Starting from the Child?

Fifth Edition

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Contents

1 What 'starting from the child' means

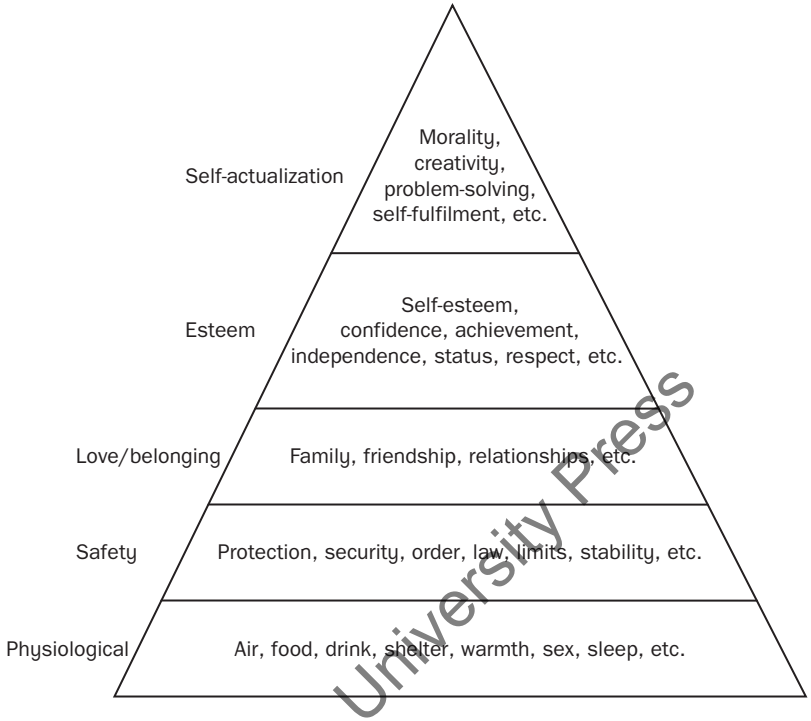
This chapter establishes the principle of this book – that an education starting from the child will always be more relevant, meaningful and enjoyable to children and, consequently, offer them motivation to keep learning. It examines learning that takes place in the home and the lessons that can be learned from parents as their child's first and enduring educators. It then moves on to consider how these lessons can be adapted to be relevant for early childhood educators as they endeavour to meet their children's unique needs and interests while working within a statutory framework. Finally, importantly, it clarifies what 'starting from the child' does ***not*** *mean.*

Introduction

Young children are voracious learners. They do not need to be coaxed or cajoled or forced to continue a ceaseless quest to explore their world and to find their place within it. The drive to learn is innate, and children's exploration of, and their fascination with, all they can sense around them begins in the womb (Gerhardt 2004; NSCDC 2010; Goswami 2015; Royal Foundation 2021). Once they are born, Gopnik and her colleagues (1999: 13) describe the infant as a scientist in the crib as they 'think, observe and reason … consider evidence, draw conclusions, do experiments, solve problems, and search for the truth'.

As their 'first and enduring educators' (Early Years Coalition [EY Coalition]: 2021: 29) most parents respond naturally, instinctively and lovingly to support their baby's development and, consequently, their learning. This primary relationship creates an internal working model for relationships that are to come. Dunlop (2018: 212) suggests that 'The ways in which children step in and out of the world outside the family forming new relationships with people, places and in their thinking, is the substance of the child's curriculum.' Lindon (1993) describes how a loving parental relationship fulfils three basic human needs: to be cared for physically; to be kept safe; and for emotional well-being. These most fundamental of needs are encapsulated in the famous 'hierarchy of needs' presented back in 1943 by the American psychologist Abraham Maslow. Figure 1.1 demonstrates how Maslow's theory places physiological and safety needs as foundational to all other development.

Figure 1.1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs



More recent thinking, stemming from the dramatic increase in our knowledge and understanding of brain architecture' (NSCDC 2020), places particular emphasis on the child's third 'basic need' – for emotional well-being.

The need for emotional well-being

Feeling unconditional acceptance, liking and love is central to human emotional health and well-being and, suggests Underdown, 'when a child feels emotionally healthy, he or she is more receptive to learning' (2007: 6). This accords with the influential work of Ferre Laevers who states that the child demonstrating emotional well-being is more likely to be deeply engaged in their learning. He characterized well-being as a state in which a child feels at ease, shows spontaneity, is self-confident and enjoys interactions with others (Laevers et al. 2013). Such behaviours spring from experience of close, loving and intimate relationships where adults are attuned to the needs of their children, recognize these needs as significant and respond accordingly. In their child well-being framework, McMullen and McCormick (2016, quoted in Trevarthen et al. 2018: 109) suggest three components of relational well-being:

