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Companionable learning: a mechanism for holistic well-being development from birth

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ABSTRACT: Set mainly in a UK context between 2003–2007, this article presents selected findings from a doctoral study, Companionable Learning: The Development of Resilient Well-being from Birth to Three; and from a series of subsequent studies carried out in English settings. Two questions have been explored: firstly, what are the interdependent components of young children’s holistic well-being and, secondly, what does well-being development look like in practice? A holistic conceptual model for well-being is proposed, with four constructs of agency, belonging-and-boundaries, communication, and physical well-being. ‘Companionable learning’ is seen as a powerful mechanism for well-being development. Four areas of companionable learning development were found to be companionable attention, authority, apprenticeship, and allowed time and space. Rich well-being situations often involve food; familiar companions and experiences; and going out. The need for well-being play and the importance of collective well-being are explored. These findings raise implications for curriculum and pedagogy in settings, for early years’ workforce and training, and for government policy.


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RESUMEN: Basada principalmente en el contexto Británico y entre los años 2003 y 2007; esta ponencia presenta una selección de los resultados del estudio doctoral Aprendizaje Social: El Desarrollo de la Recuperación (resilencia) desde el Nacimiento hasta los Tres Años y de una serie de estudios posteriores llevados a cabo en contextos Ingleses. Se han explorado dos cuestiones: en primer lugar, cuales son los componentes interdependientes del bienestar holístico de los niños de corta edad; y en segundo, qué apariencia tiene en la práctica el desarrollo del bienestar. Se propone un modelo conceptual holístico, con cuatro constructos de la agencia: pertenencia, límites, comunicación y bienestar físico. El “Aprendizaje Social” se concibe como un poderoso mecanismo para el desarrollo del bienestar. Se identificaron cuatro áreas del desarrollo del aprendizaje social que fueron la atención social, la autoridad, el aprendizaje y permitieron los tiempos y espacios. Situaciones de alto bienestar implican a menudo alimentación, los acompañantes y experiencias familiares, y las salidas. Se explora la necesidad de juego saludable y la importancia del bienestar colectivo. Estos resultados plantean implicaciones para el currículo y la pedagogía de los centros; los trabajadores y su formación en primeros años; y para las políticas gubernamentales.

Keywords: early childhood; well-being; agency; companions

Introduction
At the start of this research in 2003, awareness of the importance of the first three years of life had been rising dramatically. Various factors had fed this awareness. These included the ongoing debate about the policy and practice implications of studies on the early development of the brain; the UK government’s commitment to families with the youngest children as evidenced by investment in the Sure Start programmes; and the House of Commons Education Select Committee’s Early Years Review, which revised its original brief to include children from birth to eight years, rather than three to eight years. As a result of the Committee’s recommendation a new framework, ‘Birth to Three Matters’ (DfES 2003) was developed to support all service providers of children’s learning and care. Increasingly there had been a focus on the related factors of ‘relationships’ and ‘resilience’ in the thinking about the development of children’s long-term well-being.

Interplay is a defining concept in the work of Trevarthen – the interplay between mother and baby. He shows that the natural sociability of infants serves to motivate ‘companionship,’ eliciting the intuitive parenting that is evident in so very many observations of mothers and infants (Trevarthen and Aitken 2001).
importance of what he calls ‘mutual self-other-consciousness’ in developing children’s cooperative intelligence for cultural learning and language. This idea of ‘intersubjectivity’ is a key concept in Stern’s work (1985). Account of infant development in the home. The theme of companionship continues to be a dominant feature in Trevarthen’s work, and is prominent in this research.

With the election of a Labour government in 1997 there was a revolution in UK early years policy, with investment of resources at an unprecedented level to achieve fundamental change. This was a huge, and in many ways daunting agenda. Labour launched Sure Start, Neighbourhood Nurseries and Children’s Centres. Behind these strategies were some fundamental driving forces. While the social policy context was undoubtedly one of these, the relationship between education and social policy had become both increasingly uncertain and increasingly relevant because of the economic, cultural and social transformation of post-industrial societies. Issues of poverty and its impact on child health were dismayingly relevant, with 34% of children in the UK in 1995/6 in poverty, the highest in all the countries of the European Union. Spencer (2000) argued that social policy decisions have a major impact on poverty and child health; and concerns about citizenship, benefit dependency and social exclusion were matters for ongoing debate. The Children’s Centres programme generated by Sure Start opened up services to children and families in a range of innovative ways.

