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# What does child-centred really mean?

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### **What does child-centred mean?**

The term child-centred is deeply rooted in understandings of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, but despite its common usage, identifying what it means is complex. Child-centred is a construct that has a rich history, but one that is illustrative of ECECs theoretical hybridity. The result is child-centred has different interpretations that can be both complementary and contradictory for those who work in ECEC, giving rise to the question –what does it mean to be child-centred?

In this article I look at the different interpretations of the concept of child-centred and how they have evolved over time. I will consider how someone becomes child-centred (and the role of training in this), as well as exploring how those that work in ECEC services have to mediate their way between the different interpretations of child-centred. In the article I encourage readers to reflect on their own understanding of child-centred and to consider how this relates to the ideas presented in the article, but also those of other stakeholders, such as team members. However, considering what is meant by child-centred also needs to include reflecting on what this might look like in practice. I therefore draw on some personal encounters to illustrate how my own understanding has, and continues, to evolve.

### **Emerging constructions**

The origins of the term child-centred are attributed to writers such as Froebel, Dewey, Rousseau, Montessori and Vygotsky, but the range of authors illustrates the theoretical hybridity that underpins the term child-centred and ECEC services more generally. The theoretical hybridity illustrates the range of disciplines that shape understandings of ECEC services and those that work in them, from developmental theories (in their various forms), to pedagogical ones, to those that draw upon socio-cultural perspectives (for example). Having multiple perspectives within ECEC is not a bad thing as exploring different understandings and thinking behind ECEC services and concepts such as child-centred practice can support us in considering our own epistemological position – what we know and how we know it. There is much that can be debated and explored in regards to our epistemological positions, but key to the concept of child-centred is that it reflects different ways of understanding children, their learning and ECEC services. How we view and understand children and ways of being child-centred will result in different kinds of ECEC services and different ways of working with children.

Child-centred is an international term, evident in the guidance offered by both supranational organisations on the provision of ECEC services and within national documentation (Georgeson et al 2015). Chung and Walsh (2000) looked at the use of the term child-centred through history and in multiple texts, citing over 40 different uses of the term. They summarise that there are three broad

constructs of child-centred that represent both the varying theoretical origins of the term and its evolving history. The first is grounded in a romantic construct of the child, who learns through exploration and is the leader of their learning. The second is developmentalism, influenced by Piagetian ideas of ages and stages and the role of ECEC is supporting child development. The third is a more democratic perspective of a child with a voice, who has the right to be heard and to actively participate. Each of the three constructs reflect the different theoretical origins and ideas on ECEC services (their purpose and how they should be provided) that reflect different values and ideologies. Each construct will be considered in turn, whilst also contemplating their implications for practice, but it will be illustrated that the three ideas are not mutually exclusive, being both complementary and contradictory.

### **Romanticism**

The romantic construction of child-centred, was a response to more didactic, traditional approaches to education that were increasingly regarded as misplaced when working with young children. The romantic construct emphasises that working in ECEC requires something different and distinct from working in later stages of education. The romantic construct recognises children have a natural curiosity and that learning will be generated through freedom of exploration. Play-based approaches have become synonymous with this construct of being child-centred - play-based learning, play as education, play for development, play-based curriculums are all examples of how play has become synonymous with ECEC, but as a part of a construct of child-centred play is seen to allow children to be themselves, free to choose, discover and explore (Wood 2007).

However, the realities of working in ECEC are that there will be limits to the freedom that children are afforded. For example, outdoor play is often regarded as offering children greater freedom, more opportunities to be themselves and to explore and discover, but the freedom of the outdoors can often be bounded by fences that physically mark the limits to a child's freedom. Such limits to freedom are inevitable in ECEC, the rooms and other spaces that are used when providing ECEC services impose physical boundaries. Such physical boundaries are a part of everyday life. However, other limits to children's freedom are the result of culturally constructed boundaries, such as safety concerns, pressures from parents and even inspection systems. Whilst there is an inevitability to the existence of boundaries in ECEC, the role of those working in ECEC becomes about providing free-play within the boundaries.

