Let's Begin at the Beginning
making marks, telling words

Given to a conference of the Bristol Early Years and Childcare Partnership, 2002

Well, let us begin at the beginning. Children come into the world, said the American poet Langston Hughes, 'out of fields of wonder', namely from the same set of tiny particles and mysteries that flowed once from the Big Bang. From the same source come also, he said, the moon, sun and stars. Children come unpredictably and uniquely, he continued, like lightning, but always with the same two fundamental purposes – purposes that are so strong and inescapable that they look and feel like physical or biological needs or instincts. The poem was entitled 'Birth' and contained in its entirety just 35 words:

> Oh, fields of wonder
> Out of which
> Stars are born,
> And moon and sun
> And me as well,
> Like stroke
> Of lightning
> In the night
> Some mark
> To make
> Some word
> To tell.

Some years ago a team of scientists resolved to observe a number of births. They visited hospitals and private homes in a range of countries, cultures and social classes and here is a summary of what they saw. The register of their language is different from that of Langston Hughes, for they were scientists not poets. But in significant respects their observations were the same. In so far as they were not the same, their observations are complementary.

> **A mother, immediately after her infant is born, picks him up and begins to stroke his face with her fingertips. At this the baby quietens. Soon she moves on to touching his head and body with the palm of her hand and, within five or six minutes, she is likely to put him to her breast. The baby responds with prolonged licking of the nipple. Immediately after the delivery the mothers appeared to be in a state of ecstasy and, interestingly enough, the observers became elated too. From the moment of birth attention becomes riveted on the baby. Something about him tends to draw not only the mother and father but all those present to the new arrival.**

A story was told, many centuries ago, of a certain Bishop of Buckingham. When he was two days old, the story says, he began preaching the gospel of Christianity. What do early childhood educators think of that? If preaching the gospel by a bishop involves substantial knowledge of Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and the ability to explicate in all three of these languages the theological concepts of incarnation, penitence, salvation and everlasting life, then early childhood educators, hearing that someone did this on day two of their life, are no doubt quite impressed. But if preaching the gospel of Christianity means expressing not in words but through one's presence that, in the words of the poet Ben Okri, 'the greatest joy is that of love – loving life, loving others, loving yourself, loving your work, and the next greatest joy is the freedom to serve', then what early childhood educators say, surely, is: 'what took him so long?' Most people, after all, proclaim Ben Okri's version of the gospel on day one.

Both the poet and the scientists refer to wonder and ecstasy, and both mention nature – for both are concerned with biologically rooted aspects of human personality, things we are pre-programmed to do. For the scientists, the two most essential things about human nature are the baby's instinct for attachment and security and the mother's instinct to give care. For the poet, the two essential instincts of human nature are to make marks and tell words. So between them, the scientists and the poet are referring to four basic needs in life: receiving care, giving care, making marks, telling words.

The four are interconnected in quite a range of ways. For example, one major way in which human beings make a mark on the world is through bringing children into it and caring for them. Amongst the most important words anyone ever tells anyone else are those they whisper and say to newborn and young children
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In addition to the marks we make on the lives of young children, and to the words we tell them, there are the marks we make as colleagues on the lives and professional practice of each other, and the words that we tell each other. We tell words in countless formal and informal conversations in homes, centres and staffrooms, and also at conferences such as this. Yes, we have come to this conference – *all* of us, not just this keynote speaker at the start of the conference – with 'some mark to make, some word to tell'.

This morning's lecture has three parts. First, it rehearses various things that all early childhood educators know. The purpose is to gather our thoughts and also to mobilise and establish ourselves before we go any further. In a familiar metaphor, the purpose is to establish a secure base from which we can then go out, in part two of the lecture, in a sortie or excursion. We shall engage with three recent national reports, respectively the Macpherson report on the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, the Parekh report about the future of multi-ethnic Britain and the Cantle report about community cohesion. These are all about equality,

identity and difference in wider society, not about early years education. Third, the lecture will return to the base from which it began, the world of early childhood education. What do we bring back from the three reports that may and should affect our practice? What new or stronger words do we now use, in the light of the reports? How should the reports affect the marks we make, the words we tell?