Alongside these developments was a range of guidance for early childhood services, some relating to overarching policy and some specifically for early childhood practice including birth to three. The first OECD thematic review of early childhood education and care (OECD 2001) concerned access to services, identifying eight key elements likely to promote equitable access to quality early care and education; while the second review (OECD 2006) built on these elements to highlight 10 policy option areas for consideration by governments and early childhood education and care stakeholders. Three of these areas were of central relevance to this research, relating to the child’s social context, to well-being and learning, and to family and community involvement. Recommendations included attending to the social context of early childhood development; placing well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC work, while respecting the child’s agency and natural learning strategies; and encouraging family and community involvement in early childhood services.

The Labour government’s determination to lift families out of poverty became linked not only with the need to raise family incomes through employment, but also with a strong national economy in which more women were employed in the workforce. Consequently the availability of quality childcare (or rather the lack of it) became a key issue. While this rationale for early day care was clearly important, it remains concerning that policy was driven primarily by economic need, rather than the needs and the well-being of the children attending it. There is a continuing tension both within families and in services for children and families, between the workforce perspective, and the developmental needs of the youngest children.

A vital theme to emerge at this time was the power of an ecological approach. Bronfenbrenner (2005) broke down some of the barriers between the social sciences of psychology, sociology and anthropology by suggesting that human development was better analysed in terms of systems, rather than by reference to linear variables. Writing of the dyad, or two person system, he suggested that if one member of the pair undergoes a process of development, the other does also. He maintains that this relationship provides a key to understanding developmental changes not only in children but also in adults who serve as primary caregivers – mothers, fathers,
grandparents, teachers, and so on. The work of Bronfenbrenner is again reflected in an important paper by Prilleltensky and Nelson (2000). Here the authors argue that child wellness is predicated on the satisfaction of material, physical, affective, and psychological needs; and that wellness is an ecological concept, so that a child’s well-being is determined by the level of parental, familial, communal, and social wellness. Rogoff (1990) also emphasises the vital role of family and community in children’s cognitive development, describing apprenticeship as occurring through guided participation in social activity with companions who support and stretch children’s understanding of and skills in using the tools of culture. Pugh’s (2005) work on risk and resilience in early childhood also adopts an ecological approach, and is an important pointer to key issues.

Fonagy et al. (1992) argued that an evident interest in resilient children was part of a shift of focus to primary prevention, driven by economic necessity as well as a desire for social justice. They defined resilience simply as normal development under difficult conditions. Grotberg (1995) argued that resilience is important because it is the human capacity to face, overcome and be strengthened by or even transformed by the adversities of life; and that everyone faces adversities; no one is exempt. Over the last two decades the use of the term ‘well-being’ has become increasingly widespread, although definitions have varied considerably. In this study, ‘normal well-being’ is synonymous with ‘normal development.’

This research constitutes a modest attempt at a theoretical model of well-being. In the review of recurring well-being themes, many threads emerged – threads that in ‘real life’ are generally embedded in the tangled web of children’s and families’ lives at home. However in order to explore and attempt to make sense of the foundations of resilient well-being, some sort of theoretical framework was needed, that would bring together the strands of emotion and learning. Consequently, the first research question related to such a theoretical framework: ‘What are the components of young children’s holistic resilient well-being?’ Given that a theory is ‘only as good as it is useful,’ the second question was about practitioners’ perspectives: ‘What does well-being development look like in practice?’

Methodology and ethics

This research arose out of a social constructivist approach, in which certain assumptions were made. The meaning we make of the world has its basis in sociocultural interaction, and this is especially the case for very young children. This thinking lies at the heart of the idea of ‘companionable learning’ which is a central concept of this article.

One aspect of this approach is the assumption that the fluctuations of a primary carer’s own well-being will make a fundamental impact on the well-being of the children in his/her care. This study investigates the development of resilient well-being from birth to three, and this assumption – that how a mother feels, for instance, makes a difference to her children – has led to a focus as much on mothers’ well-being as on children’s. Clearly other ‘companions’ matter too. Within this paradigm, it was decided to draw on a range of methods for different questions. This carried the advantage of strengthening the study by the opportunity to triangulate the findings.

So this mixed method, collaborative study was, initially, made up of three separate and very different studies: one in which 100 mothers of young children in different parts of the UK were interviewed; one where a series of focus group seminars were held with practitioners, researchers, service managers and policymakers; and the
main study involving extended case studies of nine very diverse families. These families included, a Pakistani family, an Indian Sikh family and a mixed race family. Family backgrounds and structures in this study were varied, as were the extended families and the needs of the children. The numbers of children in the families ranged from one to seven. Data relating to practitioners’ perspectives in settings were drawn from three subsequent projects collaborating with childminders, local authority managers and advisers, and practitioners working in Children’s Centres.

