

A close-up photograph of several willow branches with fuzzy, green catkins. The branches are dark brown and the catkins are a vibrant green, some with reddish-brown tips. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light green.

# Flourishing in the Early Years

Contexts, practices and futures

A **David Fulton** Book

Edited by Zenna Kingdon, Jan Gourd and Michael Gasper

# Flourishing in the Early Years

If young children are to flourish and become happy, confident and motivated learners, they need to develop in an environment that gives them the opportunities and freedom to play and learn, along with the support of parents and practitioners who are flourishing themselves.

This invaluable text looks at the conditions that enable all those engaged in the early years sector to flourish, covering themes such as the outdoor environment, the curriculum, parent partnership, equality and ethical practice. Divided into three sections, each part covers:

- **Concepts:** A consideration of how flourishing is framed by political, historical and policy frameworks.
- **Practices:** Exploring the issues that early years practitioners are faced with when engaging with parents and multi-agent professionals within their setting.
- **Futures:** Examining some of the long-term issues that may need to be revisited on a regular basis to enable continual and flourishing development to occur.

With key points and reflective tasks, this book will be valuable reading for all students and practitioners working in the early childhood education and care sector who want to ensure that the children in their care are given the best possible start in life.

**Zenna Kingdon** is Principal Lecturer and Head of Early Childhood Education and Care at Newman University, UK.

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Edited by  
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# Contributors

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# Introduction

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Zenna Kingdon and Jan Gourd

In our first book, *Early Years Policy: The impact on practice*, we considered all aspects of policy within early years contexts and considered how these could be resisted and challenged in positive ways by utilising the concept of flourishing. We drew on Seligman's (2011) model of PERMA:

**P**ersonal Enjoyment: the pleasant life;

**E**nagement: a flow state in which thought and feeling are usually absent;

(Positive) **R**elationships: relationships are key to the development of all humans;

**M**eaning: belonging to and serving something that is bigger than the self;

**A**ccomplishment: the pursuit of success, achievement and mastery for its own sake.

In this second text we look more broadly at definitions of flourishing demonstrating that while the term may be new, the concept can be considered to be universal and has its roots in among other things the work of the ancient Greeks, particularly that of Aristotle. More recently we see that the work of some recognised early childhood pioneers, including for example, Margaret MacMillan, can be considered to support the development of flourishing in young children. Within this text we not only consider the flourishing of the children, but also those who care for them in early childhood settings as well as their parents and carers. Flourishing is examined in a range of contexts with consideration of how this can be facilitated.

This text is intended for students at both undergraduate and post-graduate level, as well as practitioners who are working in the early childhood education and care sector. All of the contributors to this text have taught at both undergraduate and post-graduate level, on a range of early childhood programmes; including foundation degrees, BA programmes and the new Early Years Teacher Status programme.

This text is divided into three sections: concepts, practices and futures. Within Part 1 Concepts, we consider flourishing as it is framed by political, historical and policy frameworks. Part 2 Practices, explores some of the issues that are faced by early childhood practitioners within their settings and when engaging with parents and wider multi-agency professionals. While Part 3 Futures, examines some of the issues that are longer term and may need to be re-visited on a regular basis in order that continual development can occur and to ensure that flourishing continues to be developed.

## **Part 1 Concepts**

Chapter 1 ‘The conceptualisation of flourishing’. According to Seligman (2011) if you ask parents about what they want for their children they will discuss issues such as: confidence, happiness, self-esteem and contentment. These concepts are linked to concepts of flourishing. We consider the ways in which flourishing is linked to well-being and pleasure. The chapter begins to explore the concept of flourishing as a contextual dimension of childhood; we consider the practices that support children to flourish and the future of flourishing for our youngest children. These concerns are set against a policy background in which early years has yet again become the focus of political agendas in which school readiness rather than social and emotional development are what are considered as key. We refocus on the paradigm of early childhood that provides for children as agents in their own lives, capable beings who are able to participate and comment on their experiences, able to act, able to flourish (James and Prout 1997).

