

Perspectives: a series of occasional papers on early years education

lets talk about
1 pedagogy

towards a shared understanding for
early years education in Scotland



SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE



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In the context of this paper, 'early education' is taken to mean 'from birth to 8' and early educators are all those who work with children in this age range.



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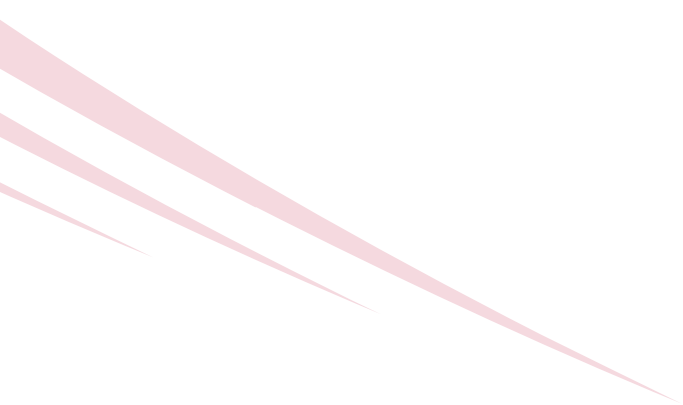
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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussion about the theory and practice of learning, teaching and development in early education in Scotland. This can be achieved only by acknowledging the complex and challenging nature of early years education, a period that needs to be seen as extending into the early years of primary school. Equally, it can happen only when we engage in a dialogue about the important place of pedagogy in our vision for the future development of early years services in the twenty first century in Scotland.

Although primarily intended to stimulate dialogue within the early years community in Scotland, this dialogue will not be exclusive to this community. It has application throughout every stage of learning and teaching, particularly in the context of a curriculum 3–18.





lets talk about pedagogy



Why is it important to consider pedagogy now?

Whilst the term 'pedagogy' may feel unfamiliar to some of us, the strength of our practice is supported by what could be called a pedagogical base. This is why exploring the meaning of terms such as 'pedagogy' and 'pedagogical base' is so important; in clarifying exactly what they mean we can develop a deeper understanding of what is informing our practice, and importantly *why* we work in particular ways. This in turn can enable us to make our practice, and the impact of our practice, more visible not only to others but also to ourselves.

Considering pedagogy can help us to:

- **be aware of the impact we have on children**

To support the vision of every child as an 'active agent' in society, we need to be aware of the experiences that children have in their early years that help them to develop as confident, powerful, competent individuals.

We know that children are born with powerful motivations to learn and that in order to learn effectively, they need *people* to interact with.¹ How can we be sure that we are engaging with young children appropriately and, most importantly, engaging in meaningful ways? We understand that children need active support from adults who:

- are well informed about child development
- are respectful of and interested in children
- are knowledgeable about and value the importance of play and the powerful contribution it makes to children's development and learning
- understand the importance of relationships with other children and with adults
- recognise learning contexts that are real and meaningful to the child.

We know that children learn from adults, from other children and from the environment around them, but also that children very often are more knowledgeable across a range of interests and experiences than the adults with whom they are interacting. This latter knowledge is crucial in our image of the child as a rich and resourceful individual, in whose abilities we need to trust.

- **make the 'why' of our practice visible**

In early years education, as in every other stage, we have the responsibility of articulating not only what we do and the impact of this, but also how, and *why* we do what we do, to parents and carers as well as to society. Understanding our pedagogical base will help us to be able to do this.

¹ *Birth to three: supporting our youngest children*, Learning and Teaching Scotland/ Scottish Executive, 2005

Pedagogy needs explicitly to be seen to encompass a spirit of enquiry and professional dialogue about *why* we do what we do.

- We need to ask ourselves, our colleagues and also the children we work with, as our co-constructors in learning, *why*. We need to encourage children to ask *why* of each other and of the learning community to which they belong.
- Asking *why* encourages the research, reflection and sense of participation needed to ensure that pedagogical approaches develop, evolve and are effective.

- **be reflective educators**

We learn in different ways and are constantly adding to what we know. We learn from:

- empirical research
- general evidence from practice
- individual and group reflection
- exploration and enquiry
- being comfortable accepting that we are still learning.

We need to continue to find ways of exploring all aspects of learning, teaching and development, knowing that *our* understanding of pedagogy is based on Scottish culture and context.

The Scottish context

For this dialogue to begin, it is helpful to look at the context in which it takes place.

