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Research Centre on Child Studies

Universidade do Minho
Instituto de Educação

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child studies

Child Studies is an international peer-reviewed journal which publishes empirical and theoretical articles focusing on children's social contexts and relations in everyday life, taking a holistic perspective. This journal is a multidisciplinary forum for sharing and discussing issues such as children's rights, development and well-being, generational and intergenerational relations, and the broad societal, political and cultural aspects impacting children's lived realities.

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EDITORIAL - THE RELEVANCE OF CHILD STUDIES

EDITORIAL – A RELEVÂNCIA DOS ESTUDOS DA CRIANÇA

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This is the inaugural issue of the journal *Child Studies* published by the Research Centre on Child Studies, University of Minho, Portugal. *Child Studies* is an international peer-reviewed journal which publishes empirical and theoretical articles focusing on children's social contexts and their social practices and relationships, both at local and global level and from a contemporary as well as historical viewpoint. Taking a holistic perspective, *Child Studies* aims to provide a multidisciplinary forum for sharing and discussing issues such as children's rights, development and well-being; child education and care services and institutions such as families and schools; professional practices and professional development of social workers, teachers, nurses and other professionals working with children; children's leisure and play in urban spaces and communities; children and the media in the digital world; child and childhood representation in public discourse (media, law, religion, literature, academia...); children and the arts; children's literature; intercultural and intergenerational relations and the broader societal, political and cultural issues impacting children's lived realities.

Child Studies is a multidisciplinary field of research which includes Child Studies is a multidisciplinary field of research which includes perspectives coming from psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and historians, as well as geographers, philosophers and others. Areas such as education, economics, political science, urbanism, medicine and neurosciences compete in the field, but also converge towards a more holistic understanding of the child. Among the historical founders of the field are great figures of 20th century science, such as Jean Piaget (1896-1980), one of the greatest child psychologists of all time, who created the developmental theory, and Phillipe Ariès (1914-1984) who published Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life (originally in French *L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale Sous L'Ancien Régime*, 1960),

one of the most remarkable histories of childhood ever written. Despite the controversy that such pioneers continue to generate, the knowledge they produced has not only contributed greatly to the theoretical advances within their areas but also across other domains, leading to the emergence and consolidation of Child Studies as a multidisciplinary field. In addition, advancements in this area have resulted in the recognition of the heterogeneity of children and childhoods, as opposed to a standardised idea of the child, and, consequently, the contextualised character of child development and social condition. Such advancements have highlighted the fact that the concept of "childhood" did not always exist, essentially being created by modern society. Ariès's study was pivotal in sustaining the notion that childhood only emerged around the seventeenth century. As such it is not a natural and universal phenomenon, but one that is socially and historically constructed.

From the 1980s onwards there have been major theoretical developments in the field of Child Studies largely based on criticism regarding the founding assumptions of developmental psychology and the traditional perspective of socialisation. This perspective is considered inadequate, especially within the field of so-called "New Childhood Studies", for conceiving children as "incomplete" and passive recipients of the culture in which they are born. Such a perspective does not recognise children's competence to interpret and act in the social world. New theoretical and methodological advances in the field, along with recognition of the child's human rights, particularly following the adoption, in 1989, of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, emphasise the idea that children are subjects of rights, thus being citizens both currently and in the future. The Convention highlights children's wide range of rights emphasising that "in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions (...), the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration" (Article 3); "every child has the inherent right to life" (Article 6); and the right of the child "who is capable of forming his or her own views (...) to express these views freely in all matters affecting them"; children "shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard" (Article 12) (United Nations, 1989). Thus, the concept of children's agency has become key, under the consideration that they are capable of affecting and not only being affected by social structures and relationships.

Such developments have stressed the idea that children are full and active members of society and that Child Studies play a pivotal role in understanding the agency of children as social actors and subjects of rights, considering the concrete contexts and circumstances of their voice and participation and not only the formal dimension of children's rights and their advocacy. The critique of adultcentrism does not point to the separation of two different worlds, that of adults and that of children, but rather to the fact that the participation of children is inherently relational, occurring

in partnership with adults. During the Covid-19 pandemic, such issues became clearly apparent, in particular, noticeable levels of inequality in, for example, the access and use of digital technologies as a result of the closure of schools; the need for contexts and situations for children's sociability, peer relations and voice; and the appreciation of outdoor activity and contact with nature, especially children's play. The relational perspective, both considering children's relationships with their peers, but also their relationships with adults, parents and professionals, especially teachers in this case, revealed the theoretical and empirical significance of Child Studies. The pandemic has accentuated issues of inequality and exclusion. The relational dimension was, for instance, largely dependent on family conditions and on the quality of the action and professional development of teachers in order to provide children with opportunities to stay in touch with friends and to express and share what they thought, felt and did during the lockdowns. In general, the pandemic showed that although the virus was universal, it affected children's lives in many different ways. This context has challenged researchers to take into account the idiosyncrasies of children's lived contexts and realities, as well as how they give meaning and express their experiences and to value the views of children in the choices and decisions that concern them. This involves listening to them and taking what they have to say seriously, respecting and putting into practice children's rights, considering their best interests along with the ethical implications of doing research with children. These aspects are key to reinforcing and expanding the field of Child Studies.

The collection of articles in this first issue illustrates the international range and importance of Child Studies. Collectively the authors examine global issues but also specific dimensions that point to the need to further explore child studies in the light of current challenges.

This issue begins with the paper "Play and learning in early childhood education: tensions and challenges", by Elizabeth Ann Wood, from the UK. The author looks at the tension between play for its own sake and educational play in early childhood education drawing on contemporary socio-cultural theories. She discusses issues such as curriculum goals, outcomes and planning within the context of educational play as well as the choices, interests and inquiries made by children in freely chosen play. Wood examines recent research on children's interests and inquiries with regard to pedagogical approaches that connect the curriculum as lived experiences, and curriculum as planned experiences, both of which reflect children's cultural repertoires and peer cultures.

The second paper "Christian values in Portuguese children's and youth literature", by José António Gomes, from Portugal, focuses on the presence of Christian values, and

other aspects related to Christianity, in contemporary Portuguese writing for children and young people. The author argues that values and themes of Christian inspiration are recurrent in such literature regardless of the Christian conviction or confessed beliefs of the authors under analysis.

In the third paper, "Child studies through the lens of applied family social systems theory", Carl J. Dunst, from the USA, addresses the foundations of an applied family social systems theory for explaining the multiple determinants of child well-being, learning, and development, parenting beliefs, behaviour and practices, and family well-being. Drawing on the applied theory, the author describes the development of an activity setting model of young children's everyday learning opportunities and a family systems intervention practices model for ensuring parents and other caregivers have the time and psychological energy to provide young children with development-instigating and development-enhancing learning opportunities in the contexts of everyday family and community life. Dunst concludes that results showed that different child characteristics, setting characteristics, parenting behaviour and practices, family and social systems variables, and practitioner measures were empirically related to variations in child, parent, and family outcomes. He also found discernible pathways of influence between family systems intervention model practices, parenting practices, and child outcomes mediated by parent self-efficacy beliefs and parent well-being.

In a similar vein, María José Rodrigo, from Spain, in the fourth paper "Benefits and challenges in the adoption of evidence-based practices in child and family services", analyses the Council of Europe's Recommendation by exploring three related directions: i) the modern view of parenting as articulated in three facets: dyadic parenting, team parenting, and social parenting, and their corresponding support needs; ii) the challenges and redefinition of evidence-based practices (EBP) for the field of child and family services; and iii) building of the national agency-university partnership, the translational research-practice bidirectional process, and the implementation and evaluation of evidence-based programmes to foster the adoption of EBP in Spain. The authors advocate for the benefits involved in such complex processes of quality assurance.

In the final paper "Maintaining quality in teacher education: A contemporary global challenge?", Ian Menter, from the UK, examines the meaning of the term "quality" in the context of teaching and teacher education. Drawing on comparative studies in teacher education, the author discusses how to maintain those aspects of quality that appear to be important in the contemporary development of policy and practice in teacher education. Menter looks at macro and meso levels of policy and practice but also at the micro level taking into consideration state institutions, the roles of educational institutions and the quality of the participants in the provision and

experience of teacher education, respectively. The author argues for the importance of an anthropological approach to teacher education and wider social insights, identifying contemporary global challenges to the maintenance of quality in teacher education.

These articles raise significant questions that require further attention and discussion. They open the dialogue and invite others to join in the examination of child studies in a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspective. *Child Studies* provides a basis for the discussion of these issues, as well as a myriad of others, analysing each topic scientifically through both theoretical and applied approaches. Amid such a plethora of interpretations within this field of research, one essential frame of reference remains, namely the child's multidimensional unity.

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PLAY AND LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: TENSIONS AND CHALLENGES

BRINCAR E APRENDER NA EDUCAÇÃO INFANTIL: TENSÕES E DESAFIOS

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Abstract

International research promotes the value of play for children's learning and development. However, in early childhood education the development of national policy frameworks highlights a tension, and possible contradiction, between play for its own sake, and educational play. This paper explores these two positions, drawing on contemporary socio-cultural theories. Freely chosen play reflects children's choices, interests and inquiries, and is understood as complex socio-cultural activity. Educational play focuses on curriculum goals and outcomes, and requires early childhood educators to plan for play in ways that direct children's learning towards those goals. Recent research on children's interests and inquiries offers solutions for pedagogical approaches that connect the curriculum as lived experiences, and curriculum as planned experiences, both of which reflect children's cultural repertoires and peer cultures.

Keywords: Play, socio-cultural theory, policy, curriculum, pedagogy

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Resumo

Pesquisas internacionais promovem o valor do brincar para a aprendizagem e o desenvolvimento das crianças. No entanto, na educação infantil, o desenvolvimento de quadros de políticas nacionais destaca uma tensão, e uma possível contradição, entre o brincar por si só e o brincar educativo. Este artigo explora essas duas posições,

baseando-se em teorias socioculturais contemporâneas. O brincar livremente escolhido reflete as escolhas, os interesses e as indagações das crianças, e é entendido como uma atividade sociocultural complexa. As brincadeiras educativas concentram-se nos objetivos e nos resultados do currículo e exigem que os educadores de infância planeiem as brincadeiras de forma a direcionar a aprendizagem das crianças para esses objetivos. Investigação recente sobre os interesses e questionamentos das crianças oferece soluções para abordagens pedagógicas que ligam o currículo como experiências vividas e o currículo como experiências planeadas, ambos refletindo os reportórios culturais das crianças e as culturas de pares.

Palavras-chave: brincar, teoria sociocultural, políticas, currículo, pedagogia

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Introduction

In early childhood education (ECE), a consistent claim can be found across most regions of the world, and across different education and cultural contexts: all forms of play support children's learning and development. There is broad agreement that play is freely chosen, is driven by children's choices and motivations, involves pretense and imagination, and is usually social and relational. Many of the claims that are made about the relationship between play, learning and development are underpinned by an extensive body of research, crafted over many decades, and across cultures, drawing on a range of disciplinary perspectives, including the learning sciences, social sciences, the creative arts, and technology and engineering. New perspectives have emerged from the study of digital technologies, especially the use of gamification in many areas of contemporary life. Thus we have a rich tapestry of research that weaves together a picture of play and playfulness as complex socio-cultural activity that is important for human beings across the lifespan. The qualities inherent in play, such as cognitive flexibility, imagination, sociability, creativity and inventiveness are desirable in all societies, especially in relation to the transformative impacts of digital technologies in all areas of our lives.

Many national policy frameworks for ECE provide further validation for play by recognizing its immediate benefits and impact on future achievements. However, alongside these positive validations for play, there are unresolved tensions and challenges, depending on the levels of policy advice, guidance or prescription for educators. This paper examines these tensions and challenges in light of policy frameworks, by contrasting play for its own sake, and educational play. The first section examines play for its own sake, and grounds the benefits for children, focusing on their

peer cultures and the collaborative development of shared interests. The second section examines educational play, specifically how this is framed in policy documents, particularly guidance on curriculum and pedagogy. The discussion draws on research evidence to consider potential solutions, with implications for educators' knowledge and practice, and how they might resolve some of these tensions and challenges.

1. Play for its own sake

When children participate in play for its own sake, they are perhaps closest to free play where they are able to follow their impulses, motivations, interests and choices. Of course, truly free play has the inherent tension that children can express free will but at the same time impose their own rules to plan, direct and sustain the play (especially socio-dramatic play which is considered to be a mature form of play). Their ability to self-regulate is situated in the imaginary context and meanings of the play activity, and the pleasure and satisfaction that children typically experience.

Research on children's free play makes many claims to its benefits in the domains of development (cognitive/metacognitive, physical/embodied, social/relational and affective) and specific benefits in areas of learning such as literacy (Brooker, Blaise & Edwards, 2014; Stagg-Peterson & Friedrich, 2022) and mathematics (Worthington & van Oers, 2016). Research on children's peer cultures has noted the significance of play for social affiliation and co-operation (Chesworth, 2019), for sharing multimodal, cultural and linguistic repertoires (Rogoff, Correa-Chávez & Dexter, 2015; Tatham-Fashanu, 2021), for building relationships with peers and adults and taking up powerful social roles (Stagg-Peterson, Young Jang & Tjandra, 2020). Children can be actively involved in co-creating their own developmental environments, where they are able to express their agency, identities, interests, heritages, languages and cultural practices. Research on play during the Covid-19 pandemic indicates its significance for supporting children's well-being and resilience, and enabling them to make sense of what was happening around them. Although many children had reduced opportunities to play with peers and kin, evidence indicates that digital technologies provided playful ways of maintaining relationships and connectedness (Cowan et al., 2021), and integrating knowledge about the pandemic into their play (Dýfjörð & Hreiðarsdóttir, 2022).

Play for its own sake enables children to follow their own agendas and interests, and to be immersed in activities that embody the qualities of playfulness (Wood, 2014). The cultural repertoires and knowledge that children spontaneously draw on in their free play activities are valuable in their own right, and take on new meanings in ECE

contexts. As play progresses in complexity, children develop their play skills, such as knowing how to join and contribute ideas to a game or play theme, how to share resources and deal with conflict, and how to manage emotions, especially when the boundaries between play/not play can be porous.

However, it is difficult for educators to identify what knowledge children are bringing into their play, how this is shared, and what meanings are being co-constructed. This is because free play does not follow the patterns and hierarchies of development and learning that are set out in curriculum guidance documents. Furthermore, play skills and knowledge do not appear as curriculum goals. Play can take different forms; play routines and events can unfold over time, and the power of imagination and pretense means that play resources can be used for different symbolic purposes. So in an education setting, it is a challenge for educators to keep track of play, and especially to identify what children are actually learning.

In ECE settings, play is always framed by the space, resources, routines and rules, which can impose constraints, but at the same time offer opportunities for play that would not be available in their homes. Although some of the limitations on play for its own sake arise from the ECE context, the next section indicates that other challenges arise when we consider the expectations set out in policy frameworks for educational play.

2. Educational play

The previous section indicates that research on children's freely chosen play has always been concerned with its purposes and benefits. Play remains a complex space for research that brings together theory and practice, with the addition of policy as a third dimension. A significant shift in the last 25 years has been the introduction of national policy frameworks for ECE, where play remains an important element but has to earn its place in terms of its educational benefits. This is because policy frameworks include specific outcomes or goals that children are expected to achieve on transition to school (a transition that can take place between age 4-7 depending on country-level policies). Play must contribute to these outcomes to ensure that children are 'school ready', which often means that they experience the pedagogical transition from play-based to formal pedagogical approaches.

The expansion of provision for children before compulsory education, and guidance for practice, have been informed by a complex inter-relationship between the learning sciences and the demands of educational reform. The dynamic nature of policy making and policy travel means that similar discourses about play circulate at supra-national levels for example through the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development. Policy discourses are taken up at national/local levels, but not in linear ways. Research indicates that although typically Western validations of play circulate internationally, the cultural-historical evolution of individual nations results in mixing and re-mixing of ideas, heritages and practices (Roopnarine at al., 2018).

Analyses of early childhood policy frameworks indicate that play has earned its place within the broad recommendations for play-based learning, play-based curriculum and play-based pedagogy (Hedges, Stagg-Peterson & Wajskop, 2018). The capture of play in policy discourses and curriculum frameworks is a mixed blessing because there are varying interpretations of what counts as play, and what play is expected, or required to produce. The demands being made of play, of children, and of their educators, reflect contemporary socio-political framings of ECE, including greater attention to academic content, and measurable outcomes. These demands are evident in countries that have traditionally been committed to Euro-American values about play-based learning, and countries or regions where ECE is being developed or reconceptualised to address social diversities and the perspectives of historically marginalized communities (Roopnarine et al., 2018; Stagg-Peterson & Friedrich, 2022; Yang & Li, 2019).

Finding a 'best fit' between the apparent orderliness of curriculum frameworks and the complexities of play remains problematic (Ruscoe, Barblett & Barratt-Pugh, 2021; Wood, 2020), and the urge towards 'structured' and 'guided' play leans more towards apparent orderliness. With the play/education debates, there are different positions. Free play is seen as relevant for achieving developmental goals, and adult-guided/structured play being more appropriate for achieving academic goals (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). This bifurcation indicates that biological/maturational perspectives retain power within the field, informed by child development theories. At the same time, curriculum frameworks in different countries exert different degrees of pressure on educators, according to the levels of prescription of defined outcomes (for example in England) (Wood, 2020), and description of indicative goals (for example in New Zealand and Australia) (Barblett, Knaus & Barratt-Pugh, 2016; Gunn & Nuttall, 2019; Wood & Hedges, 2016). Pyle and Danniels (2017) propose that 'purposeful play' sits on a continuum between developmental goals and academic goals, but this remains a problematic construct depending on whose purposes are privileged – those of the children, or those of the educators. For Vygotsky, school instruction and work are "compulsory activity based on rules" (1978, p. 104). This is not to downplay how children engage with the knowledge around which curriculum content is framed, as they are being/becoming mathematicians, geographers, artists, technologists, readers, writers, designers and players. However, children also draw on sources and funds of knowledge from their own cultural repertoires to inform how they experience and build curriculum (Chesworth 2016; 2019; Hedges, 2021; 2022; Hill & Wood, 2019).