Chapter 2 ‘Constructs of the flourishing child’ sets out to examine the ‘flourishing child’ as a recent iteration in the many social and educational constructions of the child throughout history. The flourishing child is contemplated at the heart of interrelated, and often competing, micro, meso and macro systems of influence; systems that inevitably impact on our understanding of childhood, and what it means to be a child. The chapter moves on to contemplate the child in the broadest

sense, their holistic development is examined to fulfil the extensive meanings the term flourishing has come to represent. It progresses to consider constructs of the flourishing child; doing so in a critical sense to reaffirm the importance of acknowledging the unique child, while recognising the fluid, evolving nature of the construct of childhood. Rousseau's conception of childhood and his influence on early years pedagogy and play is discussed. The chapter closes with a focus on the child's home environment and a discussion of the ways in which cultural capital impacts on their ability to flourish.

Chapter 3 'The ecology of flourishing' critically explores the issues raised by the policy dichotomy of 'universal' and 'targeted' services. The move from universal to targeted services, such as the 'refocus' of Sure Start on low income families, is framed within a political and economic context rather than a social and welfare one exemplified by the loss of the ECM agenda. This discourse and policy focus has obscured the complexity of the reality of people's lives, focusing on what are essentially superficial symptoms, ignoring the causes of the causes and the ecological contexts (Bronfenbrenner 1994), and putting the blame for all difficulties faced by disadvantaged people on to the individual and most often the parents. This individual blame is highlighted by the plethora of policy initiatives under New Labour and the Coalition focusing on 'troubled families'. This chapter argues that in order for children and their families to flourish the dichotomy of universal and targeted provision must be challenged. Finally, this chapter revisits the concept of multi-agency working to support flourishing.

Chapter 4 'Risk taking, philosophy and ethical practice to facilitate flourishing'. Dahlberg and Moss (2005, p. viii) state that there is 'always more than one possibility, more than one answer to any question'. This means that early years professionals have to make responsible choices every day in practice. Many of these choices are intuitive and based on experience. This chapter discusses the balance between the ethics of practice, explicitly determining the notion of perceived risks versus potential benefits. At the same time the notion of compassion fatigue is explored, considering why it is so necessary for practitioners to flourish if they are to support children and families to flourish. With a developing field of research into risk-taking, this theme is explored in relation to early childhood settings. From this standpoint, a challenge issued to early childhood is that of developing revolutionary approaches and challenging the discourse of 'accepted' practice. Finally, the chapter explores how flourishing may be further facilitated within the early year's setting.

## Part 2 Practices

Chapter 5 'Flourishing through Forest School' discusses the way in which Forest School is growing rapidly in popularity in the UK. Since its introduction as a concept in 1993 Forest School has grown from small beginnings at Bridgewater College to the point where many early years and primary settings now seek to include Forest School in their pedagogy or curriculum. The chapter seeks to explain some of this enthusiasm for a concept, which, some might argue, is a limited reinvention or re-packaging of pre-existing outdoor learning methods. The approach appears to have struck a chord with those educating younger age groups and with concerns for the moral panics of increasingly protected and sedentary lifestyles. The links between Forest School and opportunities for young children to flourish are considered.

Chapter 6 'Parent partnership for flourishing in an age of austerity' focuses on the value of partnerships with parents in identifying and nurturing characteristics that will enable them and their children to flourish. It uses reflection on case studies to draw out key features of successful partnerships between professionals, private, voluntary and independent agencies and parents as well as between agencies themselves and key challenges in these relationships. In reflecting on these challenges consideration is given to each perspective and particular attention will be given to ways in which successful partnerships can be supported at Local, Regional and National levels. It concludes with a juxtaposition of enabling and disabling factors for families, professionals and decision makers at all levels. The chapter develops the theme of flourishing, and draws on Bronfenbrenner, Wenger, Whalley and the Pen Green Team to demonstrate this in practice.

Chapter 7 'The creative curriculum: flourishing in the play environment'. This chapter explores the notion that while academics including Robinson (2016), Rosen (2014) and Waters (2013), continue to argue the necessity for a curriculum that supports young people to be creative, we appear to have a group of politicians and those in positions of politically conferred authority who are persistent in their refusal to acknowledge the research evidence that shows that children in early years settings do best when they are given opportunities to play and explore for themselves. This chapter explores how we need to provide an appropriate environment for young children, in which they are encouraged to: explore, to be curious and to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes that will support their future development and their ability to flourish. The chapter concludes that in order for children in early childhood to be enabled to flourish there are a number of factors

that need to be in place, these include: providing a creative curriculum, having a suitable environment, which includes access to indoor and outdoor spaces, allowing children to explore their own interests, and providing open ended and engaging materials with which they can investigate and explore.