In Scotland, there is a growing understanding that how we *think* about children is crucial. An important cultural shift is taking place, where increasingly the child is being viewed as 'an active agent in his or her world'.² This view sets the tone for all that we aim to do and locates any discussion about provision for children within such a context.

A new parliament for Scotland, and in 2004 the appointment of a Children's Commissioner, to *listen* to children and give weight to the issues they raise, serve to emphasise further that in Scotland we have new aspirations for our children.

All of the main statutory agencies involved in services for children have been involved in major organisational change over the past 10 years. During this period, there have also been major changes in early education and childcare services in Scotland. These changes have affected growth, delivery, type of provision and expectations of service providers in terms of knowledge, skills and understandings. Some of the important working groups established by Scotland's new parliament to review services to children, led to key documents such as *For Scotland's Children*.²

Policy and guidance generated at a national level in order to support early years work emphasise the importance of the child as an individual, the central role played by adults in supporting and extending children's learning and the resulting demands made on early years educators.

*A Curriculum Framework for Children in their Pre-school Year*³ and *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*,⁴ which extended the earlier advice, were based on a recognition of the fundamental importance of the adult role in supporting children's development and learning. They stemmed from the growing awareness of the importance of the quality of early years experiences and a commitment to building a 'coherent, continuous and progressive educational experience for all young people in Scotland'.⁴

More recently, in both *The Child at the Centre*⁵ and the *National Care Standards: early education and childcare up to the age of 16*,⁶ education and care are further emphasised as an indivisible whole. The impact of regulation and inspection plays an important role in both influencing provision and creating expectations of educators in terms of skills, knowledge and understanding.

² *For Scotland's Children*, Scottish Executive, 2001

³ *A Curriculum Framework for Children in their Pre-school Year*, SOEID, 1997

⁴ *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999

⁵ *The Child at the Centre*, Scottish Executive, 2000

⁶ *National Care Standards: early education and childcare up to the age of 16*, Scottish Executive, 2002

At present, national guidance for birth to 3 is provoking lively and stimulating discussion on how policy and practice impact on Scotland's very youngest children.⁷ This guidance adopts the coordinated care and education approach emphasised in the quality indicators and national care standards cited above. An integrated strategy for early years is also currently being addressed within Scotland, with a number of initiatives in place that promote a more integrated approach to service provision for children, including Sure Start Scotland, Integrated Community Schools, Social Inclusion Partnerships and Children's Services Plans.

Finally, Scotland has undergone a review of the future of education, which, significantly, has led to a new focus on a curriculum 3–18, with accompanying principles applicable to every stage of learning and teaching:

- challenges and enjoyment
- breadth
- progression
- personalisation and choice
- coherence
- relevance.

A *Curriculum for Excellence*⁸ includes a new emphasis on successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. Exploring what these four capacities mean in the context of early years thinking and practice will be an important task. This places an increased responsibility on all those involved in the education of children and young people to think deeply about the kinds of learning experiences that allow children to become confident, responsible, effective and successful learners.

Separately and cumulatively, all of these factors will influence our thinking about pedagogy in Scotland.

⁷ *Birth to three: supporting our youngest children*, Learning and Teaching Scotland/Scottish Executive, 2005

⁸ The Curriculum Review Group, *A Curriculum for Excellence*, Scottish Executive, 2005

What further factors have influenced pedagogical thinking?

Issues of how children learn, of how to teach and questions of pedagogical approach in early years education are topical and on the agenda, both within Scotland and elsewhere.

Whilst there is no doubt that we can learn from notable practices and examples of alternative conceptions of pedagogy, it is important to understand the context in which pedagogical issues arise and to respect the socio-cultural traditions within early years in Scotland.

In Scotland we believe that we need an understanding of *how children learn* and an understanding of *how to teach*; that children's learning experiences should leave them confident and competent. The learning process should be based on the view of children as experienced learners and communicators, central to their own learning and with the confidence and self-respect to have high aspirations for themselves and others.

Traditions of early childhood education in Scotland are rich and historical. Robert Owen, well known not just within Scotland but also internationally, opened the first nursery in Lanark, Scotland, in 1809, followed in 1817 by his School for Children between the ages of 1 and 10. Owen's vision stated clearly that children should be provided with opportunities to share, be kind to each other, be curious and ask questions, with an emphasis on teaching practices based on encouragement and an understanding of the whole child. '... If the foundation were not truly laid, it would be in vain to expect a satisfactory structure'⁹ – a belief reflected in many of today's approaches to early childhood education.