Policy versions of play are concerned more with structured play than with children's freely chosen play, to ensure that play contributes to outcomes and goals, and is a means of supporting children's progress and achievements. Policy statements thus position play within a wider discourse of raising standards and improving children's outcomes. In other words, educational play must earn its place within the system, in order to justify the economic investment in ECE.

This brief overview indicates that there are tensions between the established discourses about the value of play, and the policy expectations that foreground planned and purposeful play, with varying degrees of teacher involvement and direction. Thus questions need to be asked about whether play is always destined to be in tension with policy, and are there other factors that work against play for its own sake?

3. Resolving the challenges and tensions: curriculum and pedagogy

The focus on mediation, co-construction and curriculum as lived experiences draws attention to the pivotal role of pedagogy in ECE settings, especially the range of pedagogical approaches and strategies that educators use to connect play, learning and teaching. Pedagogy is understood in an expansive way, integrating concerns with ethics, equity and inclusion, and understanding learning from the perspective of children's goals, as well as the goals of the curriculum. Pedagogy connects the curriculum as lived experiences, and curriculum as planned experiences, both of which reflect children's cultural repertoires and peer cultures. This position is undoubtedly demanding of the skills and knowledge of educators, and practice-focused research continues to engage with the challenges of integrating teacher-directed and child-centred pedagogies, which are often problematised as being not just in tension but in opposition (Arnott & Duncan, 2019; Cheng Pui-Wah et al., 2015).

Research indicates how educators can accomplish integrated pedagogical approaches. Fleer (2015) focused on the pedagogical roles of educators inside and outside imaginary play situations. Detailed analyses of practice indicated that educators in the study acted in five different ways according to the physical positioning or proximity to the play, the levels of intersubjectivity between adults/children, resourcing and supporting the play theme, being engaged with the play, and being inside the play, in imaginative but restricted ways. Fleer's research exemplifies the pedagogical decisions and actions that educators take in relation to play, and the challenges of sustaining imaginative play against more instrumental discourses within ECE policy frameworks. Fleer (2020) subsequently used the concept of Conceptual Playworld to develop an intervention study where teachers collaborate to build collective zones of proximal development in an ECE setting. Drawing on Vygotsky's cultural-historical theories of play, and subsequent interpretations, Fleer documents

how the teachers interacted with children during group times to create new developmental conditions within the ECE environment, and in their collective practices. The teachers supported collective imagining, enabled children to extend the collective imaginary situation of the play themes, supported children to develop imaginative possibilities and scenarios through the 'what if' and 'as if' imaginary perspectives, and extending the plot of the play activities over time.

Hill and Wood (2019) report an ethnographic study of children's interests, working theories and funds of knowledge in free play activities. The study took place in an international school in Switzerland with children age 5-7 years old. Analysis of the children's freely-chosen play activities showed how their play themes incorporated knowledge and emerging concepts across a range of themes:

• Death-rebirth, death and dying

• Good and evil, bad/good, disobedience and punishment

• Tools and equipment

• Gender – what it means to be a boy/girl

• Family roles and relationships

• Babies and being a baby

• Animals and being an animal

• Popular culture and everyday events in the news.

• Myths and legends, Disney, fairy and folk tales

• Power and control – agency, what it means to be a child/adult

• Knowledge and coming to know – sources of knowledge

Arnott and Duncan (2019) conducted research on the pedagogic cultures of ECE, focusing on play and creativity in a nursery and a science museum in Scotland. They argue that planning for play is a multidimensional task that must incorporate space, interpersonal collaborations and materials not just as characteristics of provision, but also as contextual cues for understanding their impact on children's learning, and on creative play. Similar to Fleer (2015; 2020) their findings indicate the many dynamic ways in which educators can facilitate creative play by considering or tweaking the make up of the pedagogic culture from an ecological perspective. Their research did not aim to offer a typology of creative play that could be replicated. Rather they portrayed the complex and interrelating processes at work in both settings, and present

creative play as a dynamic, multifaceted and relational process, shaped by the pedagogic culture.

Practice-focused research offers contrasting theoretical perspectives on children's learning that provide guidance for educators, and can potentially enable them to reconcile the different tensions and challenges within their provision. Contemporary theories offer counterpoints to the normative basis of child development theories, by foregrounding children's cultures, particularly the richness and diversity of the interests and funds of knowledge they bring from their home, family and community lives (Chesworth, 2019; Hedges, 2021; 2022; Stagg-Peterson & Friedrich, 2022). Many recent studies of play in ECE settings indicate that there does not need to be a separation between adult-led and child-initiated activity, or between play and work. The use of digital technologies, and their flexibility is dissolving boundaries between formal and informal learning; research on children's converged (traditional/digital) play reveals the different sources of knowledge on which they draw, and the new affordances of apps and devices (Marsh, 2017). From the perspectives of educators and children, curriculum can consist of planned experiences, and intentional teaching, but can also drawon children's lived experiences as sources of curriculum. Far from being the simple occupation of childhood, play is complex in its different forms and manifestations. More importantly, what children choose to do in and with their play is varied and often unpredictable, but always reveals a wealth of insights into their funds of knowledge and funds of identities, which include their home and family practices, their interests, questions and ongoing inquiries.

So what are the key principles for early childhood educators as they plan for play and learning in their settings? First, play is one of many ways in which children learn and develop, and typically encourages learning-relevant processes such as exploration, experimentation, imitation, metacognition, as well as developing interests and inquiries. These processes enable children to move from exploration - 'what does this do?' to inquiry and knowledge creation 'what can I/we do with this?'.

Second, children's interests are not just manifest in their activity choices (such as sand, water, building blocks). Over time, their choices reveal processes of sustained inquiry, and the motivation to become more skilled and knowledgeable about their social, cultural and material worlds. Learning through play is not just about storing new knowledge or information: it is embodied, relational and dynamic. Being a skilled player is a developmental achievement in its own right, and may be highly prized and rewarded in later life in some occupations.

Educators use a range of pedagogic strategies and create pedagogic cultures that pay attention to equity, diversity and inclusion because all children's funds of knowledge can become sources of curriculum. Research shows us that children's

interests extend beyond curriculum goals, and incorporate their deep concerns with relationships with humans and non-humans; morals and ethics; existential matters of life, death and dying; and everyday events, including catastrophes and the pandemic. In other words play may be both a mirror that reflects children's social and personal interests and knowledge, as well as the engine for driving, motivating and directing further learning.

Policy versions of educational play are concerned with how play can produce or at least contribute to specific learning outcomes in curriculum frameworks. Policy frameworks are the source of tensions and challenges for educators as they strive to manage play for its own sake and educational play. In addition, because they have to manage other policy goals such as school readiness it is easy to understand how they become pulled towards teacher-led formal activities in order to 'deliver' the desired outcomes. Play has been tamed and distorted, to the extent that planned and purposeful play may say more about educators' intentions than it does about children's interests and choices. When educators are pulled between different demands, they may not have the time to observe children's play, and may miss valuable opportunities for interacting, scaffolding and understanding children's meanings and intentions. In contrast, integrated pedagogical approaches enable practitioners to move across adult-initiated and child-initiated activities in ways that build on children's interests, connect interests with curriculum goals, and incorporate children's funds of knowledge.

Conclusion

ECE has been the focus for substantial investment, with expansion in provision and improvements in training and qualifications for educators. Many countries now have a policy framework that sets out statutory responsibilities for the sector, and may include guidance on curriculum and pedagogy. Many of these frameworks are informed by different theories and research that reflect established notions of good practice with young children. However, these developments have also highlighted debates and challenges about curriculum and pedagogical approaches, especially in frameworks that set out developmental levels and learning goals that should be achieved at the start of primary school.

The contemporary research presented here offer contrasting ways of understanding children's learning, and the role of play in ECE. The ongoing endeavor of integrating play into provision indicates the complexity of educators' roles in planning and enacting a curriculum that both reflects the guidance in national frameworks, and respects children's interests and funds of knowledge as sources of curriculum. The traditional binaries of adult-led and child-initiated activities, play and work, formal and informal learning are being challenged by co-constructive approaches

that integrate structure and flexibility. Policy concerns with 'effective' or 'the most effective' pedagogies do not align with recurring attention to diversities, dialogue, meaning-making, scaffolding (amongst peers and peers/adults), multimodality, and the complex processes of inquiry that are evident as children develop and follow their interests. However, these theories also present challenges for early childhood educators to consider all elements of their provision, including the resources, the environment, the rules and structures, and the roles of educators in and out of children's play. They need to consider how all elements of their provision develop the overarching pedagogic culture and sustain children's peer cultures.

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CHRISTIAN VALUES IN PORTUGUESE CHILDREN'S AND YOUTH LITERATURE

VALORES CRISTÃOS NA LITERATURA PORTUGUESA PARA CRIANÇAS E JOVENS

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Abstract

The present article outlines a non-exhaustive overview of the presence of Christian values, and other aspects related to Christianism, in contemporary Portuguese writing for childhood and youth. Different modalities/genres (narrative, poetry, drama) are considered and some of the most relevant voices in this domain, such as Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, Luísa Dacosta, Nuno Higino, Alice Vieira and others, are highlighted. The author acknowledges the strong presence, and recurrence, in this literature, of values and themes of Christian inspiration, regardless of the confession of faith and the Christian conviction of the authors in appreciation.

Keywords: Children's and youth literature, Christian values, contemporaneity, overview

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Resumo

O presente artigo traça um panorama não exaustivo acerca da presença de valores cristãos, e outros aspetos relacionados com o cristianismo, na escrita portuguesa contemporânea para a infância e a juventude. Diferentes modalidades/géneros (narrativa, poesia, drama) são considerados e algumas das vozes mais relevantes neste domínio, como Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, Luísa Dacosta, Nuno Higino, Alice

Vieira e outros, são destacadas. O autor reconhece a forte presença e a recorrência, nesta literatura, de valores e temas de inspiração cristã, independentemente da confissão religiosa e da convicção cristã dos autores em apreciação.

Palavras-chave: Literatura para crianças e jovens, valores cristãos, contemporaneidade, visão global

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I asked a good friend who is an essayist and poet, besides author of short stories for childhood and knowledgeable of the Bible – and not just by obligation –, to suggest a brief passage of the New Testament which could work as a synthesis of Jesus' message, reported in the text as His word. Immediately after writing it, I sensed my request suffered from an excess of ignorance which might hold the addressee back. And yet, the answer came swiftly, though accurate and pondered. Abusive it might be, I cannot resist quoting it[1]: «(...) there are several passages of the Gospels which could be used as a synthesis of Jesus' message. I would single out two from Saint John Evangelist, because he knew Christ personally and deeply and he was his dearest disciple. His testimony is, therefore, the closest to the source. The passages are the following: John, 15,12: *This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you. Nobody possesses a greater love than he who gives his life for his friends*". A second example (John, 13, 1-17) was introduced in the form of synthesis and not as a direct quotation. Further on, my friend would add: "Everything by Saint John will be the most consistent. Besides the Gospel, he also wrote three letters; each of them is a good synthesis of Christianity. For example the first letter, when he says: "*He who does not love, does not know God because God is love* (I John 4, 8); or, further on: *If somebody says that loves God but despises his brother, he is a liar* (I John, 4, 20)."

As I had asked for this opinion because of the present article – in which I propose some thoughts on the question of human/Christian values in Portuguese children's and youth literature –, the answer immediately brought to memory the works of three contemporary authors, whose writing has in common what could be called the awareness of alterity as a condition of the *being who feels and acts*. Compassion, fraternal solidarity and love for the other – generally for the most unsafe and disadvantaged – are, so to say, the performative modalities of this awareness. We can find this question in *A Noite de Natal* [*Christmas Night*] (1959) and *A Fada Oriana* [*Oriana, the Fairy*] (1958), by Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen (1919-2004), who resorts to

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[1] I thank my dear friend, the writer Nuno Higino, the testimony I use here, by quoting fragments of our personal correspondence.

fantasy interweaved with parable, as it also happens in *O Anjo de Timor* [*Timor's Angel*] (2003). We can find it in short stories with a realist register signed by Matilde Rosa Araújo (1921-2010) in *O Sol e o Menino dos Pés Frios* [*The Sun and the Boy with Cold Feet*] (1972), but also in some poems for youth in *O Cantar da Tila* [*Tila's Song*] (1967) (the second moment of a sort of lyrical biography which starts with *O Livro da Tila* [*Tila's Book*], from 1957). And we can confirm the same theme in some short stories by Luísa Dacosta (1927-2015) which take place inside a particular fantasy world, such as *O Elefante Cor de Rosa* [*The Pink Elephant*] (1974) or *História com Recadinho* [*A Story with a Message*] (1986), characterized also by the persistent search for an encounter with *the other*. Author of challenging reenactments, which are stylistically very elaborate and suggestive, of biblical passages addressed to adults, such as *Os Magos que não Chegaram a Belém* [*The Wise Men who didn't reach Bethlehem*] (1989) and *Aleluia na Manhã* [*Hallelujah in the Morning*] (1994), Luísa Dacosta declared herself a non-believer who however had always manifested some fascination by the figure of Jesus and who was knowledgeable of the Bible, having, in her youth, integrated the reflection group Metanoia, and been editor of the journal *Grandes Páginas Cristãs* [*Great Christian Pages*]. This is where texts by Joaquim Alves Correia, his brother Manuel Alves Correia and others have been published, with the seal of Metanoia Publishing House and sometimes with her introductions and notes. This Christian group was composed, at least, by Fernando Ferreira da Costa (writer's husband), João Sá da Costa and Maria Lúcia Nobre, besides Luísa Dacosta, who signed her comments as Maria Luísa Ferreira da Costa, before having published a book. This group, whose activity dates to the end of the 40s and 50s, claimed to be a community of Christians with a strong spiritual stand characterized above all by a pondered revisitation of the great doctrinal texts and by the defense of a return to the purity of Christian ideals.

Allow me to highlight Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, not only for her confessed Catholicism of progressist breed, but also for the fact that her narratives are unanimously considered classics of Portuguese children's literature. *A Fada Oriana* [*Oriana, the Fairy*] stages the atonement of narcissist-driven guilt, whereas *A Noite de Natal* [*Christmas' Night*] portrays the social orphanage of Manuel as a reincarnation of child Jesus, image which, at the end, gives meaning to the values of friendship, share, thrift – which enlighten the gestures of little and lonely Joana – and the search for a union between human and sacred. A further narrative by the author of *O Cristo Cigano* [*The Gypsy Christ*] affirms, in turn, the victory of moral integrity and self-denial over the forces of perversion. We are referring to *O Cavaleiro da Dinamarca* [*Denmark's Knight*] (1964), which illustrates an initiatory and probative voyage which, by confronting the protagonist with a succession of diverse human types, events and mythical places, reveals everything to this untarnished knight: danger and temptation, the value of family, examples of heroism, passion and art. Not to mention the (not entirely solved)

tension between a theocentric worldview – which finds in the glorification of Christmas its most symbolic element – and a new anthropocentric gaze which emerges from Renaissance. On the way, we get to revisit Denmark, the Holy Land, Italian cities of the north and Flanders. We can feel the fascination for the humanist splendor (the action takes place in the 15th century) and for the great adventure of the Portuguese navigators and "conquerors", during what is presented as a "new time" for Europe and the World, without however ignoring the drama engendered by the clash of cultures and ethnicities – and that is why *O Cavaleiro da Dinamarca* [*Denmark's Knight*] is one of the first Portuguese narratives for the youth which poses the question of the need for intercultural dialogue. Let us add that, in this beautiful fiction by Sophia, a chain of ethically modeling narratives embedded in the main plot can be observed: the story of Vanina (almost a version of Romeo and Juliet, with a non-deceptive ending), the lives of Giotto, Dante, and the adventures of a Flemish sailor and a Portuguese one, Pero Dias. In this manner, this work represents also a passionate homage, almost always implicit, to the narratives of great cultural tradition of the West: the Bible, the *Divine Comedy*, the *Decameron*, travel books, maritime chronicles…

In the three mentioned authors, Christian ideals represent a fundamental axis which cannot be ignored by the reader and which actually permeates the writing of authors generationally close, albeit with different political-ideological beliefs. We are referring to voices connected to the poetry magazine *Távola Redonda* [*Round Table*], such as António Manuel Couto Viana (1923-2010) or Fernando de Paços (1923-2003) – above all, in texts for children's theatre – or figures such as Esther de Lemos (n. 1929) and Maria Isabel de Mendonça Soares (1922-2017). This one, in particular, is the author of a considerable narrative production in which humour and a certain educational concern coexist, but in which friendship, family and the valuation of personal effort are recurrent themes, often in articulation with whether the defense of natural heritage (in a permanent devotion to Nature), whether the celebration of Christian festivities, such as Christmas and Easter. As far as this is concerned, one should reread *Dias de Festa e Outras Histórias* [*Festive Days and Other Stories*] (1983), *As Amêndoas do Padrinho Pascoal* [*Godfather Pascoal's Almonds*] (1990) and also youth novels such as *Logo Se Vê* [*We shall see*] (1994) and *Verde É a Esperança* [*Hope is Green*] (1998).

On this subject, allow us to remind that both Christmas spirit (a very Christian topic) and the victory over loneliness and egocentrism, family and its importance have always constituted pivotal themes in literature read by children (it is impossible not to evoke classics such as *Nussknacker und Mausekönig* (1816), by E. T. Hoffmann, certain short stories by Hans Christian Andersen or the unforgettable *A Christmas Carol* (1843), by Charles Dickens).

