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Abstract

Despite the expense and effort expended on ‘Every Child Matters’ (2003), England produces some of the unhappiest children in the western world (UNICEF 2007). Significant factors underlying this issue relate to the national culture of care and education; in particular ‘over a quarter of children do not look forward to going to school’ (The Children’s Society 2012, p.60).

This is not a new debate. In the early years of the twentieth century, Margaret McMillan proposed that it was impossible to effectively educate tired, dirty, infested, diseased and hungry slum children for whom compulsory schooling consequently became a source of abuse (Mansbridge 1932). McMillan’s criticisms and subsequent development of early years practice eventually spawned an enduring range of public initiatives relating to children’s physical health. However, concern for children’s psychological well-being is less well developed; this can be seen by the dominance of the transmission style of learning within the English National Curriculum, a style that “does not adequately recognise ... the need for to-be-learned material to be embedded within cohesive narratives” (Jarvis 2009, p.66), and in the lack of attention paid to the impact of attachment difficulties upon the entire developmental period (Wetz 2009).

This paper will argue that the focus for early twenty-first century educators should be a thorough and holistic exploration of evolutionary, psychological, philosophical and sociological perspectives relating to human development and, in particular, how these may conflict with threads of political pragmatism in state education, where policies often seem “to be more concerned with the welfare of the national economy than with the welfare and protection of young children” (Alderson 2008, p.53). The perspectives of Bruner (1990), Wittgenstein (1953) and Bowlby (1988) will be at the centre of this debate.

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Introduction: the historical context

The roots of political pragmatism in the British state education system date from the very beginning, from Victorian schooling as social control (Thompson 1981) to the mid-twentieth century focus upon schooling as preparation for work (Phillips and Harper-Jones 2002), and the ‘New Labour’ focus on children as trainee consumer-workers in a complex post-industrial global society, motivating Alderson to propose that ‘[Every Child Matters] seems to be more concerned with the welfare of the national economy than with the welfare and protection of young children’ (Alderson 2008, p.53).

Following the instigation of state-funded education in 1870, social reformers appointed by school boards began to question the wisdom of an education system fashioned in the factory schools of the mid-19th century to be completely driven by top-down directives, relentlessly focused upon transmitting to children only what they needed to know to become very small worker ‘cogs’ within the huge ‘wheel’ of a newly industrialised society. One such reformer, who eventually made a major and enduring contribution to the ethos of Britain’s public services for children, was Margaret McMillan (1860-1931). At the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth, she pioneered initiatives that went on to form the basis of modern children’s health and protection services, and modern early years care and education practices. She relentlessly insisted that children’s physical needs must be met in order for them to be receptive to education, proposing that it was impossible to educate tired, dirty, infested, diseased and hungry children and that,
if the state insisted such children were to attend school without putting in place measures to deal with those in poor physical condition, then the school (and the state) would become yet another abuser (Mansbridge 1932). The ideas that she introduced gradually became nationally entrenched, creating an environment in which Susan Isaacs (1885-1948) could introduce play-based learning in her Malting House School, premised upon emerging evidence from psychological research, drawing her practice from the concept that “play has the greatest value for the young child when it is really free and his own” (Isaacs 1971, p.133). It can be argued that, following the advent of the welfare state over the immediate post-Second World War period, the culmination of these ‘care and education’ developments was expressed most explicitly within the Plowden Report on primary education, which proposed that: “At the heart of the educational process lies the child” (Department of Education and Science 1967, p.25).

It might have seemed at that time that Britain was on the brink of creating an educational system that would mirror those emerging in the Scandinavian countries, but the national attitude began to change as the more politically unstable decade of the 1970s dawned, with the so-called ‘William Tyndale Affair’ in January 1974 acting as a catalyst for an abrupt change of direction in the national education debate. The William Tyndale Junior school in North London had begun to operate under a highly progressive team-teaching regime that gave children a great deal of choice and freedom...... To all intents and purposes there were no rules at all (Haigh 2008, online).
James Callaghan, the then Labour Prime Minister who created British education's first 'New Deal' in 1976, agreed with the basic sentiments of the anti-progressive lobbyists, and criticised new informal teaching methods.

However, he eschewed extremes of commentary, stating in his 'Ruskin College' speech:

The goals of our education, from nursery school through to adult education, are clear enough. They are to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive, place in society, and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other but both..... The balance was wrong in the past. We have a responsibility now to see that we do not get it wrong again in the other direction. There is no virtue in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills (Callaghan 1976, online).

The Thatcher Conservative government, elected in 1979, followed through with the legislation that created the National Curriculum in the Education Reform Act 1988 and the schools' inspectorate, OFSTED in The Education (Schools) Act 1992. Conway (2010) refers to the National Curriculum as a 'legal straitjacket' that was introduced in far too detailed and prescriptive a manner. Likewise, the system of monitoring school performance that it instituted went far beyond anything that had been truly called for... pupils became subjected to far too much external testing (Conway 2010, p.4).

