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Does Early Childhood Education in England for the 2020s Need to Rediscover Susan Isaacs: Child of the Late Victorian Age and Pioneering Educational Thinker?

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Abstract: Since the nineteenth century, the history of childhood has been inextricably linked to the history of schooling. Throughout the period of state-provided schooling, the approach to teaching the youngest children, originally from five but currently usually from three years old, has been contentious. This article looks at Susan Isaacs as a major figure in the shaping of views about early childhood education and thus in the history of contemporary childhood. It surveys her rather special position as someone who was herself a child in the urban late Victorian school system when schooling became compulsory for all, and who later combined radical innovation in the combination of educational theory and practice. She experienced for a period the running of a small experimental primary school on a daily basis, yet also engaged in high level academic research and writing which was founded on psychological, educational and, unusually for the time, observational principles. She thus provided evidence-based thinking for policy making at a crucial point in England's educational history (The 1944 Education Act). Her early life, her neighbourhood as shown by the 1901 census and the educational significance of her position on the value of assessment through detailed observation are discussed within the overall context of the last one hundred and thirty years of educational change. This reveals the principles which formed during her childhood and which teachers who work with young children share now even though these are challenged by current government policy. This article focuses on educational policy in England, as the other countries of the UK have at times evolved separate structures for their school systems.

Keywords: early childhood education; Susan Isaacs; urban Lancashire demographic sample 1901

1. Introduction

1.1. Susan Isaacs-Key Facts

Susan Isaacs lived from 1885 to 1948 and is noted for a range of varied activity: her many writings including two major field-based studies ([Isaacs 1930](#), [1933](#)); her role as head teacher under the directorship of Geoffrey Pyke of the experimental Maltings House School in Cambridge during the 1920s; and her academic role as head of the child development department at the University of London Institute of Education from 1933. She contributed to the 1932 Hadow Report on Infant and Nursery Schools and to the framing of the 1944 Education Act which has, since that time, sat at the heart of the education system in England and to an extent determined its parameters, rather as the National Health Service has been defined by the core principles of its launch in 1948. As her obituary in *Nature* ([1948](#), p. 881) summarised (my italics):

‘Few can have had a greater influence in our time on the upbringing and education of children; indeed, the modern trend towards full recognition of the *human* aspect of nursery school and subsequent education owes much to her work.’

Susan Isaacs is the subject of this article because she drew from her own experience, period of study and working life, from starting school in 1890 through to her death in 1948, a coherent philosophy about early childhood education (ECE) which on one level offers a remarkable continuity through to the present day, but which on another level is the source of divergent views and conflicting policies. Her work was cited in the Plowden report of 1967 and was represented also through her husband Nathan Isaacs’ contributions to that very influential publication. It, like her work as a whole, lies at the heart of the debate about the nature of early childhood education in the twenty-first century.

1.2. *The Current Context of Early Childhood Education*

The first section of this article looks at the British attitude to ‘childhood’ and ‘schooling’ as it developed from the introduction of compulsory education; as part of this we will see that there is a marked tendency for childhood to become secondary to schooling and to a preparation for adulthood.

