

Understanding Ourselves As Learners: An Interview With Professor Joy Cullen

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I think we all need interests. We need to be encouraged to pursue our interests. We need people who are interested in us. We need faith in ourselves that we can do things. And all learners, be they gifted and talented, or children with major disabilities, need the sort of support that helps them to have some understanding of themselves as learners (Joy Cullen, 2006).

Joy Cullen believes in people, believes in the power of learning and believes in herself; all central to her ability to tackle new challenges and pave the way for others. What she wants for educators and young learners is what she has for herself, a love for learning and the ability to pursue her interests. As educators, Joy believes it is our job to ensure that all learners can get a sense of themselves and a belief that they can learn. In understanding ourselves, Joy says we can learn more effectively – and she should know. Having attained a series of significant achievements in teaching and the academic world (including a masters degree, a doctorate from the University of Alberta and being appointed foundation professor in early years education at Massey University), Joy knows something about what it means to be a learner, and what it means to learn. After completing her doctorate in educational psychology focusing on learning disabilities, specifically learned helplessness, Joy was offered a one-year post-doctoral fellowship in child development by the University of Canterbury, a special award for the International Year of the Child (1979). During the 1980s she taught in early childhood teacher education in Western Australia, and in 1992 became Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at Massey University. Joy is now Professor of Education (Early Years) at the College of Education, Massey University.

As a teacher in the 1960s and 1970s, Joy taught in the early primary years (5-8 year olds) and later, in the 1980s, her area of research and teaching focused on young learners in early childhood education and early intervention – although ironically she never attended an early childhood setting herself as a child. What interests Joy is how learning occurs in the early childhood years, irrespective of any formal or informal setting.

I had a childhood in which I was encouraged to show initiative and be reflective, and enjoy the outdoor environment and to have aesthetic interests. I mean, obviously these things reflect my values. I was brought up in New Zealand, so I reflect the New Zealand environment. And growing up in education post-war, the 1950s, we really didn't have the resources we have today. I didn't go to an early childhood

service. So, again, that suggests to me that as learners it's more than what happens within formalised learning centres that influences the way we are. I was brought up in a family of girls. I had a father who used to do things with us that he probably would have done with sons if he'd had sons, but didn't. So, we learned to be quite self-sufficient really. That probably is important too.

When I met with Joy to talk about her work, she went to some lengths to clarify whether the focus would be on early intervention or early childhood as Joy was integrally linked to both. The resulting conversation highlighted that when talking about all learners, and about learning, there is no distinction. The point of difference is that the supporting team may be larger according to the diverse needs of the child. Ultimately the learner is still central to the process, and it is this that drove Joy to the greatest provocation of her career: all children can and will learn, so how do teachers, professionals and families support the learning for the child?

From her own personal experience, Joy learned two important lessons that would inform her work. When she saw what Early Intervention Services (EI) meant for someone in her family, Joy identified two critical factors in the services. First, that valuing diverse forms of knowledge from both professionals and families was fundamental to supporting children. Second, don't give up on children.

I have learnt two things from that. I learned to value the specialists because they did have an enormous amount of knowledge, and I discovered a lot, that everyone can learn something at whatever level. So, you don't give up on children. We work with children with the skills and competencies they bring and yes, it is worthwhile to do that in itself.

But I also learnt that families are part of the scenario. And, of course, this has been really important in early intervention, with its strong family focus. You can't take families out of the provisions of young children with educational needs. And somehow I think we've got to get the mix a little better in early childhood education. That's why I was impressed with what I saw in Great Britain where they were looking at ways of finding supports for parents, and involving parents and acknowledging their expectations and wishes and expertise, and bringing them together with what the early childhood programmes had to offer. I don't think we've quite got that right yet. I think there's more to explore there in New Zealand.

I think we have made tremendous progress in the sector. It's been an exciting time in which to work in early childhood education since the early 1990s when the first draft of Te Whāriki was distributed.¹ So we can be proud of what we are doing to develop our own unique curriculum and research in this country. At the same time we must situate what we're doing against international literature. We can contribute to the international literature, and we can learn from what is happening in other areas.