When a Labour Government was subsequently elected in 1997, the controls exerted through the National Curriculum and OFSTED were increased, creating detailed instructions for teachers not only relating to what to teach, but how to teach; the second 'New Deal' legislation (which instigated the
literacy and mathematics hours in primary schools in 1998 and 1999 respectively) re-emphasising the concept of education as the transmission of various sets of skills. The ultimate goals of children’s services were spelt out by Every Child Matters (2003): the child was not only to be safe within his/her environment and in good health, but also s/he must be making an undefined ‘positive contribution’ that, if considered jointly with the following requirement, to ‘achieve economic well-being’, demonstrates a political imperative to re-create schools as compliant consumer-worker citizen creation factories: a twenty-first century version of the factory schools of the early industrial period.

Children’s author Michael Rosen commented upon the notion of literacy education becoming a forum for skills-based instruction, leaving no time for an effective and affective introduction to story-telling and published imaginative narratives:

> All these initiatives the government … put in place … actually spoilt many children’s chance of loving books … These initiatives are about learning to read – there’s virtually nothing at all about enjoying books (The Guardian 2009, online).

The practice of transmission teaching ‘to test’ within such regimes, where the material to be taught is broken down into specific objectives, funnelling down into a set of highly defined outcomes, sometimes referred to by teachers as WILF (What I am Looking For) has also drastically reduced the opportunities for children to contribute to the collaborative construction of original shared
narratives through genuine, open-ended peer ‘discovery’ activities (Jarvis 2009, Layard and Dunn 2009; Santer et al. 2007; McNess et al. 2003; Bishop and Curtis 2001; Reay and Williams 1999).

This preamble introduces the contemporary educational and political context in England. Throughout a nearly twenty-five year history, successive versions of the National Curriculum have focused on the transmission of knowledge and skills, with scant attention being given to social, emotional and affective development. While some lip-service is paid to these in current guidelines for the youngest children aged birth to five, early years practitioners are increasingly perturbed by the requirement for children to show quite advanced intellectual skills by the time they transfer to the first year of the National Curriculum by, for example, having to show competence in mechanical phonetics by decoding a set of ‘nonsense’ syllables. However, as Whitebread and Bingham (2011, p.3) propose:

The model of ‘readiness for school’ is attractive to governments as it seemingly delivers children into primary school ready to conform to classroom procedures and even able to perform basic reading and writing skills. However, from a pedagogical perspective this approach fuels an increasingly dominant notion of education as ‘transmission and reproduction’, and of early childhood as preparation for school rather than for ‘life.’

These authors conclude (p.2) “it is not whether a child is ready to learn, but what a child is ready to learn”. This is borne out in the differences between both policies and results within the English and Finnish education systems. Finnish children (who, alongside the other Scandinavian countries, are rated within the top five for high levels of ‘well-being’ in the 2007 UNICEF report) are not judged ready for
formal schooling of any kind until the school year in which their seventh birthday falls, yet they hugely outperform British children in reading literacy by the midteen years. Somewhat ironically perhaps, it was OFSTED who noted that:

Finnish pre-school teachers placed less emphasis on reading and writing than the Year 1 teachers in England; yet, by the time they are 15, Finnish pupils are outperforming their English counterparts….by a considerable margin in reading literacy and by smaller margins in mathematical and scientific literacy (OFSTED 2003, p.2).

Additionally, over the last 25 years, British educationalists and psychologists have increasingly raised a range of concerns relating to increases in children’s and adolescents’ behavioural and emotional problems, and the rate of mental illness amongst young people (Collishaw et al. 2004). In 2004 one in ten children between five and sixteen years of age living in the UK had a clinically diagnosed mental disorder (Office for National Statistics 2005, p.xxi). Twenge (2000, p.1018) reported that in the US, which fared only marginally better than the UK on children’s sense of ‘well-being’ in the UNICEF report An Overview of Child Well Being in Rich Countries (2007), that “self-reports of anxiety have risen by about a standard deviation between the 1950s and the 1990s… anxiety is so high now that normal samples from the 1980s outscore psychiatric populations from the 1950s”. Collishaw et al. (2004) used statistical techniques to ensure that there was a genuine rise in such conditions in the UK rather than a rise in identification or record keeping of such conditions. They subsequently speculated upon the impact of rising divorce rates, a rise in cohabitation outside marriage, increasing numbers of single-parent and step-families and increasing numbers of dual-earner
households, causing children to be “looked after in day-care facilities of variable quality” (Collishaw et al. 2004, p.1359). Twenge (2000, p.1017) proposed that societal factors, namely “low social connectedness and high environmental threat” were the underlying culprits. She concluded: “Until people feel both safe and connected to others, anxiety is likely to remain high”. The Children’s Society report A Good Childhood (Layard and Dunn 2009), which was commissioned to investigate further the “lack of well-being” proposed by UNICEF within the UK, concluded that, “if mental health difficulties have increased, it must be because the quality of children’s experience has deteriorated” (Layard and Dunn 2009, p.116).

It could be posited that continual individual spoon-feeding of facts and skills, followed by testing against narrowly defined ‘performance’ outcomes, breaks down the aspect of ‘social connectedness’ that Twenge describes and instead, creates a population of winners and losers, with individual worth defined in terms of how accurate and compliant the individual is with respect to regurgitating transmitted information under test conditions. There is much evidence across a range of social science and biological research that can be cited in support for the proposal that this is a highly unnatural environment for human development. A range of such evidence will be discussed below, reflecting upon a range of changes that have occurred over the last quarter of the twentieth century in the ways that care and education is provided for the nation’s children. We will start with the very youngest.
On the importance of infant ‘attachment’

In 2008, UNICEF published the ‘Child Care Transition’ report, which argued that:

A great change is coming over childhood in the world’s richest countries. Today’s rising generation is the first in which a majority are spending a large part of early childhood in some form of out-of-home child care….. Whether the child care transition will represent an advance or a setback – for today’s children and tomorrow’s world – will depend on the response (UNICEF 2008, p.1).

