

# The Competent Child: valuing all young children as knowledgeable commentators on their own lives

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## ABSTRACT

*In this paper, we discuss the concept of ‘competency’ and ‘the competent child’ in relation to young children, particularly those who may be considered ‘less competent’ than others, whether through disability, ethnicity or socio-economic background. We critique normative discourses of ‘competency’ and consider how assumptions about competency in early childhood education can support or hinder young children’s learning. We ask how competent are we, as researchers and educators, in recognising and valuing young children’s perspectives? We ground our argument in brief accounts of findings from two UK-based early childhood research studies which were both founded on the principle that all young children are knowledgeable commentators on their own lives. The first example is taken from a small-scale study exploring the learning experiences of four-year-old children with special educational needs who attended both ‘special’ and ‘mainstream’ early education settings. The second example draws on a longitudinal study with young children aged three to eight years in the re-design of their early childhood education environment. We critique normative conceptualisations of competency and the competent child, and we adopt a socio-material perspective to disentangle how perceptions of competence configure the relationship between competency, participation and pedagogy.*

## KEYWORDS

*Visual methods, participation, early childhood, competency, Mosaic approach*

## RÉSUMÉ

*Dans cet article, nous étudions le concept de ‘compétence’ et de ‘l’enfant compétent’ en nous focalisant sur les jeunes enfants, notamment sur ceux qui peuvent sembler être ‘moins compétents’ que les autres, que ceci soit dû au handicap, à l’origine ethnique ou au milieu socio-économique. Nous portons un regard critique sur le discours normatif relatif à ‘la compétence’ et examinons la façon dont les postulats sur la notion de compétence dans l’éducation du jeune enfant peuvent renforcer ou ralentir l’apprentissage au cours de la petite enfance. Nous nous interrogeons sur notre compétence, en tant que chercheurs et éducateurs, à reconnaître et à évaluer les perspectives des jeunes enfants. Nous fondons notre argumentation sur un bref exposé des conclusions de recherche de deux études sur la petite enfance menées au Royaume Uni dont le principe de base commun est que tous les jeunes enfants sont des acteurs compétents de leur propre développement. Le premier exemple provient d’une étude à petite échelle qui explore les expériences éducatives d’enfants de quatre ans ayant des difficultés d’apprentissage et ayant suivi des parcours éducatifs à la fois en classe de maternelle traditionnelle et en classe spécialisée. Le deuxième exemple s’appuie sur une étude longitudinale concernant des enfants de trois à huit ans au cours de la restructuration de leur environnement éducatif de petite enfance. Nous interrogeons les conceptualisations normatives de la notion de ‘compétence’ et de ‘l’enfant compétent’ et nous adoptons une approche socio-matérielle afin d’analyser la manière dont les différentes perceptions sur la notion de compétence configurent le rapport entre mise en œuvre des compétences, participation et pédagogie.*

## MOTS-CLÉS

*Méthodes visuelles, participation, la petite enfance, compétence l’approche Mosaïque*

## INTRODUCTION

“How we ‘see’ young children is influenced by our culture, our training, the theories we hold, and our experiences as children and adults. These views about children and childhood influence our day-to-day interactions with children, whether professionally or personally and in research and practice” (Clark, 2017, p. 20). This article reflects critically on the notion of ‘competency’ and ‘the competent child’ in relation to young children and inequality, particularly those young children who are less likely to be considered ‘competent’, whether through age, disability, ethnicity, language fluency or

socio-economic background. Our aim is to critique the rhetoric of ‘competency’, and to uncover some of the assumptions about competency in early childhood education (ECE), policy and practice that can support or hinder young children’s learning. We draw on critiques of neoliberal ideology to understand constructions of competence in contemporary ECE (Cameron & Moss, 2020; Gibson, McArdle, & Hatcher, 2015), and we turn to socio-material theorisation to disentangle how the intersection of time, materiality, space and relationships impact on young children’s experiences and opportunities for self-expression in their earliest years of education (Barad, 2007; Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