Childhood is a construct which throughout history has been shaped and reshaped by adults, principally adults in power (Valkanova 2014). Some of the roles children have had laid upon them have been determined by pragmatic considerations with the interests of adults or society as paramount. This is as true in the twenty-first century as it was in the late nineteenth. The claims of government policy about improving the educational standards of all children are essentially consistent through that period of time and yet the context for such ambitions has changed rapidly between 1880 and 2019. Some of the debate about the nature of and purpose of childhood might be initiated by philosophers or other types of educators, but at an everyday level it is the family and immediate community which inevitably sets out the reality of what it is to be a child. Early childhood education (ECE) is an aspect of the nature of childhood which since the late Victorian times has gradually encompassed all children from the age of three, four or five years. The current structure in England divides the system at five years. Before that, the Early Years Foundation Stage covers ages birth to five with its own framework and curriculum; from five, the National Curriculum has specifications which cover learning to the age of fourteen with examination syllabuses taking that forward to sixteen and eighteen. In ECE, an international dimension in ideas appears to have been an accepted aspect of policy making until the last twenty years in England; for example, the significant and influential Plowden Report of 1967, which cited Isaacs’ work, emphasised approaches which originated in the thinking of the swiss psychologist Piaget (1936). Recently, however, the influence of how things are actually done abroad has lessened significantly as a divide between research and practice has opened up. Under the three Labour governments, beginning in 1997 and the subsequent Coalition and Conservative governments up to the time of writing, England especially has increasingly set out its educational course separately and with an introvert focus, preferring to identify and ‘solve’ its problems from within. Where policy makers reference other systems, for example Singapore (see critique by Hogan 2014) and Finland (Hart 2017), the core structures and belief-systems they build upon are often virtually ignored and, especially in the case of Finland, cherry-picked even when those cherries are a tiny element of the recipe.

This was not always the case and in the field of ECE from the early twentieth century, both theoretical and experiential thinking from Europe, for example from Froebel, Piaget, Montessori and from the USA, e.g., Dewey were commonly discussed. But currently, increasingly, even the pool of what constitutes ‘from within’ has shrunk as the twenty-first century has progressed. The Education Secretary from 2010 to 2014, Michael Gove, denounced in a series of statements (e.g., *The Daily Telegraph* 2013, 24 March 2013) as ‘enemies of promise’ education academics, local education authorities and ‘militant’ striking teachers. There was also a disdain for ‘experts’ (Jackson and Ormerod 2017), a role for which Isaacs was clearly admired according to the Obituary in *Nature* (1948). This divide in who has authority in education constitutes a dispute about the nature and role of childhood now as surely as in the late nineteenth century when with the new emphasis on compulsory schooling, children were seen as in a

separate stage of life and not merely mini-adults waiting for work and adulthood. Yet, at the same time, a good education is of course designed to lead to a usefulness to society. Valkanova (2014) has shown how across history childhood, as a concept, has itself been constructed to fit with the power dynamics of each age. She points to how in the early twentieth century the concepts of the progressive child (with its self-constructed identity) and of the normalised child (seen through the parameters of standardised testing) both grew to popularity. We might say that both survive now in the opposing views of the need for the child to be ready for school or the school to be ready for the child.

The new National Curriculum (DfE 2013) replaced the reformed (but cancelled) 2009 version (DCSF 2009) and could be said to be its polar opposite; the 2013 programme emphasises narrowly bounded subjects with a strong emphasis on core skills of Literacy and Numeracy, as opposed to a broader, more integrated domain-based structure that Rose had articulated in his 2009 report. In a special edition of the journal *Education 3-13*, Duncan (2010, p. 342) in her editorial, writing about the Rose Review and also the previous Cambridge Review of Primary Education (see Cambridge Review of Primary Education 2010 for an overview), stated (her italics):

‘Several of the proposals set out in both reviews have the potential to begin the process of constructing a curriculum which is more responsive to the ways in which *children* believe they best learn. The immense care taken by both reviews to acknowledge and take account of the voices of children, parents, local communities, head teachers, teachers as well as researchers and educationalists has produced a set of recommendations in which a wide constituency of stakeholders have played an important part.’

The Gove declarations about enemies of promise and experts give an insight as to why the incoming Coalition government cancelled the new curriculum before it had even been introduced.