Whether they profess the Christian faith or not, many writers feel attracted by the magic and mystery of Christmas, almost always associated with generous values (compassion, fraternity, share…) and/or the condemnation of the inhumanity of the "murdering economy" (to use Pope Francis' expression) and the consumerist fever. Hence one of the recurring genres – let us call them so – in children's literature be the Christmas short story. Let us enumerate a few cases closer to us in time, by order of generation, whether of more or less assumed Catholic authors (Lemos, Vaz, Vieira, Higino, Ribeiro…), whether of others who, albeit non-believers, seem to adopt a Christian cultural and moral matrix: «O hino de Natal» [«Christmas' Hymn»] (in *A Rainha de Babilónia e Outras Histórias* [*The Queen of Babylon and Other Stories*], 2nd ed., 1987), by Esther de Lemos; *Há Sempre Uma Estrela no Natal* [*There is Always a Star at Christmas*] (2006) and other titles by Luísa Ducla Soares; *Milagre de Natal* [*Christmas' Miracle*] (2008), by António Torrado; *Hoje É Natal!* [*Today is Christmas!*] (2000), by José Vaz; *O Cavalinho de Pau do Menino Jesus e Outros Contos de Natal* [*Baby Jesus' Hobbyhorse*] (2009), by Manuel António Pina; *A Árvore das Histórias de Natal* [*The Christmas' Stories Tree*] (2006) and other titles by José Jorge Letria; *Paisagem com Trenó e Neve ao Fundo. Um Conto de Natal* [*Landscape with Sleigh and Background Snow. A Christmas Carol*] (2005), by Vergílio Alberto Vieira; *Histórias de Natal Contadas em Verso* [*Christmas' Stories told in Verse*] (2000), by Alexandre Parafita; *Sonhos de Natal* [*Christmas' Dreams*] (1997), by António Mota; *O Meu Primeiro Natal* [*My First Christmas*] (2005), by Margarida Fonseca Santos; *Eu Fui o Menino Jesus* [*I was Baby Jesus*] (2010), by João Manuel Ribeiro; *O Nascimento de Jesus* [*Jesus' Birth*] (2016), by Miguel de Oliveira. Numerous titles could be added to this list (by José Viale Moutinho, by Alice Vieira, by Ana Saldanha, by Rita Taborda Duarte…)! And to them examples in the sphere of poetry should be added, such as *A Casa de Cedro* [*Cedar House*] (2010), by Vergílio Alberto Vieira, or in the sphere of theatre, such as *O Menino Jesus da Cartolinha* [*Top Hat Baby Jesus*] (2007), by the same author, or *A Nascente. Em Louvor de São José* [*The Fountain. In Praise of Saint Joseph*] (2015), by Dom Manuel Clemente.

In the realm of narrative, *A Mais Alta Estrela. Sete Histórias de Natal* [*The Highest Star. Seven Christmas Stories*] (1998), by Nuno Higino (n. 1960), should be singled out. A former priest who, in 2005, renounced his ordinance and returned to laicism, Higino who, besides a well-known poet, has become an academic researcher in matters of Philosophy, and especially in Aesthetics, is one of the voices in whose work for childhood and youth the values of Catholicism are molded in a manner perhaps more dense and intense – paradoxically, in a writing which often conveys the reader an impression of purity difficult to describe. One of the key features is the fascination, on the one hand, by the mysteries of artistic creation, and, on the other hand, by the great exemplary figures of Christianity – for example, in *O Cavalo que Engoliu o Sol. Histórias da Vida de S. Paulo* [*The Horse that Swallowed the Sun. Stories of the Life of Saint Paul*]

(2008) or *O Peixe Dourado. História de São Pedro Pescador de Homens* [*The Golden Fish. Story of Saint Paul Fisher of Men*] (2011). The capacity to endow elements of nature with a magical vibration, as well as the power of enchantment of a speech in which metaphor is never banal, grant singularity to his poems for children (*O Menino que Namorava Paisagens e Outros Poemas* [*The Boy who Dated Landscapes and Other Poems*] (2001), *Versos Diversos* [*Diverse Verses*] (2008) and several other titles) and to the short stories, molded in a poetic prose which is reminiscent of the work by Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen and, inevitably, of biblical narratives and other great founding texts.

On account of his relevance as poet, as author of chronicles and fiction, and as one of the most original voices in Portuguese writing for childhood, let us highlight a further author, already mentioned on the subject of Christmas stories, Manuel António Pina (1943-2012). In Pina, the parodistic inclination is notable, and we could find this approach to biblical figures in parodic register immediately in his inaugural book in this field, *O País das Pessoas de Pernas para o Ar* [*The Country of Upside Down People*] (1973). We are referring to the controversial yet delicious short stories «O menino Jesus não quer ser Deus» [«Baby Jesus doesn't want to be God»] and «O bolo e o menino Jesus» [«Baby Jesus and the cake»], in which, alongside the intertextuality with the biblical text, it is assumed an intertextuality with Alberto Caeiro, one of Pessoa's heteronyms.

Regarding internal and external factors which destabilize family as a structural educational nucleus – linked to problematic psycho-affective and social frameworks, in urban contexts –, but also regarding the necessary child and youth resilience to face tensions and fears, let us read for example *Rosa, Minha Irmã Rosa* [*Rosa, Sister Rosa*] (1979), *Chocolate à Chuva* [*Chocolate in the Rain*] (1982), *Flor de Mel* [*Honey Flower*] (1986), *Os Olhos de Ana Marta* [*Ana Marta's Eyes*] (1990), *Meia Hora para Mudar a Minha Vida* [*Half an Hour to change my Life*] (2010) and other narratives by Alice Vieira (n. 1943), in whom, amidst the disquiet, a light of hope always dawns on the young female protagonists. After the death of her husband Mário Castrim (1920-2002), confessed communist and Christian, collaborator in publications by Combonian Missionaries and himself too author of fine books for childhood, besides TV critic, Alice Vieira wrote herself for such periodicals. It is no surprise that in 2012, as a Catholic, she has retold, fairy-tale like, *Histórias da Bíblia para Ler e Pensar* [*Stories from the Bible to Read and Think*], focusing on six episodes from the Old Testament which distinguish themselves for the moral wisdom they enclose and for the roguish adventure which is so dear to very young audiences. Let us not forget to note that, three years before, José Tolentino Mendonça had also proposed his *Histórias Escolhidas da Bíblia* [*Selected Stories from the Bible*] (2009), written in a poetic prose in which stylistic echoes of the Scriptures themselves are noticeable – the differences in style across the several books of the

Bible, from which the author culls episodes whether from the Old whether from the New Testaments, are recognizable.

With a writing which, especially in the books for children, assumes a religious implication (for instance, in *Jesus e Eu* [*Jesus and I*] (2011)), and in which spirituality and rapport with the divine are not overlooked, Maria Teresa Maia González (n. 1958) has also cared for a long time for growing pains and the confrontation with the world in pre-adolescents and adolescents, while never ceasing to propose a reflection on values, family and its conflicts (see the books from the collection «Profissão adolescente» [«Occupation Teenager»] or the *bestseller* which *A Lua de Joana* [*Joana's Moon*] (1994) constitutes, on the subject of drug addiction). Nevertheless, in a juvenile novel such as *O Guarda da Praia* [*The Beach Warden*] (1996), affective orphanage, friendship and love building, brotherly circumstances and the maternal condition are approached with sensitivity.

These notes crop up excessively. I therefore conclude by calling attention to other voices (regardless of confessing to their belief) to whose literary creations we should pay attention if we commit to studying the fierce presence of Christian humanism in contemporary Portuguese writing for children and youth: Álvaro Magalhães, Maria de Lourdes Soares, Sílvia Alves, Maria João Lopo de Carvalho, Rosário Alçada Araújo, Pedro Boléo Tomé (and his juvenile series «Aventuras na Terra de Jesus» [«Adventures in the Land of Jesus»])... Both the aforementioned João Manuel Ribeiro (n. 1968) and Afonso Cruz (n. 1971), whose books, which can sometimes be situated in the realm of an education for citizenship which never ceases to bear a Christian matrix – while not disregarding the aesthetic function –, deserve a special mention: for instance, the volumes *A Casa Grande. Manifesto de Cidadania* [*Big House. Citizenship Manifesto*] (2009) and *A Cruzada das Crianças* [*The Children's Crusade*] (2015), respectively. On this subject, there would be much to say about the role of *exemplum* which another genre could assume: biography (why not read *Teresa e o Castelo Escondido* [*Teresa and the Hidden Castle*] (2014), by Ana Paula Azevedo, as a work centered in the life of Saint Teresa of Avila?).

Lastly, a challenge: why not to explore the picturebooks Isabel Minhós Martins (n. 1974) has been publishing in Planeta Tangerina (an editorial project of which she is cofounder), well-humored and somehow functioning as an education for affective life, or as meditations on life and death. For example *Pê de Pai* [*F as in Father*] (2006), *Coração de Mãe* [*Mother's Heart*] (2008), *Quando Eu Nasci* [*When I was Born*] (2007) and *Para Onde Vamos Quando Desaparecemos?* [*Where do We Go when We Disappear?*] (2011).

I shall finish how I started, speaking of love and quoting a children's book by a non-believing author, José Jorge Letria. It is acalled *O Amor O que É?* [*What is Love?*]

(2005) and it says: «O amor é / o único remédio / que pode curar o mundo»[2] [«Love is / the only medicine / which can cure the world»]. Maybe children's books may, in their own way, put out a helping hand.

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Child Studies Through the Lens of Applied Family Social Systems Theory

Os Estudos da Criança vistos através da lente da teoria aplicada dos sistemas sociais da família

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Abstract

The foundations of an applied family social systems theory for explaining the multiple determinants of child well-being, learning, and development, parenting beliefs, behavior and practices, and family well-being are described. The theory is derived from tenets of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and other social, family, and contextualized theories. The applied theory was used to develop an activity setting model of young children's everyday learning opportunities and a family systems intervention practices model for ensuring parents and other caregivers have the time and psychological energy to provide young children with development-instigating and development-enhancing learning opportunities in the contexts of everyday family and community life. Results from three different lines of research are described which provide support for the applied systems model and the two associated intervention models. Results showed that different child characteristics, setting characteristics, parenting behavior and practices, family and social systems variables, and practitioner measures were empirically related to variations in child, parent, and family outcomes. There were also discernable pathways of influence between family systems intervention model practices, parenting practices, and child outcomes mediated by parent self-efficacy beliefs and parent well-being. The contributions of the theory, models, and research findings to child studies are described.

Keywords: social systems, family systems, family activities, community activities, parenting practices, child learning, intervention

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Resumo

Neste artigo descrevem-se os fundamentos de uma teoria aplicada dos sistemas sociais da família para explicar as múltiplas variáveis do bem-estar infantil, da aprendizagem e do desenvolvimento, das crenças parentais, do comportamento e das práticas e bem-estar familiar. A teoria deriva de princípios dos sistemas ecológicos de Bronfenbrenner e outras teorias sociais, familiares e contextualizadas. A teoria aplicada foi usada para desenvolver um modelo de configuração de atividades das oportunidades de aprendizagem quotidianas de crianças pequenas e um modelo de práticas de intervenção de sistemas familiares para garantir que os pais e outros cuidadores tenham tempo e energia psicológica para fornecer às crianças oportunidades de aprendizagem que estimulam e melhoram o seu desenvolvimento nos contextos da vida quotidiana da família e da comunidade. O artigo inclui resultados de três diferentes linhas de investigação que sustentam o modelo de sistemas aplicados e os dois modelos de intervenção associados. Os resultados mostram que as diferentes características da criança, assim como as do meio, os comportamento e as práticas parentais, as variáveis dos sistemas familiares e sociais e as ações do profissional estão empiricamente relacionados com as variações nos resultados da criança, dos pais e da família. Foram igualmente identificadas vias de influência entre as práticas do modelo de intervenção dos sistemas familiares, as práticas parentais e os resultados da criança mediados pelas conceções de autoeficácia dos pais e pelo seu bem-estar. Descrevem-se as contribuições da teoria, dos modelos e dos resultados da investigação para os Estudos da Criança.

Palavras-chave: sistemas sociais, sistemas familiares, atividades familiares, atividades comunitárias, práticas parentais, aprendizagem infantil, intervenção

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Introduction

Child studies is a multidisciplinary field that focuses on the life events and experiences that enhance child well-being, learning, and development Zwozdiak-Myers (2007). The fields of study most interested in which life events and experiences are related to optimal child functioning include, but are not limited to, psychology, education, sociology, anthropology, and other behavioral and social sciences.

One aspect of children's studies that differentiates the field from other disciplines is an emphasis on holistic child development (e.g., Taylor & Woods, 2005). The focus of interest is the learning experiences and opportunities that promote children's physical, social, emotional, psychological, mental, and intellectual development. Whole child learning and development is concerned with the broad-based acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competencies in different domains needed for healthy child well-being and optimal development (Cantor et al., 2021).

Investigations of the life events and experiences that are related to different domains of child development within children's studies place primary emphasis on understanding and studying children's development in context (Cantor et al., 2019; Graue & Walsh, 1998). The meaning of context, however, differs according to which discipline is investigating the factors related to variations in child learning and development (compare e.g., Bragg & Kehily, 2013; Edwards et al., 2019). Contexts have been described in terms of the social (Murry et al., 2015), physical (Evans, 2021), societal (Gershoff et al., 2016), ecological (Osher et al., 2020), and cultural (Nugent, 2002) settings in which child learning and development occurs.

Development-in-context theories view child learning and development as related to and influenced by different life events and experiences (e.g., Lerner, 1991; Richardson, 2011; Wozniak & Fischer, 1993). Systems theories, for example, view children as embedded within the contexts of family systems and families embedded within the contexts of larger social systems where events in the different systems have direct and indirect effects on child learning and development (Friedman & Allen, 2010; Laszlo & Krippner, 1998). For example, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasizes how different social systems factors, both directly and indirectly, influence child learning and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992).

This paper includes descriptions of key features of an applied family social systems theory, a family systems intervention model derived from basic tenets of the theory, and the research evidence for the hypothesized relationships between the model practices and child, parent, and family outcomes. The theory and associated model "borrows" key concepts from ecological system theories, family and social systems theories, development-in-context theories, and other theories that were used to develop the intervention model and set of operationalized practices. The practices were developed for use by early childhood intervention (ECI) practitioners with parents and other primary caregivers to improve the well-being, learning, and development of young children and their families (see Dunst, 2017a, for a description of these theories).

The foundations for the family systems intervention model were first described in Dunst (1985) and subsequently updated in other sources (e.g., Dunst, 2000, 2017a; Dunst, Trivette & Deal, 1988, 1994a). Available research at the time the model was

developed was used as the evidence for the hypothesized relationships among the operationalized practices in the model. Research conducted over the past three decades by myself and my colleagues systematically evaluated how different intervention practices are directly and indirectly related to variations in child, parent, and family functioning. Results from these investigations are described in this paper to illustrate how family social systems intervention practices are directly and indirectly related to child learning and development. At the outset, it is noted that the variables considered the key characteristics of the model are not the only variables known to be related to variations in child learning and development (see e.g., Wachs, 2000). The variables of interest are ones that were operationalized as intervention practices for improving child, parent, and family functioning.

An Applied Family Social Systems Theory

Three elements of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory have proven particularly useful as the foundation for the intervention model and associated practices. The first is Bronfenbrenner's description of the characteristics of everyday experiences that are the context for child learning and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). The second is Bronfenbrenner's description of the conditions necessary for parents to be able to competently carry out parenting roles and responsibilities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The third is Bronfenbrenner's description of the role social network members play in the provision of supports and resources that influence parenting practices and provide parents the time to engage their children in different learning experiences and opportunities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Children's Learning and Development

Bronfenbrenner (1993) contended that the experiences that promote and enhance child learning and development are influenced by different child, caregiver, and setting characteristics. According to Bronfenbrenner (1993),

> The personal characteristics likely to be most potent in affecting the course...of [child] development [include] those that set in motion, sustain, and encourage processes of interaction between the [developing] person and two aspects of the proximal environment: first, the people present in the settings; and second, the physical and symbolic features of the setting that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively

more complex interaction with an activity in the immediate environment (p. 11).

Figure 1 shows how Bronfenbrenner's (1993) description of everyday social and nonsocial settings was operationalized for intervention purposes. Everyday activities are considered major sources of child learning opportunities, children's interests are considered a personal characteristic that motivates children to engage in interactions with the social and nonsocial environment, the interestingness (situational interests) of everyday activities are considered activity setting features that encourage and invite child participation in everyday activities, and responsive and supportive parenting behavior and practices are considered factors that encourage and promote child learning while engaged in everyday activities.
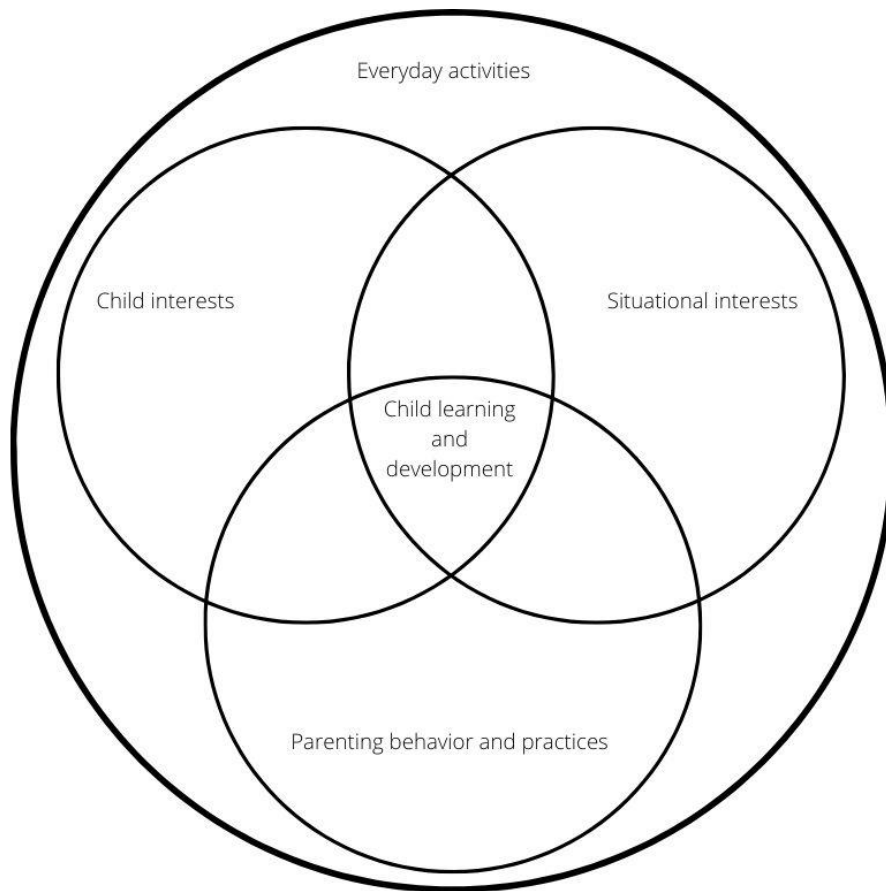

Figure 1. Child, setting, and caregiver characteristics that are the key characteristics of an everyday activity setting model of child learning and development.