I have just recently been to Britain and I visited two of their flagship early childhood centres in Pen Green, the Early Excellence Centre in Corby and the Thomas Coram Children's Centre for parents and children in London, both of which have Sure Start government funding for research into supporting learning. And I was very impressed with their outreach programmes, their working with parents and the supports that they had in place. They've gone much further down that track than we have. Certainly one of the goals of the New Zealand Early Childhood Education Strategic Plan², is to do with collaboration and I think the New Zealand centres of innovation are part of that. But we haven't gone very far down the track of developing systems that bring families and early childhood centres together. I see this as particularly important for early intervention, and it's one of those areas I'd like to see us give a lot more attention to in this country.

Throughout our conversation, Joy talked about the need for children with significant learning needs to have the opportunity to learn and the right to participate and interact with others. She said that focusing on the child as a learner was important, rather than the traditional focus of a "child with a special educational need". Within this view, diversity for any child should be acknowledged and addressed.

I think we have these same goals, and in many cases the process is the same, but sometimes we need more specialised support and processes. Everyone needs a slightly different mix to support them. I mean you can see that within any family, can't you? The children. Same parents, same past, apparently the same circumstances, but look how diverse the children are. So everyone is an individual.

I don't actually go along with the extreme socio-cultural views that emphasise the collective and de-emphasise the individual. By and large, I favour a socio-cultural approach, but I would not ever want to filter out the individual because I think individuals are important. And encouraging individuality is very important. I think that's something we've done well in New Zealand. We've been allowed to be individuals. I would like to see the early intervention provisions supporting children as individuals with interests and competencies, rather than as just one of the group. I don't like seeing them being stereotyped.

Teachers and specialists have different but complementary skills that are used to support the learning of children. To move from a medical or expert model to a more ecological model, the focus shifts from a deficit view of the child to seeking to understand the way the child learns in the environment and through interactions with others – peers and teachers alike. This shift of focus has an impact on the type of assessments used and the way the teacher interacts with the child. It also involves a different role for specialists. As Joy highlighted, it requires specialists to be seen, and used, as a resource for teachers working in collaboration with other educators and the family.

I would like Early Intervention teams to present themselves as resources to teachers, rather than experts. They do have expertise and I don't want to devalue their expertise. It's very valuable, but there is a psychological mindset, if you like, between thinking of the specialist as a resource there and the specialist holding all the expertise who is telling the teacher what to do.

I know from a project I recently worked on that teachers became empowered quite rapidly when they started to shift their mindset. They saw their educational expertise was being valued, they could use their educational expertise, and the use of learning stories was actually quite pivotal to this because THEIR assessment tool was valuable. And that was important because so often IPs are being dominated by specialist assessment tools.³

R: So did that mind shift occur through them seeing the value in their work?

J: Yes. Yes. Seeing how, because learning stories comment not just on the child in isolation, they also comment on the child's interactions with others, including the teachers. So, they could see what effect their own teaching interactions were having, what effect it was having on the child. That in itself was empowering. Another important outcome was the increased interactions with the education support workers, so that it became much more of a team support.

[Through learning stories, teachers] do an analysis. They're looking at what has captured the child's interests ... what's happening here? Then they're looking at their own strategies and what is the next step from there. I have to be honest, when I started off this project I didn't think that learning stories would be robust enough to pick up all the skills and aspects of it because I do believe that one needs to have that mixed balance of skills and interests in working with all children. It was really quite illuminating to see how these different learning stories written by the specialists, teachers and parents were focusing on the skills that were coming through and you could see a continuity across the stories.

¹ Ministry of Education (1996). *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.

² Ministry of Education (2002). *Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki*. Wellington: Author.