Bowlby’s theory of attachment, created in the period directly following the Second World War, was based upon a combination of ethological theory and Freudian psychoanalysis. It proposed that a lack of bonded attachments with adults in early infancy creates psychological problems for human beings on a lifelong basis; in particular, their abilities to create healthy attachments with others. Bowlby (1988) proposed that when children’s first experiences of their relationships with adults communicate to them that they are lovable, and that other people will be willing to help them, they are provided with a secure base from which to venture out and to which they can subsequently return for help. Bowlby emphasised that excursions from this base grow steadily longer and further throughout childhood and into adolescence, from which time new bonded relationships with peers begin to supersede those with parents. He proposed that attachment remains a key feature of human nature on a lifelong basis: “all of us, from the cradle to the grave, are happiest when life is organised as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figure(s)” (Bowlby 1988, p.69).
If such attachments are not securely formed in infancy, Bowlby theorised, this would have lifelong consequences. Modern research within both psychology and bio-psychology appears to bear this out. For example, Raikes and Thompson (2008) argue that:

relational experiences, especially before 36 months, were significantly predictive of later peer related representations [and] attachment security at 24 and 36 months was associated with enhanced social problem-solving skills (p.319).

Main, Kaplan and Cassidy (1985) found that different attachment styles could also be found in adults, and that, using attachment theory these could be reliably mapped on to events that they reported occurring within their earliest relationships.

More recent research in the bio-psychological arena has found biological evidence to support the importance of secure relationships in infancy. An extensive range of studies discovered abnormally raised levels of stress hormone (cortisol) in young children placed in situations where they do not feel secure in the care that they are receiving. Chronically high stress levels across the lifespan have been linked to susceptibility to all the ‘stress induced’ illnesses; for example heart disease, some cancers and diabetes (Locker 2008), and – of course – mental illness.

In normal mammalian physiology, cortisol has a regular cycle, rising to a peak as the creature awakens from sleep. It then falls steadily throughout the following waking and, subsequently, initial sleep periods, rising steadily as the creature moves into the later stages of the sleep cycle (Sims, Guilfoyle and Parry 2006).
Research in both the psychological arena (e.g. Raikes and Thompson 2008) and the bio-psychological arena (e.g., Sims et al. 2006, Badanes et al. 2012 and Watamura et al. 2010) suggests that there is a complex relationship between levels of cortisol, behavioural indicators of insecure attachment, and the quality of care that children receive in home and daycare setting environments, which in turn interacts with the socio-economic situation (and the resulting stresses) in which their families are immersed (e.g. Raikes and Thompson 2008). Lowe Vandell et al. (2010, p.751) argue that a “consistent finding in the literature is that more hours in child care and more centre-type care are related to higher levels of behaviour problems in young children”. Notwithstanding the complexity of possible relationships, however, for young children spending full days in collective daycare, cortisol has been found by a range of studies to increase across the day from morning to afternoon (denoting increasing stress in the individual), while cortisol decreased across the day in the same children when they were cared for at home (Dettling, Gunnar and Donzella, 1999; Dettling, Parker, Lane, Sebanc and Gunnar, 2000; Watamura et al., 2003; Watamura, Kryzer, and Robertson, 2009).

Susan Isaacs argued that “without security as a background to his life [a child] cannot dare to explore or experiment, to express his feelings or to try out new relations to people” (Isaacs 1952, p.21). As such, what evidence is there to suggest that the effects of insecure attachment have a measurable effect upon children when they reach the secondary school stage? Lowe Vandell et al. (2010, p.751) proposed that “more hours in child care and more centre-type care are
related to higher levels of ...problem behaviours at age 15.....ones that are particularly pertinent to adolescence: risk taking and impulsivity”. Wetz (2009) carried out a study of attachment styles in secondary school children and found that those who left the school system with no GCSE qualifications were most likely to be young people who had a history of complex emotional and social changes in early childhood, and who commonly reported feelings of isolation that prevented them from taking a full part in learning activities within the school environment. He concluded:

The proposition is that increasing numbers of young people are acting out ‘attachment difficulties’ which neither their families nor our schools know how to address and which our teachers are inadequately trained and resourced to attend to (Wetz 2010, p.3).

While many have in the past rushed to ‘blame the parents’ on the basis of such evidence, it is important to consider what societal support is given to parents of infants in contemporary Britain. In nations such as the UK, where most of the cost of non-familial care is borne by the parents rather than the state, the situation for parents of infants is either to endure the stresses of not earning while caring for their infant at home, or to continue to work and select their childcare provider on the basis of what they can afford. The highest quality care is likely to be beyond the budget of the average young couple and/or single parent unless they are lucky enough to be offered assistance by a member of their extended family with whom the child has previously built secure attachment bonds. However, with the statutory age of retirement rising, the ‘grandparent option’ becomes increasingly
less likely. The outlook in this area is therefore increasingly bleak. As Bowlby (1988), writing at the beginning of the western cultural movement towards mass daycare argued:

Man and woman power devoted to the production of material goods counts a plus in all our economic indices. Man and woman power devoted to the production of happy, healthy and self-reliant children in their own homes does not count at all. We have created a topsy-turvy world (Bowlby 1988, p.2).

