that during the first three years or so of a child's life the brain is immensely 'plastic' and responsive. In the fetal stage the brain is building billions of brain cells. After birth some trillions of connections are gradually established and these form the structures or 'maps' that govern the coordination and transmission of information. The constant change in the networks and in their sophistication is the direct result of contact and observation, of repetition and curiosity. Processes of 'selective amplification' occur in direct relationship to the frequency and intensity of the stimulation by the environment. All of it is embedded in attachment, consistency, mimicry, such that, in reality, ALL learning is social, a reflection of those cumulative childhood experiences. Neuron-synapse connections are produced in overabundance during the early post-natal period and those concerned with the mapping of responses seem crucially linked to interactions between the child and its parents and carers. The characteristic way in which a close adult behaves will especially influence the child's emotional behaviour and this seems also to play a major role in helping establish the individual patterns of brain development, thus setting those ever-more-common avenues of expectation which begin to typify responses to the environment. If persistent stress occurs, either during fetal or post-natal development, it is likely that the two hormones Serotonin and Noradrenalin will be produced at above-normal levels. Such over-activity can then itself become a 'typical' process affecting both response and behaviour regulation.

(**Serotonin is a major impulse modulator and is central to the control of aggression. Too low a level correlates with depression, and explosions of rage; too high a level is implicated in obsessive-compulsion disorders and lack of self-confidence. **Noradrenalin** is part of the alarm system, alerting the body to flight. Low levels cause under-arousal and speculation has it that they may cause cold-blooded acts of violence. Similarly, it is thought that high levels may cause over-arousal and impulsive, violent behaviour.)
In addition to all this, many researchers believe that the input of information flows best during specific phases between birth and about 12 years or so. These are the so-called broad 'windows' of opportunity and they vary a little from child to child and according to circumstances. It is dangerous to think of these as 'irredeemable critical periods', since, whilst these may apply to certain basic processes, they may be less applicable to specific higher order thinking protocols. But certainly, in normal childhood, during the first three years, it appears that the foundations for language are securely laid down, as are the major parameters of the child's attitudes and dispositions towards the outside world. The important thing to remember is that whilst plasticity and process are vitally necessary to brain development, variations in outcome are vast, as are variations in rates of development (Some girls have been observed with a vocabulary of six words at the age of 5.5 months; some perfectly normal boys do not have a similar vocabulary until nearly 3 years). We should be very careful, however, before we attribute these differences solely to genetic differences in the brain. Whilst there do appear to be differences in the density of the brain (female brains being somewhat denser in grey matter) differences in socialisation and interaction may account for much of the way that the 'windows of opportunity' are exploited.

It should be noted that we gradually lose the facility to mimic the wide range of possible phonemic combinations of which we are capable during the first few years of life. This is to do with the lack of significance and lack of use of certain sound combinations (in our language) and the fact that the number of neuron synapse combinations depletes by about age three or so. Thus we can, if given the opportunity, accommodate to and learn several languages with considerable fluency during these early years; and certainly well before puberty. For some reason educational systems have been slow to respond to this feature of human development and very often teach second (and other languages) at precisely the wrong time in our children's lives, at post puberty. Fluency and flawless accent are then rarely the outcome of such later learning! There have been numerous attempts in English primary schools to introduce a second language (usually French). These seem to have failed repeatedly. It is noticeable that Finnish children often appear to have a reasonable command of English and Swedish (as well as their native Finnish) by about the age of ten or eleven years. It may be that that the influence of proximity and of the media especially are the main reasons, however.