Leading up to the two new versions of curriculum, from 1997 there were, through the twin prongs of, firstly, the original National Curriculum (which had only been launched in 1988) and its offspring The Primary Strategy (1999–2010) and, secondly, a rigorous inspection regime, a very heightened concrete focus on ‘standards’. This produced, in that period, comparison tables between schools, the grading of schools, teachers and even individual lessons and a relentless pressure on headteachers and their staff to narrow the curriculum priorities to English and mathematics at the expense of all other subject disciplines. From 2007, Teacher Education courses have been inspected specifically on their training for the teaching of reading and how far it meets the prescriptive government approach centred on the use of systematic synthetic phonics (SSP). The standards-led focus has in the last couple of years spread to early childhood education with the publication of a report, *Bold Beginnings*, from OFSTED (the schools inspection agency) (OFSTED 2017). In this report, schools are urged to make the Reception Year (children aged 4–5 years) more formal with a heightened emphasis on Literacy and Numeracy and especially on the use of SSP for the early teaching of reading. This is designed to lead in to the revised 2013 National Curriculum at Key Stage 1 (5–7 years) which raised expectations from previous iterations. Similarly, the government is introducing from 2020 a compulsory baseline test for children entering the Reception year which will eventually be used to compare progress between the ages of four and eleven. Children spend at least six hours a day, thirty-nine weeks a year in school and whether from two years old if they access the recent government extension to schooling, from three years old if they attend a Nursery class or from four if they start at Reception level, school defines a major part of their waking childhood and they are ‘measured, throughout the period from starting school until eleven years in a variety of education-based tests and health screenings. We can see therefore that childhood and schooling are inextricably linked.

2. Late Victorian State Schooling

It is not possible to make a realistic comparison of curriculum between 1890 and 2019 since there was no national Curriculum in Victorian times, but clearly reading and writing and arithmetic were the staple diet then, as they are now with the current strong focus on the disciplines of English and

Mathematics. Of course, between then and now, the resources for teaching, the training of teachers, the cultural expectations of school, the identification of pupil need, the psychological understanding of development and cognition are all worlds apart. The concern for standards has been ever-present from the mid-Victorian period, although it is more difficult to be accurate about the changing motivation for the pressures this brings. For example, when, in their historical review of education, [Nutbrown and Clough \(2014, p. 7\)](#) state:

‘By 1862, the Revised Code was introduced whereby grants were awarded to elementary schools, depending upon the achievement of their pupils. Forster’s Education Act of 1870 established school boards in areas where there was a lack of elementary school provision [,]’

We might maintain that the thrust of those policies, despite their enforcement ethos, was the widening of school access and improvement of young children’s life prospects and a more egalitarian view of how society should develop. According to [Shuttleworth \(2010\)](#) the child began to be seen as the bearer of the future rather than as a commodity or mini-adult. By 1890, the payment by results policy was questioned and although not immediately ended we can see that as schooling had become compulsory, a more collective societal responsibility for education was emerging. In fact, following the Acts of 1870 (the first major Education act), the Factory Act of 1878 which prohibited child labour before the age of ten, the Education Act of 1880 (when school attendance between the ages of 5–10 became compulsory) and 1882 when the Mundella Code emphasised enlightened teaching methods and a variety of subjects, schooling gradually became the norm for the majority of young children. Schools had been inspected for some time and Arnold who served for many years as a school inspector wrote about the tensions of the sometimes conflicting views of government, schools, the Church (who ran so many schools) the inspectorate itself (see [Campbell 2013](#)) and was thus contentious then as now. Following the Education Acts and the advent of compulsory schooling, the inspection framework became an annual event and the School Boards also visited to evaluate whether any grants should be paid. In this way, there was an attempt to monitor a fledgling national system and to establish some norms of quality in matters of attendance and standards. The terms used by inspectors, according to one Midlands school for which we have an overview of daily log book data, centred on the intelligence of the pupils, the efficiency of the schools, the discipline and tone of the classrooms ([Hodge 2008](#)).

Mixed age teaching was still very common in late Victorian times because there was often a single teacher in a school so pupils of four to nine or eleven were routinely in the same class. In some urban areas, the headteacher would have an assistant teacher, who could be unqualified and there was also the use of pupil-teachers in some cases. In the Midlands school case ([Hodge 2008](#)), there was segregation of the sexes rather than of age levels above the infant stage. At one point (1890), we see a staff of four (a headteacher, assistant teacher, pupil-teacher and a monitor) between them teaching 180 girls across seven school years. Clearly, here it was possible for children to ‘go missing’ in the classroom as close scrutiny of attention and work was highly problematic. Actual school attendance was monitored, however, and schools had to produce statistics for the annual inspections. At that school, one School Board visit (in 1902) questioned the staffing levels as not being generous enough and warned about the withdrawal of the grant ([Hodge 2008](#)).