Chapter 8 'Pedagogical documentation to support flourishing' explores the way in which the documentation of children's learning has gained prominence over the years and has in some instances become the primary occupation of practitioners. This documentation is created through ever increasing observations of children's activities. Foucauldian notions of the panopticon of power are at work (MacNaughton 2005). Likewise Greishaber and McArdle (2010) ask whom this surveillance of childhood is for. In the United Kingdom we create learning journeys, while in New Zealand they create learning stories and in Reggio Emilia pedagogical documentation is the main form of recording children's progress (Rinaldi 2006). In order to ensure that these records support the flourishing of the child we need to carefully consider how they are created and used. Carr (2011) spent time researching in a number of early years settings in New Zealand to consider how the learning stories were used with the children. These investigations focused on children's understanding not only of their learning, but also how the learning occurred. Rinaldi (2006: 63) demonstrates that in Reggio the documentation is used in, 'fostering learning and modifying the learning teaching relationship'. This chapter investigates whether there are more creative ways of using learning journeys in order to record children's progress, which benefits the children by incorporating our knowledge of formative assessment for lifelong learning and flourishing. We investigate what we can learn from New Zealand and Reggio practices to shift the balance from surveillance to assessment for flourishing.

## Part 3 Futures

Chapter 9 'Equality for flourishing in the early years' shows that currently in England inclusion is defined by policy makers (DfE 2014) as responding to children's emerging needs and interests where practitioners respond to them and guide their development. The challenge in early years is that the range of diverse experiences, which exist for both children and for practitioners, may make inclusion something that is more easily talked and written about, than practiced. This chapter questions the hidden assumptions and mental models, which practitioners bring

to their settings and explores the ways in which these might inhibit the flourishing of some children in their early years. It will argue that equality and inclusion are both central and fundamental to the development of all children. It will question why the early years' literature is often secure in terms of defining difference and dis/ability, but less secure in questioning the broader social, political and economic structures that limit the flourishing of all children. The chapter argues that early years practitioners have a duty and a responsibility to explore their own values and prejudices as part of their professional formation and in their ongoing professional roles. It will conclude that every child has a right to an early education in a cultural and educational space, which honours their unique experience, family background and community of origin, free from oppressive and judgemental language and practice.

Chapter 10 'Flourishing and quality' explores the current policy context of austerity, value for money and the education of pre-school children that has woven together notions of quality with techno-rational conceptions of professionalism within a performativity agenda (Moss 2014). This chapter deconstructs these concepts and questions the particular way in which policy has come to define what counts as quality in early years provision. It goes on to explore alternative conceptions of quality from the different perspectives of the child, the practitioner and the parent. This exploration will be located within the broader debates about the meaning and purpose of early years educational provision and will argue that a different professionally led discourse on quality offers an altered perspective of its importance and its relationship to the flourishing of the pre-school child. It will conclude that 'quality' re-framed can be used as an important conceptual tool to re-capture the elusive concept of educational excellence within the complex early years environment.

These final two chapters provide an opportunity to look at ways of being in the future that can support flourishing for the child, family and practitioner. We are not suggesting that these approaches are simple, in fact quite the opposite; we acknowledge many of the inherent challenges in these approaches. However, we conclude that we have attempted to examine flourishing from a range of perspectives and through a number of lenses. We hope that we provide thought-provoking challenges, which support those engaged in the early childhood sector in considering how they can provide a challenge to the neo-liberal techno-rational agenda of top-down approaches, that allow them and more importantly the children to flourish.

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PART

**1**

# Concepts

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# The conceptualisation of flourishing

Zenna Kingdon and Jan Gourd

## Introduction

In our last book we looked at how early years policy contributed to flourishing in the early years. Previously we based our conceptualisation of flourishing on Seligman's PERMA. While this suited our purpose at the time, the aim of this book and this first chapter is to further explore how flourishing is conceptualised more broadly in the early years context. The linkages between flourishing, well-being, happiness and pleasure form the basis of this chapter. We will firstly look at a number of theories of flourishing and a number of theorists who do not necessarily discuss flourishing but its constituent attributes including happiness, resilience, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships and values. We then seek to relate each of those to common early years themes.