The culturally constructed boundaries can also shape and inform the kinds of child-centred free-play that is provided in an ECEC centre. Those working in ECEC will be all too aware that ECEC practitioners can be accused of just playing all day or not doing anything other than watching children play. Clearly I do not ascribe to this way of thinking. In fact, I think both of these criticisms reflect two core challenges of working in ECEC. The first, is that a child-centred approach that is play-based presents difficulties for those working in ECEC to know when and how to become involved in a child's play activity- that moment of walking over to a group of children who are engrossed in a make-believe activity, to find they all disperse on seeing an adult. The second is that observing children playing provides many opportunities to know and understand children. Observing children play helps to understand the children that we work with, their interests and personalities, and to inform decisions about when or if to become involved in children's play and what other play activities might be provided. However, the observing of children and making decisions of when and how to engage with their play represents the complexities of working in ECEC. To the untrained eye, working in ECEC is just playing all day, but what cannot be seen is the complex thought process that

members of the workforce go through to inform their daily practice, such as offering opportunities to extend children's play and learning.

## **Developmentalism**

The desire to demonstrate the effectiveness of a child-centred philosophy whereby the child is the leader of their learning through play-based approaches has a relationship to the second construction of child-centred practice – developmentalism. Theories on child development were drawn upon in an attempt to demonstrate the effectiveness of ECEC and child-centred, play-based approaches. Broadly the association with child development theories have been successful as ECEC is recognised internationally as providing the foundations to children's lifelong learning, but the association with child development has also been something of a double-edged sword.

Identifying ECEC as supporting children's development has led to increased scrutiny of ECEC services in an attempt to define the features of ECEC practice that will best contribute to child development. The preoccupation with the quality of ECEC services by policy makers, supra-national organisations and researchers is centred on identifying the attributes of ECEC practice that will best contribute to improving the developmental outcomes of children. The result is twofold, one is that ECEC practice becomes a technical performance of particular acts in order to achieve the desired developmental outcomes (often determined along narrow, rather than holistic understandings of child development). The focus on achieving particular outcomes is then exacerbated by the second consequence which is the scrutiny of ECEC services, whereby those working in ECEC are expected to provide evidence of child development (and other outcomes). A tension emerges between the romantic child-centred construct with its emphasis on free-play and that of developmentalism where the desire to demonstrate development can result in less play and more enticement towards particular forms of play in order to provide evidence of a child's development.

The tensions between the romantic and developmental perspectives of child-centred illustrate many of the tensions that have been identified within ECEC policy in the UK. Principles of child-centred practice can be identified as far back as the Plowden Report in the 1960s, but became prominent in the 1990s and later with the introduction of Sure Start, Every Child Matters and the various iterations of the Foundation Stage Curriculum all offering examples of how child-centred became an accepted ECEC principle and a part of the ECEC rhetoric (Wood 2007). However, the evolution of ECEC policy also developed the tension between the romantic and developmental perspectives of child-centred. For example, the Foundation Stage in England is a curriculum that broadly supports play-based approaches, but the Foundation Stage Profiles require staff to record children's development. The focus on developmentalism has continued to grow as illustrated by the debates on baseline assessments and school readiness. Staff therefore find themselves setting up multiple maths activities (for example) at the end of term in order to generate evidence for the Foundation Stage Profiles. Children's free play becomes coerced play in an attempt to illustrate the effectiveness of ECEC (all-be-it along the narrow lines of Foundation Stage Profiles). The documenting of children's development can risk losing a focus on the child as the child becomes a series of tick boxes or another form of documentation to meet the needs of external inspectors, rather than celebrating a child's development with the child.

It is important to note that it was not a monolithic super power that imposed developmentalism onto ECEC practice, but rather the desire to demonstrate the effectiveness of what many of the original theorists mentioned earlier believed to be true – children learn from exploration in play. The

support for play-based approaches is compelling (Wood 2007), but child-centred appears to have become a self-contradiction that illustrates two competing epistemological positions. One construct of child-centred enables children's freedom of exploration, the other being more didactic, but both illustrate how interpretations of child-centred impact on the ECEC services that are provided for children. The contradictions in the interpretations of child-centred also illustrate that there are multiple perspectives of child-centred and multiple stakeholders who contribute to the different understandings. Those who work in ECEC therefore find themselves mediating between their own epistemological perspective and that of others, such as policy makers, blending together the different interpretations.