On ‘becoming social’: the importance of social free play in childhood

While Bowlby emphasised the role of mothers and female caregivers in the earliest months of life, MacDonald and Parke proposed that, in the later stages of infancy, gentle ‘rough and tumble’ (R&T) games, particularly with fathers and other close male relatives, create a rich source of infant social learning: “children may be learning the social and communicative value of their own affective displays as well as how to use these emotional signals to regulate the social behaviour of others” (MacDonald and Parke 1984, p.1273). In order to understand the importance of social free play for young children, human beings have to consider their evolutionary roots. In all primate groups, juvenile peer interaction is most likely to consist of the central activity that young primates carry out together; that of play. Dunn (1983), in a longitudinal study of families before and after the birth of a new child, found that where siblings played together, especially in pretend play, by the age of 2 years the younger child was likely to show a more sophisticated
understanding of ‘theory of mind’ (ToM) than the older child had done at the same age. In this context, ToM describes the human (and primate) ability to ‘guess’ what another person may be thinking and to adjust one’s own behaviour accordingly for various purposes (for example, to flatter, surprise, or deceive). Dunn theorized that the ToM difference that she had found between her participant groups was due to the variable of exposure to the influence of a slightly older playmate. Lindsey’s (2002) longitudinal research with three- to six-year old children indicated that children who had at least one mutual friend at the beginning of the study were better liked by peers one year later than children who did not have any mutual friends at the beginning of the study, and that this finding was not correlated with each child’s place on the liked/disliked continuum created at the beginning of the study. Lindsey concluded that, as early as three years of age, mutual friendships underpin children’s social development processes (Lindsey 2002).

Thus it would seem that, for young children, it is not only the ‘secure base’ that is important, but the ability to move gradually outwards from this into a range of day-to-day relationships with a range of other human beings. Peers with whom they engage in symmetrical interaction, which is shared on equal terms between partners, have a particularly important role in the development of shared meanings. Importantly, human beings do not only use verbal forms of communication in such early play experiences. There is much evidence to suggest that all primates, including human beings, learn a species-specific ‘language’ of non-verbal social signalling within their juvenile peer play. The importance of the
human ‘play face’ in signalling playful intent during R&T behaviours was initially identified by Konner (1972). This was subsequently emphasized by several later researchers in the field and linked to firm evolutionary roots. Aldis (1975), for example, proposed that the open mouth descends from an evolutionary track of ‘play-biting’, which occurs in species older than the primates. Some additional evidence to suggest that human beings are extremely adept at subconsciously using non-verbal signals to judge intention was outlined by Zivin (1977, p.1314), who suggested that there is a facial expression that is used by human beings of both genders that she called ‘the plus face’, which consists of raised eyebrows, wide open eyes, and a slightly raised chin. It is used in peaceful verbal persuasion but “somewhat resembles other primates’ threat faces”. Zivin proposed (1977, p.1320) that ‘plus faces’ are mainly used by top ranking 7-10 year olds during “subtle challenges in even tempered conversations”. As children mature, the expression still appears, but crosses the face more fleetingly. Zivin’s conclusion was that the top ranking children within a group “have learned how to ‘invisibly’ use a gesture to create a sophisticated aura of challenge while being explicitly unobjectionable” (Zivin 1977, p.1320).

Researchers have found in studies of childhood sociability that children who are popular among their peers in the primary school years deal skilfully with the society of the playground, competently recognizing teasing and R&T overtures from other children as invitations to play (Pellegrini and Blatchford 2000). They concluded that, for five-and-a-half year old boys, the amount of time spent in active social play
with other boys directly predicts their level of success in social problem-solving one year later. Correspondingly, children who are rejected by their peers are more likely to mistake such overtures as real aggression (Dodge, Coie and Lynam 2006). Alongside the culture of narrow academic competition creating ultimate winners and losers, these findings might offer some explanation for a plethora of claims and counter-claims surrounding ‘bullying’ in school described by The Children’s Society (2012). Is it possible that these may emanate from increasing numbers of children who lack the necessary secure base and subsequent infant socialisation experiences to cope within the hurly burly of a juvenile primate peer environment, where a grasp of the complex, dynamic pattern of competition, collaboration and cooperation that characterises primate social life is needed for full integration? A longitudinal study of boys’ and girls’ narratives within R&T (Jarvis 2007a and 2007b) concluded that such play underpinned the creation of complex social narratives embedded in both language and action that might act as the basis for the further development of generic and gendered social skills required for more subtle and sophisticated adult interactions.

Levels of experience in social free play interaction would thus seem to be a crucial factor for children with respect to learning how to comprehend and use these subtle modes of communication. In an observational study of children’s playground-based behaviour, Braza et al. (2007, p.209) concluded that engaging in R&T and pretend play allowed children to create complex social hierarchies which "seem to reduce aggressive behaviour and help children develop sociocognitive
skills not required in other types of play”. Gordon et al. (2003) tentatively located such changes in the amygdala and dorsolateral frontal cortex of the brain which, in rats, showed significantly elevated neuronal activity following episodes of R&T play, suggesting that “play may help program higher brain regions involved in emotional behaviours in the mammalian brain” (p.17). These findings suggest (by extrapolation across mammalian species) that what children are doing in their early social interactions is building important neuronal connections relating to sociability: “neural maturation is primarily influenced by exogenous signals” (Webb et al., 2001, p.147) – which is, of course, also demonstrated by the bio-psychology studies outlined above that link levels of infant emotional security with levels of cortisol in the body.

