

Can We Have A Global Approach to Child-Centred Early Childhood Practice?

Jan Georgeson¹, Verity Campbell-Barr¹, Éva Bakosi², Magdolna Nemes², Sándor Pálfi², and Paolo Sorzio³

¹ Plymouth University, England; ²University of Debrecen, Hungary; ³University of Trieste, Italy

Globally, increasing interest in the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services as a social investment strategy has been accompanied by worldwide concerns to identify appropriate pedagogical practices for working with young children. Both supra-national organisations, such as UNICEF and the European Union, and national governments advocate child-centred pedagogies, with a number of individual national curricula and practice guidance documents upholding a child-centred approach. The term ‘child-centred pedagogy’ therefore spans cultural and political borders but, given that early childhood provision is shaped by the cultural values of the particular society where the child is growing up (Rogoff, 2003; Fler and Hedegaard, 2010:151), we question the extent to which there can be a global understanding of child-centred pedagogy. Here we trace the developing interest in child-centred approaches, both pedagogically and economically/politically, before considering whether there can be shared understanding of the term between countries with different histories of early childhood provision. Case studies of England, Hungary and Italy will consider both policy rhetoric and curriculum guidance in the context of the cultural-historical background to their early childhood provision. Emerging findings suggest that the term ‘child-centred’ has rich pedagogical associations that can be easily subsumed into different value systems prizing for example individuality, loving care or democracy. But a ‘child-centred’ approach can also be used as a political tool, developing practice which foregrounds the interests and needs of the child while masking (to different extents) a focus on ECEC as a social investment strategy underpinned by economic (human capital) perspectives (Campbell-Barr and Nygård, forthcoming) – the development of the child for society’s sake, rather than for their own sake. The ‘child-centredness’ of provision can also be politicised in so far as this might persuade parents that it is acceptable to use ECEC services and return to the labour market. We therefore argue that whilst the term ‘child-centred’ can be adapted to fit the country and its values as they relate to pedagogical practice, the political motivation for child-centred approaches is largely economic. This could lead to contradictions in practice which can sap the term of its meaning – particularly as it is not a word which we commonly think of as having a different sense in different contexts (Vygotsky, 1983:347). To add to the confusion, the term can be used pejoratively by politicians wishing to distance themselves from ‘progressive’ educational ideas. In the light of these findings, we consider the implications of the use of the term ‘child-centred’ both for workforce development at a national level and for international collaboration, particularly in the context of the commercial internationalisation of training.

Campbell-Barr, V and Nygård, M. (forthcoming) Losing sight of the child? Human capital theory and its role for early childhood education and care policies in Finland and England since the mid-1990s. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, accepted October 2013.

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