### **Democratic**

The compromises that can be made as those working in ECEC mediate between the different constructions of child-centred practice interweave with the final construct of child-centred that I wish to consider – democratic. The development of both sociological approaches to childhood and the rise of children's rights have contributed to an understanding of children as active social agents, who are not only a part of society, but will bring with them (when entering ECEC) prior experiences and knowledge. Ideas of adopting a more ecological approach to ECEC, that recognises a child's family background, prior experiences and interests, acknowledges an autonomous child, who has a right to be listened to. There is an overlap here with the romantic construct that illustrates that the different constructs of child-centred are not mutually exclusive, but interweave with one another. Offering children freedom of exploration has already been associated with the romantic construction of child-centred, epitomised by free-play, but the free-play also supports the democratic approach as children can both lead their own learning and demonstrate their interests and prior knowledge.

However, the focus on children's rights brings additional questions to the meaning of child-centred practice. Clearly the focus on children's rights can lead to an argument for children's rights to come before the needs of policy makers who wish to track improvements in children's development, but even in the day to day there is the question of whose rights – which child is at the centre? Take for example any conflict situation within a daycare setting. The origins of the conflict are the sharing of a toy car. As the member of staff who is managing the conflict there is the question of whose rights – the right of the child that had the car first or an egalitarian construct where both children are seen to have a right to play with the car. Often the cultural context will interplay in determining the approach, so in the UK it is not uncommon to hear a member of staff suggest "why don't you play with it together?" or maybe the member of staff will suggest "why don't you take turns with the car?" Yet in other contexts this could be seen as denying the rights of the child that had it first.

The issue of sharing illustrates that the concepts of child-centred practice that we hold will be shaped by our cultural context, including the ways in which ECEC services are understood and the role that they are seen to provide. The socialisation reading of ECEC services places an emphasis on sharing, a notion that we all need to get along. Yet the social reading highlights another tension in understanding child-centred practice, that of the distinction between individualism and collectivism. Perspectives of an autonomous child, who leads their learning emphasises individualism, as does the developmental perspective as it focuses on an individual child's development. For someone who works in ECEC there is an expectation that they will differentiate learning to meet the individual needs of children. However, within ECEC, rarely are we offered the privilege of working one-to-one with children. Occasionally we may be offered the opportunity to work with small groups, but often

we are managing the needs of 20+ children – so which one is at the centre? An example would be where a member of staff identifies that a child has been excluded from a play activity involving a small group of children. If the member of staff encourages the group to include the one child that had been excluded, that one child's needs are at the centre, but what of the needs of the group? Those working in ECEC therefore find themselves mediating between children's collective and individual needs, returning to the complexities of the thought processes that those working in ECEC undertake daily.

The question of which child is at the centre also brings us back to the issue of child development. Criticisms of some mythical normal child to which all others must adhere are well versed in discussions that seek to emphasise that children develop at different rates. Recognising the differences in development is part of an individualised child-centred perspective. However, there are criticisms that the child who has informed child development theories is a western child. This may have consequences for those who work in ECEC in diverse communities, as the cultural norms are likely to vary as a result of that diversity. The global spread of ideas on ECEC as being good for children's development, the foundation to their lifelong learning, prompts us to consider if the 'normal child' is applicable to all contexts and all children? Choosing to change the country that we work in might also mean a change in understandings of child-centred.

### **Learning to be child-centred**

My exploration of understandings of child-centred has been driven by an interest in the ECEC workforce and how those who work with young children learn to do so. I believe that working in ECEC requires knowledges – and I emphasise the plurality of knowledge as I think that there are different ways in which a person comes to know how to work with children, from theory, to our own childhoods, to the daily experiences in ECEC. Most ECEC training models internationally adopt a combination of theoretical and practical elements, the notion being that the theory is learnt in the classroom and then applied within the ECEC centre. The relationship between theory and practice is rarely this linear, primarily because when working with children we are drawing on multiple forms of knowledge to inform our practice. The multiplicity of knowledge is well illustrated by child-centred practice, whereby theories on child development alone do not mean a person knows how to work in ECEC. Instead theories on child development combine with knowledge of a child's interests, a child's background, the needs of other children, policy requirements etc. etc. in order to inform practice. The theoretical hybridity of child-centred practice illustrates that there are multiple ways of knowing, but child-centred also illustrates that knowledge will be grounded in both theory and the everyday – the children that we work with.

I think there are many strengths in training models that combine theory and practice, but I do wonder whether sufficient space is given to considering what is meant by terms such as child-centred and the contradictions that are embedded in the term. I am not suggesting some definitive child-centred model that could be taught, but rather acknowledging that respecting all children's rights, differentiating between developmental needs and supporting children's free-play takes great skill and a multiplicity of knowledge.