³ An IP is an Individual Programme (also referred to as an Individualised Education Programme/Plan, IEP; Individual Development Plan, IDP). The Individual Development Plan or Individual Plan is an early intervention programme developed for children with special education needs. It outlines the child's goals and the resources, support, monitoring and evaluation required to enable the child to meet those goals over a defined period.

There were the multiple lenses of different people bringing their different frameworks, but they were picking up on skills, and the goals for the IP really flowed out of that quite readily. I wouldn't say that would be the only way to plan for children, but it certainly involved the teachers much more proactively than in some of the more traditional IPs. And that is the valuable thing.

R: Is that using the same assessment tool for all children?

J: Yes. I see learning stories as one of an array of assessment approaches. Our current assessment system, the whole learning story and narrative approach to assessment, if you follow that through with every child, is an enormous amount of work for teachers. They're doing it with a great amount of enthusiasm and professionalism, and certainly it's highlighting a whole new approach to assessment that has received international interest. Visitors from around the world are interested in the use of narrative assessment for children in early intervention.

So there is a very positive aspect to it, but that type of assessment, as opposed to the old-fashioned checklist variety, is enormously time consuming. One wonders how long teachers are going to be able to cope with all the professional tasks that are being required of them.

R: Do you think that it is contributing to a different way of teaching?

J: Oh, yes, in some centres. I mean you can still go into some early childhood centres, and see the sorts of practices you would have seen 20 years ago. There's still that free choice play and the foregrounding of children's interest. There are two ways of looking at children's interest. One, in which you're really working and extending them into developing projects, and the teacher is involved in that co-constructive style of learning. Or there is a much softer sense, if you like, of children's interests where children are just able to choose what they do. The old-fashioned free choice, self-selection sort of programme. That type of programme has been researched and shown it can be very low-level play and it's not extending anyone. If you place a child into that sort of environment, what are they going to gain from it? They make their choice, and they might engage in repetitive play.

While the choice of free play was identified as not necessarily achieving goals for learning, Joy does believe that learners need to explore their natural environments and access learning opportunities outside of the classroom. In the 1960s this was referred to as creative expression, and the basis of exploring and learning about the environment, under whatever guise, is still important.

*J: It is relevant, actually, to my interest across the birth to eight years. I did a two-year teacher's college course at the Auckland Teacher's Training College and I was placed in an experimental group "creative expression". This was a great era of creative expression in primary schools. It was at that time when Elwyn Richardson had published his book *In The Early World through the New Zealand Council of Educational Research*.⁴ It was very influential, particularly in the junior primary classrooms.*

The lecturer in charge of my programme was Roy Sanders and he was president of the Auckland Playcentre Association then. He insisted as part of our background to work with children in schools that we needed to know what was happening and appropriate for children prior to school entry. So, we actually had visits to playcentres and kindergartens, and our course had a very strong child development focus. Lex Grey, who was sometimes called the guru of the Playcentre Association, was the Child Development Lecturer at the Auckland Teacher's College, and he was also closely involved in this course. Not only did we have this very creative aspect to it, we used to go off on field trips, we would paint and write poetry, but we also were inducted into this very strong message that education didn't just begin at five. We had to know about young children.

So, that was always a very strong part of my socialisation into the educational world. But it's something I have never given up on. Obviously it's something that influenced the choices I made along the way.

R: What were those choices?

J: All my teaching was in the junior primary area. I loved the two years I had in the bottom half of a two-teacher school. I had the infants, or what was called the infants in those days, five- to eight-year-olds.

As I said, it was the era of creativity so we could be very flexible. It was a very activity orientated programme. We had wonderful resources for children, a giant sandpit outside, blocks, and the children used to create with dough and paint. It was a wonderful era for people who were interested in working with young children because there were not the same constraints in terms of what you had to fit into the curriculum. You could spend large blocks of the day allowing the children to explore and create.

I can remember going for walks up the road and picking blackberries, coming back and trying to make blackberry jam ... not very successfully! But doing wonderful paintings about the blackberries, looking at the colours ... and it was an era, the 1960s, which promoted that sort of creativity.