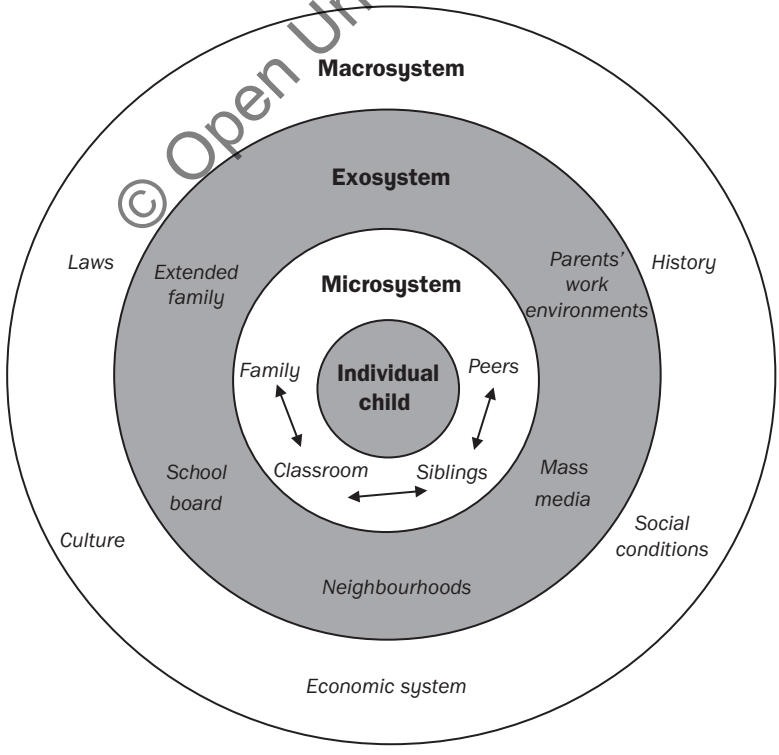
- *affinity*: promoted when children receive affectionate touch and nurturance within a positive emotional climate

- *communication*: including respectful and continuous dialogue between caregivers, children and families to promote mutual understanding
- *self-respect*: fostered when caregivers create and communicate a culture of respect for who the child is, what the child believes and what the child feels.

The Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child, in one of their influential working papers (NSCDC 2012: 11), states that sound mental health 'provides an essential foundation of stability that supports all other aspects of human development – from the formation of friendships and the ability to cope with adversity to the achievement of success in school, work, and community life'.

Emotional well-being is not static of course, and can be impacted by varying social, environmental and health factors. The work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) (see Figure 1.2) demonstrated how a child's emotional well-being interacts over time both directly and indirectly with these other factors. While each child develops within a complex set of relationships – within the home, the community and their early childhood setting – their development is also affected by broader issues such as the health and social circumstances of those with whom they live; the culture, values and laws of the society in which they live; the cultural

Figure 1.2: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory



freedoms they may or may not enjoy within that society, and so on (see also NSCDC 2010). Some children face more challenges than others, but the child who has high levels of emotional well-being is more likely to manage the changes and uncertainties of life, because they carry with them the feeling of being nurtured and cared for, and cared about. As O'Connor (2017) explains, they have that special sense that they are 'held in mind' by their parents and their wider families.

The Covid-19 pandemic has done more than any other event in my lifetime to raise awareness of the impact of societal events on the personal well-being of us all. A number of research studies, as well as a great deal of anecdotal evidence, have identified the impact of Covid on young children's emotional well-being as much as their attainment. Early in 2022, Ofsted produced findings from inspection evidence stating that, 'The negative impact on children's personal, social and emotional development has continued.' They reported children lacking confidence; being shy especially in group activities; being upset when left by parents; and needing more support with sharing and turn-taking. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF 2022) commissioned a report assessing the impact of the pandemic on children's outcomes in their Reception year and found that both parents and schools perceived young children had been disadvantaged in their socio-emotional well-being. None of these findings is surprising. Those working in the sector during that time know that many children born during the pandemic have yet to experience a typical year in either their early years setting or at school. For many of those born pre-pandemic, normal routines have been lost, opportunities to socialize with a range of peers have been lost, and interactions with a range of adults have been lost. Too many children have returned to their classrooms and nurseries full of apprehension, at a stage in their development when they are most in need of certainty and security. Zeedyk (2020) suggests that, while children's well-being is fortified by their connections to others, in turn, connections and relationships are impacted by a child's capacity to make attachments.

The importance of attachment

Responsive, sensitive and loving parenting offers children their first feelings of emotional security on which relationships and close attachments are founded. This attachment 'theory' is most often associated with the work of John Bowlby (1907–1990) who investigated how a baby's earliest experiences could impact on the overall well-being of the adult they might become. So Bowlby's theory developed Maslow's identification of physiological needs as paramount, proposing that the infant has an instinctive need to be kept safe, leading in time, as Lindon suggests, to that sense of emotional equilibrium. O'Connor (2017) points out that babies are not passive in this quest, but that their instinctive attention-seeking behaviours attract caregiving behaviours responsive to their needs. She suggests that it is 'as though babies – and those people around them – are programmed to respond to each other' (O'Connor

2017: 3). So, through the level and sensitivity of response that the baby receives, they build up an image of themselves as being worthy, or not, of love and attention. It is an image constructed over a thousand different episodes that can make children feel emotionally safe and gives them the 'ability to cope with adversity' (NSCDC 2012: 1).