Although the concern for ‘standards’ is therefore not new, there is a difference between a time when compulsory education for the benefit of all seemed a noble aim to work for and the present day when an enormous amount of research has interrogated the nature of child development, child psychology and pedagogies have blossomed with the myriad types of artefacts, media and technology that the twentieth century and the opening years of the twenty-first have produced. In 2013 in the lead-up to the publication of the new National Curriculum an attributed BBC report ([Coughlan 2013](#)) stated: ‘Michael Gove promised to rid the curriculum of “vapid happy talk” and ensure pupils had a structured “stock of knowledge”’. The rhetoric currently is that all children should be able to succeed equally and it is the debate about what qualities really constitute the best approach to education for all that is currently so contentious. It is in the education of the youngest children that the debate truly rages and many teachers of the 21st Century feel that the potential of so much developmental

work centred around childhood and children's real learning needs is currently ignored. One social media example of this is a closed Facebook group with over 40,000 members which is dedicated to maintaining a child-centred focus for 2–5-year olds in school. The tone of this group is very much one (in equal amounts) of positive pedagogical sharing and frustration at the external pressures on schools to comply with what is seen as a narrow government policy. As we have tried to show here, the view of schooling for this young age group certainly defines a large part of the actual childhood of those passing through the system although the policy makers conveniently avoid any definition of childhood, merely emphasising the need for standards to rise and social mobility to be effected. As Morgan, the then Minister of Education, said in the DfE Strategy document (2015)

'My vision is to provide world-class education and care that allows every child and young person to reach his or her potential, regardless of background Children only get one childhood and one chance at their education, so there is a real urgency in our need to deliver' (DfE 2016, pp. 3–4)

In fact, that document (DfE Strategy 2015–2020) only contains one occurrence of the word childhood and it comes, very much conflated with the idea of education at the end of the introduction.

The fact that in the late nineteenth century there were financial rewards for schools if they reached certain standards does indicate a similar pressure on a system to comply with whatever it was that inspector and school Boards advised; it does also demonstrate the historical precedent of what might currently influence heads and teachers to find the most efficient way of reaching targets without necessarily considering the children's diverse preferences, needs or contexts. It is probably fair to say that just as society in the late Victorian period was structured around quite rigid hierarchies and an expectation that the population in general would respect these boundaries and authorities, so were schools. Whereas currently, rebellion or at least non-compliance is a part of society which few would pretend is absent or should simply be crushed, that was perhaps more a feature of the thinking of the 1890s. A small-scale 'rebel' from the period who became a key figure in the framing of the debate about the nature and most appropriate model of early childhood education in the UK was Susan Sutherland Isaacs (1885–1948). Isaacs was born and grew up in Turton, which lies immediately to the north of Bolton in Lancashire.

3. The Environment in Turton

Turton is a district to the North of Bolton, where Isaacs' father edited the newspaper, the Bolton Journal and Guardian. The area is described on the internet site British History Online (<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/lancs/vol5/pp273-281>) in these terms, relating to 1911:

'There are numerous cotton mills, print works, bleach works, dye works, and quarries. The land is chiefly in pasture. The Egerton spinning mills were formerly worked by a powerful water wheel. There is a disused paper mill at Chapeltown.'