Messages from Early Childhood Education

The ten points that follow are ten theories, beliefs or hypotheses – principles that are firm and articulated, but also that are verifiable or falsifiable by academic research and by daily routine and professional practice.

Message One: universal human nature

Regardless of culture, class, country or gender, there are basic human needs for attachment and care, and for self-expression through action and communication. These needs are biologically rooted, not dependent for their existence on cultural or social context.

Message Two: most caregivers are good-enough

The vast majority of parents and other caregivers are good-enough for the vast majority of the time. Most people therefore experience security in early childhood, both at home and elsewhere, including school. A significant minority, however, do not. At home or at school, or both, they do not have an experience of being deeply cared for.

Message Three: let the child call the tune

Feelings of security arise from being treated sensitively and responsively. 'Attend to the child – the child will tell you what to do,' said Froebel, meaning that the good-enough parent or other caregiver frequently lets the infant determine the pattern of interaction between them. They pace themselves to the infant's ways; they recognise and attend to the infant's moods and — beneath their moods, as it were — their real, underlying desires and needs.

Message Four: personal security leads to social competence

Children who feel secure, as a consequence of being cared for, known and recognised, are more likely than others to be socially competent in relationships with other children and with adults, more likely to have empathy and concern for others, and less likely to tease, bully or be quarrelsome.

Message Five: the importance of play

Children who feel secure are more likely than others to engage in and enjoy exploratory play, and to learn from such play. For small children, to play is to work, it's their business in life.

Message Six: foundations are laid down in childhood
Patterns of security and play in early childhood have far-reaching consequences in later life for skills of social competence, and for creativity in a wide range of fields, and for capacity to give care to others.

Message Seven: mind-mindedness
An essential skill, developed and strengthened in early childhood, is the ability to imagine accurately the minds of others. To repeat (see message three above), one of the key skills of caregivers is the ability to see the child as having a mind of her or his own and of being able to imagine how the child's mind is working at any time.

Message Eight: the art and craft of storytelling
At all stages in their lives human beings need stories – they need to be able to narrativise their own lives, particularly their relationships and associated mental pain, and to learn about their own lives by engaging with the stories of others. For young children, making up stories is a kind of play, and the capacity to make stories ('to story', as the phrase sometimes is) is dependent, as all play is, on having a secure base from which to move out.

Message Nine: lifelong oscillation
Throughout life there is an oscillation between going out to explore, work, struggle and manage and returning to seek attachment and security ('re-charging one's batteries'). It follows that parents and other caregivers, amongst others, need to receive good-enough care as well as to provide it. Such care is often provided by stories and play.

Message Ten: inequalities of class, gender, race and culture
Early childhood education, as all education, takes place within contexts of inequality and injustice. Early years educators must identify, resist and as appropriate remove their own biases and prejudices, and biases in the institutions for which and in which they work, and must seek to prevent or address prejudices amongst children. Race, gender and class oppressions are not the same as each other, and must therefore be treated separately. They are interconnected, however, and for this reason must also be treated together.

On that note, let us go out now from the world of early years education to engage with the Stephen Lawrence report, the Parekh report and the Cantle report. And let us keep those words of Ben Okri's ringing in our ears: 'The greatest joy is that of love – loving life, loving others, loving yourself, loving your work. The next greatest joy is the freedom to serve.'

Messages and Stories in Three Reports

The Stephen Lawrence, Parekh and Cantle reports tell and discuss stories, both directly and between the lines. What are the stories they tell, and how do they tell them, and what are the purposes they have in mind?

‘Stories,’ to quote Ben Okri again, ‘are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves and you change the individuals and nations.’ He continues: ‘Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings.’