Children who experience close attachments are usually those whose parents are alert to their needs and have the capacity to respond. Regrettably, some parents have so many needs of their own that responding to the needs of a demanding child can prove too much of a challenge. If secure attachments – those coming from responsive care – are not the child's experience, then 'starting from the child' can be a challenge for educators. Grimmer (2021) reminds us that bonding with carers and educators does not always happen naturally and that educators need 'to be pro-active in enabling this attachment to form' (Grimmer 2021: 142). She explains that the early childhood educator who is effective in meeting young children's needs does more than feed them or change their nappies, but is the educator who 'interacts socially, plays and communicates with them'.

It is particularly important perhaps that those working with young children appreciate how the behaviour of a child with insecure attachment is so often a way of communicating their unmet needs: sometimes quite literally a cry for help. Some of the children in our settings may have experienced early trauma, loss, neglect or abuse which can 'disrupt the typical patterns of developing brain architecture and impair emerging capacities for learning and relating to others' (NSCDC 2012: 1). Those who have suffered such experiences may have become skilled at suppressing what they think or feel for fear of upsetting an adult, learning 'to appear calm and unconcerned, but when measured their heart rate and automatic arousal is rocketing' (Gerhardt 2004: 26). Others may constantly need or demand attention and affection, as though reassuring themselves that they are fundamentally loveable (Robinson 2003). Such children may cling to another child or a chosen adult in the hope of finding reassurance and those unmet feelings of security and safety. Then there are children who have experienced erratic or conditional care where there have been few, if any, opportunities to learn to manage emotions or themselves, because the reactions they have received from adults have been so unpredictable and random (O'Connor 2017). All of these children need relationships with their educators that 'buffer the impact of adverse early experiences to make them tolerable' (NSCDC 2012: 2).

Warm, close, responsive relationships are necessary for all children. Children need educators who appreciate that without their varying and various needs being met, their development and learning will not have sufficiently secure foundations. Educators who appreciate that 'starting from the child' means being sensitive and flexible in response to children's needs, understand that managing feelings and emotions can be a struggle for any child, and that modelling how to respond and react in certain situations – 'co-regulating' children's feelings and emotions – is a crucial stage towards helping children to manage and regulate themselves (Robson and Zachariou 2022). Indeed,

Shanker et al. (2015, quoted in Conkbayir 2023: 39) state: 'The single most important discovery that scientists have made about the early years is that it is by being regulated that a child develops the ability to self-regulate.'

It is from a place of emotional safely and security that the young infant gains the confidence to reach out to the world, to explore, to investigate and to take risks. The support offered in the naturalistic environment of the home has been shown to be crucial for a child's well-being and development, not just within the family but also when faced with the new world of an early years setting.

The home as an effective context for learning

Not every child is fortunate to have the 'warm attentiveness' (Vermes 2008) on which others thrive. A number of factors can impinge on home circumstances being conducive to learning. Parental stress, family poverty, issues of disability and mental health may all cause relationships in the home to be strained and the learning context to lack certain cognitive stimuli. However, every home circumstance is still full of learning potential. Children, whatever their home circumstances, will still learn about relationships; about family customs and routines; about food, or the lack of it; something from programmes on the television or on a mobile device; from conversations in the street or outings to the supermarket. Each one of these has learning potential and each one gives a child the foundations for their future attitudes to, and competence as, a learner.

However, not all of these learning experiences prepare a child for the learning that takes place in nursery or school. Places where certain learning is valued and where certain homes are thought to prepare children better for the educational experiences they will encounter there. As the early years becomes increasingly seen as preparation for school (Neaum 2016; Kay 2018; Roberts-Holmes 2019), the 'school readiness' agenda is shifting attention towards whether a child is ready for school, rather than whether the school (or setting) is ready for the child. All children at whatever age are 'ready to learn'. So the significant question is 'not *whether* a child is ready to learn but *what* a child is ready to learn' (Whitebread and Bingham 2011: 2). It is here that certain children find themselves at a disadvantage. When 'readiness' pertains to 'the rapid acquisition of literacy and numeracy' (Moss 2012: 9), then certain children will not be as 'ready' as others. Numerous indicators highlight the substantial differences in the early childhood experiences of children, and how these will influence a child's dispositions towards learning as well as influencing the range of knowledge, skills and understanding they may have acquired and be able to apply when they start school.

It is valuable for educators to reflect on what is known about early learning in the home, whatever the circumstances, that might be instructive when planning for learning in early years settings. How do so many parents become effective 'educators' when that is not, in most cases, their conscious objective? (see Pascal and Bertram 2022).

- Learning in the home **takes place in a context that is personal, relevant and meaningful to the child**. The learning is embedded in real-life situations that interest and motivate the child to know, to find out more, and to be included.
- Learning arises '**in the moment**'. Situations are natural, genuine and spontaneous, arising from, and involving, people who are of importance to the child.
- In the home parents and siblings **respond to the child's interests, comments and queries** because the child is their starting point. The child is (usually) not one of a large group; there are (usually) no parental goals or objectives to be fulfilled.
- Parents are more likely to **continue a topic or idea or interest** raised by their child than change it for one that suits them or has been preplanned by them.
- In the home, parents intuitively **adjust their responses to the child** in accordance with what they know about that child's abilities, tolerances, interests and levels of concentration and involvement.
- In the home **children ask the questions,** and adults answer.