This belief in outdoor play and the importance of children having the opportunity of interacting in the social and natural environments lead to one of Joy's earliest learnings about teaching. When teaching in London during her early career, she was introduced to a very important guideline.

J: One that I've had throughout my career. There's never one right way of doing things ... I was exposed to a different education system. We had to take the children down to the park to get outside play. The schools didn't necessarily have outdoor playgrounds, well of a sort that we would consider outdoor play with grass. There was a very different valuing, partly because of the climate, of the outdoors. So one has to respond to climatic factors and the traditions of the institutions.

⁴ This was first published in the 1960s and was reprinted in 2001. Richardson, E. S. (2001). *In the Early World*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

When discussing the long-term nature of why we're doing the things we do in early childhood education and early intervention, Joy places emphasis on research and analysis.

There's a lot of faith built into this. The positive aspect of the early childhood sector which I really appreciate is the fact that teachers are always positive and willing to take on ideas, to give tremendous amount of energy for something that's new, such as Te Whāriki. But at the same time, that can give them blinkers because they sometimes do that in a mission orientated way, rather than an analytic way. So I consider my role, as someone who is involved in the training of researchers in early childhood, to develop those analytical skills. I'm really pleased with the research students that we have in this university, and also in the other universities where post-graduate research developed, that we now are bringing a more analytical lens to what is happening in the early childhood centres.

Joy discussed the importance of all children being included in regular early childhood settings and observed the additional demands placed on teachers to ensure a family focused and supportive environment for these young learners. She believes that young children should not be "placed" but should be actively involved in these settings. Including learners is about the child's active involvement and participation in the activities in an early childhood setting, not just having them attend the centre. What works in one setting may not work in another. Joy observed the additional demands placed on teachers to ensure a family focused and supportive environment for these young learners.

J: It can become a coping situation if the demands are too heavy on teachers. The curriculum itself is very demanding. It takes an enormous amount of energy, to at the same time link in with parents and what they understand about children's interests – to involve parents in collaborating. It means teachers really have to be healthy and energetic, and analytical about what they're doing. They have to have an enormously sound knowledge base, a professional knowledge base, to be able to work informally with all the discipline areas such as literacy, mathematics, technology. All those things which early childhood teachers are expected to do now.

They need a knowledge base about children with diverse needs. I have always felt that while it's important to have a specialist service as a resource, teachers themselves need to feel that their educational expertise is valued. Nevertheless, there is an enormous amount known about promoting learning from the "special education" era, as opposed to an inclusive approach. That is where I want to get into the skills topic.

I did my academic education and special education in the 1970s when it was very much a skills-based approach. And that wasn't seen as the negative way in which it is often interpreted now, it was seen as something which was a very positive move. It moved from the stage of just labelling children to saying, "we can do things. We can improve these children's lot in life". A tremendous amount of research work, including my doctorate, was put into developing the educational programmes, to extend the skills and competencies of children.

Now, we look back and we say they were decontextualised, and it was disempowering, sometimes disempowering parents, or alternatively parents were asked to be doing a lot of this teaching themselves, but it was decontextualised from everyday activities. So we can see the weaknesses of it. But one of the important outcomes of that, an introduction to that research for me in the 1970s, was that skills ARE important. One of the issues to me, in seeing the inclusion philosophy in practice in early childhood education, is that if we filter out skills from our educational approach in working with these children, the danger is that children, will be included, but they will just sit on the edge of the sandpit and watch. They'll be on the fringe rather than being actively involved.

So teachers need all their educational expertise to know how to involve a child who may have, for example, physical disabilities in play, in active outdoor play with children. We don't want to put it all back onto the Physios and the Occupational Therapists (OTs) who have their special knowledge. Nevertheless, Physios and OTs in the New Zealand system who work with young children with physical disabilities have an enormous amount of experience and expertise. I would like to see some of that shared in a user-friendly way for teachers to have access to, to help them to increase the array of approaches they can use when working with children.

