

Introduction: Towards an Understanding of Ethical Practice in Early Childhood

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In recent years the field of early childhood studies has become increasingly concerned with applying ethical practices to educational environments and with creating a form of pedagogy for children. There is a growing concern to involve young children actively in every aspect of their lives and experiences. In the vast body of literature (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Edminston, 2008; Clark et al., 2005; Christensen & James, 2008; Harcourt et al., 2011) there is an ideological shift from the traditional constructions of childhood such as the polite, the innocent, the holy, the romantic, the developmental child or the child in need of protection (Benton, 1996; David, 1993; Dahlberg et al., 1999; Hendrick, 1997; Palaiologou, 2008) to the construction of the child as an active actor or socially active being.

It is now more than ever argued that children should be viewed as co-constructors of the knowledge and practices that influence their lives. Children should be recognised as a social group which shares with others a place in society; therefore, they should be perceived as socially constructed and embedded within a local context, recognised as being social actors, having agency, belonging to a unique culture and engaged in worthwhile, meaningful social relationships. In the light of this ideological shift children's participation and consequently children's voices have become the catalyst for engagement. Research and practice have been influenced to alter their methods and practices so as to place the child in the position of 'knower'.

Additionally, the ideological shift in research and practice is about creating autonomous learners and placing them in active control of their learning and experiences. Children are more often asked to be active and to participate 'on the basis of who they are, rather than who they will become' (Moss & Petrie, 2002: 6). In other words, they are considered social citizens in their own right, rather than future citizens in waiting.

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The current ideological position regarding the simplicity of the developmental child who is viewed as a re-constructor of knowledge, values, cultures and identities is evolving into a complex construction of the child as an active citizen who is ready, can achieve and, hence, is able to participate in all activities involving him/her. Early childhood research and practice is now underpinned by an increasingly dominant view that children have the ability to take command of their own learning and to adopt shared responsibility for that learning. This shared responsibility involves all parents, children, teachers, practitioners and the local community. As a result the fundamental question that, before, dominated thinking on early childhood, concerning how practitioners can help children to learn how to learn, has now moderated to a consideration of how we can work with children so that they take responsibility for and ownership of their learning.

This has led to a situation where children's basic emotional and cognitive needs for autonomy, competence and participation in social circumstances has been extensively recognised. The focus is now on how the encouragement of autonomy and shared responsibility may be achieved.

However, there is a need to question further what is actually meant by the view of children as social actors. A social actor is someone who has the autonomy to act, who acts through a sense of reason and responsibility, and who lives within a system of law s/he respects and obeys. A person guided by reason, s/he desires to take account of the life and the good of individuals and the community; consequently, s/he lives in accordance with the laws and systems of the community. In such a context, the field of early childhood studies as a community should be developing a system of practices where children can become autonomous, responsible participants in their community. The discussion of what constitutes ethical practice in the field of early childhood learning has emerged from this context.

It is thus important to explain what is meant by the term 'ethical practice' before we embark on specifying what is intended by 'ethical practice' throughout this book.

The area of philosophy traditionally known as ethics aims to investigate human attempts to arrive at an understanding of the nature of human values, how humans ought to live their lives, what distinguishes right from wrong and what constitutes appropriate

conduct (Mackie, 1977; Rawls, 1971; Peters, 1966, 1967; Borrow, 1972, 1975; Bradley, 1970; Ayers, 2004; Palmer, 2007; Stricke, 2007).

From a philosophical point of view, central questions to the study of ethics are: 'What traits of character make one a good person?' and by extension 'What is the right thing to do?' (Rachels, 1993). Research into these two questions has led philosophy in a number of different directions and theories. Theories about ethics are dominated by debates of rightness and obligation (Pincoff, 1986; Stocker, 1976); there are, however, other writers who object to this approach. They suggest that the discussions about obligation, rights and duty should be abandoned so that the central questions revolve around the concept of virtue (Anscombe, 1958). This section does not attempt to involve itself either in a philosophical debate of what ethics are, in a theoretical debate of different approaches to what ethics mean, or in a long discussion on what is a satisfactory theory of ethics. Instead, it holds the view that ethics are not concerned solely with the elucidation and justification of morality in the narrow sense.