The family lived in houses around Bromley Cross which is and was a part of the township close to the edge of the Bolton urban area. The 1901 census for Turton was completed in two halves and the eastern half centring on Bromley Cross contained a population of 1611 spread across some two hundred records. Clearly the infant mortality rate of the time was greater in industrial urban centres, especially in mining and textile areas (Jaadla and Reid 2017) and the records on any one date mask the past infant and child deaths in each family. The census reported two hundred and twenty-two children of sixteen or under living in that part of the town which would have been Isaacs' immediate community. Around fifty-three percent of the households included children and therefore, perhaps surprisingly, a relatively high proportion (around forty-seven per cent) were all-adult households, either with predominantly older or middle-aged residents and occasionally a younger couple without children at that point. Excepting farms where the population was more varied, only ten households included servants. No child under twelve was shown as at work and only two of nine of that age had

an occupation listed on the census. However, from thirteen up to sixteen years, the majority were at work. At thirteen, the balance was close with nine of seventeen working, but at fourteen and fifteen the great majority had an occupation listed (eleven of twelve at fourteen and fifteen of seventeen at fifteen). There were fewer sixteen-year olds on the census register but only one of the ten listed was not shown as working: that is Susan Isaacs, bearing her birth name Susan Sutherland Fairhurst. The occupations of these forty-six children included a strong majority carrying out a range of jobs at either the local bleach works or cotton mill (usually following a family employment pattern); but the figure also included dressmakers, labourers, an errand boy, a sawyer, a clerk, a wheelwright apprentice, and a confectioner (possibly a sweet shop assistant). From a census, it is of course impossible to know whether the younger children were attending school regularly and that they were not sometimes employed in their family's line of work or working to help keep the house. What we see from these statistics is that Isaacs would have been conscious of her different position from that of the majority of her counterpart and from the wider cohorts immediately above and below her age which would have been linked to her older and younger siblings.

Isaacs had, in some ways, a privileged childhood and learning formed a strong part of that as the large family was cultured and creative. But her life was not without its traumas. Her mother died when she was six years old after a long illness following the birth of her younger sister. Her father remarried quite quickly and this involved a woman who had been in the house for a time nursing his wife. Biographies make much of the fact that the young Susan mentioned that relationship innocently to her mother just before she died ([Gardner 1969](#)) and

'according to Susan's later recollection, someone came and led her away from her mother's bedside. Her last memory of her mother was of her mother's white face wearing an expression of deep distress that she herself had caused.' ([Graham 2009](#), p. 37)

The incident is held to show that this demonstrated her strong desire always to tell the truth and to report what she saw. This clinical objectivity formed a strong part of her later work in education although according to all accounts of her life she was certainly not without emotion or humour.

Isaacs' childhood in the home, as noted above, was not always happy and neither was her schooling. She attended a Methodist school from five and then a relatively new secondary school from when she was twelve. This required an entrance examination and was much larger than the elementary school. Summarising her educational experience, [Graham \(2009, p. 49\)](#) writes:

'One might have hoped that for a child suffering so much grief at home, school would have been a compensating experience. This was certainly not the case as far as her elementary school was concerned; here she was teased and found no pleasure in learning. This school was, by comparison with others of the day in the same city, poorly run. The teaching was regarded as of low quality and some of her teachers found difficulty in keeping order. Her secondary grammar-type school was more demanding and stimulating, but even here she was not happy. She remained a difficult and troublesome girl.'

The linking from her own childhood into her later educational work and writing is demonstrated by an article she wrote later. According to [Graham \(2009, p. 44\)](#) she referred to a girl (whom he identifies as almost certainly herself), who:

""throughout her school years was characterised by obstinacy, noisiness, insubordination, seeking after boys, occasional stealing". At seven years "she ate chalk . . . She used in school to blow her nose very loudly in order to annoy a woman teacher whom she much admired and loved""

The household which was cultured, athletic and involved much musical activity, was 'lined with bookcases' ([Gardner 1969, p. 31](#)) which were according to [Graham \(2009, p. 34\)](#) 'not just on revivalist religion, but on politics, the arts, history, travel and, of course, sport.' These topics represented the

context of her father's occupation as a journalist working in Bolton and his close adherence to his Methodist faith which also meant the children had Sundays busy with church activity. Not only were the books very varied but so, according to a family friend ([Gardner 1969](#)), were the family's activities which were often based outdoors. The surroundings combined the industrial with the natural and in conversations with her biographer ([Gardner 1969](#)) Isaacs commented on the attraction in later life when she returned to the area both of the grimy houses and mills and of the nobility of the moors and the charmingly wooded valleys. Clearly, she was not a child who sat indoors, read and saw no-one which gives a rationale to the argument that her origins and experienced strongly underpinned her later thinking about the needs of young children and education.