Early years educators know this very well. Stories are where children live and indeed where all humans live and where they find nourishment — anecdotes, travellers’ tales, memories, curricula vitae, biographies, parables and fables; jokes; lies and fibs; novels, theatre, soap opera on television; most items on the first few pages of most newspapers, some of them one-offs but others ongoing sagas; grand narratives and myths about community, tribe and nation; accounts of the origins and destiny of humankind. The essential question, recalls Okri, is not ‘is this story true?’ but ‘does this story help us to face our own truths?’ Does it or does it not free our histories for future flowerings?

There are all sorts of ways of sorting stories. When you are creating a collection of books for an early years setting, for example, it is useful to distinguish between three kinds of book and to make sure that you have all three: (a) wordless books; (b) picture books, where words and pictures combine to tell the story; (c) illustrated books, where the text tells the story and the pictures explain what is said or act as decoration. Another obvious way of classifying is between stories that purport to be factually accurate and stories that are clearly fictional. The latter kinds of story are frequently introduced by a formula such as ‘once upon a time’, so that everyone knows where they are. (However, all parents and grandparents know that these two genres can marvellously merge. ‘Once upon a time,’ you say at bedtime, ‘there was a little woman and one day she …’ You then narrativise the child’s day from the time she got up to the time when she went to bed and to sleep. The child doesn’t hear the end of the story, however, for by then she’s peacefully, serenely, joyfully, asleep. ‘The greatest joy is that of love – loving life, loving others, loving yourself, loving your work.’ The quintessential way in which humans remember that joy is through stories.)

Another way of distinguishing between different kinds of story involves referring to ‘hegemonic narratives’ on the one hand and ‘counter-narratives’ on the other. Hegemonic stories are those which the majority of people in a society tell and listen to. They include national history and all its bits and pieces but also the myriad stories of everyday life told by most individuals, for these are all of a piece with, in code or in as many words, a society’s store of hegemonic stories. A story which has held sway in Europe for the last five centuries was famously summed up a few years ago by Mrs Thatcher in her famous Bruges Speech:

> Too often the history of Europe is described as a series of interminable wars and quarrels. Yet from our perspective today surely what strikes us most is our common experience. For instance, the story of how Europeans explored and colonised and — yes, without apology — civilised much of the world is an extraordinary tale of talent, skill and courage.

Counter-narratives are those which provide an alternative and, indeed, an opposition to hegemonic stories. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report, for example, contains not only a factual account of what happened on 22 April 1993 and on ensuing days, weeks, months and years, but also a counter-narrative about the nature and history of Britain. The hegemonic story is that Britain is a civilised place built on principles of fair play, a place where the colour of your skin is unimportant and not worth noticing or mentioning.

The counter-story is that British institutions systematically treat black people worse than they treat white people, and that this is true also of most or many individuals in British institutions, particularly (but not only) those who are white – individual teachers, headteachers, nursery nurses and classroom assistants, as also police officers, local government officers, health professionals, and so on. Very substantial changes are required, according to the counter-narrative set out in enormous detail in the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report, in the institutions and their cultures of British society, and indeed in British culture generally, Britain's understanding of itself.

To match Mrs Thatcher's version of the hegemonic narrative, here is a formulation of the counter-narrative:

> The story of how people from the Caribbean, Africa and South Asia came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s and how, though they met foul words, spit, sticks and stones and sometimes knives on the streets; and how, though they met also genteel, patronising indifference amongst the professional and managerial classes in a wide range of institutions and organisations; and how, though many of the industries and services they came to work in collapsed due to forces of globalisation; and how, though they had to deal with perennial issues of inter-generational, male-female and intra-religious conflict in circumstances of incredible difficulty, they struggled and survived and prospered, and helped to make Britain a better place – is an extraordinary tale of talent, skill and courage.

The Cantle report is one of five reports all published in summer or autumn 2001 and all said to be about 'community cohesion'. The other four are sometimes referred to as the reports of Clarke, Ouseley, Ritchie and – wait for it – the IDMGPOCC, the Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Public Order and Community Cohesion. There is also what could be called the IWDB, the Interview With David Blunkett, which appeared in a Sunday newspaper on 9 December, and which provided the lens through which four of the other reports were then viewed and reported. Incidentally it was more how Mr

Blunkett's remarks were spun by the press than what he actually said that influenced the debate.