We open with a discussion of the notion of the theoretical foundations of flourishing. This includes a consideration of flourishing in the contexts of classical philosophy utilising the work of Aristotle. We then consider flourishing in terms of learning theory drawing on the work of Margaret McMillan and finally we consider flourishing through the lens of positive psychology examining the work of Seligman.

We move on to consider flourishing and well-being and the interrelatedness of these two concepts with a particular focus on mental health. We recognise that in order for individuals to enjoy good mental health particular conditions need to be in place. These are often also related to attachment theory (Bowlby and Ainsworth 1991), recognising that children need to be enabled to develop effective relationships with those around them in order to be able to flourish.

In looking at flourishing we then consider aspects of happiness as a significant contributory factor to long-term flourishing. Moments

of happiness, however, do not necessarily lead to flourishing. Flourishing comes from values and relationships developed and deepened over time, which develop and strengthen the receptive capacities of the brain that enable an individual to respond appropriately and emotionally to life events. We investigate the emerging relationship between flourishing and neuroscience.

Greishaber (2008) and Murriss (2013) provide challenge to some of the current educational practices in which there is a focus on norms and expected ways of developing and achieving, often at the detriment of other aspects of being that are linked to flourishing. Current educational practices are often focused on outcomes and achievements in the short term rather than on long-term activities that will support the flourishing of the individual child. These concerns are investigated in order that we can consider alternative educational practices that may support the development of flourishing.

Much of the developmental psychological approaches to education focus on a becomings model. More recently, sociology of early childhood has developed an integrated model in which children are seen as both beings and becomings. Cross (2011) takes this a stage further by integrating three selves: beings, becomings and having beens. This model is considered and its relevance to flourishing is explored.

Recent iterations of flow suggest that creative pedagogies that offer opportunities for self-direction and agency within stimulating environments maximise the opportunities for the development of flow within play. Subsequently, they influence the happy ethos of the childcare environment. We conclude by discussing the necessity to establish a positive ethos within all early childcare settings.

## **Foundations of flourishing: Aristotle, McMillan and Seligman**

In considering flourishing in all its forms it is essential to try to establish the development of flourishing as the concept with which we are now familiar. In doing so we look back as far as the Ancient Greeks who were concerned with philosophical concerns of epistemology, the notion of how we develop knowledge and understanding and ethics, the notion that actions and pursuits should be moral and in the quest of some good (Aristotle 1925). He (*ibid.* 1925, p. 1) states that, 'every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good.' Noddings (2012) suggests that almost all of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* were concerned with the good life – something that we can directly relate to the notions of flourishing. Watson *et al.* (2012)

equally suggest that Aristotle was concerned with what constitutes happiness and well living. Aristotle (1925, p. 11) states that in seeking good in one's life, 'we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more final than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else.' He argued that that something was happiness. He (*ibid.*, p. 15) goes on to suggest that, 'the happy man lives well' Noddings (p. 152) further argues that Aristotle was concerned with seeking a better way than those that had come before, saying that, 'human beings are persistently seeking better ways than their ancestors'. She (p. 156) suggests that one of the strengths of Aristotle was that he sought to consider questions of everyday life and therefore had relevance for all, he did not, 'confine his philosophy to the analysis of abstruse language or the elaboration of a formal system'. Aristotle was concerned with the ethics of virtue in which individuals were concerned with the conduct of their everyday lives and the ways in which moral education should be developed.

Aristotle was not without his critics given that he argued in favour of a system that supported slavery and infanticide (Noddings 2012; Singer 1993). He supported the leaving of deformed newly born infants on mountainsides to die, suggesting this as a natural and humane solution for such sick and deformed babies (Singer 1993). He equally defended slavery because he felt that it was an essential element of a well-run society (Noddings 2012).