On this basis, the term 'ethical practice' is concerned with how people around early childhood research and practice conduct their work through morally upright practices, and how different points of view are considered. Ethical practice considers questions about what could count as justifiable reasons for acting in one way rather than in another, and about what constitutes a good life for children.

Contemporary philosophers distinguish between 'substantive ethics' or normative ethics, and 'meta-ethics'. The fundamental difference between these is the emphasis on the questions each asks.

Substantive ethics is concerned with questions of what kinds of actions are good or right. In contrast, meta-ethics is concerned with issues of how to determine whether an action is good or right.

The second question above is more complex. It requires the development of ways of understanding through an analysis of the language used in the first question. Meta-ethics goes beyond the discovery of what is good or what is right; it extends into the search into what is intended when it is said of something that it is 'good' or 'right'. This idea of analysing further the language of 'good' and 'right', then trying to understand in depth the actions that make something good and right, seems highly appropriate in the field of early childhood. Early childhood could be said to deal with issues

of actions and the complexities that have arisen from these actions. The message could be simplified: ethical practice is about good actions between adults and children. However, this view entails a major problem as 'good' and 'right' are subjective judgements as their meaning changes depending on the person's point of view, on culture, on religion and on different circumstances and contexts. Thus ethical practice should be concerned with the analysis of actions in the early years sector rather than what is good or right for children.

Nevertheless, in the name of research and practice for the 'good' of children, these actions are ignored. As professionals working in the field of early childhood we are, for example, involved in the balancing of the rightness of our practice through research from our point of view; we attempt to 'shield' children – but we do need to question whether we are actually doing these children a disservice. Do we really offer children the 'correct' perspective, or do we offer our own perspective? Do we act for the good of children? Or should we act with children for good?

If ethical practice is about dealing with issues of actions, the remaining question concerns *whose* actions. Ethical practice cannot be limited by the simplistic explanation that it is about 'good' actions. Complexities have arisen from these actions, for example complexities in research, in daily routine work with children, in dealing with parents, and in dealing with government agendas, inspections and regulations.

There are situations, such as in curriculum implementation and in assessment, where each context prescribes the actions between adults and children and these diverge; when two apparently contrary actions are initiated in the same subject area, a change must necessarily take place in one or both of them until any conflict is eliminated. This view of ethical practice contains a vast amount of tension and anxiety for the professionals, who are asked on the one hand to adhere to an ideological shift of actions 'with children' while on the other they are required by officialdom to measure children against models and a set of standards laid down in regulations. There is thus a mismatch between an ideological understanding of what is 'good' practice with children within the early years sector, and a number of practices that are laid down in the name of 'doing the best for children'. The dilemma here is that professionals try to act according to reason and hence attain ethical practice, yet external practices are imposed upon them in the name of the good of the children.

Therefore the concept of ethical practice may be extended to include the causality between adult actions through the essence of what these actions cause to children. Ethical practice requires logical sense and judgement or the assertion that the action is based on reason. Adults' actions are inseparable from the effect these have on children.

There is a necessity to be able to provide an environment and conditions for children that respects their nature and their dignity. Early childhood practice must allow all actions that fall within the scope of practice which are not contrary to children's nature. In that sense, ethical practice is not merely the necessity to 'do' good acts in the field of early childhood, but to questioning those actions. These actions must be related to the consideration of the causes in regard to the emotions, dignity, autonomy, protection from harm, and privacy of the child. An essential criterion for engagement and participation is for children to take pleasure in all they do, such as pleasure in the kind of knowledge that will be acquired through research or pleasure in whatever activity is involved.

Ethical practice should go beyond government agendas of what is 'good' and beyond the framing approach to children's good. The urgency experienced by governments to 'regulate' the upbringing and safeguarding of children goes beyond the children's control. The aspect of choice becomes an adult-oriented issue when the adult is imposing the choices and the children 'choose' what is to be chosen. This view, some might argue, is radical. However, a question remains: the notion of what is good for children, i.e. ethics, may be forced on children and is paradoxical in the sense that the discussion centres on children's participation and developing a sensitivity to listening to children – without actually taking account of children's views – in the name of the 'best interests of children'.

Addressing the complex issue of a balance between what is good for children and how we can act with children for their 'good' revolves around an examination of propositions by considering the fundamental question: *How do we know that we act with children?* It is proposed that ethical practices in the field of early childhood research and practice should be permissive only – permissive to individuals and their groups – rather than universal. Promoting the cultivation of an organised overarching ethical framework of good practice fails to address the emerging construction of children as social actors. In a framing environment with universal practices, autonomy becomes autocracy.