It would appear that some children appear more vulnerable to stress and some are more resilient. Perhaps they were born that way; and investigations of stress during pregnancy tend to confirm such a view (Perry, 1993; Greenspan, 1997). Whilst some stress is necessary for normal human functioning; and challenge often precedes repetition and mastery, excessive stress clearly damages functioning and capacity. In extreme cases where traumatic and highly stressful events are the norm in the early developmental stage, the human brain responds with a disrupted, irregular and (eventually) dysfunctional series of responses which may well then limit the range of reactions that the child can best make. There is a relatively short continuum of responses within which the child needs to manage stress and frustration, but this is optimised when the child can also revert to the comfort, support and consistency of the parent or caretaker in order to develop a flexible, but relatively secure, system of coping. Self-responsibility and attribution of causality seem critically related to these coping mechanisms and themselves
become vital vehicles for later self-esteem, self-discipline and persistence in learning. The cluster of these features, or attributes, have been given many names by different social scientists. One of the most popular labels currently is that of 'dispositions'. Many believe that, though there may well be some genetic 'pre-dispositions' with which the child is born, the bulk of them are key, learned attitudes during early childhood, such that we are 'disposed' to attribute causality in similar ways for the rest of our lives in concordance with these early learned dispositions. Certainly, such assumptions give a different perspective to the way we bring up or young and may well influence the structure of programmes and curricula now so popular during kindergarten and those early years of institutionalised care and education.

Overall, the advances in knowledge of the developing brain, particularly that resulting from the last decade or so and which have benefited from MRI scanning and new biochemical techniques, have led us to re-emphasise how interactive and crucial are the first three or four years of life. The research certainly tells us that all brains appear to thrive best in a nurturant social environment and one which espouses the provision of consistency and predictability, together with interventions which both secure the child yet enable her to explore and play safely. What the research cannot be said to do is to commit one to specific universal features of curriculum design or of interactive early learning settings. We know more, but we must still be cautious, despite the fact that most signposts now point in the same direction. We must also recall that there are other periods of crucial learning and re-learning during our life-times (notably that of adolescence), such that we must not regard all early learning as so fixed as to be incapable of remediation. Boys and girls, women and men are often better at different things, though the within group differences are still very large. Females have been observed, among other things, to be better at identifying matching items at speed and at most language functions. Males tend to be better at gross motor movement and at mechanical and spatial skills. The point at issue is that, whilst there may be genetic predispositions that help with this, these tasks are overlayed with social meaning and reward very early on in the child's lifetime.(Smith, 2001)

**The media**

"The shift away from family and peers to mass media technology as primary socialisation agents can be traced to the growing popularity of radio in the 1930s, followed by television in the 1950s, and the computer networks today." (Griffiths, 1999, p 249)

The mass media and the speed with which it has been exploited and assimilated into every home is an accelerating feature of the second half of the twentieth century. In 1950 there were fewer than three million televisions in the UK and no videos recorders at all. That number has now increased ten-fold and many households have access to a very wide range of programmes through satellite and cable. Children watch considerable amounts of television, with estimates varying from country to country, but commonly falling between the range of about twenty hours per week at age three years to about forty hours at certain stages of the early teens. (Boyer, 1991; Gulbenkian, 1995; Muenchow, 1996) However, the process of socialisation by the media began earlier than that, and television has been added to and expanded by the computer, the video, access to the Web, the development of software for the very young (called 'lapware'; vide Elkind, 1998)
and the powerful common use of colour graphics and advertising. The speed of developments is such that computers really last no more than about three years before they are thoroughly out-of-date and the pressure on mobile (cell) phone renewal is probably even faster. Technological advances (such as cell-phones) are seductively marketed and often targeted at the young and at adolescents via the very efficient means of TV advertising. The same is true for a range of goods, from cereals to footwear, from toys to hairstyles, from navel studs to pubescent pop stars.

The media have both a primary and secondary impact upon children; primary in the sense that there are many programmes which are directly designed to entertain, influence and inform children; secondary in that the media sometimes manufacture, shape and control wider public opinion, not least in those features concerned with health, childcare and education. It is common to refer to the television 'industry' or the 'information industry' nowadays; and, sometimes information is confused with or thought to be the same as knowledge. Moreover, the industry has its own agenda; its corporate takeovers and its immense power may not always be easily amenable to legislation and control. This is also true of the World-Wide Web; and, whilst I am not advocating censorship of the Web (and it would be difficult to control such censorship, which itself could also lead to abuse, as one can witness in certain countries like China), it is already clear that 'market forces' are an insufficient and undesirable regulator on their own. In all the media, from broadsheet to WWW, children's and families' interests are unlikely to dominate, unless at the crudest level of lowest common denominator, or at the level where vulnerable taste and fashion may be successfully exploited for financial gain.