We ground our argument in research examples from two early childhood research studies founded on the principle that young children are knowledgeable commentators on their own lives. The first example is taken from a small-scale study conducted in a rural location in England that explored the learning experiences of three four-year-old children who had been identified with special educational needs, and whose parents had opted for them to attend two early education settings – one multi-agency provider that specialized in provision for children identified with physical and/or cognitive disability, and one mainstream provider (Flewitt, Nind, & Payler, 2009). The second example is taken from a longitudinal early childhood research study carried out in an urban location in England involving young children aged three to eight years old in the re-design of their ECE environment (Clark, 2010). We begin by considering different ways of conceptualising competency and the competent child, and the relationship between competency, participation and pedagogy.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMING**

### ***Competency and the competent child***

For many decades, international children’s rights policy and ECE curricula have been deeply influenced by normative, age-related conceptualisations of child competency, underpinned by the assumption that adults are capable of assessing individual children’s capabilities. For example, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989, p. 3) casts doubt on child competence by stating: “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child”.

As Flewitt & Ang (2020, p. 93) argue, taken in isolation from other UNCRC Articles, “this phrasing leaves a child’s rights open to adult (mis)interpretation”. Similarly, in an educational era that is increasingly dominated by a focus on measuring, assessing and comparing learning outcomes, notions of child competence in ECE have fallen prey to

age-related performative discourses. If young children's signs of learning do not appear to conform to normative expectations of development, then children's competency tends to be judged in terms of deficit, which may require some form of 'treatment'. That is, the absence of tangible signs of normative learning expectations tend to be pathologized and viewed as requiring specialized intervention (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). This is exemplified in the statutory practitioner guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFS) in England, which itemises normative levels of achievement in seventeen specific Early Learning Goals (ELGs) against each of which every child's progression must be assessed: "Practitioners should use these materials to decide whether a child has met the level of development expected at the end of the EYFS for each ELG or if they have exceeded that level or not yet reached it" (Department for Education, 2014). In this framework, children who do 'not yet' conform to mainstream conceptualizations of competence in diverse curriculum areas are deemed as 'less' - less orally fluent, less literate, less sociable, less physically dextrous etc.

By contrast, there has been an increasing tendency in social research to value all children as competent communicators whose views and capabilities should not be defined by adults or by children's chronological age (James & Prout, 2015). Rather, *all* children should be considered knowledgeable about their own lives, feelings and preferences, and the onus lies with adults to become competent in recognising and valuing the many different ways that children communicate their thoughts, views and intentions (Cowan & Flewitt, 2020). This might involve paying attention to children's silent expressions of meaning and to what they do as well as what they say, gradually piecing together a 'mosaic' (Clark, 2017) of children's perspectives. This more generous view of children's equal rights and their role as change agents in a transformative social agenda has become more fully recognized in the UN 2030 agenda for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015).

### **Participation**

The strong association between the concepts of participation and voice has resulted in placing constraints on who is seen as able to participate (see Clark, Flewitt, Hammersley, & Robb, 2014; Flewitt & Ang, 2020; Rouvali & Riga, 2020). The General Comment on early childhood issued by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child et al. (2006) promoted the view that participation does not need to wait until children are able to join in with speech or writing. "Young children are acutely sensitive to their surroundings and very rapidly acquire understandings of the people, places and routines in their lives, along with their awareness of their unique identity. They make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child et al., 2006, p. 40-41).

This raises questions not only about who is able to participate in research but in what ways? Orrmalm (2020) explores ways of reimagining participation in an ethnographic study of babies by critiquing a concept of participation that is limited by preconceived ideas about maturity, age and voice. Orrmalm advocates an embodied approach that views participation as a multisensory process, including young children's intra-actions (Barad, 2007; Burnett & Merchant, 2020; Lenz Taguchi, 2010) with materials, people and places. Along with other early childhood researchers (e.g. Alderson, 2012; Als et al., 2012), Orrmalm closely observes how babies participate and take part in creating perspectives in unexpected, spontaneous, often 'messy' and sometimes unimaginable ways, which trouble conventional notions of participation. It is this openness to the unexpected in research with young and very young children that we seek to emphasise in this article, together with an acknowledgement of the intra-actions involved. We now consider how pedagogy is shaped by notions of child participation and competency.