For those who are undertaking their training to begin working in ECEC, child-centred represents a deeply embedded ideal of ECEC practice, but it is a weakly bounded concept, with multiple definitions, making it a concept that students struggle to realise in practice. Students are at the start of a process of learning how to support children's development, how to differentiate between

children's different needs and interests, how to manage conflict situations, how to become involved in children's play... The presence of pedagogical ideals such as child-centred is not enough to support a person to know how to be child-centred or what child-centred might look like in practice.

### **Evidence of child-centred practice**

I think key to exploring understandings of child-centred practice are considering what would an example actually look like in a daycare centre or preschool (for example). I recently experienced observing a singing session in a kindergarten in a Middle-European country. There was one pedagogue and an assistant with approximately 20 children from three to seven years of age. The pedagogue started singing, using animated facial expressions and gestures to entice the children to come and listen to her song. The decision to participate appeared to lie with the children, although there was some gentle coercion from the pedagogue and assistant. Eventually the pedagogue sat with the whole group of children in the carpet area. Initially there is little to suggest that this singing session is anything out of the ordinary, but what struck me was that the children were not permitted to participate in the song. The pedagogue would lay a finger on their lips or place her hand on their heads if the children began to speak or sing. My own personal reading of this was that it neglected children's active participation, curtailing their rights, as I identified singing sessions as being group activities in which children would sing along with adults (if they chose to). For me, the signing session was not child-centred as it was adult led and children did not actively participate. However, I was told that the songs were a gift of thanks for the children for the time spent together (pedagogue with the children). The difference in interpretation of the singing session enabled me to question my own perspective of what it means to be child-centred. I recognised that I placed an emphasis on children's rights and active participation, but the explanation of a gift of thanks made me wonder whether we ever take the time to thank children for the time we spend together in ECEC?

Constructs of child-centred practice will be shaped by the cultural context that reflect different values and ideas of ECEC services and children. Observing ECEC practice in another country can often prompt contemplation of our own ideas as we notice things that are either the same or different to our own practices. The differences often stand out and whilst the observation of one kindergarten class cannot be taken as illustrative of all kindergarten classes in a particular country it has led me to consider what does child-centred practice look like?

As I have said, I am not advocating that definitions are formed and training is delivered on how to "be" child-centred, generating some uniform approach to be adopted across all ECEC centres. Merely focussing on the words "child-centred" illustrates that all ECEC settings will be different as a result of centring on the children that attend them, but I do think there is a need to contemplate what would an example of child-centred practice look like?

### **What is your understanding of child-centred?**

The use of child-centred is so common within ECEC that it would appear that its meaning is self-evident, but the brief exploration of the term above has illustrated that it is a complex construct. Importantly, it is one that is informed by an individual's epistemology – how they understand ECEC

services, children and their development. Whilst it is possible that people can borrow pre-existing definitions (or form their own), making sense of any definition will be individual, dependent on their own epistemology (Georgeson et al 2015). However, within ECEC we are often based within teams and we are subject to external constraints (such as curriculum documents or child development profiles) that will interplay with our own views and ideals. Being child-centred is therefore not only considering our own interpretations of the term, but navigating between the different interpretations, considering the expectations of different stakeholders – policy makers, colleagues, managers, parents and, of course, children.

I think it is important that we question what we mean by terms, both as individuals and as teams in ECEC. This is not about some destructive process of questioning until there is no meaning left in the term, but instead considering not only what child-centred is, but also what it might look like in practice. Observing the song session made me realise that whilst the pedagogue spoke of the importance of being child-centred, the practice during the singing session did not illustrate this for me. This is not to say that I am right with my initial interpretation, because further questioning has made me wonder about the pedagogue's interpretation of child-centred, for example offering thanks could be seen as a form of respect for the children. The encounter forced me to consider my epistemological position – how I view children, ECEC services and what this might look like in practice. I have no doubt that other encounters will further prompt me to reflect on my understanding of child-centred and other ECEC terms.

## **Conclusion**

Child-centred is a weakly bounded concept, with no firm definition, as illustrated by the different perspectives on the term. But the weak boundaries offer many advantages to those who work in ECEC as it makes it possible to consider the different meanings in order to formulate an individual understanding that can be shared and explored with others. However, I would not only advocate that those working in ECEC consider what child-centred means, but also how it is enacted in practice. It is possible to hold many pedagogical ideals, such as being child-centred through play-based approaches, but what does this really look like in practice?



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