Media violence is an issue of general public concern in many countries, as is the type and quality of image offered on the game machine in the amusement arcade. Indeed, 'amusing violence' would seem a common enough diet for most children nowadays and one can only speculate on the amount of confusion or eventual inurement it procures. It is unclear whether discernment and greater sophistication enable the very young to detach themselves from the ever-more graphic images of violence or prejudice. Many are convinced this is not the case. (Australian Psychological Association, 2001)

Peer groups, once thought to be the province mainly of teenage life, have been clearly found to have an impact upon the clothes, toys and cereal choices of the very young (ably assisted by media advertising.) The influence of the Barbie Doll is everywhere to be seen, with (in my opinion) its dubious value associations of glamour and female expectation.

In short, whilst the possibilities of learning and socialising for our young are offered almost limitless scope by modern technology and generate an excitement which few children can resist, the media cannot of itself be seen as benign, but simply as an industry driven by values not entirely amenable to the common good.

General Implications

What are the general implications of the rapidly changing context of childhood? The key ones would seem to be as follows:

- Children are a decreasing 'commodity' in the modern world. This may seem a coarse way of expressing it, but it has direct implications for economies in respect of the
future proportions of the working population in relation to those retired from work. Health, Education and Welfare budgets will become increasingly constrained by what one can raise from the taxes applied to the younger generation actually creating the wealth. (Mustard, 1999) It also suggests that many a child is in fact an 'only, lonely child'. This means that early childhood care and education are not simply provisions for the feckless or for the occasional working mother, they are highly necessary, possibly universally necessary, facilities for the socialisation of our young in happy, sharing communities. There are additional implications connected with the change in family patterns of aging, too. Early retirements are likely to become fewer in a world where many adults now live healthily into their late eighties and ‘nineties. Certainly we know that children born today into healthy ‘middle-class’ families in Europe are likely to live to be a hundred years old, given normal health patterns.

- Families have altered; and what matters is not so much the structure of the family, but its function. How our children may be best loved and socialised in a secure environment is the fundamental issue. There will be families of all sorts: lesbian partners with children, single parents with families, heterosexual parents, re-constructed step-parent families with children, de-facto partnerships with children and so on. The legal (child-rights) implications of in-vitro fertilisation will become more pressing, as may issues surrounding cloning and genetic modification.

- Divorce and separation are inevitable, a part of adult choice and of our mobile longer-living, modern, ‘post-natural’ societies; and such family change needs to be viewed much more constructively, both for the sake of children and for the mental health of the adults involved. This could lead to a more cohesive, constructive view of ‘coupledom’ and improved social outcomes generally. Counsellors, marriage guidance personnel, psychologists and others involved (such as the legal profession) must be encouraged to develop a more positive view of the opportunities for friendship and the creation of extended relationships which can be developed after divorce and separation.

- Children are increasingly socialised by the media. Whilst this provides for greater democratisation of knowledge (at its best), it can also result in the domination of information by forces inimical to sound psychological and social health. Violence is a particular issue, as is the assumed consensus and the ‘dumbing down’ of complexity and difference. Popular culture is big business and music and ikonic performances by chosen ‘stars’ manipulated for the benefit of marketisation and profit, sometimes regardless of merit. Increasingly politics (and certainly political success and failure) are subject to the scrutiny and sometimes the perversity of media culture. In some cases democracies can be manipulated and cults exploited by the power of the media.