### **Pedagogy**

The pedagogies that are adopted in ECE hold implicit understandings about what kinds of knowledge are valued in society, and about young children's ability to work with and develop knowledge. These implicit understandings reflect taken-for-granted social and cultural understandings of the child, and both construct and are constructed by professional and personal assumptions. Formosinho, Oliveira-Formosinho and Costa (2019, p. 100) draw attention to this in their discussion of early childhood pedagogies: "...learning and teaching methods point to implicit epistemologies that are important to uncover through three stances: how we see the *nature of knowledge* (immutable or in constant construction), how we see the *relationship of the child with knowledge* (the child either as a passive or active learner), and how we see *knowledge development* ( as a solitary enterprise or as a solidary one)".

If the *nature of knowledge* is viewed as variable and changing rather than as fixed and unchanging (for example, as is the case with canonical knowledge in fixed curricula), then the role of children, educators and the learning environment can each play a significant part in the co-construction of knowledge. We draw on Formosinho et al. (2019, p. 100-102) here to illustrate what participatory pedagogy can look like in contrast to a transmission or 'mainstream' model of pedagogy: In participatory pedagogies children are viewed as competent and able to play an active role in exploring the world (see Flewitt et al., 2018). Educators are open to the unexpected, giving time to listen to children and document their interests and activity rather than being channels for transmitting pre-defined information. From a sociomaterial perspective, the learning environment is not just a socially organised container within which learning takes place, but a dynamic player with open and accessible materials which actively play a role in knowledge co-construction. Unstructured and open-ended resources and activities, as

Cuffaro (1995, p. 70) explains, “are well-suited for young children to experience their world, to pose their questions, to express and refine the meanings they have given to self and the world”. Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind and Kocher (2017) expand this thinking with material further to make us alert to how materials shape our experiences.

## **RESEARCH EXAMPLES: MANDY AND SAMINA**

We now present two examples from empirical research to illustrate how notions of young children’s competency underpin pedagogy and children’s participation in ECE in ways that can either support or hinder their learning.

### ***Four-year-old Mandy***

The first research example is taken from a small-scale video ethnography conducted in the south of England that explored the early literacy learning experiences of three four-year-old children who had been identified with special educational needs, and whose parents had struggled to find one ‘ideal’ ECE setting for their child (Flewitt et al., 2009). Each child therefore attended both a mainstream and a special setting to get what parents described as ‘the best of both worlds’ (Flewitt & Nind, 2007, p. 425). This study was designed to capture each child’s perspectives by getting to know their conventional and idiosyncratic meaning-making across multiple modes (Kress, 2010). We therefore video-recorded each child’s learning at home and in each ECE setting during one week in the Spring term, and one week in the Summer term. We also interviewed each child’s parents, carers, ECE practitioners, and medical and therapy professionals who had all played a role in delineating each child’s learning needs. The study was framed by a social model of disability, which distinguishes between impairment - a functional limitation that affects a person’s body - and disability, or barriers that are embodied in sociocultural structures, attitudes and practices. This perspective enabled us to explore how different ECE pedagogic approaches facilitated or constrained the children’s participation in learning.

Here, we focus on one young girl, Mandy, and our research with her at home and in the two educational settings she attended. Mandy’s statement of educational need described her as a ‘happy, contented little girl’ with Angelmans syndrome and epilepsy, being pre-verbal and just beginning to walk with support. The observational data showed marked differences between the pedagogic approaches across the two ECE settings that she attended, with overlap between the practices at home and the mainstream pre-school playgroup. At home, literacy practices were consistently present in Mandy’s play with her 2-year-old younger sister, parents and volunteer care worker, including mark-making, looking at books and being read to, naming and counting, listening to songs and rhymes, singing along, interspersed with lots of talk. During these

sociable, shared activities, Mandy initiated exchanges and responded to others through vocalizations, some of which resembled words and were understood by her mother and carer, through gaze direction and gaze aversion, and through body movements, including pulling herself along the floor to move around, and being supported to walk by her mother. In this context Mandy's participation was both embodied and multisensory in a complex intra-action between gestures, materials, family members and carers.