So much of what makes the home an effective learning environment is the degree to which parental responses to their child are contingent on the child's interests, the questions they raise and the willingness of the parent to involve themselves in the child's enquiries. Parents instinctively know to and want to 'start from the child'. When the child is absorbed and fascinated, when they want to know when, why and how, when they start a conversation, then it is the natural and instinctive thing for most parents to reply. And when the child receives a reply that shows parental interest and attention, and that answers a question or plants an idea, then successful learning is likely to take place. Trevarthen (2018: 4) reminds us that 'before children can learn the rational skills of literacy and numeracy with a store of remembered facts that education policy typically attends to, a child must first belong to a community of affectionate and caring others that altogether serve as the bedrock for confident curiosity and risk-taking in the adventure of learning'. So what is it specifically that enables parental response to be contingent on the proclivities of their 'unique child'?

What parents know and what educators need to find out

As we can see above, parents are often effective educators because they share the same context, experiences and events as their child. Learning is therefore 'situated' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 29) so that the meaning of learning is 'configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice'. Learning that is collaborative and cooperative in this way often springs

from shared interests and opportunities. Parents are naturally in a position to build on, respond to, discuss and inform their child about a whole range of topics and queries that arise in the shared moment. They are in the perfect position to 'start from the child'. But as educators, there are things we need to work at harder than parents may need to, in order to find out about each child as a learner. It is an immense challenge. Very often educators are responsible for up to 30 children, a few more than can be found in most families! And each child has a developmental and learning history that needs to be explored and uncovered if we are to educate effectively.

Most parents share their children's **previous experiences**. Unless a child comes later into a family by way of adoption or fostering, for example, the parent can draw on those shared experiences to give the child a sense of belonging, of family and community traditions. Shared previous experiences can be drawn on to discuss 'Do you remember when …?' and 'I can remember when you could only…', all of which cement the parent–child relationship, giving the child a strong sense of being known and valued. When children do not have such connections with their past, particular sensitivity is required by both 'new' parents and a setting's educators (Verrier 1991; Cairns 2002). These strong **relationships** give children love and security and from this comes the confidence to try things out, to take risks and make mistakes. All in the knowledge that the parent is providing that secure base and safe haven referred to so adroitly in the 'Circle of Security' (www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/), a visual map of attachment developed in the United States to help caregivers connect with children in their lives. The map, or diagram, shows how from a secure base the child says 'look at me, support me', but when confidence falters the adult is there to 'protect me, comfort me'.

A shared learning history gives parents familiarity with children's **working theories**. This term, utilized by Hedges (e.g. 2014, 2022), describes the way in which children get hold of an idea and, over time, refine and develop that idea, connecting it to what is already known and understood and making edits along the way. Because parents are usually with their child daily, they are able to observe and understand how these theories (which they would not probably name as such) develop over time and where children's understandings, and misunderstandings, might spring from.

The families from whom and within which young children learn, offer them a wide range of experiences and opportunities. Families may eat different food, celebrate different festivals, sing different songs and worship different gods, but whatever the experiences may be, they offer the child rich **funds of knowledge** (González et al. 2005; Chesworth 2016) that enhance their sense of connectedness and belonging to the people important to them and which enrich their knowledge, understandings and attitudes to learning in varied but deeply personal ways.

Children are motivated by what interests them and what they are currently fascinated or preoccupied by (Whitebread 2012). These interests frequently emerge from their everyday experiences and activities in their own families and communities (Hedges and Cooper 2016). Therefore, in the home, it is easier

for parents to become aware of their child's **interests and fascinations**. Children usually have greater freedom and agency at home to follow their own lines of enquiry and to remain absorbed in a fascination for as long as they choose. A parent often picks up on these interests as a result of the endless questions their child poses. Sometimes these are one-off and random questions of course, but often – particularly as children get older – they follow a thread of thinking, a thread of preoccupation that indicates where the child's current interests lie and what experiences they might want or can be offered to enhance these interests further.

We are aware that young children are active agents in the process of learning (EY Coalition 2021). In the home children are far more likely to have greater freedom and choice as to how they spend their time, what they are occupied and preoccupied by and what interests to pursue. This greater control leads to positive **attitudes to learning** and being a learner. Where there are no rules, boundaries and expectations to learning there is less failure. The child develops the sense that they *can do* rather that they *cannot do* and when a child sees themselves as capable and competent, then it leads to greater confidence in themselves as a human being, and as a learner. In turn, as the child gets older, being left more to their own investigations and play promotes self-regulation – of organization, ideas, management – rather than dependence on an adult.