One of Isaacs' older sisters is shown in the census as working as a school teacher and was probably a pupil-teacher at Susan's school in Bolton at one point, but by 1901 none of the brothers whom she valued as intellectual companions, was still living at home. Susan herself was to have periods of teaching or tutoring between the time she left school and starting higher education (see below). The pattern of the neighbourhood, that from twelve years upwards children quickly abandoned school and started working, the majority in challenging factory environments which involved potentially harmful chemicals, would certainly have made her count herself fortunate and is likely to have formed a view about the value of education which she had already benefited from and was to continue as she moved eventually into higher education. She talked about this to her biographer Gardner who cites her ([Gardner 1969](#), p. 35):

'I remember periods of pinching and even of famine among the cotton workers . . . There was no unemployment benefit, no insurance, no general social responsibility for starving children, and skilled men could not find work. But fellow feeling was strong and direct . . . the chapel or the church called upon the lucky ones in half-time, if not in full-time work to pool their resources for the more needy. Many families who attended the Wesleyan Chapel in my own village deprived themselves for a week or a month of all butter on their own bread or sugar in their tea and paid the savings into the common fund for the help of their less fortunate friends.'

But at sixteen, although not shown to have an occupation in the 1901 census, she was ironically, not actually in school as her father had withdrawn her at the age of fourteen or fifteen (accounts vary) to counter her developing agnosticism ([Gardner 1969](#)) and so her education continued autonomously before she finally attended higher education via a route at Manchester University which was intended to prepare students for teacher training. This course introduced her to the work of Dewey and Froebel which were to inform her thinking about education greatly by the time she opened the Cambridge based Maltings House School in 1924. She was recommended to transfer to a full degree-level course and after an intervention from an academic which convinced her father he should finance this, she gained entry to Philosophy in which she subsequently gained a First Class degree. She had had to study very rapidly two foreign languages to achieve the entry requirement and managed to reach a sufficient level in both German and Ancient Greek partly alone, partly with the help of a family member. Not only did she demonstrate very high intellectual ability but also substantial originality of thought; this rare combination was no doubt founded in her experience of taking a mediocre school education and combining it with the rich family culture and then the opportunities which the Manchester courses offered. Having such qualities ensured she was noticed and she was subsequently offered a scholarship at Newnham College Cambridge where she began to study Psychology. Her subsequent activity as detailed below suggests that she always carried her early experience with her.

4. Isaacs' Developing Theories

After her time at Cambridge, Isaacs became heavily involved in and influenced by the emerging psychoanalytical theories which came from Freud and his school. These provided a foundation for the way in which she observed the children at the Maltings House School; she launched the institution in

Cambridge as an experimental school with its proprietor in 1924 after connections between the two were made by a mutual acquaintance within the psychoanalysis community. Among Isaacs' major influences, importantly in the sense that she acknowledged but also critiqued them, were Dewey, Piaget and Montessori. Dewey had himself addressed the theories of Froebel, who is usually regarded as the originator of the kindergarten style of early childhood education through establishing a laboratory school in Chicago and so a direct line can be traced between the approaches he carried out and how Isaacs decided to run her own institution. Froebel had in turn learned from Pestalozzi, a disciple of Rousseau, so a connection back to the eighteenth century was established which drew in long discussions about both childhood and education. The [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy \(2017\)](#) characterises Rousseau's theories of education as centring on the need to protect and develop a child's natural goodness and that the educational process should be that:

'The child is not told what to do or think but is led to draw its own conclusions as a result of its own explorations, the context for which has been carefully arranged.'