Similarly, in the nearby mainstream playgroup, Mandy was enabled through one-to-one adult support to take part in a wide range of literacy learning opportunities that promoted play and social skills. These included table-top activities such as drawing, gluing and block-building, as well as sharing books in the well-resourced Book Corner, and enjoying one-to-one and whole-class book reading, with Mandy seated in a specially adapted chair within the large circle of children. In this setting, Mandy moved freely from one space to another by pulling her body across the floor or being supported to walk by an adult, but was also regularly asked if she would like a ride in her wheelchair, which, when she signalled she would like this, enabled her to take part in whole-class dancing and running events - thanks to adults' skilful and creative wheelchair-pushing. Other children regularly helped adults to steer Mandy's wheelchair, or to clear a way for her, and were solicitous to ensure she was happy. In short, Mandy was the only child in this group with a Statement of Educational Need, but she was a valued and competent member of the community, described by practitioners as 'very observant', 'interested', 'determined' and 'easy to accommodate', who had 'become part of the group'. Here, the setting's inclusive pedagogy supported Mandy as an active participant in the busy learning community, and provided an emotionally rich, secure and enabling network of people, materials and places for the development of her identity as a learner and as a highly valued member of a welcoming social community.

The second ECE setting Mandy attended was a Children's Centre, which had been part of a Special School and was still attended predominantly by children who had been diagnosed with learning delay. The pedagogic approach in this setting focused more on Mandy's need for 'adult support for all her needs' (Statement), on 'special' approaches and 'assistance from all therapies'. In this setting, Mandy was described by ECE practitioners as a 'little girl with developmental delay', who was 'very amenable', 'quite compliant' and 'tolerates guidance'. The in-house paediatrician described her as 'totally dependent on adults for her dressing, feeding and toileting skills' and the educational psychologist emphasised her dependence 'on adult support for most activities'. In this setting, Mandy's time was dominated by the administration of diverse therapeutic interventions, with very few opportunities for playfulness or sociability. Only one opportunity for literacy-related learning was observed during all research observations, involving one practitioner's largely unsuccessful attempt to encourage her to hold a pencil and to draw with minimal assistance. Mandy's activity was closely surveilled by practitioners who kept her 'out

of harm's way' (interview) but in so doing, tended to curtail her freedom and agency. In this environment, Mandy lived up (or rather, down) to the staff's comparatively low expectations of her competence. She tended to accept adult intervention, but rarely initiated interaction and did not respond when adults talked to her, unless she knew them. Here there was limited opportunity for embodied, multi-sensory participation to take place, and Mandy's behaviour suggested she had become aware of this. Whilst remaining compliant, she had ceased to bother trying to act on her own initiative or to access resources that adults felt she was not competent in using.

To summarise, although there was common ground between all three settings (home, mainstream and special ECE settings) in how Mandy was understood as a happy and determined 4-year-old, her participation in learning activities were enabled or disabled by the intra-actions between the pedagogic approaches in each setting (Lenz Taguchi, 2010), her relationships with adults and peers, the material resources she had access to and was enabled to use (or not) and her own sense of place and possibility in each setting over time. At home and in the playgroup, Mandy's competences were recognised and valued by adults and enhanced by the inclusive and responsive pedagogic approaches they adopted. In the Children's Centre, Mandy's competences were described primarily in deficit terms of therapeutic need – by the things she could not yet do unaided rather than by the things she could do, whether aided or not. At just four years of age, Mandy was already responding consistently to the constraints and possibilities opened up to her in each setting<sup>1</sup>.

#### ***Four-and six-year-old Samina***

The second research example is taken from the Living Spaces study. This three-year study investigated the adaptation of visual, participatory methods based on the Mosaic approach to explore young children's views and experiences of their early childhood environments in order to contribute to the design and review of such spaces (Clark, 2010). The Mosaic approach is based on a competent view of the child (Clark, 2017; Clark & Moss, 2001). The authors of this approach emphasize that this research strategy is built on the assumption that all children are knowledgeable commentators on their own lives and reflects the principle that young children are 'experts in their own lives' (Langsted, 1994). The Living Spaces longitudinal study involved two case studies, an example from the first of which is included here, based on children aged three to eight years involved in the design of a new nursery class within a primary school in an urban area of the UK.