When learning moves to an early years setting

Once children leave home to continue their educational journey in a nursery or at school, the early childhood educator needs to value all that the child already knows and can do and has experienced at home, to actively and proactively find out what gives each child their learning motivation. There is a dreadful emphasis at present in England on what children *cannot* do. Indeed, the Ofsted report *Are You Ready?* goes so far as to suggest that 'For too many children, especially those living in the most deprived areas, educational failure starts early' (Ofsted 2014: 4). Such a negative perspective is a deficit view of childhood (Whitebread and Bingham 2011), of what is missing, of what is not good enough. But, as we have seen, every young child arrives in nursery or school with an astonishing array of experience, skills, understanding and knowledge. Almost all will have learned to walk. Almost all will have language. All will have begun to understand relationships and how important they are. All will have developed likes and dislikes: whether in food or clothes or animals or people. The list of their accomplishments is endless and if, as educators, we do not celebrate these and build on them, then we are profoundly underestimating, and indeed disrespecting, the child's many achievements, as well as ignoring the lessons learned so well from life at home.

The deficit view of the young child comes from educational policy that sets goals to be reached and outcomes to be achieved. But for many children, Neaum (2016: 241) suggests, 'a prescribed outcomes driven curriculum, focused

on formal skills in preparation for the next stage of education is misinformed, developmentally inappropriate and potentially damaging'. The sad fact is that when measured against a narrow set of these prescribed outcomes, many children will indeed fail. But this is a problem of education policy (Roberts-Holmes 2019), the school's problem not the child's. There are many ways of succeeding, many ways of showing ability that these narrow criteria do not measure. The national campaign against SATs (Standard Assessment Tests) and Reception Baseline Assessment called 'More than a Score' (www.morethanascore.org.uk/) reiterates this message strongly to children in its videos, which proclaim 'you are more than a score'. But such principles are only authentic when we start from the child and not from the measures – from the child and not from the data. As educators we have a responsibility to ensure that the learning day gives every child the opportunity to shine and thrive. That gives every child the chance to show what they *can* do, as well as getting to grips with those things that, as yet, they cannot.

This is not to suggest that we should not bother with the literacy and mathematics agenda. Far from it. Both are valuable throughout life and those with skills in both areas often progress more successfully through the education system because of it. But important though these skills are, they are not sufficient. Literacy and mathematics at this age are Areas of Learning that more often than not stem from an educator's planning: the adult's curriculum – not the child's. There are many things that an early childhood educator wants a child to learn: how to express their feelings, how to write their name, how to subitize. But these skills and understandings, valuable as they are, are not always immediately relevant or meaningful to the child. They may not instantly grab their interest and attention. So the learning day must balance the intentions of the adult with the intentions of the child (see Chapter 7). The child's curriculum is expressed through their exploration and play. Because it is in the hands of the child, it offers independence, opens up possibilities, develops certain attributes and introduces certain skills in ways that adult-led learning never will. The child's curriculum can motivate those who are less able (by the school's criteria), less confident, less compliant children; those who can quickly become disenchanted, or disaffected by a more formal, table-bound approach; children who are happier on the move than sitting still, do not like being in a whole class group on the carpet and, often, simply do not respond well to being told what to learn.

What if you are just not very good at literacy or maths? What if they are the very aspects of learning with which you struggle and yet you know that you will have to face them day in and day out? What happens then to your self-esteem? Your view of yourself as a learner? Children who struggle with the increasingly formal, adult-led agenda need space in their learning day to show how good they are at building a complex model with blocks; weaving a story with small world characters; organizing a game with balls and hoops for all their friends to play; being the child whose car goes fastest down the guttering. When children have the chance, and know they will have the chance every day, to access learning that suits them, that they enjoy and where they can show what they

can do, then they will come more readily to the parts of the day where perhaps they do not enjoy learning so much, which they find difficult and about which they might feel anxious. A pedagogy that celebrates and embraces child-led learning alongside adult-led learning can transform an educator's view of children as learners. Rather than seeing a child who 'can't', rather than seeing a child who is 'not very good at', they are able to say: 'This is a child who is expert at this; and a child who really loves doing that.' When we start from the child we are always looking for strengths and not deficiencies, for success and not failure.

How educators build on what parents know and what children have learned

Every child who arrives in an early years setting deserves to be viewed as 'rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent' (Malaguzzi, 1993). So as early childhood educators we should strive to offer these young children educational experiences that allow them to continue believing in themselves as competent, and that allow them to show us, every day, their strengths and what they enjoy. Even though we face external pressures and expectations that are recognized throughout this book, it is our responsibility as early childhood educators to plan an environment, and curriculum experiences, where every child can show us their successful selves: where every child goes home at the end of the day talking about what they did and what they enjoyed – and not what they could not do and what made them upset.

Previous experience

As educators we join the child some considerable way along their learning journey. Unlike the parent, educators have not been privileged from day one (or the day when the child came into parental care) to have shared each minute stage of their development. So it is incumbent upon us, as educators, to forge a warm and trusting relationship with the parent(s) so that they can tell us about the child we do not know. About what experiences may have shaped their interests and their attitudes. About what motivates and excites them and what makes them anxious or sad. To get to know the child at home who may be similar, but may be quite different, from the child we meet in our setting. Often a child may be talkative at home but shy or even reluctant to talk in their setting. They may be boisterous at home, but timid and inhibited in their setting. Educators need to get to know what parents think, how parents feel about their child, what parents know about their child, and what makes them the individuals – and the learners – they are.