Sources of Child Learning Opportunities

Activity setting theory proposes that the everyday activities than make up a child's life are important contexts for learning functional and meaningful cultural behavior (Farver, 1999). Young children with and without disabilities are routinely involved in hundreds of different family and community activities (Dunst, 2001; 2020a; Dunst, Bruder, et al., 2001, 2002; Dunst, Hamby, et al., 2002). Family activities include such things as mealtimes, bath times, bedtime routines, floor play, and dressing and undressing. Community activities include such things as food shopping, neighborhood walks, visiting friends or relatives, library storytimes, and visiting a nature center or petting zoo.

Dunst, Hamby, et al. (2000), in a national study of everyday child learning, found that young children, birth to 6 years of age, are routinely involved in 11 different kinds of family activities (e.g., child routines, parenting routines, play activities) and 11 different kinds of community activities (e.g., family outings, outdoor activities, running family errands). Results from several studies of parents' strengths (self-reported interests and abilities) found that parents' strengths-based activities are also major sources of everyday child learning opportunities (Dunst, 2008, 2020c). All of these different types of activities are sources of many different child learning opportunities and the foundations for learning different child behavior (see especially Dunst, 2020a).

Child and Situational Interests

Child and setting characteristics are both considered factors that engage children in everyday activities as sources of child learning opportunities (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Two of the more potent characteristics associated with child participation in everyday activities are children's interests and the situationally interesting features of people and materials in everyday activities (Dunst & Raab, 2012; Renninger et al., 1992).

Children's interests include their preferences, the things they enjoy doing, and the people and activities that get them excited (e.g., a child handing a favorite book to a parent to initiate a shared reading activity). Situational interests include the characteristics and features of everyday activities that evoke and encourage engagement with the people and materials in everyday activities (e.g., a child happening upon a puddle on a neighborhood walk which elicits jumping up and down in the puddle). Both types of interests are related to children with and without disabilities' participation in family and community activities (Dunst & Raab, 2012; Dunst, Bruder, et al., 2001).

Parenting Behavior and Practices

Parents and other primary caregivers play important roles in engaging young children in everyday activities and promoting child learning in the activities. The National Academies of Sciences (2016), for example, as part of a narrative review of parenting knowledge, attitudes, and practices, identified family routines (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007) and caregiver responsiveness (Dunst et al., 1990) as two of the more important parenting practices that are related to optimal child development.

 Richter (2004), in her narrative review of the parent-child interaction literature, concluded that "sensitivity and responsiveness [to child behavior] have been identified as the key features of caregiving behavior related to later positive health and developmental outcomes in young children" (p. 1). Other parenting behavior found important for facilitating child learning in everyday activities include parent-guided child participation (Rogoff et al., 1993), parent scaffolding of child behavior (Kermani et al., 2009), and children observing and active involvement (Rogoff et al., 2014) in everyday parent and family activities.

All of the above parenting behavior and practices have been used to develop different naturalistic teaching procedures that include everyday activities as the sources of child learning opportunities, child and situational interests as means to engage children in the activities, and parent sensitivity, responsiveness, turn-taking, scaffolding, and other supports (e.g., guided participation) for promoting child learning and development (Dunst, Raab & Trivette, 2012).

The findings from the different studies of young children's everyday learning opportunities provide converging evidence that the development-in-context activity setting model (Figure 1) includes practice characteristics that engage children in family and community activities. The results, taken together, indicate that person (child and caregiver) and activity setting characteristics are related to child participation in everyday activities.

Parenting and Family Supports

Parents are not able to engage their children in everyday learning activities if they do not have the time and psychological energy to carry-out parenting roles and responsibilities. Demands unrelated to parenting can and often do interfere with having the time to spend with their children. Bronfenbrenner (1979) noted that "Whether parents can perform effectively in their child-rearing roles within the family depends on the role demands, stresses, and supports emanating from other settings" (p. 7). Elsewhere, Bronfenbrenner (1975) stated that "Inadequate health care, poor housing,

lack of education, low income, and the necessity for full-time work…rob parents of the *time and energy to spend time with their children*" (p. 466, emphasis added).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) hypothesized that different social networks are the sources of supports and resources for parents to have the time and psychological energy to carry-out parenting responsibilities (see also, Cochran & Niego, 2002). Findings from family social support studies indicate that parent and family social networks are comprised of four to six different groups of informal and formal social network members (e.g., Almasri et al., 2014; Dunst et al., 1994b; Hanley et al., 1998; Littlewood et al., 2012).

Figure 2 shows one way of depicting the different social networks that are generally available to parents of young children. The particular social network members available to families would be expected to vary according to different family, neighborhood, cultural, and other factors. Members of the different social networks are considered potential sources of supports and resources depending on the types of help and assistance needed for parents to be able to engage their children in everyday activities and promote learning and development.

The sources of supports and resources shown in Figure 2 show a developing child embedded in his or her nuclear family and the family embedded in both kinship and informal social networks. (The Figure 1 variables and practices are the core features of the developing child component in Figure 2.) These informal social networks are embedded in different formal social networks that are sources of support and resources to young children and their families. These informal and formal social networks are viewed as sources of supports and resources for parents of young children with and without identified disabilities, chronic health conditions, or those at-risk for poor outcomes to be able to carry out parenting roles and responsibilities (Dunst, 2017a).
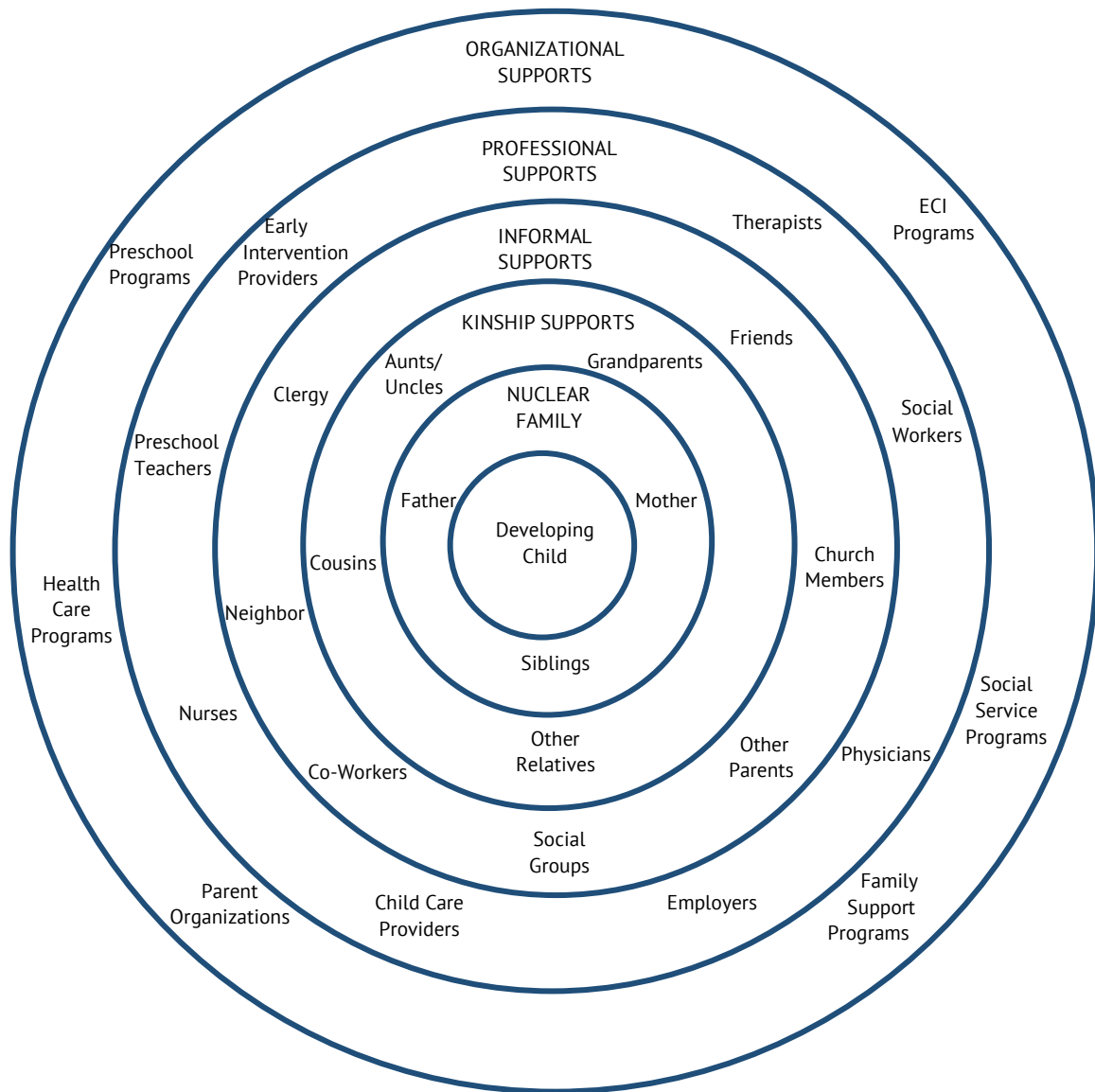
Figure 2. The informal and formal social networks that are sources of social support and resources for caregivers of young children. (NOTE. ECI = Early childhood intervention)

Research Foundations for the Family Systems Intervention Model

The hypothesized relationships described above and elsewhere (Dunst, 2017a) were used to develop a family social systems definition of ECI as the procurement or mobilization of supports and resources by parents and other family members from informal and formal family social network members in ways that directly and indirectly improve child, parent, and family functioning and which have capacity-building consequences (Dunst, 1985, 2000, 2017a). This is accomplished by ECI practitioners

using relational and participatory family-centered practices for working with parents and other family members (Dunst & Espe-Sherwindt, 2016).

The family systems intervention model that has been the focus of practice and applied research is shown in Figure 3. The model components are derived from the tenets described above as well as from lessons learned from more than three decades of practice and research. The four sets of practices in the model are operationalized by having parents, other family families, or other primary caregivers identify their needs (concerns and priorities), the supports and resources for addressing concerns and fulfilling needs, and using family and family member strengths to obtain needed supports and resources (Dunst, 2017a). Family-centered help-giving practices provide the foundation for building and strengthening a family's capacity to obtain needed family support and resources and to engage in desired child, parent, and family activities (Dunst & Espe-Sherwindt, 2016). Markers for determining if parent and family capacity has been strengthened are different self-efficacy beliefs and appraisals about the ability to execute courses of action to achieve goals and aspirations (Bandura, 1997; Skinner, 1995).
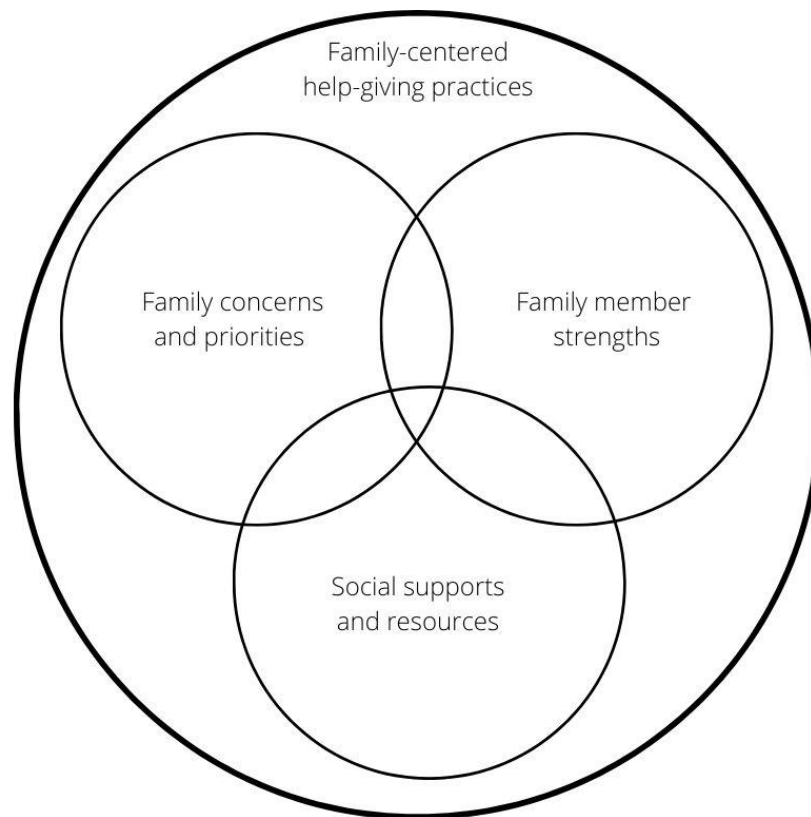
Figure 3. Four components of a family systems intervention model.

Research Evidence for the Intervention Model Practices

Three lines of applied research were conducted to test basic tenets of the family systems intervention model and to identify the conditions under which operationalized family systems intervention practices are related to child, parent, and family functioning. One line of research focused on evaluating how everyday activities, child and situational interests, and parenting behavior and practices are related to child learning and development. The second line of research focused on ascertaining how family concerns and priorities, supports and resources, family strengths, and family-centered practices are related to different domains of child, parent, and family functioning. The third line of research focused on identifying the pathways between (a) family systems intervention practices, (b) parent self-efficacy beliefs, (c) parent and family well-being, (d) parenting behavior and practices, and (d) child well-being, behavioral functioning, and child development.

Child Learning Opportunities

A basic premise of the framework in Figure 1 is that everyday activities are sources of development-enhancing child learning opportunities. An activity setting perspective of ECI uses everyday activities as the sources of children's learning opportunities and not places where traditional ECI is implemented. Results from several studies found that using everyday activities as sources of child learning and development resulted in considerably more learning opportunities compared to implementing ECI in everyday activities (Dunst, Bruder, et al., 2005; Raab & Dunst, 2004). Using everyday activities as sources of learning opportunities is associated with more child-initiated participation in the learning activities compared to implementing ECI in everyday activities (Dunst, Bruder, et al., 2006; Raab & Dunst, 2004).

Comparative studies of the two types of ECI practices also showed that using everyday activities as sources of child learning opportunities was associated with more positive and less negative child, parent, and family functioning compared to implementing ECI practices in everyday activities (Dunst, Bruder, et al., 2001, 2006; Dunst, Trivette, et al., 2006). This included differences in child well-being, child behavioral functioning, parent well-being, parenting competence, and family quality of life.

Results from meta-analyses of child participation in everyday family and community activities were related to young children's early literacy and language development (Dunst, Valentine, et al., 2013a, 2013b). Dunst, Valentine, et al. (2013b) found that child participation in shared reading activities, family routines, family outings, and other literacy activities was related to both expressive and receptive child

language outcomes and phonological and print awareness. The more frequently the children participated in family and community activities, the better the outcomes.

Meta-analyses of interest studies indicate that both child and situational interests are related to different child outcomes (Dunst, Jones, et al., 2011; Dunst, Trivette & Hamby, 2012a, 2012b; Raab & Dunst, 2007; Raab et al., 2013). The child outcomes related to interest-based learning opportunities include sustained child engagement in everyday activities and differences in child behavior functioning, child social-emotional behavior, child interpersonal relationships, and child cognitive, language, and literacy development.

Results from meta-analyses of caregiver behavior studies indicate that parent sensitivity and responsiveness to child behavior were both related to different child outcomes (Dunst & Kassow, 2008; Raab et al., 2013). Caregiver scaffolding and guided participation are two parenting practices often used to provide support and assistance to young children to enhance learning in everyday activities (see e.g., Vandermass-Peeler et al., 2002). Findings from meta-analyses of parenting practices studies showed that different verbal and nonverbal supports used while children were engaged in everyday activities had development-enhancing effects (Dunst, Williams, et al., 2012; Raab et al., 2013).

Studies that have included two or more of the activity setting characteristics shown in Figure 1 indicate that different combinations of factors contribute to child learning and development (Dunst, 2020b; Dunst, Bruder, et al., 2001; Dunst, Raab, & Hamby, 2016). Dunst, Raab, and Hamby (2016), for example, found that parents' use of naturalistic teaching practices as part of intentional efforts to increase child participation in interest-based everyday family activities was related to improved child language outcomes. Results from this study as well as those from the other studies described above provide empirical evidence for the development-instigating and development-enhancing consequences of the activity setting model practices.

Family Systems Intervention Model

The contentions that parents' abilities to carry-out parenting roles and responsibilities depend on the supports and resources available from informal and formal social network members and parents' abilities to seek out and procure those supports and resources requires evidence that the family systems intervention model components (Figure 3) are related to parenting well-being, beliefs, behavior, and practices as well as child and family behavior. The contention that the influences of family social systems variables can be traced to parenting practices and child learning

and development requires evidence for pathways of influence between the family systems intervention practices and parent, parent-child, and child outcomes.