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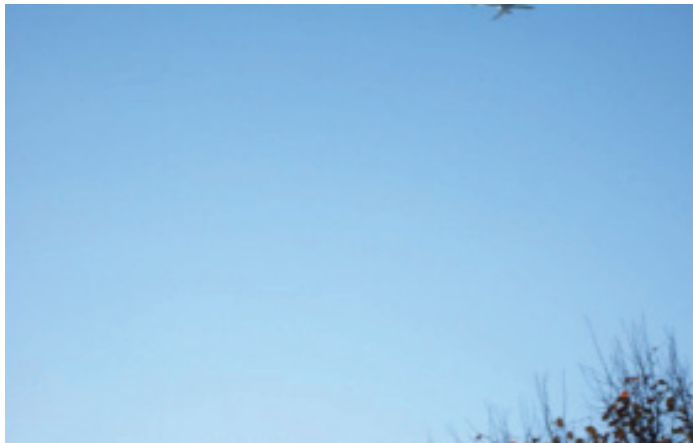
1 With parental permission, the research team began to liaise between the home and special setting, and shared video footage of Mandy being highly communicative at home with the therapy team in the special setting. Our aim was to nudge thinking in Children's Centre towards more inclusive and creative pedagogic approaches for Mandy and other children, whilst appreciating the practical challenges of their duty to deliver multi-agency therapies.



Samina had just turned four years old when the research began. English was an additional language for Samina, but at the time she was almost silent in the nursery. She joined one of the other girls to take the researcher on a tour of the nursery, and using non-verbal communication to indicate she was happy to use a camera, she proceeded to take several images in response to the question: “Can you show me what’s important here?”. Two of these photos were of her friend, whilst another contained a huge expanse of clear blue sky, with the wing tip of an aeroplane along the top edge of the image (Figure 1a). After talking to Samina about her photograph the researcher asked, ‘Is it about the sky?’ she shook her head “Is it about the aeroplane?” (the small dot in the sky) the researcher ventured. She nodded, so the researcher wrote the caption: ‘the aeroplane’ under the photograph in Samina’s photo book.

Two years later after the building work had been completed and the new nursery class was being used, the researcher revisited the school and talked again to Samina and the other children. Samina was now a talkative, lively 6-year-old who seemed to be very much at ease in her school environment. She took the researcher again on a guided tour of the school, concentrating on the outdoor spaces, this time choosing to be together with her best friend. As the two girls walked and chatted to the researcher and laughed together, they took photographs of ‘important things’. This time Samina’s chosen photographs included an image of the researcher in the left-hand corner of the frame, the tops of the school buildings and a large expanse of sky, with a small dot in the top right-hand corner of the frame (Figure 1b).

**FIGURE 1a**



*Samina’s photograph of an aeroplane*

**FIGURE 1b**



*Samina's second photograph of an aeroplane taken two years later*

The following discussion took place with Samina, on reviewing the previous photobook, which she had made with the researcher two years earlier, along with the photographs from her more recent, second tour of the school after the building work had been completed. This extract begins on coming across the image shown in Figure 1b:

Samina: What's that? That's you?

Researcher: That's me. Yes this is me and it says...because there's something else in the picture, I don't know if you can see it, it's very small?

Samina: Aeroplane.

Researcher: [Laughs] So two years ago you took a picture of an aeroplane and you took an aeroplane this time, as well, didn't you? I thought that was quite funny. So I decided you maybe liked aeroplanes, but I don't know.

Samina: I...I love...home and I like...Bangladesh...country.

Researcher: Oh right, yes, and that's your country and that's why you like aeroplanes. Ah, of course, that makes a lot of sense, yes... (see Clark, 2010, pp. 119-120).

These encounters with Samina were embodied and multisensory. They were an entanglement of walking, talking, looking, smiling, listening with a camera and with photographs as well as with a friend and the researcher. There was a particular spatial and temporal dimension to these intra-actions, in which the outdoor environment of the school and the open sky were active players. The photographs were experienced as 'holding time', allowing Samina and the researcher to time travel back to earlier discussions. The images as material artefacts had "power, vibrancy, timeliness [and]

possibilities” (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017, p. 6). Samina’s strong sense of identity rooted in a distant place became apparent through this intra-action between people, materials, objects and place over time. There was the opportunity to gain a layered understanding of what was important to Samina as a child in transition from one culture to another. After two years in school in England, she continued to value her home in Bangladesh and her heritage culture as well as her home and her schooling in England. Samina demonstrated an ability to continue to hold these multiple identities together, finding traces in her urban British playground of her Bangladeshi roots.