Despite these concerns it would seem that Aristotle is enjoying a renaissance and the ideas contained within his work are being used to support aspects of moral education including, citizenship, social and emotional learning, character education and positive psychology, the last being where current notions of flourishing are being developed (Kristjansson 2013). Kristjansson explores why Aristotle's philosophy is enjoying such resurgence and how it links with current concerns about flourishing and the good life. He (*ibid.* 2013, p. 51) suggests that many theorists have now, 'returned to the common-sense paradigm of the flourishing child, in Aristotle, where the simple and easily observable truths of the matter lie.' He (*ibid.* 2013) goes on to suggest that Aristotle's approach is appealing in that it addresses both human flourishing and a universal approach in which it is not possible to develop one's own virtues without at the same time benefitting others. Watson *et al.* (2012) support this idea suggesting that Aristotle introduced notions of morality and virtue from which value judgements needed to be made. Likewise, Noddings (2012) suggests that Aristotle addressed questions that concerned everyone and everyday life, his philosophy was therefore for everyone. Hence Aristotle's approach depends on an interrelated society

in which happiness and flow occur as a result of individuals' happiness, well-being and pleasure.

- Aristotle's work is seen as common sense and it is for this reason it is enjoying a resurgence.
- Aristotle considered questions about everyday life and living well.

## Margaret McMillan

Like Aristotle, McMillan can be considered to be having a renaissance and that her work has underpinned much of what is currently considered to be important in early years policy and practice. There are clear links between her concerns around diet and outdoor provision and aspects of the EYFS (DfE 2012). Margaret McMillan can be considered to be deeply concerned with flourishing, demonstrating concerns with children's 'physical, mental and moral well-being' (Read 2011, p. 423). Margaret was a Christian Socialist who became a member of the Independent Labour Party where her views were taken forward as the views of the party, focusing on the promotion of nursery education particularly for the children of the poor (Brehony 2009). In her early career she worked with older and privileged children, however, Du Charme (1992) suggests that having been influenced by a Russian revolutionary she became interested in the plight of the poor. From then on her career was spent firstly in Bradford and later in London concentrating on the children who were growing up in slum situations considering how their lives could be improved (Giardiello 2013). In Bradford she was elected as the ILP member of the school board, where she worked closely with Dr James Kerr, the School Medical Officer. She became interested in the physiology of growth. She campaigned for improved ventilation in schools, for correct breathing to be taught, for school baths and for the provision of wholesome school dinners (Bradburn 1989).

In 1897, the first school in Bradford had its own swimming bath and 12 slipper baths were seen. McMillan was concerned about how the children's opportunities to get clean, something that her research allowed her to understand, impacted on children's health and well-being (Bradburn 1989). On returning to London McMillan concerned herself with the development of outdoor nurseries and night camps for children in Stowage Deptford where the children were once again living in extreme poverty.

To let them live at last and have the sight of people planting and digging, to let them run and work and experiment, sleep, have regular meals, the sights and sounds of winter and spring, autumn and summer . . . to get these things we sacrificed everything else.

(McMillan 1919 cited in Bradburn 1989, p. 142)

McMillan sensed, and her research evidence supported this, that children would flourish when they were well fed and clean, when they engaged in an environment that was appropriate for them and met their needs, when they were enabled to gain a sense of the seasons and were able to understand the relationship between what was sown in the ground and what they cooked in the kitchen. These holistic and cyclical relationships with those around them and with nature were at the heart of McMillan's work. These relationships extended to those who cared for them in the nurseries. McMillan believed that the staff should be well qualified and trained to work with young children. She stated that:

The new thinkers, the psychologists . . . Began to show why the first five years of life are the most important of all . . . They told us how the first five years was the time of swift events and that destiny was settled then.

(McMillan 1932, cited in Bradburn 1989)

McMillan's pedagogical approach included three notions that set her work apart from others, which was training women to work with young children. Firstly, she stated that young children needed teachers, secondly, that the staff working with the children should be immersed in their lives in such a way that they could understand the childrens' experiences, this included living within close proximity of the nursery settings in order that they were able to visit the children in their homes. Thirdly, practice needed to precede academic work. McMillan was insistent that the women who worked with the young children were vocationally inclined to do so. Through these three principles she felt that she would be enabled to develop practitioners who were in turn enabled to support young children to flourish; physically, emotionally and intellectually through both education and care (Giardiello 2013).

- McMillan was concerned that young children were well fed, clean and in a suitable environment.
- These three aspects when taken together appear to support flourishing.