- Research on the developing brain, whilst not offering all that is sometimes claimed in terms of curricula for the very young, suggests that money is spent at the wrong end of the developmental curve. It also corroborates what many early years teachers have averred and expressed for years, ie that consistency, attachment, play and good social interaction form the best basis for secure learning and probably (later) for the development of non-dysfunctional adults. This is an urgent issue to address in
the light of the tendency for the compulsory primary school age to be lowering all over the world and the increasing tendency for children to be in the care of professionals from birth or soon after. (OECD, 2001)

- One suspects that, in general, policy-makers have received only half the message; they now know that learning from birth is crucial, but tend to assume that a formal structured early curriculum is the best match for the children. Strauss and others remind us too that corporate business may often have an investment in certain views of learning such that they have even manipulated reading 'research' results and thus present views of learning or of schooling which are inaccurate, or, at very least, somewhat overstated. (Strauss, 2003). It cannot be emphasized enough that research shows how children need variation, systematic, but non-competitive atmospheres and ample opportunity to choose and persist. (Ball, 1994, Sylva, 1998). Many might go further and suggest that long-term predictors of adult success lie less in curriculum content than we think. Certainly much success apparently lies in the early fostering of appropriate dispositions and attitudes. (Feinstein, 2000)

- Trauma, depression and long-term delinquent behaviour are a consequence of inadequate and abusive environments. Money spent wisely in the early years is likely to reduce recidivism, and anti-social behaviour later and to result in much greater social cohesion.

- Poverty is still one of the most obvious and significant correlates of chronic disease, poor cognitive performance and inadequate social adjustment in our societies. Market forces do not well cater for the needs of the dispossessed. The result is that the effects of poverty are often cyclic. (Zigler, et al, 1996; Silburn et al, 1996.) "Children in poor families are twice as likely to have low vocabulary and mathematics scores, twice as likely to repeat a grade, and more likely to be seen as hyperactive, to drop out of school, and to have friends who are frequently in trouble." (Robertson, 1999, 552); said recently of Canada's poor.

- Childhood and being a child are effectively under siege in many modern societies, since children are too often viewed as economic investments, 'products' for the future. The child must have the opportunity to be as well as become. The Nordic and Scandinavian countries may have much to offer us in their treatment of children, their awareness of the commercial exploitation of childhood and in their attention to the construction of less-pressurised childhood experiences. (OECD 2001; Morrill, 2003)

Specific Issues of Caring, Teaching and Training

"If you look at teachers or social workers or case workers ...... the front-line staff are 85% females ...... working with children ...... seeing their lives ...... but in the organisations that design and control public education, mental health service delivery or child protective services, 90% of the administration (policy and practice makers) are males ...... who spend almost no time with children.

The effects of this are that the people who define policy know very little about the real lives of children and families in duress ...... and make policies which are much less 'child' centred ............ while the frontline workers who have to live with the foolish policy
limitations are frustrated, burned out and get cynical about their inabilities to impact 'the system'." (Perry, 1997, WWW)

There are a series of issues here which seem to be important. I will list them, then deal with the inter-related aspects at greater length.

1. As far as learning is concerned, early care and education are indivisible and recent British experience suggest they can be most productively based in genuinely wrap-around services, which include the delivery of child health and opportunities for family and personal adult learning. Family involvement and commitment are vital.

2. Any 'curriculum' or programme for the early years must be able to stand on the basis of the best research possible and not on the whims and ideologies of legislators, nor must children simply be viewed as 'little investments for the future'. They have the right to 'be' as well as 'become'. Play is a vital ingredient in the trial and error and active modelling during infant learning (OECD, 2001).

3. Money needs to be diverted in greater proportions to the early years.

4. Both sexes need to be involved in the early years care and education of our children. Children need nurturant male exemplars as well as female ones.

5. Teacher and carer education needs to be better-integrated and more tied to principles and knowledge of human development, both social and psychological.. This is the professional spine of early years work, but we must be especially careful to examine critically those 'models of childhood' which are so frequently offered or assumed by such professionals and particularly those offered by politicians and the media. There is evidence from OECD (2001) and from the evaluation report by Bertram et al (2003) Sylva et al, (2003) that well qualified/well-trained leaders make a strong impact for the good of the centre and the quality of child outcomes.