## DISCUSSION

What questions does our analysis of these examples raise about conceptualisations of the competent child in education research, policy and practice? In an attempt to develop a more nuanced understanding of how participation and pedagogy can embrace young children as knowledgeable communicators on their own lives, we now discuss the entangled importance of relationships and temporal and material practices in perceptions of competence.

### **Relationships**

Recognising young children’s competencies can require adults to be open to the unexpected. If children are measured against a normative, developmental script then as adults, with all our entrenched beliefs and practices, we may miss moments when children are ‘off script’ and do not conform to our blinkered assumptions.

There are challenges for educators and researchers in being open to the unexpected. It can require setting aside or pausing and re-evaluating previously held knowledge about what young children can do. This can be seen as an ‘epistemological humility’ that isn’t afraid to *not know* all the answers (Clark, 2010, p. 190). Picking up the thread of being ‘open to the unexpected’, we have seen how the educational culture in Mandy’s preschool playgroup was open to Mandy’s idiosyncratic and multimodal ways of communicating, which supported her identity as a “social and cognitive apprentice to the socially situated practice of this group of learners” (Flewitt et al., 2009, p. 222). The Children’s Centre appeared to relate to Mandy more in terms of her learning delay, focusing on her stated need for therapy interventions, which were premised on normative patterns of development associated with her diagnosis of Angelman’s syndrome. That is, the pedagogic approach here directed attention to scheduling pre-determined treatments for Mandy’s medical diagnosis rather than to enabling her unique personality, agency and competences to flourish. The diverse therapy sessions she underwent during her attendance interrupted her inclusion in learning opportunities, and this, combined with educators’ low expectations of her communicative competence,

seemed to have resulted in her resigned acceptance of and occasional resistance to active participation in Children’s Centre activities. In the absence of close relationships to nurture her confidence and self-expression, Mandy’s resistance in turn appeared to have rendered her subject to deficit judgements about her competence that validated the treatments she received and the attitudes she encountered in this setting. As Truman et al. (2020, p. 4) argue: “...it is important to continue to interrogate against which (or whose) standards knowledge and competency are defined and measured ... The term *competency*, for example, alludes to efficiency or success in carrying out a task or completing a goal. As such, it carries the fingerprints of logic and rationality. If arguments for unrecognized knowledges and competencies continue to sit within a humanist logic, the effect is a continued upholding of an existing world order, albeit with the increased possibility of inclusion into that order for some”.

Samina was seen as a silent child in the nursery when she was first involved in the Living Spaces study. As a researcher, Clark remained open to the different ways that Samina might choose to communicate, including inviting Samina to choose a friend with whom to take her on a tour around the nursery and outdoor space. Walking and taking photographs provided the material resources for Samina to indicate what were the important features for her of being in the nursery. This required establishing a feeling of trust between Samina and the researcher based on in-depth listening.

An *openness to the unexpected* and *recognition of the idiosyncratic* also points to an educational culture that is *attuned to the emergent*. This links to the type of educational culture that Formosinho et al. (2019) describe in Pedagogy-in-Participation:

- A culture of interactivity between processes and achievements.
- A culture of multiple possibilities; a curriculum that attunes the emergent and the planned professional intentionality.
- A pedagogic culture of encounters and voices.

Attuning to the emergent alongside the planned can be seen as a willingness and capacity to improvise. This pedagogical improvisation was a feature of a Danish research and development study, adapting the Mosaic approach to embed young children’s perspectives (Clark, 2017, p. 137): “Pedagogues chose which methods to apply in what order, sometimes inventing methods, while remaining aware of the ethical underpinning of the study. This improvisation, following the children’s lead could take the research encounter in unplanned and unexpected directions, developing new ‘dances’ with children”.