If children initially experience attachment difficulties, and these feed into a lack of understanding of peer play signals in early-mid childhood, it can therefore be posited that they are likely to have great difficulty in fully developing their social competencies. This being so, opportunities for children to engage in species-appropriate co-operative socialisation must be regarded as integral to their developing understanding of language, both verbal and non-verbal. Yet, as it stands, the economy-driven social milieu in post-industrial societies such as that of the UK provide early care experiences that are highly likely to be fragmented and, in later childhood, children are unlikely to be offered sufficient free play and co-operative socialisation due to narrowly focused ‘education’ based upon simple transmission of facts and skills- which ironically, is hugely hampered when
opportunities for integrated social, emotional and intellectual experiences that characterise primate development are insufficient.

**A philosophical perspective on childhood and infancy**

These findings thus raise a range of questions relating to how the social competencies may be ‘sufficiently nurtured’. One central question relates to how children might learn subtle social gestures, which while being routinely perceived at the subconscious level by interaction partners, are still crucial to mutual understanding, and why some individuals appear to learn to use them more effectively and/or at a much younger age than others. A plethora of evidence from psychological and philosophical research indicates that meaning is created *between* conspecifics using a vast range of different inputs, rather than directly transmitted from one individual to another in a simple linguistic ‘from my store directly into yours’ fashion. This has huge relevance for the ways that we construct socialisation and education opportunities for children, who should not be seen as vessels to fill with knowledge and skills, but as apprentices to induct into the multitude of ways in which human beings create shared meanings.

One perspective on this issue is that offered from a cultural psychological paradigm by Moghaddam, who suggests that developmental scientists have for too long concentrated on what he calls the ‘embryonic fallacy’, characterised as ‘the assumption that as soon as life begins, the individual becomes the source of psychological experiences’ (Moghaddam, 2010, p.466). Such a view leads to the
notion of the child as a “self-contained individual [who is]… assumed to be the sole or main source of psychological experiences” (Moghaddam, 2010, p.466). In contrast to this, Moghaddam draws on some of his earlier work (Moghaddam 2003) and work by others (Sammut et al., 2010) to argue that it is the understandings shared within and between cultures about social reality that develop the notion of interobjectivity, and that it is from this notion that intersubjectivity develops (p.466). Intersubjectivity is here taken to mean how individuals understand other individuals, and “how individuals perceive others” (Moghaddam, 2010, p.466). Such concepts are also beginning to emerge in neuropsychology, where Hood (2012, p.ix) argues that “while the daily experience of our self is so familiar…. brain science shows that this sense of self is an illusion”. Hood’s central point is that the ability of human beings to collectively create a complex dynamic culture has the emergent property of each individual creating an illusionary sense of self, which is largely used as a social navigation tool. We can find the philosophical roots of this debate in the mid-twentieth century philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who, in his later writings, created the underpinning philosophical debate relating to arguments against the existence of ‘private languages’. This perspective, we believe, has important implications for children’s well-being.