For example, although the rights of children are promoted throughout this book, at this point we will reflect on United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). The UNCRC claims the universality of the rights of children; we need to question firstly whether these universal rights have passed the test of importance as shared ideals, and secondly whether these rights (i.e. social rights and participation) may be set against claims for the freedom of the human spirit or the right of the individual's cultural development.

This section has aimed to explain the notion of ethical practice in early childhood. It is suggested that this notion is complex and extends beyond the simplicity of discovering what is 'good' research, practice, interaction with children or terminology. Instead, ethical practice is concerned with the examination of concepts, with analysing concepts such as 'good' and 'right', rather than actually using the concepts to talk about human conduct, and with the causality of the actions of adults and children.

About the Book

In the light of the above discussion this book makes no attempt to examine the philosophical debates of ethics in each relevant topic area discussed. Instead, it discusses ethical practice in terms of asking the fundamental questions of what is logical, reasonable and justified. It addresses whether, when researching or working with young children, we would like to foster and develop attributes and attitudes that support the children in facing challenges as they embark upon their journey towards lifelong learning and development. Development involves positive changes in a life, not merely the linear increase that determines learning.

The book does not wish to develop a moral vocabulary or step towards ethical practice. Instead, it aims to offer ideas of what is considered good practice, which incorporates the notion of rights as a valued part of human activity and goals. The scope of the discussion is to identify in early years research and practice problem areas that concern children.

It is therefore relevant to state that the book rejects the notion of providing a framework for ethical practice in early childhood work. Such an approach is in direct conflict with the actual search for good practice. The right *not* to have a specific kind of education, provision, practice or research with children is promoted and celebrated

throughout the book. The notion of practice imposed upon children in the name of participation, protection or a belief only in 'what is best for children' is adult-oriented and contradicts the essence of children's autonomy.

However, rejecting the view that a framework of ethical practice is a cultivation of organised yet fragmented practices that actually highlight the 'deficits' of children instead of celebrating their diversity and participation, practices based on values, and judgements arising from sensitivity to individuals and society, this book claims to offer a pluralistic approach to ethical practice.

As has been stated, since the discussions offer propositions and address the right *not* to have a particular way of 'doing' things with children, it has been decided to interfere only minimally with the personal style of each author/s. This book does not claim to cover all debates and all issues around ethical practice with children, and certainly does not aim to become a predictable and uniform view of ethical practice. For the editor to 'control' the diversity and respective autonomy of the authors would have been paradoxical to the essence of the book.

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 discusses issues around ethical practices and issues with regard to research. It consists of five chapters which explore and discuss key issues with regard to children's participation in research.

Chapter 1 provides a historical account of how children's participation as a topic was developed. The examination of the underpinning ideology of children's rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child focuses on three rights vital when involving children in research: Article 2 – Non-discrimination; Article 3 – The Best Interests of the Child; and Article 12 – The Child's Opinion is to be Expressed and Considered.

Chapter 2 examines ethical practice when choosing research tools with young children. This chapter takes the stand that all research methods are appropriate when conducting research with young children if – and only if – these tools are underpinned by ethical practice and the central questions are examined under the lens of justified logical actions. A range of research methods must be considered so as best to inform the researchers' practice and to create methods suitable to the needs of children within their care.

Chapter 3 claims that the individual differences in children do not constitute a barrier to ethical concerns around young children. It states that the parents' permission is not enough when working with and researching young children; these children, too, have the right to be involved in ethical considerations in order to promote inclusion and participation at all levels. The chapter examines how to empower children through the use of relevant research tools (for example, using photographs to share thoughts through both verbal and non-verbal responses) to allow children a 'voice' within the research process. It considers the challenges of interpreting a wide range of responses reflecting the diversity of individual differences to gain informed consent and in the interpretation of data. This is set in the context of issues surrounding trust and any possible imbalance of power in relationships.