It is interesting that we can trace the particular thread of thinking about early childhood education back by around two hundred and fifty years, note its role at a point approaching a hundred years ago and still see the issue as a matter of debate in the current educational system. This is not about the essential goodness of a child, as we have seen Isaacs' own self-assessment countering that line of thought, but about the nature of deep learning. The Rousseau method in its most simple iteration, as outlined above, still has the presence of a teacher, but one who creates a learning environment and then truly facilitates from the side. The talent for 'careful arrangement' is crucial as it is a deep pedagogic knowledge that enables that to be done most effectively. It requires a certain amount of bravery to wait in the confidence that the learning environment *will* truly enable progress in terms of deeper understanding and more embedded skills rather than in terms of content memorisation. As we saw earlier, the current debates in the ECE arena stem from exactly this divide in the view as to what the true purposes of early education are. In this sense, we might say that Isaacs was in tune with the thinking from central and northern Europe and from the U via her tutor at Manchester, Grace Owen, in a way that is not prevalent now amongst policy makers, although ironically it is far more understood by teachers than was the case in the 1920s when she ran Maltings House.

Isaacs' thinking developed directly from the twin sources of her reading of progressive sources and her own longitudinal observation at the school and these two separate but related interactive strands culminated in the two publications ([Isaacs 1930, 1933](#)) on Intellectual and Social Growth respectively. In these, she reflected on how children learn and also crucially what the curriculum should contain:

'For me, the school has two main sorts of function: (a) to provide for the development of the child's own bodily and social skills and means of expression; and (b) to open the facts of the external world (the real external world, that is, not the school "subjects") to him [sic] in such a way that he can seize and understand them.' ([Isaacs 1930](#), p. 20)

She continues ([Isaacs 1930](#), pp. 20–21) 'This view has long been associated with the name and work of John Dewey.' Dewey (1899, 1902, 1916) had written three very influential works regarded as the foundations of progressive education and in turn had been influenced by the thinking of Froebel (1888) (regarding the value of learning through play and the nature of an early childhood kindergarten ethos which he created through running his own kindergarten), which informed Dewey's experimental school at the University of Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century and thereafter. Given Isaacs' decision to use close longitudinal observation at the Maltings House School we see the rise to prominence of practice-oriented theory generation. Her referencing of and discussion of Piaget's work demonstrates her close attention to contemporary thinking as Piaget's 'Language and Thought of the Child' was first published in English in 1926 and Isaacs uses his material and critiques it in the 1930 publication 'Intellectual Growth in Young Children'. Crucially, she critiques Piaget's explanation of development through his developmental stages as not simply biological maturation but a process which contains social factors where the:

‘process of socialisation is gradual and continuous and that the “social instincts” which appear more marked at seven to eight years undoubtedly have, at any rate in part, an individual history . . . ’ (Isaacs 1930, p. 79)

This possibly anticipates the more social-constructivist approach of Vygotsky (1978) which was contemporary to Isaacs’ life but not translated from the original Russian until the late 1970s. For Isaacs, it was important to establish a naturalistic learning environment and self-directed play as the basis for her rigorous scientific observations of children and to capture everything they said and did. This accords with the Vygotskian emphasis on learning first in a social context through dialogue with others and the importance of language for learning. It also highlights that children develop individually and on a path that is not necessarily like that of others. Current practice in early childhood education in England is centred around close observation as the main method of identifying both children’s development and the most appropriate next steps in their learning. This is both at an individual setting level where adults use the method on a daily basis while interacting with children as individuals or small groups and in materials or approaches which have been developed as instruments, such as the Leuven Scales (Laevers 1994). Isaacs is undoubtedly a pioneer in this approach in the English context and her direct legacy is perhaps most clearly seen in this aspect of early childhood education.