One important point is that ‘primitive’, natural expressions’ (Wittgenstein Z, §218)* of fear, anger, joy, pain, playfulness and so on, provide the setting (Wittgenstein PI, §257) for the acquisition of a first language; by training and persuasion, children
can be brought into a community of shared certainties which provide the frame of reference through which verbal language can be first acquired (Gilroy, 1996, p.113). In any particular context, we (as experienced users of verbal and non-verbal language), and children (as novice users) observe, hear, and imitate, gestures, actions, expressions, tone of voice, and the like (Wittgenstein OC, §10; Wittgenstein, 1935/1968, p.248); “linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour are woven together into an intricate organic whole” (Pitcher, 1964, p.240) or ‘language-game’ (Gilroy, 1996, p.109). With this perspective, terms such as ‘fractiousness’, ‘friendliness’, and so on are not seen as having meaning because of an underlying psychological state or process within an individual, but by being used to describe certain behaviours in certain circumstances within a language-game (Z, §540), where a language-game consists of “language and the actions into which it is woven” (PI, §7). Such a view recognises that a young child “learns to react in such-and-such a way; and in so reacting it doesn’t so far know anything” (OC, §538). Children naturally behave in certain ways even before they can employ language – ways which can be described by others as fractious, friendly, thankful, desiring something, playful, and so on (Malcolm, 1981, p.4). Just as there are behaviours which we would consider natural for a human being who is in pain, so too there are behaviours which we would consider normal to see in a human being who is angry or afraid, or who is friendly, thankful, and so on (Wittgenstein PI, p.229e).
What are the implications of such a perspective for children’s well-being? One implication is that we need to recognise that verbal and non-verbal meanings (language) develop from social settings. Thus develops a very different and far more socially-rooted ‘theory of mind’ than that suggested by the view which implies internal introspection or reflection on to one’s own supposed mental states leads to action (Baron-Cohen 2001, p.176). In the context of this paper, such a perspective is crucial, reminding us that developing understanding of self and others, and of language, meanings and signs, presupposes a social world, in which verbal and non-verbal behaviour are intertwined. Bruner (1990, p.69), drawing upon evolutionary biology and Vygotsky’s theory of Social Constructivism (Vygotsky 1978) proposed that “human beings are creatures who evolved to critically rely upon sharing symbolic meanings to operate within their world … such a social meaning readiness is a product of our evolutionary past”. Bruner had previously considered the way that human beings understand many, sometimes overtly similar aspects of their world very differently, depending on the narratives that they draw from their social and cultural milieu: ‘Isn’t it strange how this castle (Kronberg) changes as soon as one imagines Hamlet lived here?’ (Bruner 1986, p.45). He concludes that human beings collectively create “products of the mind [and] build them into a corpus of culture” (pp.45-46); that we create our understandings of the world in the spaces between people rather than in separate storage areas residing within each individual.
These arguments highlight the significance of social interaction, first, in providing the way in which infants can begin to acquire meanings and, second, in bringing to-be-learned material inside a ‘narrative’ or context. From this basis, it can be proposed that a human being, once language has begun to be acquired, is unlikely to be able to make sense of a concept or idea unless s/he is able to make sense of the narrative or context in which it is presented. Harré, considering that the bank note in his pocket would appear to be a simple piece of paper to the uninitiated, reflected “material things have magic powers... in the context of which they are embedded” (Harré 2002, p.25). Lyle (2000, p.55) proposes that human beings are in fact “storying animals [who] live in a largely story shaped world”, while Friedman Hansen (1982, p.190) simply stated that “learning cannot be understood in isolation from the dense network of cultural information in which it is embedded”. Material that another person has attempted to ‘download’ into our minds in a socially disembedded fashion is therefore likely to be very quickly lost from the thinking processes of a creature evolved to think and learn in cohesive narratives: Lyle’s (2000) ‘storying animal’.

The human primate in the post-industrial society

Have we, as Bowlby suggested, chosen to ignore what we know of human children’s complex linguistic, social, and emotional development, and in so doing created a deficient environment that subsequently results in both individual and societal problems? Are current English modes of education attempting to take erroneous ‘short cuts’ to the development of knowledge and skills, which in fact
cannot be fully produced without experiences that additionally nurture the social
and emotional skills, reliant upon complex emotional attachments to and social
interactions with others, from the earliest years of life? In modern lives, “whether
on the needs of working parents or the requirements of the economy for a skilled
workforce, the debate has, in the main, been dominated by adult concerns” (Daniel
and Ivatts 1998, p.166) which, since the advent of industrialisation, have been
increasingly dominated by the machinations of national and international
economies rather than the core human needs for community and security.

In keeping with Bowlby’s points about a ‘topsy-turvy world’ (1988, p.2), both
parents may nowadays work many miles away from their home locations, with the
emergent result that children are frequently taken out of their immediate
neighbourhood during the working week, to be cared for in a succession of
settings. Both inside and outside the school day, and even within settings caring
for the very youngest children, state-registered adults are now routinely paid to
direct children’s activities, being closely scrutinised and reported-upon by the
national inspection body OFSTED for the perceived ability to structure children’s
moment-to-moment activities in ways aimed at mechanically developing ‘learning’
via the rote transmission of facts and skills. Many twenty-first century children are
used to a routine from early infancy that utilises the family home only as a place in
which to eat and sleep during their parents' working week. An AA poll found that
the average modern British parent drives for 2,000 miles per year to ferry their
children around, with a minority (11%) travelling up to 4,000 miles per year (AA 2010, online).

Contrastingly, in the family environment prior to the last quarter of the twentieth century, independent socialisation opportunities were unconsciously but routinely provided for children within a local neighbourhood inhabited by a wide circle of familiar peers and adults. The majority of adults undertook their day-to-day working lives within easy travelling distance from such communities, while their children engaged in a substantial amount of independent, outdoor social free play, casually over-seen by familiar neighbourhood adults who could administer minor on-the-spot admonishments, and take reports of serious bad behaviour back to the relevant parents. Such a scene was described in 1969, by Opie and Opie who reported “there is no town or city known to us where street games do not flourish” (1969, p.vi). Since then, however, out-of-school play spaces have been increasingly consumed by motor vehicles and sensational mass-media heightened adult fear of predatory stranger abduction, creating an “adult colonisation’ of children’s lives”, and a loss of time and space for children’s independent free play in the out-of-school environment (Corsaro 1997, p.38). A contemporaneous development has been the decrease in break-times (or play-times) in school since the emergence of the National Curriculum and key stage testing, in order to give more time for children to attend to the adult-defined, outcome-based learning demands of this modern statutory curriculum (Pelligrini and Blatchford 2002). As such, both physical and temporal ‘spaces’ for children to engage in independent,
collaborative free play withered and, to a great extent, died over the last two and a half decades of the twentieth century.