Meta-Analytic Evidence

A series of meta-analyses have been conducted to determine if measures of the four different family systems intervention components are related to variations in parent, family, and child functioning. This has included meta-analyses of family needs studies (Dunst, 2022b), family resources studies (Dunst, 2021d, 2021e, 2022d), family support studies (Dunst, 2022a, 2022c), family strengths studies (Dunst, 2021b; 2021c; Dunst, Serrano, et al., 2021), and family-centered help-giving practices studies (Dunst, Trivette, & Hamby, 2007, 2008). The caregivers in the studies in the meta-analyses were primarily mothers but also included fathers and grandmothers of children and adolescents with and without identified disabilities or chronic health conditions. The focus of analysis in all of the meta-analyses was the sizes of effect (correlations) between the different family systems intervention practices measures and parent well-being, family well-being, parenting self-efficacy beliefs, parenting stress, parenting practices, child well-being, child behavioral functioning, and child development.

Table 1 (at end of the paper) shows the results for the relationships between the different intervention model components and the parent, family, and child outcome measures. The pattern of results was the same for all five sets of analyses. Fewer family needs, more family resources, more family support, more family strengths, and practitioner use of family-centered practices were related to less negative and more positive parent, family, and child functioning. More specifically, higher scores on the intervention-related measures were associated with less parenting stress and less child-rearing burden, and more positive parenting beliefs, parent well-being, parenting practices, family well-being, child well-being, and child behavior functioning. The results, taken together, provide support for the hypothesis that the different family systems intervention model practices would have positive effects on parents, families, and children.

In the meta-analyses where the relationships between the intervention model components and the study outcomes were examined for different subgroups of children, the sizes of effects for children with and without identified disabilities or chronic health conditions, the relationships between measures were all statistically significant. The same was the case for children at-risk for poor outcomes. In those meta-analyses including other moderator analyses, the difference in the sizes of effects was related to sub-components of the intervention model practices rather than caregiver, family, or child variables (Dunst, 2021a, 2021c, 2021f). For example, in a meta-analysis of the relationships between three different types of family resources

(basic resources, financial resources, and time availability) and caregiver psychological health and well-being, the size of effect for time availability was almost twice as large as the sizes of effect for the other two types of family resources (Dunst, 2021a).

Pathways

Several pathways models have been proposed to discern how different systems variables are directly and indirectly related to parent and child behavior (see e.g., Armstrong et al., 2005; Newland, 2015; Richter et al., 2018). The contention that the family systems intervention model practices are directly and indirectly related to parenting and child behavior and functioning requires evidence that there are pathways of influence between the family systems intervention model components and parent and child outcomes.

The pathways model that has been investigated by myself and my colleagues is shown in Figure 4. The arrows show the hypothesized direct effects between the six variables in the model. There are also hypothesized indirect effects between the different variables in the model. Family-centered practices are hypothesized to be indirectly related to self-efficacy beliefs mediated by the family systems intervention practices. The family systems intervention practices are hypothesized to be indirectly related to parent and family well-being mediated by parent self-efficacy beliefs. Parent self-efficacy beliefs are hypothesized to be indirectly related to parent-child interactions mediated by parent well-being. And parent well-being is hypothesized to be indirectly related to child behavior and development mediated by parent-child interactions.
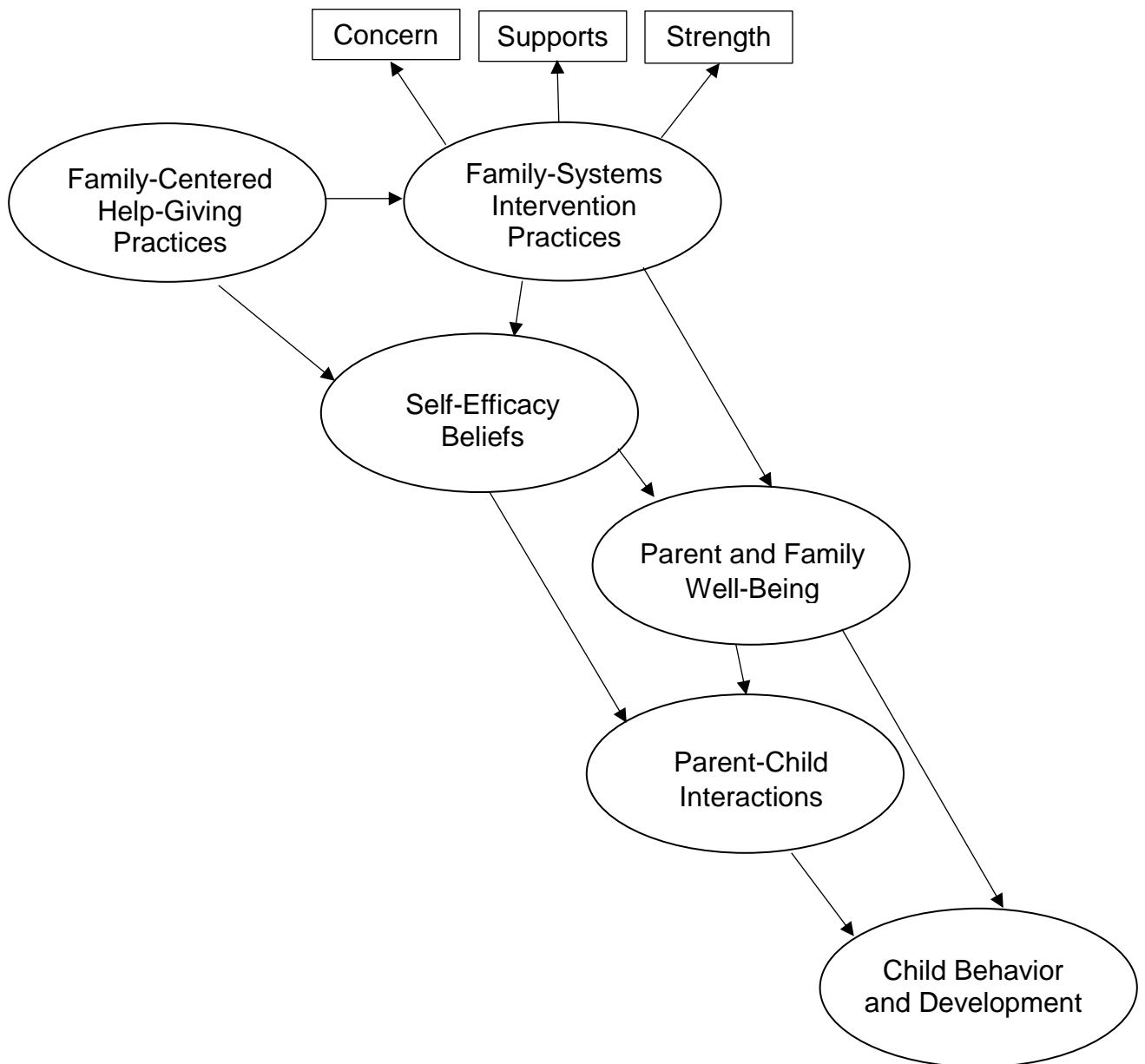
Figure 4. Pathways of influence between the family systems intervention model practices and parent self-efficacy beliefs, parent well-being, parent-child interactions, and child behavior and development.

One structural equation modeling study and three meta-analytic structural modeling studies were conducted to test the hypothesized direct and indirect relationships in the model (Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Dunst, Hamby & Brookfield, 2002;

Dunst, Hamby & Raab, 2019; Trivette et al., 2010). The studies included either family-centered practices measures or both family-centered practices and family systems intervention practices measures. All of the studies included self-efficacy belief and or both parent and family well-being measures. The parent-child interaction measures assessed parent sensitivity and responsiveness to children's behavior. The child outcomes in the different studies included child social competence, child well-being, and child development. The study participants were parents and other caregivers of young children with identified disabilities and/or chronic health conditions. Some studies included children at-risk for poor outcomes. Nearly all of the children were receiving ECI.

All of the pathways in Figure 4 were statistically significant in the studies including the variables in the model. Results showed that the family systems intervention model measures were directly related to parenting self-efficacy beliefs and well-being and indirectly related to well-being mediated by belief appraisals. In the two studies including parenting practices measures, the family systems intervention practices measures were indirectly related to positive parent-child interactions mediated by parent self-efficacy beliefs and parent well-being. Parent well-being was directly related to parenting practices and the child outcomes and indirectly related to the child outcomes mediated by positive parent-child interactions. The results showed that the pathways of influence between the family systems intervention model practices could be traced to parenting practices mediated by parent self-efficacy beliefs and parent well-being.

Discussion

The results described in this paper provide empirical support for the basic tenets of the applied family social systems theory and both the activity setting and family systems intervention model practices. The research reviewed for the activity setting model showed that child learning and development were related to children's interests, the interestingness of people and materials in everyday activities, and parents' behavior and practices. The meta-analytic research reviewed for the family systems intervention model practices showed that family needs (concerns and priorities), supports and resources, family strengths, and family-centered practices were related to variations in parent, family, and child behavior and functioning. The research reviewed for the pathways model showed that the family systems intervention model practices could be traced to variations in parenting practices and child behavior and development through positive parent self-efficacy beliefs and positive parent well-being. These different set of results contribute to what Canosa and Graham (2020) describe as theoretical

contributions to child studies by showing how child learning and development is related to sources of influence beyond a child's family.

The three sets of results, taken together, indicate that parents and other primary caregivers' abilities to engage young children in development-enhancing everyday activities (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) depends on the supports and resources necessary for parents and caregivers to have the time and psychological energy to promote child learning and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). The results also indicate that other family systems variables also covary with parents' abilities to use positive parenting behavior and practices. The different sets of meta-analysis results (Table 1) for the four family systems intervention model components showed that the family needs (concerns and priorities), family support and resources, and family strengths measures were all associated with less parenting stress, less parenting burden, more positive parent self-efficacy beliefs, and more positive parenting practices. Results from the family-centered meta-analyses showed that the use of these types of help-giving practices was also associated with less parenting stress and more positive parent self-efficacy beliefs. The pattern of findings is consistent with Armstrong et al.'s (2005) pathways model between social support, well-being, parenting, and child functioning (see also Richter et al., 2018).

The applied family social systems theory described in this paper differs from other applied theories in three important ways. First, one focus of analysis is understanding child learning and development in the context of everyday child, parent, and family life (Mehl & Conner, 2012). Second, the variables of interest are ones that can be operationalized as intervention practices for improving children's, parents', and families' lives (see Dunst, 2017b, for a description of procedures for developing operationalized practices). Third, variables that cannot be altered (e.g., child condition) or are beyond the scope of ECI are treated as moderators and the focus of analysis is whether the relationships between intervention practices and outcomes of interest are the same or different for the moderator variables (see e.g., Dunst, 2021e).

One contribution of the applied family social system theory to child studies in the context of ECI is the findings that different family and systems variables and intervention-related practices have direct and indirect effects on child well-being, learning, and development. The practices that are related to parent, family, and child outcomes include those considered best practices (e.g., family-centered practices) but also practices that are still not a main focus of ECI (e.g., use of informal social supports and broad-based family resources). This is unfortunate because these latter variables (as well as family strengths) were found to be important in terms of explaining the availability of child learning opportunities, positive parenting beliefs and practices, and child well-being, learning, and development. Research is needed to better understand

the processes and mechanisms to explain how and in what manner the family systems intervention model practices provide the foundation for desired outcomes in ECI programs for children with identified disabilities, chronic health conditions, and developmental delays.

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Table 1

Average Weighted Effect Sizes for the Relationships Between the Different Family Systems
Intervention Model Components and Different Parent, Family, and Child Outcomes

Intervention Model Components	k	N	r	95% CI	Z-test	p-value
Family Needs Studies[a]						
Parenting Stress	7	554	-.46	-.57, -33	8.15	.000
Parenting Burden	7	1199	-.42	-.56, -.26	5.97	.000
Parenting Beliefs	4	152	.30	.04, .52	3.63	.000
Family Well-Being	3	425	.30	.11, .39	6.57	.000
Child Behavior Functioning	4	1100	.28	.17, .38	8.00	.000
Family Resources Studies						
Parenting Stress	20	4170	-.42	-.47, -.37	15.66	.000
Parenting Burden	8	1102	-.33	-.42, -.24	7.74	.000
Family Stress	10	2495	-.35	-.43, -.26	8.43	.000
Parenting Beliefs	11	1039	.24	.12, .35	4.35	.000
Parenting Practices	14	3294	.29	.23, .35	9.33	.000
Family Well-Being	5	190	.35	.19, .48	5.94	.000
Child Engagement	11	1319	.27	.18, .36	6.28	.000
Child Behavior Functioning	6	566	.35	.22, .46	6.89	.000
Family Support Studies						
Parenting Stress	62	5687	-.21	-.25, -.17	9.63	.000
Parenting Beliefs	13	1106	.22	.16, .28	7.80	.000
Parenting Practices	13	1421	.21	.17, .23	12.86	.000
Parenting Burden	26	2936	-.14	-.18, -.10	7.12	.000
Parent Well-Being	24	1962	.17	.09, .23	4.80	.000
Family Strengths Studies						
Parenting Stress	6	705	-.37	-.57, -.12	3.80	.000
Parenting Burden	6	702	-.27	-.50, -.02	2.74	.000
Parenting Practices	14	4808	.43	.28, .56	5.69	.000
Parenting Beliefs	8	1324	.35	.30, .40	15.53	.000
Parent Well-Being	7	520	.54	.30, .71	5.07	.000
Family Well-Being	10	2545	.54	.43, .63	9.52	.000
Child Well-Being	11	1603	.27	.19, .35	7.19	.000
Family-Centered Practices Studies						
Parenting Stress	23	1543	-.28	-.32. -.25	11.97	.000
Parenting Beliefs	20	945	.15	.11, .18	5.07	.000
Parent Well-Being	7	554	.19	.25, .32	8.07	.000
Family Well-Being	10	1543	.26	.23, .30	8.32	.000
Child Behavior Functioning	10	308	.19	.09, .22	5.98	.000
Child Well-Being	14	401	.28	.19, .41	5.76	.000

NOTE. k = Number of effect sizes, N = Number of study participants, *r* = Average weighted
correlation coefficient, and CI = Confidence interval.

[a]The family needs scales were scored so that higher scores indicated fewer needs (concerns and
priorities).

Bionote

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BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES IN THE ADOPTION OF EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES IN THE CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

BENEFÍCIOS E DESAFIOS NA ADOÇÃO DE PRÁTICAS BASEADAS EM EVIDÊNCIAS NOS SERVIÇOS PARA A CRIANÇA E A FAMÍLIA

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Abstract

The Council of Europe's Recommendation (Rec 2006/19) to promote positive parenting, aimed at fostering child development and protecting child rights, has emphasized a preventive approach to support all families, the need to strengthen parental capacities and empowering communities, and the adoption of evidence-based practices (EBP) to improve the quality of professional work with families. This paper, revolved around this Recommendation and expanded in three related directions: (a) described the modern view of parenting as articulated in three facets: dyadic parenting, team parenting, and social parenting, and their corresponding support needs; (b) proposed the challenges and redefinition of EBP for the field of child and family services; and (c) showcased the building of the national agency-university partnership, the translational research-practice bidirectional process, and the implementation and evaluation of evidence-based programmes to foster the adoption of EBP in Spain. The conclusions highlighted the benefits involved in this complex process of quality assurance.

Keywords: Positive parenting, parenting task, evidence-based practice, evidence-based programmes, standards for evidence, quality assurance

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Resumo

A Recomendação do Conselho da Europa (Rec. 2006/19) para promover a parentalidade positiva, destinada a promover o desenvolvimento infantil e proteger os direitos da criança, enfatizou uma abordagem preventiva para apoiar todas as famílias, a necessidade de fortalecer as capacidades parentais e capacitar as comunidades, e a adoção de práticas baseadas em evidências (PBE) para melhorar a qualidade do trabalho profissional com as famílias. Este artigo reflete em torno desta Recomendação e desenvolve-se em três direções relacionadas entre si: (a) descreve a visão moderna da parentalidade articulada em três facetas (parentalidade diádica, parentalidade em equipe e parentalidade social), e as correspondentes necessidades de apoio; (b) aponta os desafios e a redefinição da PBE para o campo dos serviços à criança e à família; e (c) apresenta a construção da parceria nacional agência-universidade, o processo bidirecional de pesquisa-prática translacional e a implementação e avaliação de programas baseados em evidências para promover a adoção da PBE na Espanha. As conclusões destacam os benefícios envolvidos neste complexo processo de garantia de qualidade.

Palavras-chave: Parentalidade positiva, tarefas parentais, prática baseada em evidências, programas baseados em evidências, padrões para evidências, garantia da qualidade

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Introduction

Our conception of what parenting should look like has changed considerably in our modern society. This is due not only to the large variety of family structures and the diversity of cultures that currently co-exist in our society, but also to a shift in the conceptualization of the parenting task. Traditionally, competent parenting was taken for granted except in problem cases in which parents failed to behave properly. In the modern view, parenting is a task that requires a set of aptitudes and skills that can be learned (Budd, 2005; Martín, Cabrera, León & Rodrigo, 2013). It is also recognized that the quality of parenting does not depend on the psychological qualities of the parents within a social vacuum, but rather exists in a range of ecological conditions that surround the family that facilitate or hinder this task (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). There is also a need to replace the concept of parental authority, which focuses solely on meeting aims related to the child's obedience and discipline, with the much more complex and demanding concept of parental responsibility related to the child's confidence, communication, autonomy, empathy, and reflection (Grusec, 2011).

Although the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) recognized that children's rights are better preserved and enhanced in appropriate family contexts and responsibility of parental figures (parents, legal guardians, or other persons responsible for the child), it took time for the international organizations and national governments to set the stage for a comprehensive and sustained child and family policy that encompasses legislation and policies which regulate and support families within a modern view of parenting.