She clearly sets out the observational approach in some detail in the Introduction to the 1930 volume (Isaacs 1930) but also admits that a purely objective observer does not exist and that children inevitably respond to being observed. She acknowledges observer bias too, citing the example of a psychologist who observed his own children and was not able to extricate his own parental approach from his observational notes or see that his views impacted on what he was observing. With these insights we can say that it is reasonable to infer from Isaacs’ writings about child development that her unconscious starting point is her own life experience combined with the very various learning that had followed with philosophy, psychology and psychoanalysis all deeply interrogated. Gardner (1969, p. 19) who talked to Isaacs many times as part of constructing the biography noted details she told her about her early education and concluded:

‘Perhaps such experiences were the beginning of her deep conviction that learning is one of the ways in which we achieve stability and happiness, and that young children need to be taught in ways which they can understand.’

Isaacs reflected deeply on the twin areas of pedagogy and curriculum, drawing in the philosophies of child-centred educationalists as well as the rich observational material that she generated daily at the school and, also in her Introduction (Isaacs 1930, p. 21) discussed the ways in which school should arrive at its curriculum content: (original italics)

‘We have been content to apply out new psychological knowledge of *how* the child learns, to the ways of getting him to learn the old things. We have not used it to enrich our understanding of *what* he needs to learn, nor of what experiences the school should bring to him.’

Earlier in the chapter (Isaacs 1930, p. 19):

‘It is, for instance, so much easier from the point of view of space, of staffing and equipment, to keep the children relatively inactive and to “teach” them, than it is to arrange for them to “find out”.’

Both of these citations appear to arise not just from what she knew happened around her in the average school but also from her own childhood. As we have seen earlier, she herself had had varied but not especially positive experiences at her two different schools but then crucially it was her experience of self-started, self-managed independent learning, where learning by doing alongside autonomous selection of reading material was very much the pattern of her daily life that appears to have been crucial in giving practical expression to the reading she had done at Manchester, Cambridge and thereafter.

5. Conclusions

We began by noting the interconnectedness of a view of childhood and a view of early childhood education. The former should logically inform the latter but a survey of current education policy suggests that the two are seen as separate, even unrelated. Isaacs experienced what she judged as an unsatisfactory education with a lack of emphasis on individual capacities, a lack of linking to the real world and a lack of pedagogical creativity. Her intensively detailed observations of young children's learning activity at the experimental school demonstrate that all of those qualities were matters to be considered in a brave approach which many might describe as risk-taking, but which Isaacs appears not to have feared. Her conviction that one needs to start from the child as Fisher (2013) more recently expressed it, and her strong belief in her ability to observe objectively and to make critical sense of what she saw appeared vindicated by the attainment of the children from Maltings House School as they progressed beyond it. She states (Isaacs 1930, p. 110) that from the schools the pupils moved to came reports commenting that they were: 'remarkable for their intelligence and adaptability' and that 'they are so very eager to learn.' There may be a difference of scale between a small experimental school and a vast education system but we should always remember that each four-year old has a single classroom and a single educational experience which can shape a future.

Isaacs' view of education was not laissez-faire. She highlighted the importance of learning but saw childhood as containing the natural desire to do so. She appears to have devoted an enormous energy to the 'careful arrangement' of the environment which attuned to Rousseau's views so long before. Now, at a time when childhood is theoretically safeguarded for so much longer than at previous points in history, we could perhaps learn from Isaacs' desire to unite the two concepts of a protected childhood with an exciting and creative education which builds understanding, skills and the capacity for independence. Isaacs' early life taken all together appears to have given her that portfolio of experiences, some happy, some traumatic, some frustrating, but it required an enormous amount of autonomous effort from her to counteract the more negative aspects. She extracted from that ways to ensure children did not need to wait so long and work so hard to reach the benefits of a carefully arranged learning environment. We should also heed that iteration of 'promise' and see in it a rationalised challenge to the prevailing policy view that to ensure that all children progress further we need to begin more formal teaching earlier. The clash between the disparate views on ECE should be given the Isaacs lens which was centred on rigorous, research informed close observation of real children engaged in the learning process. In that way, a policy which builds on the full learning of the last one hundred and thirty years could be adopted with confidence by the profession as a whole.

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