Contemporary post-industrial cultures offer a shallow, deceptive veneer of ‘child friendliness’, which is largely encapsulated within a focus on marketing various products to children through their parents; what Bryman (1999) referred to as the ‘Disneyization effect’. However, our societal milieu accords little importance to children’s core developmental needs beyond a shallow fact- and skills-based transmission motivated education and care system, from early infancy to adolescence. In this sense it is as though English state education has turned in a large circle over 150 years, first moving away from its utilitarian origins, through the child-centred policies of McMillan, Isaacs and Plowden, thence looping around back to practices aimed narrowly at preparation for adulthood and work as an uncritical consumer-worker ‘achieving economic well-being’ (DFES 2003). However, contemporary children lack the out-of-school opportunities for free, independent associative play that their ancestors were afforded, and as such, within one of the wealthiest human societies that has ever existed, they have become one of the most socially impoverished generations of all time. We propose that this has resulted in the dichotomous emergence of a poor sense of well-being within an environment of consumer plenty; anomic children afloat within an anomic society.
**Pedagogy, politics, and practicalities**

How is such anomie thence further nurtured and sustained by modern ‘transmit and test’ policies within the day-to-day milieu of the typical English classroom? Reay and Williams (1999) proposed that many creative and collaborative activities that had been part of day-to-day classroom practice in English schools prior to the advent of the National Curriculum were quashed in favour of ‘spoon-feeding’ an individually-learned, individual outcome-focused curriculum, in order for children to perform at the maximum possible level in predictable questions within key stage tests. McNess, Broadfoot and Osborn (2003) concluded that within English education a growing policy emphasis on accountability, and the need to raise school standards ... [resulted in] ... a performance oriented, transmission model of learning [being] given preference over a sociocultural model which recognised and included the emotional and social aspect (pp.245–246).

While primates' social worlds obviously involve competition as well as cooperation and collaboration, it is argued here that for human beings especially, as highly evolved primates immersed within the most complex symbolic society on earth, the two modes are intricately intertwined. However schools are now environments where the individual worth of pupils is judged principally by their ability to regurgitate 'programmed' knowledge in narrow, artificial 'school test' situations. In this sense, our current structures of education are very poor preparation indeed for the complex, dynamic social milieu that is the characteristic back-drop for all primate societies.
This perspective is substantiated by research which suggests that both teachers and students frequently find teaching and learning within the confines of the English National Curriculum a frustrating and alienating experience. For example, Jarvis (2009, p.72) quotes one young research participant who expressed the opinion that “teachers focus upon what they are interested in rather than what they think the pupils might be interested in”. Within the ‘transmit and test’ culture of contemporary education however, teachers constantly struggle to negotiate a maze of competing narratives emanating from their own previous experience in the subject, those of 30+ learners and a plethora of instructions contained in a monolithic curriculum document; a very tall order indeed.

The region in Italy which is famous for its liberal education system, Reggio Emilia, has a very different approach. Carla Rinaldi, the president of Reggio Children outlines her construction of a human child: “a child who, very early on, is able to attribute meanings to events and who attempts to share meanings and stories of meanings” (Rinaldi 2005, p.84). Consequently, education for her is seeking “possibilities … for the individual child and the group of children, the protagonists of the experience, to have a story, to leave traces, to see that their experiences are given value and meaning” (Rinaldi
this is part of an education system based upon a very human primate premise:

The central focus is on the relationship between children and adults. The [school].... should be seen not as a single system, but as.... a system of relationships and communication among children, teachers and parents.... a living organism that pulses, changes, transforms, grows and matures' (Rinaldi 2005, p.85).

This would seem to be far more in keeping with the model of the child that has been painstakingly built by the psychological and philosophical perspectives outlined above, which conversely seem to have been completely ignored by the current English approach to education.

In conclusion, it seems that there are good grounds for arguing that the English mode of interaction with young children does not adequately tune into their social and emotional needs and, further, that our pedagogical practices need to recognise the crucial interface of the social, linguistic, behavioural, emotional and intellectual in the developmental processes of complex human primates. The Reggio Emilia philosophy may suggest a more positive direction for nursery and primary education in England, with the proviso that a framework that has organically arisen within one cultural arena cannot be simply grafted onto another, but needs to be given the time and space to fully develop in context. Wetz proposes a model for secondary schooling that is far more in keeping with human primate modes of learning than current practices:

The Urban Village School is a coeducational, non-selective, learning and research community of 375 11–16 year olds, designed and organised so that young people have a secure base in relationships, are well-known by
their teachers and peers, and challenged to fulfil their potential..... The learning programme emphasises active enquiry and in-depth learning and is delivered through research assignments.... The assessment programme is structured through group reviews, performance assessment and narrative reporting (Wetz 2009, p.3-4).

Conclusion: Policies and People, or People and Policies?