Underpinning these collaborations was the concept of grounded theory research as the unifying design characteristic bringing together the three studies. Although grounded theory is seen as a process whereby theory is generated from the data, it can also be used, as in this research, to test, explore and extend an a priori theory. Three attractive features of using grounded theory were that it provided explicit procedures for generating theory in research; it presented a strategy for doing research which, while flexible, was systematic and coordinated; and that it provided explicit procedures for the analysis of qualitative data.

The research was carried out within the ethical principles for conducting research with human participants laid down by the British Psychological Society (1992).

The principles cover the issues of mutual confidence between participants and researcher; attention to the participants’ standpoint; properly informed consent; avoiding deception; assessing the need for debriefing; participants’ right to withdraw; maintaining confidentiality; protection of participants; safeguarding privacy; and discerning whether to offer advice. These principles constituted a fundamentally important and often challenging framework for the design and implementation of the research.

Four ethical issues were particularly relevant and challenging. Firstly there was the need to find appropriate and effective ways of listening to children’s voices; secondly, using video footage to collect and analyse data posed particular challenges; thirdly, obtaining properly informed consent potentially generated tensions between ethical considerations and research design; and fourthly, when collecting data with families in the home, the limitations of the researcher’s role needed careful clarification.

Conceptual framework for ‘companionable learning’

Grounded theory analysis of the data within the structure of the a priori theory resulting from the literature review generated a well-being framework with four main constructs. The largely contextual construct of physical well-being formed a basis for the other three constructs: of communication, belonging-and-boundaries, and agency. The construct of physical well-being is about the impact of the external and physical world on processes and states of well-being, including physical health. It is divided into two components: the first, health and development, containing the elements of eating, sleeping, motor control, health routines and managing ill health. The second component is the physical environment, containing family income, housing, and the local environment.

The next construct, of communication, is of a different order from the mainly contextual one of physical well-being. Communication is the central process that, always in the cultural context, underpins all affective, social and ultimately cognitive functioning (Vygotsky 1962). This construct of communication is about processes of interaction. In this well-being framework, communication is made up of two components, received communication (with elements of listening, looking, touching, smelling and tasting)
and expressed communication (with elements of body language, talking, visual representing, stories, music and moving).

This communication construct is not just about conversations with people – aspects of language acquisition – but is essentially about all interactions with the world, in ways that rely on all the senses. It is about how we find out what things are, and how they work, by internally and externally formulating questions and interacting with the environment in order to discover. It is about two-way processes of connection. Building on the work of Prilleltensky and Nelson (2000) and Bronfenbrenner (2005), the mutuality that characterises ‘companionable learning’ can be termed ‘diagogy’ – a mutual, intersubjective style of communication and learning and that incorporates the development of well-being.

The remaining two constructs, belonging and boundaries and agency, are states of well-being. The construct of ‘belonging’ is very closely associated with the theory of attachment (Rutter 1972). Belonging depends on a person’s sense of individual identity within their relationships and communities, and a sense of belonging is acknowledged as vital to very early development (DfES 2003). This research also suggests an important association between the two elements of ‘belonging,’ and ‘boundaries’ – the expectations, routines and responsibilities that are an inevitable consequence of belonging. In the literature and in policy and service delivery, the separation of belonging and boundaries – in families, communities and societies – has made a negative impact in relation to fragmenting family life, the rise in behavioural problems in schools, and in youth offending (Rutter and Smith 1995). We are used to the association of ‘rights’ with ‘responsibilities,’ and this is a related concept for early childhood. Analysis of the data identified the elements of belonging as a sense of identity (in relation to others), attachment to ‘companions,’ and a sense of belonging to place. Elements of boundaries were identified as respect for people and places, awareness of expectations, familiarity with rules, understanding reasons for boundaries, and self-regulation.

A sense of belonging and its consequent boundaries underpins our interactions with the people and the environments in which we find ourselves; whereas developing a sense of agency – the final construct – relates to the internal world that drives our thoughts and actions and the ways in which we communicate, making a fundamental impact on our wellbeing. Human agency can be described as the capacity of human beings to make choices, and to act on those choices in the world. It is about the tendency to take the initiative, to rise to challenges, to try to influence events – an individual’s ability to act both alone and with others, to make a difference to their world.

This idea of making a difference collectively leads on to the idea of collective wellbeing. Griffey (2002) argues that to promote resilience in later life, children need family, educational and vocational learning contexts in which they can take control. The disposition and the ability to do these things depends on a degree of confidence in the likelihood of success, underpinning the importance of children’s development of a positive sense of self, and of realistic self-esteem (Roberts 2006). In this model, the construct of agency is made up of three components and their elements. These are a positive sense of self, with the elements of self-esteem and confidence; learning, in this context containing the elements of positive learning dispositions, and a sense of pride and achievement; and finally influencing, involving internal decision-making, a sense of empowerment, and a caring disposition (for self and others).