Chapter 4 extends the themes introduced in Chapter 3 and looks at ethical issues when working with and researching young children. Novice researchers who assume that new publications on research ethics merely follow a well-worn path may be surprised to note that the ethical implications of research involving children and vulnerable groups is a relatively new area of interest. The dearth of interest in this subject owes much to the fact that, for many years, researchers mistakenly believed that methodological integrity and ethical integrity were one and the same. The chapter begins with an overview of some of the research malpractices that led to calls for greater rigour in the care of research participants. The chapter continues by exploring the influences that led to a shift away from children being viewed as 'subjects' of research to children being accepted as 'participants' in research.

Chapter 5 deals with issues of researching other cultures. As early years settings are now becoming multicultural and multi-dimensional, it is important to address the fact that when working with children from cultural or ethnic backgrounds other than where they are attending centres, there is a need for effective communication as well as a need to accommodate the diversity of different cultures. This chapter discusses such issues in the light of the ethical implications when working with or carrying out research into children from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Part 2 explores ethical practices around policy and practice. It is divided into seven chapters, the aim of which is not to provide a neat, unified account of ethical practice about the matters under discussion.

That would be too meagre an approach. Instead, these chapters aim to discuss ideas, practices, theories and arguments.

Chapter 6 identifies the recurring issues in implementing policy reform for those working with young children and assesses the effects of the fragmentation of social policy to analyse the importance of the role of practitioners in engaging with the issues and becoming activists. It is important for readers to understand the fragmentation of social policy that hinders child protection and development, and to gain awareness of their role as agents for ethical change. The chapter seeks to engage readers with the fragmentation of social policy over the last four decades and to do so as critical practitioners who can trace the historic substantive issues, outline why changes in the social fabric might see certain issues recurring and, finally, how they can think beyond their immediate roles and locate themselves in the landscape as actors for ethical change.

Chapter 7 discusses the ethical implications in an era of working in partnership. It examines ethical aspects of communication, team work, the sharing of information and practices. It examines the different ways of working in a 'joined-up' manner and attempts to address ethical challenges that professionals are facing in such environments.

Chapter 8 addresses the issues around loss and bereavement in early years. Professionals do not always know how to cope with and handle these situations; this chapter explores all these key issues with emphasis on the ethical implications when professionals are faced with such circumstances. It discusses children's emotional and social reactions in situations of loss and bereavement. It also explores issues of the role of the early years workforce when children are faced with loss and bereavement and explores ways how they can work in an ethical environment with children, families and other professionals.

Chapter 9 deals with issues of studying early childhood and the ethical challenges that students might face. This chapter discusses how students may be helped in implementing good ethical practices when they are in settings studying children. The chapter will also examine how students can plan an effective research project that allows a variety of voices (including children's, parents' and practitioners') to be heard. It will differ from earlier chapters in its focus on practical guidance for students on how to plan an ethical research project *prior* to undertaking research within an early years setting – the application of which has been covered in earlier chapters.

Chapter 10 extends the concepts of the previous chapter. It claims that key to improving the lives of children is the notion of a professional childcare workforce. During the course of early years study, developing professionals learn about definitions of childhood and how their practice, e.g. through curriculum delivery, relationships or interactions, affects the young child's identity and life-course options, as well as their quality of life. The chapter examines the theoretical underpinnings of professional development and training; in practice, it covers a number of ethical, rights-based issues with an impact on children's lives, including Northern Ireland as a society slowly emerging from conflict, poverty, disadvantage, mental ill-health, special educational needs, disability, children's well-being and quality of life.

Chapter 11 considers how the inspection and regulation of early years services conforms to ethical practice. The focus will be on the role of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, known as Ofsted, which is identified as the independent body responsible for ensuring that early years settings meet the identified regulatory standards and educational framework of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England. The chapter aims to help students to develop an understanding of the role of Ofsted, to consider the implications of the role of inspection and regulation of early years settings, then critically to consider the relationship between inspection and quality processes leading to improvement.

Chapter 12 explores the challenges facing accountable leaders in education. Leadership is defined as a social construct with more attributes than the allocation of formal authority; it is one that requires the post-holder to demonstrate behaviours that not only modify the competencies and motivations of other adults, but also determine organisational purpose, aims and objectives. Formal leaders, it is argued, are faced with moral dilemmas with regard to the core purpose of their provision that should be resolved in concert with their local community as well as with their principal funding agency. Once confident of their organisational purpose and direction, the focus of attention switches to developing the capacity of their colleagues. In summary, the chapter provides prospective ethical leaders in early years settings with the means by which they can determine their core purpose and develop their staff to deliver that vision.

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