The Council of Europe (COE), a major intergovernmental organization that currently includes 47 Member States, started the lead with the 'Recommendation on policy to support positive parenting' (Council of Europe, 2006, p. 3) that emphasizes the governments' duty to create the ecological conditions for positive parenting. COE defines positive parenting as the parental behaviour based on the best interests of the child that is nurturing, empowering, non-violent and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting of boundaries to enable the full development of the child. Under this lens, the aim of the parenting task is to foster positive family relationships, based on parental responsibility that guarantees the child's rights, promotes the child's participation in the socialization process and optimizes her optimal development and active contribution to community life (Rodrigo, 2010; Daly, 2013; Daly et al., 2015).

Significantly, the COE Recommendation states that all families need support to a greater or lesser extent, and so the main challenge lies in knowing how to provide support for the broad diversity of family circumstances through appropriate, high-quality services (Rodrigo, Almeida & Reichle, 2016). On this regard, the positive parenting framework promotes the co-responsibility of the state in the development of programmes, projects, services and/or measures to support families from diverse domains of action (social, healthcare, educational and legal), to provide equal opportunities for families as they fulfil the functions entrusted to them by society. Under this initiative, the family should be considered as an asset, an investment in the future, a social resource that is to be protected and supported, given its key role in the development of individuals and the protection of their rights, especially of the most vulnerable, as well as an instrument for the social cohesion and welfare of communities.

This paper addresses three related topics that allow the implications of the Positive Parenting Recommendation to be further developed. First, described the modern view of parenting as articulated in three facets: dyadic parenting, team parenting, and social parenting, and their corresponding support needs. Second, proposed the challenges and redefinition of evidence-based practices (EBP) for the field of child and family services. Finally, showcased the adoption of EBP in Spain focusing on the operational aspects and benefits involved in this complex process.

Three facets of parenting today

The child and family policy with a focus on the parental role as the main guarantee of children's rights has implied a modern view of parenting (Figure 1). The three facets of the parenting task are totally embedded one inside the other like Russian dolls. The internal task is the "dyadic parenting" established very early through caregiver-infant encounters that consist of sensitive and responsive interactions to read the child's signals conveying her needs that fosters healthy, protective and stable emotional bonds for the baby (Bowlby, 1982; Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland & Carlson, (2008). Early relational experiences and caregiver-infant interactions are very important in building lifelong health, early learning, social-emotional capacities, self-regulation and resilience (Metzler & Willis, 2020). In particular, the dyadic emotional availability observed during mother–child exchanges in a free play task (Biringen, 2000; Biringen et al., 2014), as well as mother-child temporal synchrony are fundamental to predict the quality of infants' attachment (Biro et al., 2017). In contrast, poorly sensitive and responsive mother–child interaction has been related to maternal alterations in the brain response to infant signals in neglectful caregiving (Rodrigo et al., 2016; Rodrigo et al., 2019). This dyadic factor has a high diagnostic value for the early child neglect among other maternal and social factors (Herrero-Roldán et al., 2021). Policy measures for parental leave (for both mothers and fathers) and public early care and education are very important to ensure support for dyadic parenting.

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┌─────────────────┐   ┌─────────────────┐   ┌─────────────────┐
│ Dyadic parenting│   │ Team parenting  │   │ Social parenting│
└─────────────────┘   └─────────────────┘   └─────────────────┘
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Dyadic parenting

Parent-child interactive bonding to promote a secure attachment of the child

Parental leave

Early care and education

Team parenting

Involvement in child care and education:

Co-parental alliance

Complementary support (grandparents, ex-partners, etc)

Family-Work conciliation and equalitarian distribution of household tasks

Social parenting

Building a social network of informal and formal supports

Quality of life, cohesion and social inclusion

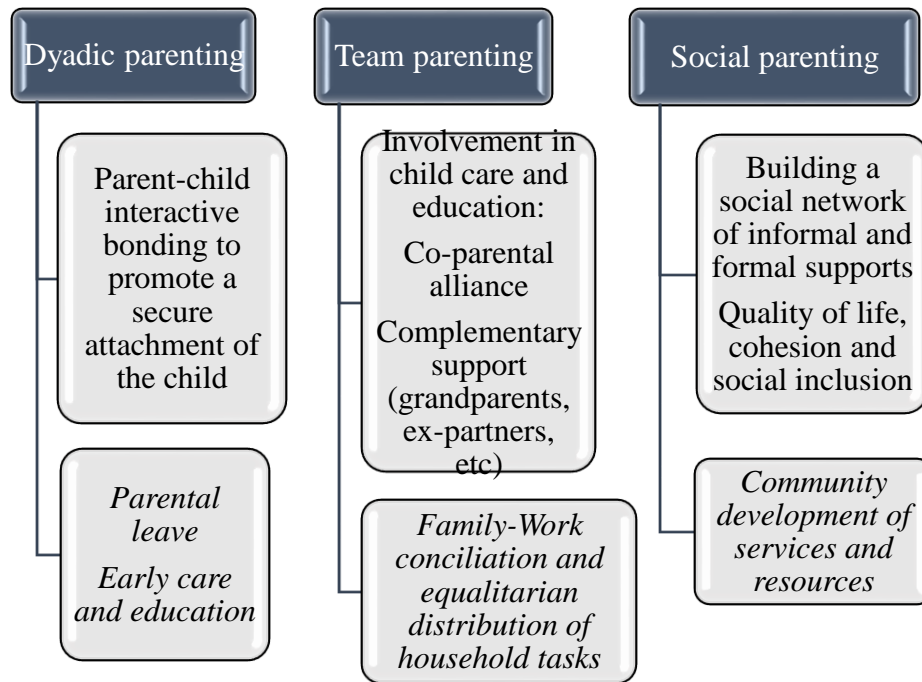*Community development of services and resources*

Figure 1. The complex task of parenting in modern societies and supportive measures

Just in parallel and close to the dyadic parenting, the establishment of the "team parenting" begins. This task consisted in the design of a structured environment for growing up in, with activities and routines that are applied flexibly to promote healthy habits and transmit rules and values of families without substantial environmental risk factors (Callejas, Byrne & Rodrigo, 2021; Guralnick, 2011, 2013; Grusec, 2011). The environment should also offer stimulation, support and opportunities for learning, as well as recognition of the child's achievements and abilities and the provision of everyday guidance (Cantor et al., 2021; Dunst et al., 2000). To prevent damages due to exposure to early adversity, the setting must be free of physical, verbal or emotional violence. Due to family diversity, the teams can be formed by the couple in a co-parenting alliance (Favez, Tissot & Frascarolo, 2018) or through complementary support with ex-partners or grandparents. The support here can consist in the granting free time for the family leisure through family-work conciliation measures and the promotion of an egalitarian distribution of household responsibilities.

Finally, the outer layer of parenting is "social parenting" which involves the caregiver's work in building the social support network to overcome difficulties and reduce parental stress. Environmental conditions and circumstances affect the parents' abilities to respond to their child's needs (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Dunst, 2021; Osher et al., 2020). Social networks can be generally defined as the set of

structural components of social relationships that surround individuals comprising kinship, friendship, employment or other community ties, while social support is a function of those social relationships (Cochran & Walker, 2005; Gottlieb and Bergen, 2010). Informal support is provided by personal networks made up of family members, friends, or neighbors, and is embedded in a natural framework of bidirectional, reciprocal relationships. Formal support can be obtained from institutions and professionals such as social workers, teachers, or police, and is embedded in a framework of unidirectional professional-client exchanges. Nowadays, the parents use of the Internet is an additional source of information to better promote their children's development and family wellbeing (Dworkin, Connell, & Doty, 2013; Niela-Vilén, Axelin, Salanterä, & Melender, 2014; Suarez, Byrne & Rodrigo, 2018a). The use of the Internet and social media allows parents to obtain information and advice from experts, but also to exchange experiences with other parents and create virtual communities around certain child-rearing topics, and attend structured online programmes (Suarez, Byrne & Rodrigo, 2018b; Suarez, Byrne & Rodrigo, 2022). All sources of support are necessary for adequate parenting what implies strong community development of resources and services.

Redefinition of EBP practices for the child and family services

The complexities involved in the parenting task, the emphasis on prevention and promotion of capacities and resilience in the family and the need of parental support for a great variety of families poses many challenges for the professional work with families (Canavan, Pinkerton & Dolan, 2016; Dolan, Pinkerton, & Canavan, 2006; Rodrigo, Almeida & Reichle, 2016; Rodrigo, Byrne & Álvarez, 2016). First, professionals should **r**ecognise and respect family, socio-educational, cultural, and gender *diversity*, always based on the best interests of the child and the meeting of their needs. Second, they should follow an *inclusive approach*, providing universally and easily accessible services to families to normalise the use of these resources, while also ensuring that support reaches those most in need. Third, the preventive approach also involves support to families through a *collaborative approach* that involves the recognition and promotion of their strengths, to encourage their autonomous functioning and confidence in their possibilities. Finally, professionals should follow the *participatory approach* that places families in the centre of the services to enable their participation to ensure that their points of view and their needs are considered. And finally, there should be cooperation and interdisciplinary coordination between agencies, facilitating means of sharing and working in an interdisciplinary network.

Taking a preventive stance to family intervention also involves a profound shift in the way professionals understand their work with families towards the promotion of

a culture of EBP as a professional model of practice (Barth et al., 2012). EBP is generally defined as the integration of the best scientific evidence with professional clinical expertise and patient/user preferences and values (Institute of Medicine, IOM, 2001; American Psychological Association (APA), 2006; Asmussen, 2012). International standards of evidence widely adopted by the scientific community have been proposed placing the use of Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) at the highest quality level (e.g., Society for Prevention Research, Flay et al., 2005). However, some researchers and practitioners consider that other standards of evidence should be considered when moving from clinical efficacy trials to multi-site effectiveness trials or to a multi-agency delivery of practice in community settings based on prevention and strength-based approaches (Berg, 2019; Boddy, Smith, & Statham, 2011). The situation is even more controversial when delivering evidence-based services for vulnerable families oriented to reducing social isolation and increasing social integration (Acquah & Thévenon, 2020). Some examples of suggestions for potential indicators of best evidence in this case include adapting the programmes to make it acceptable to a wide range of socioeconomic/cultural groups (Davis, McDonald, & Axford, 2012), ensuring that the programmes are implemented with fidelity by agencies and staff (Durlak & DuPre, 2008), and assuring sustainability by integrating the programmes into the network of public community resources. Fortunately, the current standards of the Society for Prevention Research have been sensitive to these demands and included all these aspects related to the implementation and scaling up of the programmes (see Gottfredson et al., 2015).

Figure 2 depicts the current view on evidence-based standards adapted to the child and family services proposed by the European Family Support Network (Almeida et al., 2021; EurofamNet). EurofamNet is a bottom-up, evidence-based, multidisciplinary network funded over a four-year duration as an Action (CA18123) under the European Cooperation in Science and Technology Programme (COST). EurofamNet was created with the purpose of stablishing a pan-European family support network by building collaborations between researchers, practitioners, policymakers, children and families, public and private agencies, and general society to inform family support policies and practices and to face current challenges at European level (European Family Support Network, 2020).
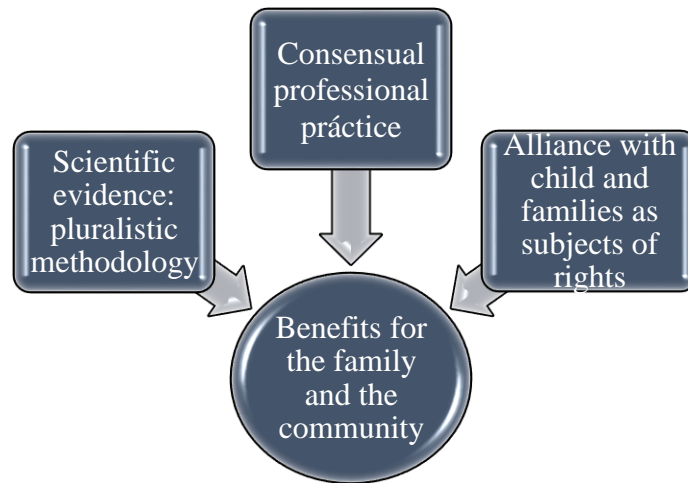
Figure 2. Model of evidence-based practices adapted to the child and family field

According to this view, standards for evidence should include three components to produce benefits for the families and communities. The first component refers to the *scientific evidence* that should entail a pluralistic approach with both quantitative and qualitative methodology used to evaluate the implementation process and the results of the practice (Fives, Canavan, & Dolan, 2017; Fixsen, Blasé, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009; Rodrigo, 2016). This evidence must be complemented by a second component that derives evidence from *consensual practical knowledge* achieved through the experience of professionals in a variety of contexts. Some people may believe the use of EBP de-emphasizes decisions based on experience, authority or opinion. However, advocates of EBP do not minimize the importance of experience. Instead, they believe evidence-based programmes and practices should be integrated with the experiences and resources that agencies bring to practice. Finally, the third component of EBP is the necessary placement of the practice within a *collaborative alliance* with the child and family as active and collaborative members of the intervention. This implies recognizing that are subjects of rights, not just as consumers or recipients of help. To safeguard the rights of children, parents and families is a very distinctive aspects of the professional practice in this context. To sum up, EBP from a positive parenting standpoint, should combine the best evidence from applied science and agreed professional experience with respect for the rights of children and youth and the alliance with the family, all within a service provision framework that has been shown to be beneficial to families and the communities in which they live.

The process of adoption of EBP in Spain

The Council of Europe's recommendation on positive parenting has been widely disseminated in Europe (Rodrigo, Almeida, & Reichle, 2016). Spain is one of the southern European countries where the positive parenting framework has received the greatest support, due to the political involvement in the dissemination of this initiative at the national level (Rodrigo, Byrne, & Alvarez, 2016). Spain has adopted the preventive approach to family intervention, recognizing that strengthening parental capacities and empowering communities are the best ways to protect children, to preserve their rights, and to promote their development. The existing network of basic and specialized municipal social services in Spain offers a launch pad for family-based prevention initiatives. Well-trained, motivated professionals working in multidisciplinary teams are the force that guarantee positive results for these initiatives. Spain is also fortunate to have a robust network of NGOs and volunteer movements providing support to families facing adverse circumstances or with special needs.

Nevertheless, as happened in other countries, there has been several obstacles to introduce the EBP into the mainstream of professional practice in child and family services in Spain. To start with, there are different family policies since Spain is vertebrated in autonomous regions. Professionals may come from different disciplinary backgrounds (e.g., social work, psychology, social education, and nursing) using different paradigms of intervention and working in different sectors directed at universal, selective and indicated populations (Frost, Abbott, & Race, 2015). There are different modes of service provision to the family: individual, home visiting, group, community, online. Finally, there is a lack of a consensual evaluation culture among professionals since the focus was mainly on the individual expertise acquired thanks to the experience in the service.

The necessary professional and scientific consensus on best practices in the field of child and family services is not often easily reached, readily adopted, or effectively translated into practice in the field, which is also a common obstacle among countries. Based on a review of the literature and interviews with expert researchers (Bellamy, Bledsoe, & Traube, 2006), four significant categories of barriers to the implementation of EBP have been identified: (1) lack of knowledge about how to best access, critically evaluate, and translate evidence for use with families; (2) lack of fit of currently available evidence with practice needs and populations; (3) suspicion and distrust of evidence and EBP based on objections related to political, ethical, or control issues; and (4) lack of resources for the training, materials, and staff time necessary to research the evidence.

Building upon the knowledge of the barriers and obstacles mentioned, the Spanish adoption of EBP was based on a process of systemic transformation under the project: "Families in positive" that started in 2009 (Rodrigo et al., 2018). The initiative was guided by three driving forces: (A) a *collaborative schema* between policymakers, researchers and practitioners*;* (B) a *transactional model* from research to practice and vice versa ending up in a quality assurance process applied to the relationships between services, practitioners and families; and (C) the implementation and evaluation of *evidence-based programmes* as a flagship of the EBP adoption in Spain. We described the operational aspects of each driving force in turn.

(A)   The *collaborative schema*

A collaborative schema was stablished on one side between the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (a nation-wide association of 7,331 local entities) and the Spanish Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030 and, on the other side, with a group of experts on parental education and family intervention from seven Spanish Universities (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Universidad de La Laguna, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Universidad de Lleida, Universidad de Oviedo, Universidad del País Vasco, and Universidad de Sevilla). It was also clear that there was a need to bring on board practitioners working in child and family services to build collaborative pathways between policymakers, researchers, and practitioners (Bellamy et al., 2008). A representative steering committee set dissemination and training goals each year through documents, conferences, and professional training cascading from seed groups composed of coordinators to local frontline providers from different sectors (Rodrigo, Máiquez & Martín, 2010 a, b; Rodrigo, Máiquez & Martín, 2011). The main goals of the collaboration were to implement a positive parenting policy to strengthen parental capacities and empower communities, and to adopt codes of professional best practices to improve prevention work in child and family services in Spain.