While it may be helpful to consider these four constructs one by one, in real life they are inextricably integrated; and it is important to think about each one essentially in the context of the others. In the data there were almost always two or more constructs in
evidence at once. Here is an example of an incident where all four were in evidence. Sasha, aged 19-months, is with her mother, Lara, and one of her brothers, Zeb:

Sasha and Zeb are finishing their little bowls of ice-cream. Sasha is sitting on a gap in the floor between the piles of things, with her bowl on the floor between her knees, spooning melted ice-cream in with an adult desert spoon and hardly spilling a drop. It is quiet in the room except for the click of spoons, and she is beaming at me between mouthfuls. After a while she looks round at her mother, who is sitting on the settee behind her, and they giggle.

Now Sasha gets to her feet, clutching bowl and spoon carefully. ‘OK then, don’t spill it – do you want Mummy to do the last little bit?’ Lara asks. ‘I’ll get the last little bit out for you...there we go, none left, is there? You going to put it in the kitchen then?’ Sasha sets off across the floor, drops the spoon with a clatter, exclaims, and bends down to pick it up, grunting with effort and satisfaction as she stands up again. With her small shoulder she heaves open the door to the kitchen and giggles with satisfaction; but the baby gate across the kitchen area is closed. She tries to heave that too, but can’t, and waits for Lara to come and open it.

In the kitchen the dishwasher is open, and we can see that there are dishes in it. Sasha glances at them and turns enquiringly to Lara, making questioning noises. ‘No, that’s clean in there, that needs emptying doesn’t it? Put it up on the side then’. Turning back, Sasha stretches up as high as she can, making effortful sounds. She can just reach high enough to push the bowl and spoon up onto the counter next to the dishwasher. Then she turns and comes back through the baby gate, looking and sounding extremely pleased with herself.

This observation illustrates all four constructs of the proposed well-being model. By contrast, the current conventional model of child development relies on the familiar categories often described as emotional, social, cognitive and physical. These are reflected in our university faculties – psychology, sociology, education and health – and in our public service delivery (mental health services, social services, schools and primary health care). These categories make a clear separation between affect and cognition; yet in real life we know affect and cognition to be interdependent. Great efforts are now being made in the UK to integrate these services together in ways that make more sense to children and families. In this proposed new model of well-being, the constructs reflect this integrated thinking. The wide-ranging processes of communication – often affective – are at the heart of cognitive development; while the states of well-being – agency and belonging-and-boundaries – reflect this interdependence in their combination of affective and cognitive elements.

These ABC constructs are one half of the well-being model – the theoretical half. Now the article turns to main findings, essentially relating to the practical half of the model, companionable learning. These findings are about the processes of well-being development, and the rich situations and experiences that are most likely to generate it.

Main findings and discussion

1. Companionable learning

The underlying idea of companionable learning for children from birth to three is based on the idea of ‘social capital’ (Bourdieu 1990; Giddens 2006). Neuroscientists have stressed the importance of early interactions, and positive, emotionally charged
interactions within secure relationships foster babies’ learning and brain development. Social interaction and active styles of learning have long been known to be key factors in positive child development (Isaacs 1954). The work of other key proponents of social learning theory underpins the concept of companionable learning: Vygotsky (1978), Bandura (1997), Wertsch, Rio, and Alvarez (1995) and Rogoff (1990).

The term companionable learning here is taken to mean learning in the widest possible sense, i.e. all of a child’s development that flows from active engagement with the world and the people in it. At the micro level which is the main focus of this research, ‘companionable learning’ stresses the mutual state of intersubjectivity that involves the child and the adult (or sibling or peer) both learning together in an equal, reciprocal dialogue.

2. Four companionable ‘A’s

Four strands of companionable well-being development emerged from the data: anchored attention, authority, apprenticeship, and allowing children the time and space they need. Children’s need for companionable attention, and their delight in situations where they are ‘anchored’ with their companions, was clearly and continuously evident. This process of anchored attention is at the heart of the ‘belonging’ half of the belonging-and-boundaries construct. Children (and companions) do not necessarily need to be physically anchored, as after a while anchoring can work as a mental process: to be ‘camped out in the key person’s mind’ (Elfer, Goldschmied, and Selleck 2003).