6. Teachers and carers are at times advocates for the child and the family and have a duty to be questing, reflective, 'uncivil-servants', not merely operatives for a process of minding or indoctrination.

7. Good leadership is as vital within the domain of ECEC and family communication as at any other stage of educational provision, perhaps more so.

8. Images of childhood, the family, education and schooling are subject to populist pressures and strong media imagery. We should be especially careful in our assumptions about desirable values of care and education. A somewhat 'punitive' view of the processes and content of education is evident in many western cultures.

It is no longer possible to distinguish between care and education in the early years. It may have been possible a century ago. Then, many children were socialised on their mother's knees and in the context of a rich helping of siblings and grandparents. Family instability and frenetic mobility did not usually strand or separate the generations; and value systems were generally more internally consistent and not so influenced by outside events of a media-rich, commercially greedy world.
Increasingly, as women access the work force, the quality of early care and education becomes an important issue. (Indeed the history of institutional child-care is embedded in provision for poor mothers who worked). Many societies are upgrading the training of carers and many others train carers and early childhood educators side-by-side for degree courses {becoming more common in Britain, Finland, Sweden and South Australia and throughout much of the European Union, with the current exception of Germany and Austria (2003)}. This seems the only tenable course of action if we are to secure the future of our children. It should provide for good multi-professional teams from birth and should be an issue for all countries if they wish to attempt any form of reduction in crime and distress and see long-term social cohesion as a desirable goal.

The attempts by policy-makers crudely to correlate economic success with literacy, numeracy and technological proficiency and then to apply ever earlier formal instruction models to young children can only be countered by good argument and clear evidence. International comparisons are by no means clear, but there is some evidence that countries with a more child-centred approach to the first six or seven years actually do better than those with a 'pressed down', highly-structured approach. (OECD, 2001, Morrill 2003). The relationships that do seem well founded are those concerning quality of outcomes and the quality of the staff. Well-trained, repeatedly in-serviced staff are certainly implicated in key aspects of quality in the Early Excellence evaluations in England and in the EPPE studies by Sylva et al (2003).

Modern brain research is still in its relative infancy, but it would be fair to say it shows that the best environment for early learning is one of attachment, consistency, stimulation and the opportunity to explore and play. This suggests that the essential core of initial teacher/carer training must be about child development, about the impact of stress and of poverty, about the social-psychological implications of motivation and causal attribution. (This is NOT the case in the UK, where much teacher education has been transformed into a study of a formal curriculum, of testing and 'outcomes-driven' approaches; and where sociology, psychology and philosophy have been almost ignored or removed from the teacher-training curriculum.) Pronouncements by politicians on, for instance, the best way to learn are relatively frequent and even those concerning how children learn to read are often pathetically inadequate and ignorant (both in the UK and North America), paying little heed to some sixty-plus years of research and varied methodology. (vide Zemelman, et al, 1999), even less to the family dynamics which seem to support good readers. (vide Sylva et al, 2003)

Studies by Perry and by Kotulak seem to confirm the theme of attachment and consistency and note the high price paid for stress and violence in the early years. (Perry, 1993; Kotulak, 1998). Other studies, such as the Dunedin Longitudinal Study (Silva and Stanton, 1997) appear to show how long-term disturbance and delinquency are the result of certain major correlates of inadequate rearing during the first three years.

According to OECD Indicators (OECD, 1998), most countries appear to devote considerably more per capita to the child over the age of ten years than to the child under ten. One might argue over the historical determinants of this, with quite different traditions being responsible in different countries. In England, until 1997/8 the differential was very large indeed; the (then) under five year old being worth approximately (and at the extreme end) ... there were marked local variations between local education authorities, one tenth
of a sixteen year old. That was during a period when the then prime minister described the early years as 'not on the agenda'. Recent changes in England have been dramatic as government ministers, and politicians generally, have seen the alleviation/removal of poverty as critically supported by good early years' provision. It is now on the agenda in a considerable manner. As Reiner (the American film producer) reputedly said at a convention in the USA in 1997, at which Boyer (The late President of the Carnegie Commission) presided, 'Why should the money only kick in after it is no more use?' And Boyer apparently remarked that 'We should be prosecuting the provision of early childhood education with the same vigour that our forefathers showed when establishing universal elementary education'.