One excellent strategy to achieve this is to arrange home visits. The pandemic caused settings to put such intimate face-to-face arrangements on hold. But those nurseries and Reception classes that include home visits as part of their transition policy from home to nursery/school always attest to how much

is learned and gained, despite the effort involved. Gained, not just in terms of knowledge of the child and how they respond and behave in the environment in which they are familiar and at ease, but in the forming of bonds with parents who are happy to have educators in their own homes where they too feel more secure and relaxed. Very often it is not what is said but what is seen that is most illuminating. How the child interacts with parents and siblings (if there are any); whether there are pets around and how they are treated; whether the child wants to show the educator their room and what it contains. Each of these glimmers into the life of the child gives the educator valuable information about a child's past and current experiences that can be referred to in the future so the child is happy in the knowledge that they and their family are known and respected.

The ongoing role of the Key Person is crucial here (see Elfer et al. 2003; DfE 2021a: para 1.16). The Key Person in a setting is someone whose responsibility it is to ensure that every child feels 'known, understood, cared about and safe' and who builds a 'triangle of trust with the child and family' (EY Coalition 2021: 31). The child's Key Person should be the adult with whom parents have the deepest and most meaningful relationship because there is mutual trust and respect. It is these shared conversations that will ensure a setting is knowledgeable about the child's previous experiences, and kept informed and up to date about what may be happening in the child's life that might impact on their attitudes and approaches to learning.

Relationships

We have seen that children with secure attachments are more likely to form comfortable, confident relationships with the educators in their setting. Conversely, the insecurely attached child may have difficulties in making relationships that are close, relaxed and warm – with both adults and children. The Circle of Security referred to earlier in the chapter can help educators reflect on how they ensure all children are offered a 'secure base', where relationships are affectionate, responsive and consistent. All children need to feel that they have this base from which to set forth and explore what the setting has to offer; to have a go and take risks; to test themselves and make mistakes – in the knowledge that caring adults are there to provide a 'safe haven' to protect and comfort when necessary and to offer loving, warm and nurturing care.

When relationships are warm and trusting, children are more likely to want to spend time with their educators and interact with them. High-quality interactions rely on high-quality relationships as the child who is anxious or fearful or ambivalent about adults will not be sufficiently relaxed or motivated to open up or respond in conversation. When relationships are warm and caring, then educators, in turn, are more likely to want to spend time interacting with children, to be interested in what the child is telling them and to respond genuinely and sensitively, encouraging those back-and-forth exchanges that 'form the foundations for language and cognitive development' (DfE 2021a: 8) and, I would add, 'relationships'.

Working theories

The concept of 'working theories' is taken from the New Zealand curriculum document *Te Whāriki*, which states:

> In early childhood, children are developing more elaborate and useful working theories about themselves and the people, places, and things in their lives … Children develop working theories through observing, listening, doing, participating, discussing, and representing … Working theories become increasingly useful for making sense of the world, for giving the child control over what happens, for problem-solving, and for further learning. (NZ Ministry of Education 2017: 44)

Children's everyday experiences at home, in their communities and in their settings, introduce them to a whole range of ideas, possibilities and opportunities from which they try and make meaning. Many theorists over the years have put forward their theories as to how this happens most effectively. While Piaget (1977) believed early thinking to be egocentric, Donaldson (1978) challenged this thinking with the idea of a sociable 'human sense' whereby children make meaning when learning is embedded in contexts that make sense to them. This chimed with the work of Vygotsky, whose view was that both development and instruction are socially embedded and 'collaboratively produced in the interaction between the child and more knowledgeable others' (1978: 102). In turn, Bruner (1960, 1966) was interested in how children make meaning, in particular when solving problems, and how educators facilitated and 'scaffolded' that process of meaning-making. Within these social and cultural contexts of companiable learning (Trevarthen 2002) we see the emergence of agreement that 'the foundations of education, in every culture, must be inherent in the development from birth of human impulses to test and expand active experience, and to share it joyfully with companions' (Trevarthen 2018: 17).

Hedges (2014: 36) explains that working theories are 'a way children attempt to connect, edit and extend understandings' as they strive to make meaning. This is why it is crucial for educators to provide learning opportunities that build on prior learning – that link with what is already known, understood and secure, so that children make sense of what they are experiencing and so that children's previous learning experiences in the home are acknowledged and respected. All experiences bring about learning and development. All experiences will have introduced children to a world of skills, knowledge, concepts and attitudes which they will have been imbibing, sorting, rejecting and connecting. It is this physical and cognitive activity that exemplifies the behaviours of that 'scientist in the crib' (Gopnik et al. 1999) and the concept of working theories Hedges (2014: 40) suggests can be considered as evidence of 'ways children process intuitive, everyday, spontaneous knowledge and use this creatively to interpret new information, and think, reason and problem-solve in wider contexts'. But this processing is so reliant on the support they receive along the way. Dunlop (2018: 212) reminds us that it is 'Relationships and interactions with others [that] form the natural core of children's experiences and

shape their futures.' As children strive to make meaning, it is the expert support of their educators that will extend, enrich and strengthen their working theories of the world and how it works. These theories are tentative, creative, unpredictable and speculative (Wood and Hedges 2016) and, therefore, open to continuous revision, development and refinement. The co-construction of new knowledge, as children go through this 'continuous revision, development and refinement', positions the early childhood educator at the heart of their learning and development.