### ***Temporal and material practices***

In past research, more attention has been given to considering the spatial rather than the temporal in relation to early childhood pedagogy (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012). There are several ways in which considerations of temporal structures in the short and

longer term can play to young children's strengths and reveal competency. We can see and hear differently by taking time to listen to young children's views and experiences rather than assuming their opinions, knowledge and abilities. In-depth, attentive listening is 'time consuming', a phrase that suggests a negative value. However, it is perhaps more a case of 'stretching' time (Cuffaro, 1995) to give space for children's interests, skills and competencies to develop. In her exploration of John Dewey's philosophy on early childhood practice Cuffaro (1995) explains: 'In giving children ample time and space for exploration, and materials as means, the larger world is made accessible and manageable, *slowed down* sufficiently so that it may be held and probed in a variety of ways and personally understood' (p. 71, emphasis added). This highlights the importance of thinking about the pace of our interactions with young children in relation to competency as Cook and Hess (2007) discuss: "This repeated engagement with the children *slowed down* the adult journey to deciding upon meanings. It gave time to think about what a child was saying, to listen again or differently, and offered the potential for new interpretations" (p. 42, emphasis added).

It is engagement with young children's photographs that Cook and Hess are discussing here as the material artefacts that mediated the change of pace. The temporal and material practices are bound together.

Temporal structures also influence the opportunities young children have within their educational systems to look back and review their experiences and achievements. This can be seen to have a bearing on how children's competency is viewed. Without the opportunity for Samina to look back and review her earlier documentation it would not have been possible to understand the personal meanings that she held about the aeroplanes that flew constantly over her school playground. Samina's opportunity to revisit the earlier documentation in combination with listening in the present resulted in the understanding of her extended family and sense of place and belonging could have been missed from her educational biography. Similarly for Mandy, at home and in the mainstream playgroup, adults took the time to follow Mandy's lead, to listen and observe attentively in order to ensure she had access to the material and human resources that would support her independent choices and active engagement in learning. However, Mandy's time and access to resources in the Children's Centre was governed by a timetabled rota of therapeutic interventions, which, whilst of some benefit in themselves, closed down many opportunities for her to thrive and to reveal her many competences.

Pedagogical documentation is one mechanism that can be a powerful tool for making visible young children's accumulated knowledge over time. This focus on the temporal value of documentation has been explored by Carr and Lee (2019) in relation to teaching, learning and assessment practices in early childhood in New Zealand: "In narrative assessment practice, a portfolio enables connections to be made from the present to the past as well as some suggestions for the future" (2019, p. 22). Drawing

on Lemke (2000), Carr and Lee indicate how different timescales are bound up in the material objects that constitute the pedagogical documentation. This includes the short term capturing of Learning Stories and the longer-term processes of co-constructing portfolios. This attunement to the continuity of learning points to the importance of valuing slow knowledge rather than fast knowledge (Clark, 2020; Orr, 1996;) and a slow pedagogy (Payne & Wattchow, 2009) for all children that values deep listening and learning, makes time for revisiting the past and creates space for young children to develop and sustain their interests.

## CONCLUSION

Unless we allow time, space and materials to support children's diverse ways of making sense of the social worlds they encounter, then their competences can remain largely unarticulated. Our argument in this paper is that as ECE researchers and educators, we need to be more open to the unexpected, and less blinkered by normative or diagnostic expectations of young children's competence. We also need to recognise that many young children opt to withdraw their commitment to early learning environments if these environments do not offer the kinds of trusting relationships that nurture their inclusion. Attentive listening remains at the centre of this endeavour, as Walkerdine (2016, p. 711) explains: "Of course, listening does not mean that the excluded beingness is still not further silenced or pathologized. But it is the opening of a space of possibility through complex and careful listening to the play of actual and silenced meanings, of discourses aiming to mute through pathologizing definition and in the possibilities inherent in the results of that attention and listening that make possible a mode of research as co-production".

In this paper, we have begun to describe how difficult and messy attentive listening might be, yet it is essential to be epistemologically humble, to allow time and space for children to lead rather than be driven by a normative agenda, which will always close down opportunities for shared meanings and for children's inventiveness and ingenuity to flourish.

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