We can also see the influence of many thinkers and theorists in today's early years practice in Scotland. When we consider the importance we place on relationships, particularly between children; on close partnership with families; on the role of the environment; on the centrality of the child; on the emphasis on the many different ways that children learn; we are reminded of pioneering work. The work of Froebel, Montessori, Steiner, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bowlby, Isaacs, Bruner and many others has advanced our thinking and helped shape our provision and practice. Within present-day Scotland, the work of Trevarthen, Donaldson, Prout and Watt has contributed greatly to our understandings of early childhood education and to how we conceptualise childhood.

⁹ Donnachie, I, *Robert Owen: Owen of New Lanark and New Harmony*, 2000

However, although we can identify these influences on our pedagogical thinking, 'pedagogy' is a term that still does not enjoy widespread currency in Scotland despite being used elsewhere in Europe and indeed across the world. By developing an understanding of what the term 'pedagogy' means and then embedding it into our thinking, language and practice, we can talk the same language as our colleagues in the global learning community and engage more fully in international debate and discussion.




What do we mean by pedagogy?

As a starter to our thinking, it can be useful to explore a few points relating to our current understandings of pedagogy. From the outset it is important not to confuse pedagogy with either curriculum or simply 'teaching'; pedagogy informs both. In the context of early years education in Scotland, where learning through exploration, creativity and play is key, any construct of pedagogy must be broadly based and seen as an evolving process.

We need an understanding that fits with the new vision for Scotland, which sees children as central to everything that affects them as citizens and as people with rights and responsibilities.¹⁰ We need an understanding against which the questions 'what?', 'how?', 'why?', 'where?' and 'when?' can be asked in relation to learning and teaching, in order that whatever decisions we make as educators, we have something that guides our actions in the many different situations in which we work.

Taking all of this into account, could the following represent our current understanding of pedagogy?



Pedagogy is about learning, teaching and development, influenced by the cultural, social and political values and principles we have for children in Scotland, and underpinned by a strong theoretical and practical base.

It is useful to consider the elements at the heart of the pedagogical decisions that we make. We need to consider what we mean when we talk about learning, teaching and development, to be enquiring about the role of interactions and environment as integral features supporting learning, teaching and development, and to be aware of the values and principles that underpin all that we do.

¹⁰ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

For example, when we talk about learning, teaching and development, do we need to consider more deeply:

- our understandings of the many ways in which children learn and the need to add to and extend our own knowledge consistently
- what we mean by children being central to their own learning, whether we are allowing for personal choice and individual responses
- whether we are giving children enough time to allow them to deepen and develop their own theories and demonstrate their understandings
- whether we are recognising and valuing children's existing capabilities, interests and perspectives, and building on these to ensure valuable, coherent and challenging experiences
- whether children are actively engaged in their learning, and whether it is purposeful, enjoyable and relevant to them
- whether we are giving ourselves enough time to support learning, not just across a variety of contexts, but also in *depth*.

When we talk about interactions, does this provoke further questions about:

- how and why we interact with children in certain ways at certain times
- how to become more responsive and thoughtful in our interactions
- whether we give ourselves enough time for interactions and for supporting interactions between children
- whether our interactions are supported by knowledge of the child that families and others share with us
- why the appropriate approach may be not to interact directly.

When we talk about environment, do we need to consider more deeply:

- whether we consider the organisation of learning spaces, both indoors and outdoors, to be one of our priorities when planning for children's learning
- how we negotiate with staff and children about the intentions for the learning space, both indoors and outdoors
- whether resources, in terms of how they are presented, make the environment feel cluttered and lacking in space, or promote independence and in-depth exploration
- whether we need to give more thought to questioning the place of systems and routines within the environment, both indoors and outdoors
- whether in creating our learning environment, both indoors and outdoors, sufficient consideration has been given to its aesthetic qualities, in terms of colour, lighting, shape and design
- whether the wider environment, including family and community, is being taken into account when we plan learning experiences and opportunities.

When we think about the values and principles that underpin all of the above, do we need to be aware of and also reflect on:

- our image of children in twenty first century Scotland and how we value childhood
- the values that we put on learning, the values that we bring to learning and the impact that these have on children
- the ways in which we encourage the development of confident, competent individuals with high self-esteem and high aspirations
- how we value diversity, tolerance and respect for self and others
- the ways in which we value all that children bring with them, their knowledge and experiences, and important aspects of their lives
- the ways in which we value relationships and the contribution of others, children, families, colleagues, and other professionals.