(B)   The *transactional model*

This model was built to facilitate the connections from research to practice and vice versa to achieve a consensual adoption of EBP adjusted to services and professional work with child and families, through collaborative research with practitioners. The improvement of the quality of the assistance given to families is a challenge for both practitioners and services, who must rethink their professional practice in order to adapt to this new approach. The aim of the transactional model was to apply the adapted notion of EBP and to reach consensus with professionals

about quality standards under the positive parenting framework. Once a consensus on EBP was reached, it was very important to establish a new consensus, this time on the interprofessional competences required to provide services to families. In fact, EBP and professional competences are two concepts that enable and strengthen each other, such that one is not fully possible without the other. In turn, consensual interprofessional competences help setting professional standards for training and professional capacity, which in turn allows for the further consolidation of quality standards (Figure 3).
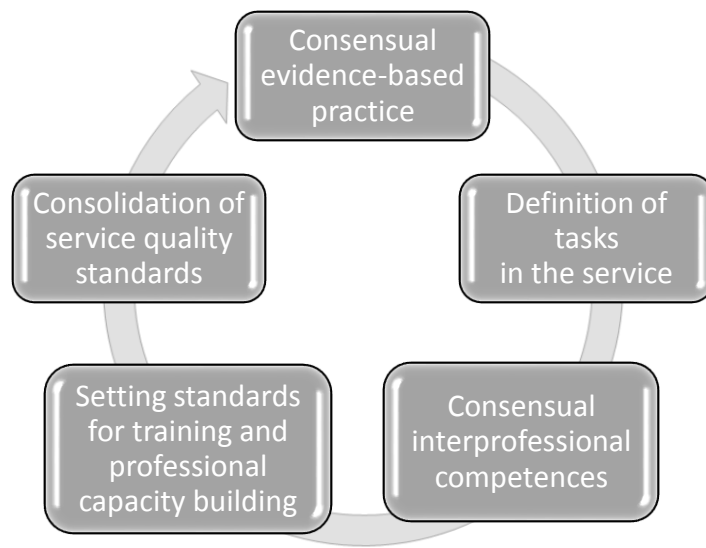

Figure 3. Cycle of enrichment and dissemination of EBP through interprofessional competences to consolidate quality standards in the service

Two main outputs of the transactional model were the "Best Practice Guide for Positive Parenting. A resource for practitioners working with families" (Rodrigo et al., 2015) and the "Guide of Interprofessional Competences in Positive Parenting. A resource for enhancing and consolidating best practices in services for children, youth and families" (Rodrigo et al., 2022). In both Guides EBP and their corresponding competences are provided in three domains of tasks: a) Characteristics of family support services and organisational culture; b) The process of professional work with families; and c) The implementation and evaluation of evidence-based programmes to support families.

In the "Best Practice Guide for Positive Parenting" series of EBPs are defined in more detail for each of the three domains, which are accompanied by indicators with a rating scale that contain even more specific wording that can help detect the presence or absence of this practice in professional or service work (a total of 25 EBPs and 189 indicators). An online version of the Guide was located in the *official website: familias en positivo* (http://familiasenpositivo.org) operating since 2015 that includes an extranet with news, monographs and materials for the general public with 420.000 visitors and 60% of return, and an intranet for politicians, professionals, researchers and students with educational programmes, evaluation tools, research synthesis, exchange of experiences, among others, with 2.500 entries. The very process of applying the Best Practices online protocol located in the intranet contributes to developing innovation and improving service quality. Its application requires, directly or indirectly, the involvement of all those individuals who are involved in the service, under the coordination of a "boosting group". Once the protocol is fulfilled, a final report is automatically delivered from the platform with the outcome of the evaluation in terms of strengths and weakness that should be overcome through a Plan of improvement sent to an official national committee for eventual approval. If the outcome is positive the service receives and official Recognition for the Promotion of Positive Parenting (https://familiasenpositivo.org/reconocimientos).

In turn, the "Guide of Interprofessional Competences in Positive Parenting" (Rodrigo et al., 2022) described the competences to develop joint and coordinated actions with other professionals from the positive parenting standpoint. *T*he *interprofessional competences* are defined as an integrated set of knowledge, skills and attitudes/values that define work between professionals of different disciplines, in alliance with families and their social networks and communities, to improve the quality of the services provided and the results thereof. A consensus has been reached with professionals on the competences to be developed in the three domains of tasks already mentioned: a) Characteristics of family support services and organisational culture; b) The process of professional work with families; and c) The implementation and evaluation of evidence-based programmes to support families. For each of these areas, a set of *competences* (12 in total) and corresponding *microcompetences* (213 in total) are included, which are divided up into knowledge (49 indicators), skills (106 indicators) and attitudes/values (58 indicators). The Guide can be used to review and reorient the definition of competences in undergraduate and graduate degree programmes where future generations of child, youth and family practitioners are trained. The guide can be also useful for interprofessional training in professional associations, services and social entities. It can also help complement the Plan of improvement developed from the online protocol already mentioned, suggesting the needs of training of certain competences. Finally, an awareness of the interprofessional competences included in

this Guide can facilitate the selection, guidance and supervision of practitioners working in services and social entities.

(C) Implementation and evaluation of evidence-base programmes

A set of structured EBP practices can give rise to a specific intervention programme. These are known as *evidence-based programmes* that have the following characteristics: they have a theoretical basis that addresses the expected process of change; they define their objectives, target population, contents and methodology, and these are described and structured in a manual; they evaluate their efficacy, effectiveness and/or efficiency in accordance with quality standards; and, finally, the conditions of implementation of the programme that affect its results in families and the community are known (Flay et al., 2005; Fixsen et al., 2005; Gottfredson et al., 2015).

The introduction of evidence-based programmes is driving a change in services and social entities fostering the adoption of EBP by way of facts. First, it brings in a *culture of evaluation* that is often undervalued in these contexts. Second, it includes new strategies derived from the positive parenting approach based on the *assessment of capacities and strengths* and the application of positive parenting promotion programmes, among others, as part of the intervention process. Third, by focusing on prevention, it *broadens the range of families* that can be supported beyond those already in a serious and chronic situation. Fourth, it increases the *modalities of provision* used (not only individual home visits but also group and community intervention, both in person and online), giving greater scope to the possibilities of intervention in cases. Fifth, it contributes to the *training of professionals* and to reorganising services and entities so that they are oriented to new approaches to professional practice. Finally, the provision of community services in *collaboration with other services* can be addressed in this reorganisation.

As an illustration of the increased use of evidence-based programmes in Spain, in the context of the EurofamNet project, members of the Spanish Family Support Network have identified 57 programmes implemented in Spain in education, healthcare, social, and community sectors (Rodrigo, Hidalgo, Byrne, Bernedo & Jiménez, in press; see also the whole monograph in the journal Educational Psychology). A common Data Collection Sheet was built under the consensus of the EurofamNet to carry out a formative evaluation of the programmes providing guidelines to improve the programme according to the standards for evidence. Although the list of programmes is not meant to be exhaustive, it represents the first catalogue of Spanish family support programmes rigorously contrasted with the same set of standards for evidence in the prevention science (see the full catalog of European

programmes in the website (https://eurofamnet.eu/toolbox/catalogue-family-support-programmes).

Finally, important outcomes are also the legal and policy actions at the Autonomous Community level that demonstrate the widespread of the positive parenting framework across Spain. There are Child Protection laws and Social Services laws in the 17 autonomous regions and two autonomous cities: Ceuta and Melilla. There are also Plans and Strategies for child and family support based on the Positive Parenting initiative in 14 autonomous regions. Finally, Positive Parenting has being included as a reference framework in Plans and Strategies for child and family support in the social, educational, health, and judicial sectors.

Conclusions

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) recognised that children's rights are best met in the family environment which secures their care and protection. Despite this, it took around two decades to develop mechanisms and resources for securing appropriate family support measures at the policy level. What happened in the meantime? Although Child Protection laws ensured the legal status of children's rights, parents disappeared as protective figures in the family setting and emerged as the main perpetrators of child abuse and neglect. Interestingly, this occurred at a time when the developmental sciences had accumulated strong evidence supporting the crucial role of the family as the context of child development. It seems that during these years there has been a divorce between the scientific and protective status of the family and the legal and policy status of the family.

The development of European parenting and family policies began with the Council of Europe's (2006) initiative on positive parenting. This initiative once-again relocated the focus on the protective role of the family and parental figures in the development and well-being of the child. It also offered an interesting vantage point from which to view parenting as it is collectively conceived of today. After many years of neglecting their importance, parents are seen as playing a key role in society, and parenting is recognised as needing public support "in-cash, in-kind, and in-time" (Dolan, Žegarac, N., & Arsić, 2020). However, the importance of the role of family support as central to meeting the children's need requires continuous reaffirmation by advocating that it be seen as a right of the child (Dolan et al., 2020).

Bringing the parenting task to the center of the family setting requires an exercise in theoretical integration between various developmental theories. Thus, in this paper we have mentioned that to envision what dyadic parenting implies, it is crucial to bring into account attachment theory (Bolwby, 1969/1982; Dunst, & Kassow, 2008).

Understanding what team parenting entails requires relying on theories that described the everyday setting as a realm for socialization practices (Grusec, 2011) and learning opportunities for child development (i.e., Cantor et al., 2021; Dunst et al., 2000; Guralnick, 2011, 2013). Finally, understanding social parenting requires, at the very least, incorporating Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1992), developmental systems theory (i.e., Cantor, et al., 2021) and family social system approaches (i.e., Dunst, 2021; Osher et al., 2020). Thus, the modern conceptualization of parenting tasks closely overlaps with that needed to contextualise child development and wellbeing.

This paper also advocated for the adoption of EBP, as redefined by the EurofamNet project, in the child and family services. This adoption brings several benefits. The incorporation of EBP not only produces changes in child and family well-being, but also leads to positive changes in professionals' work with families and contributes to a better organization of the services. The adoption of EBP allows services and entities to test the functioning of their professional practices; redirect efforts toward the provision of coordinated actions to improve efficiency; render due accounts of what has been done in the service and of the benefits obtained by the families and the community; ensure informed decision making in the services or entities that allow improvements to be made; and, finally, establish an informed and duly oriented family policy that creates the appropriate frameworks to facilitate improvement of services and the generation of knowledge for society.

The final section of the paper showcased the process followed in Spain to promote the adoption of EBP according to the 'Families in positive' project. Spain is an interesting case as the service provision to families has been steadily improving since the economic crisis in 2008, while at the level of general family policy – i.e. the combination of benefits, services, tax breaks and leave arrangements that support family members in raising and providing care to minor children and other dependent persons – the situation has undergone some changes but few major reforms (OECD, 2022). This situation is intended to change with the proximal approval of the "Ley de familias" (Law of families) aimed at increasing the state support to the family diversity. For its part, the national strategic plan currently under way to promote child and family well-being represents a new line of family policies, highlighting the important role that positive parenting plays as a protective factor for child development and recognising the need to provide more preventive and integrated support to families. The increasing implementation of evidence-based programmes in Spain in a sustainable way is an important step towards introducing the evidence-based movement in the domains of child and family services. In this regard, it is good news to see quality assurance in the provision of services increasingly placed at the forefront of efforts by policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to deliver the best evidence-based programmes to support parents.

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Bionote

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MAINTAINING QUALITY IN TEACHER EDUCATION: A CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL CHALLENGE?

ASSEGURAR A QUALIDADE NA FORMAÇÃO DE PROFESSORES: UM DESAFIO GLOBAL CONTEMPORÂNEO?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to scrutinise what the term quality means in the context of teaching and teacher education and to discuss how we maintain those aspects of quality that do appear to be important in the contemporary development of policy and practice in teacher education. The paper draws on some comparative studies in teacher education that have been undertaken in recent years. Initial consideration is given to the macro and meso levels of policy and practice, through looking at state institutions and at the roles of educational institutions. The focus then turns to the micro level, considering the quality of the participants in the provision and experience of teacher education. The paper identifies the anthropological significance of teacher education and the wider social insights that may be gained from such study in the twenty-first century and in conclusion some contemporary global challenges to the maintenance of quality in teacher education are considered.

Keywords: teacher education, quality, policy and practice, comparative study, contemporary global challenges

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Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é o de analisar o que significa o termo "qualidade" no contexto do ensino e da formação de professores, discutindo como se mantêm os aspetos de qualidade que parecem ser importantes no desenvolvimento

contemporâneo de políticas e práticas de formação de professores. O artigo fundamenta-se em diversos estudos comparativos sobre formação de professores desenvolvidos nos últimos anos. A consideração inicial incide sobre os níveis macro e meso das políticas e das práticas, considerando instituições estatais e os papéis das instituições educacionais. O foco volta-se de seguida para o nível micro, considerando a qualidade dos participantes na oferta e na experiência de formação de professores. O artigo identifica o significado antropológico da formação de professores e os contributos sociais mais amplos que podem ser obtidos a partir de tal estudo no século XXI e, em conclusão, são considerados alguns desafios globais contemporâneos para a manutenção da qualidade na formação de professores.

Palavras-chave: formação de professores, qualidade, políticas e prática, estudo comparado, desafios globais contemporâneos

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1. Introduction

> There has been an explosion of interest in "teacher quality" around the globe during the past decades. (Akiba and Le Tendre, 2018, p. 1)

From the 1980s onwards, we have seen significantly heightened political interest in teacher education. The impacts of neoliberalism and of globalisation have been much commented upon and have been noticeably different in diverse settings, albeit with many common elements. But perhaps the most powerful mantra - certainly affecting the western world and many parts of the developing world, has been the dual proposition that the quality of education depends on the quality of teachers and that the quality of teachers depends - at least in significant part - on the quality of their preparation, of their teacher education. While this is a powerful mantra much beloved by populist politicians, there is of course also much to recognise in it from the points of view of those of us who are teachers and teacher educators. The mantra should not be dismissed. Teachers do matter (Day, 2007) and certainly teacher education does matter.

The purpose of this paper is to scrutinise what the term quality may actually mean in the context of teaching and teacher education and to discuss how - once we know what it means - we maintain those aspects of quality that do appear to be important in the contemporary development of policy and practice in teacher education. In order to

undertake this task, after seeking some definition of the term, I will draw on some comparative studies in teacher education that I have been engaged in over recent years, in particular to ascertain what comparative study may bring to this agenda. Initially I consider especially the macro and meso levels of policy and practice, through looking at state institutions and at the roles of educational institutions. But then I turn to questions around the quality of the participants in the provision and experience of teacher education, that is the managers and practitioners of teacher education in schools and universities, but I also consider their students, including their recruitment into teaching.

Following these discussions, I step back again in order to identify what might be described as the anthropological significance of teacher education and the wider social insights that may be gained from the study of teacher education in the twenty-first century. At least in the UK, anthropology is a discipline which has all too rarely been deployed in the study of education, both within schools and colleges and within teacher education.

In all of these deliberations, in seeking to draw out how the maintenance of quality is indeed a considerable challenge, I identify a number of aspects that reveal just how very severe some of the global challenges are. The exemplars I take relate to health, conflict and climate change. We cannot discuss teacher education today without acknowledging the impact and influence of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Nor can we ignore the terror and destruction caused by violent conflict such as that being witnessed (at the time of writing) in Ukraine. Neither can we expect - even without pandemics and conflict - that the future of teacher education is safe, stable or secure while the climate is warming and physical resources are declining at an unprecedented rate.

So the central problem to be addressed in this paper is how can we develop teacher education positively in times of rapid change and uncertain futures?

2. What do we mean by quality in teacher education?

'Quality' is arguably one of the most over-used and poorly defined words in education today, including in teacher education. We may start by looking at dictionary definitions. Even there, we find many different entries, but among those that seem most salient to education are, from *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*:

- 'the degree of excellence of a thing';
- 'general excellence'.

But can education be seen as a 'thing', surely it is rather a process, albeit with inputs and outputs? And if quality is about excellence, excellence suggests a relative judgement. So if we are aspiring for universal excellence in education, where is that which the successful parts excel? (We had a White Paper in England a few years ago called *Education Excellence Everywhere*!! (DfE, 2016)) These may seem like semantic points but they do remind us that excellence and indeed quality tend to be used as persuasive, judgmental and sometime hyperbolic terms. 'Quality in education' is, in other words, a somewhat slippery or problematic term (see Mockler, forthcoming). As Michelle Schweisfurth puts it:

> As a construct or variable, it ['quality'] tells us little about what to do to improve teaching and learning. It also has implications for the initial and continuous professional development of teachers. As such, it goes beyond a question of language to a question of discourse, with the power to shape perceptions and actions. (Schweisfurth, in press)

When we attempt to judge whether something is of high quality we need some criteria by which to make this judgement. These criteria may be seen as being representative of our values, which leads us to see how definitions of quality may be - and frequently are - contested. If what I value in education is the development of strong subject knowledge and what you value is the development of creativity and independent thought, then how are we to agree on what constitutes quality in education? Indeed, as Raymond Williams pointed out in his brief history of English education in his book *The Long Revolution*, three very different underlying sets of educational values may be identified, what he called the old humanists, the public educators and the industrial trainers (Williams, 1961/2011; Menter, 2022). In my experience this triumvirate of interests may be detected in education systems as well as in teacher education around the world. In many countries today, the industrial trainers are very much in the ascendancy, with the great emphasis globally on the economic impacts of education.

When we are focusing more closely on teacher education *per se*, another approach to questions of quality is to look at how we understand teacher professionalism. In a recent issue of the *European Journal of Teacher Education*, Maria Flores and I suggested that contemporary definitions of teacher professionalism must incorporate a view of teaching as a research-based profession (Menter & Flores, 2021) (that paper also drew

on the BERA-RSA report from 2014; see also Mayer and Menter, 2021). Such a perspective leads towards a very different understanding of quality in teacher education from that of the industrial trainers.

Even if and when we have agreed on our definitions of quality in teacher education, we may then move on to the even trickier question of the links between the particular processes of teacher education and the outcomes designated as being of high quality, that is to a consideration of the causal links between inputs and outputs in teaching. In an analysis of approaches to the professional development of teachers and their respective impacts on quality, Linda Evans has suggested:

> Conceptual clarity and definitional precision are found wanting, and the variability transcending these extends to the professional development process – which, notwithstanding some significant contributions…. – remains under-researched and under-theorised. (Evans, in press)

Much the same could be said for all stages of teacher development including pre-service education.