The second strand, companionable authority, was seen to feed well-being development especially in the context of companionable attention. This element of everyday well-being was not about a rigid, authoritarian approach to young children; but about a gentle but firm style of authoritative companionship with children that can be especially helpful for children’s sense of belonging-and-boundaries. Authority was about companions being reliable, regular and consistent: doing what they had said they would. Underpinning it were the processes of establishing routines and rules; and gently but firmly sticking to them as long as they are appropriate.

The third strand was apprenticeship – children’s active companionable involvement in everyday tasks that they normally saw adults doing. It was often referred to by the children themselves as ‘helping.’ Clearly relevant to everyday life at home but also powerful in settings, this concept illustrates the potential strength of childminders in family day-care. Larger settings, too, can build up children’s participation in this way; although in relation to expanding day care for children, apprenticeship activities – even when their importance is understood – are harder to organise in institutional day care settings. Perhaps one of the reasons why apprenticeship is not, at present, an important part of childhood in the UK, is the insistent focus on children’s independent achievements, rather than on their companionable ones.

Allowing children time and space was the fourth strand. This was often about time and space to play; but both at home and in settings, the children also needed ‘somewhere to call their own’ – even if only their own peg and shoe bag, or a particular area of the bedroom. Some of the children treated their buggy and – if they had one – their car seat as their own space too. For them, being in these places seemed to involve ‘down time,’ the mental spaces in which to process what had been happening: time and space for reflection, an essential part of the learning process. The mothers were sharply aware of their own need for this kind of reflective mental space, but there was
less awareness of children’s equally pressing needs, and diminishing opportunities, in this respect.

3. **Rich situations and experiences for well-being development**

There were particular situations and experiences in the children’s everyday lives that were evidently rich in opportunities for well-being development. Particularly powerful situations and experiences were grouped under three headings, as follows:

1. *Food*: growing it, shopping together, cooking, eating, clearing up, picnics, parties
2. *Familiarity*: people (companions), books, pets, songs and rhymes, places
3. *Going out*: everyday expeditions, getting around – walking, bus, train

How effective these situations and experiences were depended not on simply providing them, but on how companionably the children were experiencing them.

4. **The need for well-being play**

It became clear that play that was rich in well-being development had particular characteristics. This kind of play was child-initiated, open-ended, un-rushed; adaptable, available, intense, intentional; leisurely, creative, free – and profoundly satisfying to the children. In well-being play, the children’s needs included anchored situations with human or imaginary companions; authority – importantly, their own; ‘apprenticeship’ materials that enabled them to base their play in their own daily experiences; and time and space to play.

5. **The importance of collective well-being**

The need for a communal sense of well-being emerged very strongly, especially in the families. In the family meeting discussions and the focus groups, collective well-being in communities, neighbourhoods and nations was also seen as important. This concept of ‘collective’ well-being, in families, communities and society, was a powerful one. Agency, belonging-and-boundaries, communication and physical well-being applied not only in relation to an individual child or adult; but also collectively, in families, in communities, in society.

**Implications**

1. **Curriculum and pedagogical issues in settings**

Curriculum and pedagogical issues were found to be far-reaching. In relation to well-being development the five main findings described above all carry important implications for early childhood curriculum. Companionable learning, the fours ‘A’s, rich well-being situations and experiences, well-being play and collective well-being all potentially impact on what children do in their settings. Additionally, those findings carry pedagogical implications, in relation to ‘diagogy.’ The ‘diagological’ implications are about the importance of relationships, and the positive impact of companionable
relationships on children’s well-being development. The quality of diagogy affects how children experience their settings.

2. *Early childhood workforce and training implications*

In relation to training and professional development, areas of well-being that could usefully be assimilated into courses might include explorations of the nature of well-being, the importance of well-being play, companionable learning ‘diagogy’ processes, integration strategies, collaboration with families and colleagues, practitioners’ own well-being. Early childhood workforce implications include staffing ratios, integrated service delivery, and potential for the development of family day-care/childminding provision.

3. *Local and national government policy*

Perspectives in relation to local and national government policy have been included in the discussion because of their relation to the four well-being constructs: that babies and young children are current as well as future citizens developing agency; that the need for ‘collective’ states of well-being – agency and belonging-and-boundaries – are needed in families, communities and society; that local and national communication can generate situations and opportunities for well-being development; and that a wide range of government departments’ policies impact powerfully on collective physical well-being – for instance in health, housing, planning, transport and taxation.

This article outlines an ABC model of well-being that integrates affect and cognition; and a process of companionable learning and well-being development termed diagogy. Certain aspects of everyday family life in early childhood underpin well-being development. It has been shown that the theoretical model and its developmental processes raise important implications for curriculum and pedagogy, early years’ workforce and training, and local and national government policy.

References