Funds of knowledge

We have seen that children come to our settings from a wide range of family backgrounds and with diverse experiences of, and expectations about, learning. Children are impacted by the social situations in which they have taken part, and are grounded in the expectations and aspirations of the culture with which they are most familiar. Enmeshed in these cultures, children bring to nurseries and schools a range of knowledge and experience that is culturally specific and culturally valued. These 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al. 1992; González et al. 2005; Chesworth 2016) are important and treasured by children. They may not be able to articulate this, but when children do not see themselves represented in pictures in the setting or do not recognize themselves or their families in the books they read or the resources in the environment; when their language is not used, even in a minimal way, by the educators with whom they are expected to interact; when they sense that somehow their home lives are seen as impoverished because they have not made them 'school ready', then self-esteem is diminished, resentment can set in and children may become less motivated to invest in their learning. As educators we must respect and value what each child brings and give them, and their family, an opportunity to share this 'knowledge' so that others can learn about, and from, them, widening their own understanding of the world's similarities and differences.

The world of all children, and all adults, is enhanced by engagement with the lived experiences of others, and young children are ready to embrace these differences especially when the educators around them celebrate what they are. The concept of 'funds of knowledge' reminds us that all children have knowledge, skills and experiences that they bring with them from their everyday lives. While not all children's funds of knowledge are valued in our current education system, we nevertheless have to ensure that they are valued in the settings for which we have responsibility, so that every child feels that their setting is a place for them, not just for others.

Like children, educators come from a variety of different backgrounds and have engaged in a multitude of different experiences both socially and culturally. It can be all too easy to see the world from our own very singular perspective and to view 'difference' as a problem and something which demands conformity. It is too easy, for example, to view low-income families or families from certain ethnic groups as being somehow deficient in what they offer their children and how well they prepare their children to be 'school ready'. To

believe that children from these homes are more likely to experience failure at nursery or certainly at school because their families have not given them certain experiences which enhance their 'cultural capital' – when this term is used to privilege certain experiences offered to children in a particular ethic group. Such deficit views can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where what we expect is what we get. View children as likely to struggle and they may do just that. View children as less able and they may live up to the label. Our view of difference must be one of celebration – to celebrate the great variety of funds of knowledge children bring which has the potential to enrich the learning and understanding of all children. To recognize that valuing children's funds of knowledge raises self-esteem which in the early years is at the heart of so much effective learning. And then to ensure that we embrace children's funds of knowledge as the starting point for their learning. So children are moving out from what they do know, where they are secure, where they are confident, to aspects of the curriculum which may be new or present more of a challenge.

Attitudes to learning

When we start from the child, when we observe them, play alongside them and introduce them to new activities and opportunities, then as educators we soon find out what their attitudes to learning and their aptitudes are. Stewart writes that 'The most effective learning involves energy and commitment from the learner' (in Moylett 2022: 61). So we understand that children's attitudes to learning have their roots in their motivation to learn. The Harvard Center on the Developing Child states that 'Intrinsic motivation can either be encouraged or suppressed by the experiences adults provide' (NSCDC 2018: 8). The brain systems that govern motivation are built over time and are shaped by interactions between the experiences children have and the genes with which they are born. Together these influence how their motivation systems develop and how they function later in life. 'Intrinsic' (*inner*) motivation is important. It is considered to be the strongest and most lasting motivator because it influences a child's attitudes to their learning. Through their exploration, play and active involvement, and the agency that these afford, children gain intense personal satisfaction and are fuelled by an inner drive to continue learning and achieving. When motivation is triggered *extrinsically* (stars, stickers, praise and so on), children can come to rely on these too much, needing a 'reward' for activity and effort rather than being motivated by personal fulfilment. Stewart (2022: 61) writes 'deep learning requires motivation to actively exert effort, maintain focus and involvement, and persevere in the face of difficulties'.

Almost all young children arrive in our nurseries and classrooms with a motivation to learn but, as we have seen, not all of that learning may be on our agenda as their educators. However, whether a child has already begun to be 'taught' at home by eager parents, or whether parents have a negative attitude to their own education that has rubbed off on their children, educators need to find what it is that sparks each child's interest and what makes them happy and willing to engage in the process of learning. We need to do so not only because children's behaviour

improves and they become more predisposed to learning in our setting, but also because, as children meet the adult-led agenda more frequently, educators can use those interests to make that external agenda more relevant and palatable.

When children are willing and able to 'personally activate and sustain cognitions, affects and behaviors that are systematically orientated towards the attainment of personal goals' (Zimmerman 2011: 1), then we see the link between motivation and self-regulation. Self-regulation is not about compliance but, in the words of *Birth to 5 Matters* (EY Coalition 2021: 20), 'involves children's developing ability to regulate their emotions, thoughts and behaviour to enable them to act in positive ways towards a goal'.

What 'starting from the child' does *not* mean

While exploring what 'starting from the child' means for early education, it seems equally important to clarify what it does *not* mean. Just because one advocates a pedagogy 'starting from the child' does not mean one advocates one that 'doesn't move from the child'.