Because early childhood provision used to be the province entirely of women, because fifty years ago the working mother was a relative rarity in industrial societies, there has been a tendency (except amongst the French and the Scandinavians) to 'make do and mend'. It is only recently that the issue has become hotly political. But now, with more and more mothers in the work force, it is a universal issue of necessity, accessibility and equality. Policy-makers all over the world are now recognising their dependence on the female work force, the need for greater social justice and the imperative of securing a balanced and fruitful future for all their citizens. They ask how best may one produce an effective source of educators for the very young; and how does one finance such provision? There are no easy answers. The best results seem to come from a blend of public and commercial/industrial responsibility not from the free application of private provision, but from an avowed ownership of the 'problem' by commerce and industry, as well as by the state and by charitable bodies. Yet governments are notably chary of emphasising or 'talking up' the link between early provision and societal cohesion; so in many cases the poor are still blamed for their poverty and poor performance! (Relatively recently the Canadian Federal Government balked at spending an unexpected budget surplus on better early childhood provision. Robertson, op cit, 1999)

Lastly, in this short section, I would like to emphasise my concern for the role of the early years teacher-cum-carer and for the teacher in general. During my forty years in education I have observed an ever-greater tendency for governments to take control of education and to dictate its content. In some respects it is their duty to do so. After all one assumes that they are the elected instrument of the people. But I have also witnessed many changes, about turns, plain ignorance of the processes, considerable confusion, the wasting of money in diametrically opposed policies, the 're-invention of the wheel', the 'dumbing down' of teaching and the tendency for business people especially to see education as instrumental, or simply a question of force-feeding. The very language of education (at least in the English language) is now replete with industrial and commercial metaphors and terms. (Taylor, ed, 1984) Government agencies talk about the education 'industry', or of 'delivering' a curriculum, to the child from birth, as though one were a postman, or a bird with a worm. How long one wonders before someone puts forth the view that there should be an in-utero curriculum? Policy-makers talk of 'target-setting' and 'output' as though children were components in a factory and the interaction of teacher and pupil a simple 'results-based' process. It is important, therefore, for teachers and carers to be on their guard, well-read, articulate and especially sensitive to the subtleties of motivation and creativity. They will know better than most that there is a very thin line between indoctrination and education. They need to be particularly well-informed, to have
current theory at their finger-tips. They need to work closely with initial and in-service trainers, so that new teachers and carers do not lose sight of the principles of education, of the importance of timing and happiness, of appropriate challenge and risk. There is need for play and choice, rather than stress, uniformity and competition; there is as much need for ‘agape’ to inform our interactions as for any ‘birth-to-three’ curriculum! Education, and particularly the ever-earlier formal education of our children (which is rapidly becoming almost universally necessary) carries real dangers with it. The zeal of our political masters may occasionally demand a response of resistance and modification, need countering by clear argument and a centrality of concern that our children actually have a childhood. We have to show also that children can learn to exercise choice, need to learn about processes of approaching and selecting knowledge, need to know that there are many perspectives of ‘truth’, not one, need to grow up as our critics, not our slaves. It could be said that children are our sacred charge. We perhaps need to be more aware of that, whilst recognising that, unfortunately, there is much that is profane in the way we construct and influence childhood today.

Of education, William James once said, "no outward changes of condition in life can keep the ‘nightingale of its eternal meaning’ from singing in all sorts of different men's hearts" (James, 1900, p301). At its best we can use change (awareness of it and a raised consciousness of the implicit values) to build better societies, such that our intentions sing in our children's hearts as well as their heads.
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