Notwithstanding the conceptual difficulties of agreeing on what is meant by quality in teacher education, we may also note that most teacher education systems include what might be seen as a sub-system for 'quality assurance'. In England that is largely based on a process of inspection by a special government agency, Ofsted. In some such settings the 'accountability' processes for quality in teacher education seem to have been taken out of the hands of the professionals involved in providing it and rather are imposed from external sources. Cochran-Smith and her colleagues have explored how fundamentally undemocratic such approaches are likely to be (Cochran-Smith et al, 2018; see also Cochran-Smith 2021). In Scotland, on the other hand, there is much more emphasis on self-evaluation (Hulme and Kennedy, 2016), as there is in many other countries, including some of those where teaching appears to be of the highest quality in terms of international assessments (eg Finland) (see Hudson, Zgaga and Astrand, 2010; Harford, Hudson and Niemi, 2012).

I turn next to consider how we may use research approaches in order to judge quality within systems of teacher education, before then considering issues of the quality of the personnel involved. In a report from Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) in England called *Quality in Schools: the Initial Training of Teachers* (and note the use of the technicist term training rather than education), published as long ago as 1987, it was suggested:

> The success of the initial training system must be measured by the quality of the foundation it lays, and by the thoroughness with which it prepares students for their professional responsibilities. (HMI, 1987:2)

Yet again, while we may agree with the essence of such a statement, this assertion raises far more questions than it answers. Let us see what we find when we look at research conducted internationally.

3. The quality of the systems: What does comparative study reveal?

My own interest as a researcher in comparative studies, and their power to provide deep insights in teacher education, came when I moved from England to work in Scotland in 2001. Starting with two country comparisons of teachers and teacher education in Scotland and England, I later linked up with colleagues in Northern Ireland, Wales and later again, the Republic of Ireland. It was this work which led to the suggestion that in terms of teacher education, England is an outlier among these five nations, having gone down the neoliberal route to a much greater extent than the other nations (see Childs and Menter, 2013; TEG 2016). England became an outlier partly because of the steady exclusion of educational theory within the pre-service programmes, the emphasis being rather on tightly defined and sometimes ill thought out standards (Furlong, 2013). It also became an outlier through the growing complexity and diversity of entry routes into the profession, including a significant expansion of employment-based routes (Whiting et al, 2018; Sorensen, 2019).

Beyond the UK and Ireland, working with Teresa Tatto, we led a twelve nation study of knowledge, policy and practice in teacher education (Tatto and Menter, 2019), considering matters at the macro/national and meso/institutional level which enabled us to identify patterns of 'vernacular globalisation' – that is processes of both convergence and divergence, reflecting the interaction of global and national influences.

The 12 countries involved in this project were: Australia, Czech Republic, England, Finland, Hong Kong, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Korea and the USA.

The six themes emerging were:

- 'professionalisation' and 'universitisation';
- the relations between research, policy and practice;

• partnership between schools and higher education;

• power and control;

• the rise of 'standards', the impact of performativity and accountability;

• the impact of digitization.

(see Menter, 2019)

Subsequently I added a seventh theme concerned with the continuum of professional learning for teachers, focussing on the links between initial teacher education and continuing professional development. These seven themes, I would suggest, offer useful indicators for assessing some aspects of the quality of teacher education systems.

More recently I have been working with colleagues in Poland, Croatia and Russia, editing a collection of accounts of developments in teacher education in 21 nations across Central and Eastern Europe, all having been under some form of communist influence during a large part of the 20th century, and then going through a process of so-called 'democratisation' late in that century. This is a project supported by the Association for Teacher Education in Europe (ATEE) (Kowalczuk-Walędziak, Sablic, Valeeva and Menter, in press). Reviewing the 21 cases, the editorial team identified eight insights, including a number that relate to quality:

• There is sometimes a disjunction between reforms on school education, teacher education and higher education more generally. Additionally, some reforms focus on structures and organisation, others on curricula and learning.

• The influence of European integration processes is very apparent in a number of the cases considered. Teacher education across the region is moving towards Masters level programmes.

• The importance of cultural and ethnic diversity within many of the countries is apparent and perhaps especially significant are questions around languages.

• There is great significance in the standing and status of teachers and of teaching as a profession in these 21 settings and the relationship of these with the supply of teachers.

So these are four of the eight insights gained from our review of the 21 accounts shared by our colleagues. If we put the two sets of indicators together, we have a list of eleven criteria which can help us to assess the quality of teacher education systems.

4. The quality of the participants: what does analysis of the processes reveal?

In a comparative study of teacher education policy and practice in England and the US which adopted an explicitly sociocultural methodology, the question of 'alignment' emerged as a key concept in understanding how outcomes in teacher education may be shaped by values and cultures at institutional and individual level (Tatto, Burn, Menter, Mutton and Thompson, 2018). What happens when the values espoused by different individuals and by different institutions involved in teacher education are or are not aligned? We considered such questions at three interlocking levels - macro, meso and micro and identified both opportunities for change (OfC) and opportunities for development (OfD). This work was influenced by Vygotsky, Hedegaard and Bernstein, among others. We gathered video and interview data in schools and universities in one teacher education programme in each country and developed ways of analysing these enabling us to explore the nature of learning that was occurring. In this account I will focus on the meso and micro level in order to ascertain the extent to which teacher education processes may be experienced and may be related to the culture and commitments of the schools and universities involved, as well as the dispositions, values and 'object motives' of those individuals who are learning and teaching what it is to be a teacher. Katharine Burn and I have written elsewhere in more detail about how a sociocultural approach can link processes encountered at the individual level with much broader global patterns (Burn and Menter, forthcoming), here though the focus is mostly on the actors themselves.

Quoting from our book from this project, we defined the OfD and OfC as follows:

> An OfD is characterised by a sense of 'crisis' or critical period caused by a lack of alignment between the views and practices of an individual and one or more of the institutions from which they are learning, or from contradictions between the object motives and practices of the institutions themselves. These critical periods may also be caused by tensions or contradictions that originate from within the learner as they respond to a particularly complex social situation of development. An OfC

may be evident in response to a critical period or sense of crisis, but does not necessarily depend on evident contradictions, but rather on individuals' recognition of their own limitations or the limitations of the situation they are in and on their abilities to imagine and enact a different role for themselves as teachers. These abilities rely in turn on the mediational tools made available to them by the higher education institution (HEI) partner or by the school or brought into the situation by the student teacher as a result of their previous experiences and prior learning. (Tatto et al., 2018, p. 228)

Having analysed all of the cases covered in the study we were able to suggest five categories that encapsulated most of the different kinds of experience that we encountered amongst the 26 beginning teachers who took part in the study:

a) Vertical and horizontal alignment with few apparent tensions or contradictions/tensions.

b) Vertical alignment across institutions with a high level of tension or contradiction evident at the individual level that was successfully resolved through effective mentoring.

c) Unacknowledged contradictions between the two institutions (the school and HEI), which resulted in low levels of support for the individual.

d) Vertical alignment between the individual and the school culture and practices, but not with the HEI.

e) Vertical alignment between the individual and the HEI, but not with the school. (Ibid., p. 150)

By vertical alignment we refer to the relationships between macro, meso and micro; by horizontal alignment we refer to relationships between actors at one of these levels. What the study shows overall, in terms of 'quality in teacher education', is that key contributions to the processes are made by the values, dispositions, orientations and culture of the individuals and the institutions that are taking part.

This may then raise questions about recruitment, not only questions about who is recruited to become a beginning teacher, but also who is recruited and deployed to support the processes of teacher education, whether in schools or in universities.

Beliefs, values, previous knowledge, dispositions of recruits are all highly salient, as is the question of who defines what is desirable and how these judgements are made. There is not space to discuss this in full here, but nevertheless this reminds us of the importance of these recruitment processes and their relationship to questions of teacher supply (Menter, Hutchings and Ross, 2002; Menter, 2011).

5. Teacher education and the nation state: an anthropological perspective

Having discussed issues of quality in teacher education at the level of systems, institutions and individuals I now want to step back and explore the relationship between teacher education and the nation state, developing a case for adopting an anthropological perspective on teacher education.

It is worth noting at the outset that teacher education is mostly organised at the level of the state, sometimes the nation state and sometimes a state in a federation of states. This no doubt reflects the fact that schooling systems are mostly organised at that level as well and it is usually assumed that teachers should be educated for the particular system within which they are intending to work. At a time of increasing globalisation in our economy, it is deeply fascinating that education and teacher education continue to be mainly organised at national and /or state level – although that of course is not to deny the significant influence of global forces within these national systems (Menter, 2016; 2019).

So, through reviewing and analysing a nation's teacher education system we are appraising what it is that teachers should know, what they should be able to do and how they should be disposed, in order to help in the formation of the future adult citizens of the society, in perhaps ten to twenty years time. Teacher education may be taken to be highly symbolic of how a society sees its future and is therefore highly indicative of its underlying values. Perhaps it is a realisation of this that has turned teacher education into such a centre of political interest in the past twenty to thirty years in many countries.

A key question that emerges in the West as we witness these rapid changes and increased instability of historic forms of education is the role of the state in education and particularly in teacher education[1]. Traditionally, education systems were controlled by the state because, in great part, education was seen as indispensable for the development of healthy democracies. An important argument that supported the key role of education in the U.S. came from Dewey (1916), who argued for the need to provide access to quality education for all citizens (universal public education) to support the advancement of the individual and society. (This is in line with Williams'

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[1] The next three paragraphs draw heavily on a forthcoming chapter by Menter & Tatto (in press).

'public educator' viewpoint, mentioned above). Dewey's ideas, as well as those of other philosophers and sociologists of education, were disseminated widely and influenced the underlying philosophy of education for many years not only in the U.S. but globally, and provided the rationale for the state to take most of the responsibility for such an important task.

However, towards the end of the twentieth century, the introduction of market models and the related global influences on education gave rise to decentralization and privatization where intentionally - but paradoxically - the state devolved its responsibility for education to the regional departments of education or the private sector. Andy Green (1997: 2-5) refers to this trend as the 'post-national' era and wonders 'how far can national states control education systems, in a world of global markets, supranational political organization [and] pressures for international convergence?' The case of teacher education in England, operating under market models, illustrates how the actions of an authoritarian state is managing to destroy years of progress in the education sector using misleading arguments (Childs and Menter, 2013).

At this point, it is valuable to once again turn to a comparative exploration in order to analyse developments in the East Asian countries and Central and Eastern Europe and their process of democratisation where, as Green argues, the state tends to continue to see education as playing a central role in constructing a sense of national identity, language and culture. It may well be that in the West and after the COVID pandemic, education will be seen as a renewed priority and that the education and proper remuneration of teachers will be seen as essential in the development of modern citizens who, in Green's words 'would have a broader understanding of the interdependence of nations, the diversity of societies, and the global nature of solutions to the world's problems' (Ibid.).'

So following from insights such as these, the historical and cultural view we take may well develop into an anthropological perspective. As set out above, the analysis of teacher education policy in any state system is deeply revealing of the currently dominant values within that society. Through defining how and where teachers should be prepared for their work and sometimes through prescribing exactly what it is they should know and be able to do, we see how those in power in society are seeking to shape the world for future citizens. However, these values and commitments are not necessarily simply enacted within the society. There may well be considerable resistances, adaptations and 'accommodations' that are made as policy processes are played out. My further contention is that these contestations themselves are highly significant sociologically and are frequently indicative of deep underlying conflicts within the society. It is for reasons such as this that the study of teacher education

policy is of enormous interest not only to educationalists but also to sociologists and political scientists, and I would now want to add - anthropologists! The discipline of anthropology sets out to explore the transmission of culture within a society and education - perhaps as much as, or more than, any other social process - is centrally and explicitly concerned with cultural transmission.

Such an anthropological perspective may assist us in making sense of what I see as three major global challenges to maintaining quality in teacher education in the twenty-first century: health, conflict and climate change.

Health

The rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus around the world in 2020 had very direct impacts upon teacher education. Nearly every country around the world undertook various forms of 'lockdown' in attempts to reduce the spread of the disease and to minimise the number of premature deaths (Reimers, 2022; Breslin, 2021). These lockdowns included the temporary closure of both schools and universities, the two key institutions involved in the provision of teacher education. Two aspects that arose are of particular significance in teacher education, the challenges to the 'practicum' and the suspension of face to face teaching.

The practicum is universally seen as a core element of initial teacher education. Every initial teacher education programme in the world includes some element of school experience for the beginning teacher. Typically, the beginning teacher spends periods of time in school classrooms, taking increasing responsibility for teaching children, usually with the support both of teachers in school and of visiting staff from the university providing the programme. The particular details and structures of the practicum vary enormously both between different national and state settings and even within these settings. However, it is a reasonable generalisation to suggest that the beginning teacher's performance in the school setting is assessed against a set of teaching standards or competences. That assessment is seen as a key indicator of that person's preparedness to enter the profession as a qualified teacher. The challenge of completing a teacher education programme when schools are closed was therefore considerable and led to some imaginative responses. In some settings even when schools reopened after a period of lockdown, there was great caution about allowing any 'non-essential' personnel into the setting in the light of concerns about increasing the risk of the virus spreading.

The second key element of the effects of the pandemic was in relation to the mode of pedagogy deployed in teacher education. Students were not only unable to attend the practicum setting - the school experience - they were also unable to attend

classes in their home university, as these institutions were also closed for lengthy periods. This led to a surge in the use of electronic, virtual means of communication. Various virtual learning environments (VLEs) were deployed, including Blackboard, Canvas, Webex and Minerva Collaborate. Other platforms were used for meetings and tutorials including Zoom, TEAMS and Skype. Such systems had been in use in many contexts before the pandemic struck, but the rapid expansion of their use during 2020 was quite phenomenal. The nature of the pedagogical relationships between teachers and learners was dramatically altered through the use of screens and the affective dimensions of interaction were shifted substantially with the reduced possibilities of effective non-verbal communication, usually a key element in learning, especially in one-to-one teaching situations.

Some of these issues arising from the pandemic are explored in more detail by teacher educators in special issues of two journals - (see Flores & Swennen, 2020; O'Meara & Hordatt Gentles, 2020; also Menter & Flores, 2021; Maguire et al, in press).

Conflict

I mentioned earlier our work on teacher education in 21 Central and Eastern European countries. These 21 nations include several where there has been violent fighting in the quite recent past (for example in the former Yugoslav Republic) but also in Ukraine where we can only speculate how teacher education may or may not be surviving, let alone maintaining quality following the Russian invasion in February 2022. Here is a brief extract from the conclusion of the chapter on Ukraine to be published in that collection. This was of course written in the months before the war broke out:

• A report *The Key Competence Lighthouse. Key-competence-driven reforms in Ukraine and Georgia* by the European Training Foundation (2021, p. 24) highlights the key achievements of the extensive, far-reaching reforms currently taking place in Ukraine under the New Ukrainian School (NUS) initiative:

• It is undertaking the most wide-reaching education reforms of recent times, building on international experiences and innovation among Ukrainian teachers and teacher educators. The latter have been pioneering new approaches to shape an education system that is focused on the needs of the individual learner rather than on delivering uniform knowledge-based lessons.

• These reforms should be continued and their positive results supported in order to build a modern system of teacher education, which will have a significant impact on the quality of education of pupils - future citizens of Ukraine. (Shyyan and Shyyan, in press)

The optimism reflected in this statement must have been shattered by the Russian onslaught on Ukraine. Regrettably, there are all too many other parts of the world where violent conflict has disrupted education systems, including teacher education.

Climate change

The process of global warming has been linked to an increasing number of major environmental disasters, including floods, storms and fires. In many instances these have directly affected schools and other educational establishments. What are the implications for teacher education and for the teaching profession? Much of the political action that has been undertaken in response to climate change has been led by young people in many parts of the world and the school strike actions, notably led by Greta Thunberg, have challenged schools, teachers and teacher educators in several countries. If children are absenting themselves from school to protest at the failure of their seniors to act on climate change, should teachers, student teachers and teacher educators offer their support? If school attendance is mandatory, then offering such support could be construed as an illegal act on the part of those adults (as well as the children). These are very real moral dilemmas for many professional educators. The threats to the planet associated with global warming threaten all species, including humans. What is the role of teacher education in reversing these catastrophic processes?

6. Conclusion: a contemporary global challenge

In this paper I have demonstrated how the concept of quality in teacher education in a complex one. It has many dimensions that can be considered at various levels, including the system, the institutional and the individual. I have outlined a number of criteria which may be deployed in making an assessment of the quality of a teacher education system. Furthermore, I have sought to explore how major global issues may create new forms of challenge to the maintenance of quality, including health, conflict and climate change. We certainly live in turbulent times and looking from an anthropological perspective we may continue to suggest that teacher education is a key signifier of the state of health of the world, the nation and indeed of the spaces and places where we live and work. As Tom Are Trippestad and colleagues put it so eloquently:

> The identification of the importance of teacher education, together with the contradictory and often idealized visions and goals from a wide array of stakeholders, produces continuing struggles for teacher education, affecting teacher education in a profound way.... In the intensified struggle for teacher education nationally and internationally at present, the voice of teacher educators is often missed or marginalised. (Trippestad, Swennen and Werler, 2017, p. 1)

In a fascinating study looking at ITE provision in five different global locations, but sharing the common criteria of operating at a large scale, Clare Brooks has identified five 'quality conundrums', relating respectively to practice, research, knowledge, the teacher educator and governance. All of these I have also at least touched on in this paper but I do find that I agree wholeheartedly with Brooks' conclusion. She writes:

> An understanding of quality in teacher education around the concept of transformation (rather than standards) and an appreciation of the spatial context in which teacher education take place is central to the work of "high quality" university-based teacher educators. (Brooks, 2021:211)

The maintenance of quality in teacher education is certainly a contemporary challenge but I would add that one of the key elements in maintaining quality in the policy and practice of teacher education will be the continuing maintenance of quality research. We need (as I have argued before, Menter, 2017) research *in, on* and *about* teacher education. We need to continue to research policy and practice but also to deploy a wide range of disciplinary methods, not only the usual approaches of educational research (action research, evaluation, sociology, psychology, etc.) but also comparative study, political economy, historical and cultural analyses, geographical and anthropological perspectives.

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