The evidence provided above collectively suggests that over the last quarter of the twentieth century, and into the opening decade of the twenty-first, English infants have been placed in situations that create fragmented attachment experiences; the difficulties caused by such situations are then exacerbated by care and education practices that place children within highly adult-directed environments where transmission processes are the principal modes of ‘teaching’ and there is little time or space for spontaneous social free play or the building of original shared narratives with peers. There is additionally a chronological correspondence between the introduction of mass daycare, the introduction of ‘transmit and test’ environments within schools, and the increase in rates of paediatric mental illness documented by Collishaw et al. (2004). The authors therefore propose that mental breakdown may be the inevitable result of raising human primates in an environment where they do not have sufficient opportunities to experience developmentally appropriate sharing of meanings that are so critical to their healthy linguistic and psychological development.
It does not take a huge leap of imagination from this point to intuit some possible reasons (and solutions) for children’s unhappiness within societies which do not offer them sufficient secure relationships, free play and collaborative learning opportunities for species-appropriate co-operative socialization, and then expect so much from them in pressurized, individualistic and highly competitive ‘test’ situations at such early stages in their development. In this, the authors of this paper are raising a similar criticism to that raised by Margaret McMillan (Mansbridge 1932) but, whereas at the dawn of the 20th century, she highlighted inappropriate educational expectations of children in poor physical condition, the authors are raising similar concerns at the dawn of the 21st century, highlighting inappropriate educational expectations of children and young people in poor psychological condition. In fact, McMillan also briefly referred to generic psychological issues in her time, describing her core mission as to “give a happy childhood to all children and solve a good many social problems en route… we must have a new conception of school” (McMillan 1929). We suggest that, given an additional century of research across the biological and social sciences, and of developments in philosophy, we are beginning to define the details of what that conception might be.

Human beings, in common with their primate ancestors, have evolved to be collaborative, co-operative and competitive. The environments provided for children in our contemporary society can be posited to all but remove the experiences that develop the co-operative aspects of the primate nature, while
hugely magnifying the experiences that develop the competitive drive and, additionally, harness it to ways of operating that are not particularly useful in human society outside the highly artificial culture of the contemporary classroom. The process that we have unwittingly constructed is incremental, in that infants who do not enjoy secure, bonded, relationships are likely go on to become children who lack the social and emotional problem-solving abilities to engage fully in independent, collaborative relationships with peers, and who lack the capacity to trust that allows them to develop effective learner relationships with professional adults. This situation is then further exacerbated by a lack of opportunity for building relationships with peers, and for the construction of original shared narratives within the school-based teaching and learning practices that children meet in the later stages of childhood.

A complex set of circular psychosocial relationships can therefore be posited, consisting of underlying feelings of social disconnectedness and the resultant feelings of anxiety and eventual mental illness in socially-privated members of a species that has evolved to live within highly socially connected environments, which are thence subsequently exacerbated by the resulting dysfunctional society, comprised of individuals with poorly developed social skills. As Bruner (1976, p.56) wrote: ‘development which is separated from a natural social environment ‘provides no guide, only knowledge… These are the conditions for alienation and confusion’.
This is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Individual and societal dysfunction interrelationships resulting from socially privated developmental experiences in a significant proportion of one or more generations

Perhaps as Bowlby (1988) proposes, following the immediate post-Second World War period, when it briefly seemed that a developmentally-informed pedagogy would gradually become part of the culture of education in Britain, society went on to reverse its priorities to the utilitarian concepts of earlier generations, single-mindedly driven by the national economy, suppressing the complex primate social and emotional needs of the human population, which as Wetz (2009) proposes,
may be better addressed from the base of a strong local society that collectively communicates with the national and global, rather than leaving individuals ‘at sea’ in the wide societal and increasingly global environments that the last 30 years have created. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, not only are we questioning our modes of care and education on the basis of producing a generation of children where one in ten has a diagnosed medical disorder (Office for National Statistics 2005) and who report the poorest sense of well-being in the western world (UNICEF 2007); we are also facing the greatest economic downturn since the Wall Street Crash of 1929, and a major breakdown of trust between individuals and institutions in society, occasioning a flurry of national enquiries into grave lapses of moral integrity within government, policing, media and banking services. This suggests that Bruner’s ‘alienation and confusion’ is fast becoming a costly reality, with many such tendrils widely infiltrating UK society.

Holmes (1996, p.40) proposes that psychologically-informed politics would include among its basic principles respect for persons, the capacity to listen, the acknowledgement of pain, acceptance of the need for legitimate expressions of anger, and above all, the provision of a secure base for all citizens as a precondition for exploration and growth (Holmes 1996, p.40).

We concur. We also need philosophically-informed politics, “so that policies can be grounded on the best available evidence of what human beings are like” (Singer 1999, p.61), and where economics and policy making can operate in ways that best support specifically human styles of behaviour, rather than attempting to
mould policies and practices narrowly around national and international economic considerations, which are increasingly being exposed as self-serving and corrupt. Policies linked to our society’s current immersion in economy-driven child care, and to education policies based on fact and skill transmission operate in ways that are not conducive to the development of psychologically healthy human beings.

We cannot however underestimate the difficulty of finding solutions to such intricate and far-reaching questions; the dangers of seeking some type of ‘quick fix’ that can neatly span the five year period between general elections cannot be over-emphasised. We must start from the premise that schools and other education/care settings are only ever the reflection of the societies that they serve, rather than the reverse- a point that is frequently confused by policy-makers. This paper proposes that an appropriate immediate response should be the initiation of a deep and wide-ranging conversation between psychologists, philosophers, biologists, sociologists and educationalists in the pursuit of gradually and methodically developing a robust, theoretically informed and above all, flexible pedagogy for the twenty-first century.

8163 words
*Note on referencing:* In view of the posthumous publication of much of Wittgenstein’s work, and of the translations into English, the following initials rather than dates have been used, with one exception, to refer to his work.

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In each case references to sections in Wittgenstein’s work are given by the section number for the English translation, for example (*PI, §347*).

**References**


Wetz, J. (2010) *Is initial teacher training failing to meet the needs of all our young people?*. Reading: CFBT Education Trust.