'Starting from the child' is not a view of the child as Piaget's lone scientist, 'creating his or her own sense of the world' (Supratman 2013: 292). It is a view of the child within a cultural context (Bandura 1977; Vygotsky 1978; Rogoff 1990) where development is seen as the result of interactions between the child and their social environment, and development is seen to be preceded by learning. Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecological systems (1979) (Figure 1.2) explains how a child's development is affected by everything in their surrounding environment: the people, the places, the experiences, the opportunities. Consequently, as Hedges (2015) explains, 'Children's engagement in everyday practices within their homes, schools and communities (becomes) key to understanding their interests.' When we 'start from the child' we make it our business to draw on the diverse sources of knowledge and interests that children bring to our settings as the foundations for their future learning. The skilful early childhood educator comes alongside each child on their unique learning journey, engaging in the co-construction of knowledge and understanding, and learning from and about each other in the process (Nuttall 2003; Nelson 2009). Moylett (2022: 2) says 'it is through the active intervention, guidance and support of a skilled adult that children make the most progress in their learning. This does not mean pushing children too far or too fast, but instead meeting children where they are emotionally and intellectually.'

'Starting from the child' challenges the critique that children lack self-motivation to learn. Despite this sociocultural perspective, a pedagogy 'starting from the child' recognizes a child's individual agency. It disputes the notion that, without challenge, the child is likely to stand still and remain where they started. Such a view positions the child as passive, an empty vessel to be filled, inherently lazy and unmotivated. How different from the child that is celebrated in this book! Children are no longer seen as 'passive subjects … but rather

as active in the construction of their lives' (MacBlain et al. 2017: 31). They do not sit and wait to be taught, but rather interact with animate and inanimate stimuli within their environment in a constant thirst to discover, to belong, to succeed.

There are, of course, some children whose experiences within their social contexts render them more 'school ready' than others. But, mercifully, school readiness is not the sum of human achievement. Indeed Markström and Halldén (2009: 121) suggest that 'children adopt strategies … to resist the intuitional discourse and gain control, and in doing so, influence and shape their everyday lives'. Whitebread (2012: 16) explains that humans have evolved to enjoy learning and to be disappointed when they do not. Consequently, their 'emotional responses to learning powerfully drive [their] motivation to learn and to make the intellectual effort required to do so'. Children arrive in nursery and school as successful, competent learners because, in their earliest years, they have seen the *point* of learning, and have the self-motivation to continue. Only 'being educated' by the 'institutional discourse' can stand in their way.

'Starting from the child' does not mean that educators lose control of learning. Negative views of 'starting from the child' can stem from deep rooted, institutionalized fears of losing control. That a pedagogy designed to meet 'the unique' child is one over which individuality may triumph and standardised outcomes may not be achieved. But when educators 'start from the child' then they demonstrate trust in the child to achieve outcomes that may lie beyond their control. This stems from a belief in the child's intrinsic desire to learn, given the right stimuli and the necessary support, and that it is their role as an early childhood educator to provide both. Despite what is sometimes misconstrued by those with little knowledge of the early years of education, the educator always has an element of control over children's learning experiences. The educator determines the pedagogy: their beliefs and values determine how children will learn in their setting. The educator determines the environment and what resources are available to match the pedagogy. The educator determines how the learning day is planned and the balance between learning that is led by the adult and that which is led by the child. The educator determines their own role, when to lead the learning and when to follow the children's lead. It is this active, interactive exploration and play – the child-led learning – that, to the untrained eye, can seem 'out of control'. However, the skilled observer understands that learning may not be conventional – children listening to the adult in silence; doing tasks the adult has set – but some of the most extraordinary and powerful learning is taking place. It is when young children are leading their own learning that they are frequently learning some of life's most valuable lessons. Once learning is in the control of children, in a setting that is crafted by the educator to meet their needs, then children become engrossed, motivated and persistent in pursuit of their own knowledge and understanding. The Reception teacher who inspired me to write the first edition of Starting from the Child? once said to me: 'the more control I give away, the more in control I am!' When learning is of high quality, and children are engrossed and motivated in this way, then the early childhood educator knows they have controlled what is necessary and successfully given away control that is desirable.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered what the phrase 'starting from the child' means – and what it does not mean. I have suggested that this principle places children's well-being at the heart of all we do as early childhood educators. That our efforts to forge relationships, and the attachments to us that our children make, are crucial in giving us knowledge and understanding of each unique child for whom we are responsible, showing us how we can bring out the best in each individual as a learner. 'Starting from the child' ensures that children are engaged in, and are motivated by, what and how they learn. It does not, however, mean that there is no challenge and no progress from these starting points. Effective early childhood educators draw on children's interests, their attitudes to learning and their funds of knowledge to stimulate, extend and enhance learning and development in meaningful contexts that offer the child agency. The early years of education should be a joyful experience. Most children come to our settings full of the joy of learning. We must make sure that we do not snuff this out.

Questions to ponder

1 Do I plan an environment and pedagogy that always starts from the child?
2 What are the challenges and barriers I face in doing so?
3 What have I read that will provoke me to try different ways of meeting children's needs and interests?