Through engaging with all of the above, we begin to develop an understanding of what pedagogy means, what our pedagogical base is and why it deserves deep and thoughtful consideration.



Discovering our pedagogical base: how will we do this?

Engaging in discussion with others is a good way to start a discourse about pedagogy, allowing us to enquire more closely about what informs our everyday decisions.

What might help us to get this discourse started?

Engaging in professional dialogue

The role of professional dialogue between and among all professionals in the field that focuses on values and principles, interactions, learning and environment, leading to a growing understanding of approaches to take, to challenge and to try next, will be essential.

Talk and reflection, genuine listening, sharing ideas, examining interactions and engaging in analysis of strengths and areas for development are all aspects that need to be recognised as important. To be able to do this, however, we need a solid core of knowledge, the disposition and the confidence to engage in the debate and an acceptance that not knowing is not a deficit, but an opportunity.

We also need time to be a part of this discussion, time to engage in professional dialogue, which involves problem solving and the type of ongoing professional development that encourages the questioning approach essential in periods of rapid change and development. We must recognise that becoming enquiring professionals also takes time, as well as the courage to act productively and creatively in order to further inform and develop our practice.

Listening, observing and being thoughtful

Much of the educator's work can be effective only if there is an understanding of the need to take a step back, to be observant and to listen. Taking a step back allows us to be thoughtful, to recognise and value learning, and to see that it arises from experiences both intended and unintended by the adult. It gives us the confidence to explore our current understandings and to develop further understandings, to operate within all types of learning situations and to be aware of those values and principles that we bring to every situation.

The ability to step back and be observant requires an in-depth understanding of child development, of the early years curriculum and of the range of contexts in which development and learning take place and thrive. Having this repertoire of understandings, which is based on flexibility and the ability to adapt, allows us to respond to children as individuals, as people and as learners.


Developing a reflective and enquiring spirit

A shared understanding of the 'why', 'what', 'how', 'when', 'where' and 'who' of pedagogy allows us to continue to challenge, to question, and to review our practice. Early childhood education would benefit from a more flexible and imaginative approach to giving children the time they need to develop their own theories and hypotheses, within an environment that has high expectations for all.

Empowering educators to try out different, well-informed approaches encourages the very reflection, discussion, debate and evolution critical to an effective pedagogical base. Where we have a clear vision and a feeling of ownership of our pedagogy, we become more confident, more able to take responsibility and more willing to be thoughtful, to reflect, question, struggle and to celebrate.

Giving consideration to these areas will serve as a good starting point for the important dialogue that needs to take place in terms of developing an understanding of our pedagogical base and pedagogy itself.

Embracing pedagogy: what are the implications?



Pedagogy is about learning, teaching and development, influenced by the cultural, social and political values and principles we have for children in Scotland, and underpinned by a strong theoretical and practical base.

Embracing pedagogy has the potential to encourage new ways of working. Set in the context of the political, social and cultural developments outlined earlier, it follows that the new aspirations we have for children should in turn require us to have new expectations of ourselves, if we are to be able to translate the vision into reality and create a Scotland where every child matters.

There are undoubtedly implications for roles and responsibilities, for a new professionalism, for early education itself and most importantly for children. Issues that will need to be considered include:

- how to embed the language of pedagogy into usual practice
- how to support the workforce in developing a shared understanding of a pedagogical base
- how to plan for the dialogue that allows these understandings to develop
- whether this way of working would require a new professionalism.

Of course, when we begin to talk about pedagogy, we are immediately faced with further questions to reflect upon and discuss. Important questions about implementation and about roles and responsibilities need to be addressed. These rely on first developing a shared understanding of pedagogy, the effect of these ideas on practice and on roles and responsibilities. It is the involvement of all educators in this developmental process that will lead to a shared understanding of pedagogy and its implications for improving the

quality of early education. This involvement could take place in different ways, through:

- continuing professional development opportunities
- work with students and trainees
- discussion at policy and service management levels.

Embracing pedagogy as a dynamic force, flexible, adaptable and always under discussion has implications for everyone involved in the early years community. Just as in the latter half of the 1990s, *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5* marked an important stage in the development of early childhood education in Scotland, this current seeking of new understandings, which our dialogue about pedagogy represents, will further deepen our knowledge and support us in realising our new vision for children in Scotland in the twenty first century.



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