Acknowledging the skills, expertise and experience of all those involved in the early childhood sector, and using that combination to greater effect, was a thread throughout the interview. There is no one-right way to assess, teach or support children in their learning, so continual research into practice is necessary for ensuring the best possible education is available to learners and that a range of practices are encouraged. Joy's wide ranging experience of teaching and research, and her travel and life experiences have influenced her views about early intervention and early childhood education. Themes from the interview included:

- we're allowed to be individuals in New Zealand
- it's more than what happens within formalised learning that influences the way you are
- we want all children to have learning opportunities that encourage active involvement and participation
- we value the knowledge of professionals and families alike
- specialists should be seen as a resource for teachers
- there is no "one-right way" in teaching and learning; therefore the ability to create and to encourage creativity is very important for both learner and teacher.

Through understanding and believing in ourselves as learners, we are better placed to support our own professional learning as well as the learning of all children. The final word goes to Joy:

If as educators we don't believe that we can make a difference, why are we here?

FURTHER READING

If you want to follow up on the ideas and work of Professor Joy Cullen, the following selected publications are useful and relevant.

Cullen, J. (2003). Te Whāriki: Catalyst for change? In J. Nuttall (Ed.), *Weaving Te Whāriki: Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum document in theory and practice* (pp. 269-296). Wellington: NZCER.

Commentary on issues arising from a holistic, interests-based curriculum.

Cullen, J. (1999). Learning opportunities for young children with special needs. *Early Education*, 21 (Spring/Summer), 5-10.

Discusses the rights of children with diverse needs in a play-based early childhood programme.

Cullen, J., & Carroll-Lind, J. (2005). An inclusive approach to early intervention. In D. Fraser, R. Moltzen & K. Ryba (Eds), *Learners with special needs in Aotearoa New Zealand* (3rd ed., pp.220-243). Southbank, Vic.: Thomson Dunmore Press.

Reviews international and NZ research on early intervention, including SE2000 research.

Cullen, J. (2002). Discourse, policy and practice: An inclusive approach in early intervention. *Delta: Policy and Practice in Education*, 45(1&2), 133-148.

Discusses the discourse of adult participants in inclusive education - parents, early childhood teachers, early intervention professionals, in relation to inclusion, human rights and the socioculturally-based early childhood curriculum.

Cullen, J. (2004). Adults co-constructing professional knowledge. In A. Anning, J. Cullen & M. Flear (Eds), *Early childhood education: Society and culture* (pp. 69-79). London: Sage Publications.

Discusses challenges for early childhood teachers and early intervention professionals from a sociocultural perspective as they aim to work collaboratively within an inclusive philosophy and programme.

Williamson, D., Cullen, J., & Lepper, C. Checklists to narratives in special education. To appear in *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*.

Lepper, C., Williamson, D., Cullen, J. (2003). Professional development to support collaborative assessment. *Early Education*, 33 (Spring/Summer), 19-28.

Reports on a collaborative professional development project with early intervention teams, teachers and parents.

INTERVIEWEE PROFILE

Joy Cullen is the Professor of Early Years Education at Massey University College of Education where she is responsible for leadership of the Early Years (0-8) programmes. She has conducted national contract research for the Ministry of Education on early intervention services, as part of the monitoring and evaluation of the special education policy. Recently she has worked with EI teams and teachers to develop shared understandings and practices about assessment of young children with special needs.

Joy Cullen



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AUTHOR PROFILE

Dr Roseanna Bourke is the Director of the Centre for Educational Development at Massey University and leads a team of in-service Teacher Educators. Prior to this she spent three years as manager, professional practice at the Ministry of Education. In both roles, her interest is to support educators develop and implement an evidence-based model of practice in education through research programmes and practice-related initiatives. Her PhD focused on students' conceptions of learning and self-assessment and her research interests are in learning, assessment and the professional learning of teachers.

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