There are differences amongst the reports and between them and the interview, but basically all reflect what has been called here hegemonic narratives and images of British society. They do not even acknowledge the existence of counter-narratives, and for example use words such as 'we', 'us' and 'our' to refer to all people in Britain when in fact many people are not included. They do all this in deathly, gobbledygooky prose, by the way With David Blunkett, which appeared in a Sunday newspaper on 9 December and looking for errors of spelling, typography, usage and punctuation in the documents is like looking for hay in the proverbial haystack. This is particularly ironic in view of the fact that all five of the reports go on about how essential it is that everyone in Britain should be able to speak English. If most people in Britain could speak and write English no better than Cantle and Co, we would be in trouble indeed.

The report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, known in brief as the Parekh report, endorses the counter-narrative presented in the Stephen Lawrence report, and applies it to many aspects of British society. Also, it discusses directly the hegemonic stories and images of British history and society which hold sway, and which in its view need to be modified, transformed or replaced. In order to assist with the production of counter-narratives, it outlines its vision of how Britain should be pictured, and of how Britain should develop. It summarises its vision with the phrase 'community of communities and citizens'.

People seek a secure base in their own community, or rather communities. They then go out, they make sorties, to engage with others. But when they return, the secure base itself may well have to change, to take account of what has happened to them. Each secure base becomes increasingly multicultural.

This is by way of saying that early years educators are affirmed by the philosophy in the Parekh report. But engaging with the Parekh, Cantle and the Lawrence reports enables us to review our own secure base, and perhaps to modify or reinforce aspects of it. In what ways should the world of early years education be modified or reinforced in the light of what Parekh, Cantle and the Lawrence report say? To this question we now turn.

Messages to Early Years Education

The following points are derived loosely from the Stephen Lawrence and Parekh reports. They are presented rather abstractly, sorry, but that is the nature of lectures. They need to be unpacked into discussion and training materials if they are to be of real use. Some of them, no doubt, will be considered in practical detail in today's conference workshops.

Mirrors and windows and 'information literacy'

First, let's consider a practical matter that all early years educators are involved in, the choice of picture books. A recent American review of images which children see on television quoted a simple rhyme:

> I love watching TV
> I believe what I see
> But I'm still looking
> for ME.

TV programmes are like the books in classrooms. They do or do not reflect back to children their own reality, and they or do or do not provide a helpful window on the world. The research found that children associate having lots of money, being well-educated, being a leader, doing well in school and being intelligent with white characters on television; and breaking the law, having a hard time financially, being lazy and being goofy with minority characters. The first two things we must ask when looking at a picture book for young children are (a) what sort of mirror it is and (b) what sort of window.

But then further, we have to help children ask these questions too – and that means we have to help them with 'information literacy', as the term is. This is what early years educators must incorporate into their core business – how young children are helped to sift through the avalanches of visual stuff (often, of course, combined with words and other sound) that press on them from birth onwards. How may the young brain be configured, through informed early childhood practices, to acquire a critical stance, a disposition that assists in the development of judgement? Particularly judgements relating to their own and others' identity, and therefore issues of ethnicity, race, religion, gender and class? Froebel and Montessori did not and could not anticipate these questions.

Multicultural persons

There used to be a terrible euphemism, 'multicultural children', meaning black or Asian children. The phrase has rightly been dropped, though the new alternative, 'ethnic children', is arguably even more disgraceful and unacceptable. But that is by the way, just at the moment. The point to stress is that the concept of 'a multicultural person' is indeed valuable. The Black British author Caryl Phillips has described the concept thus: 'A truly multicultural society is one which is composed of multicultural individuals: people who are able to synthesise different worlds in one body and to live comfortably with these different worlds.' The books we use with young children should include mirrors for, and windows on to, multicultural persons.

'Treating all children the same'

The teacher herself should strive to be a multicultural person, and should encourage each of her pupils to be a multicultural person too. Both she and they are in the business of making a better, more just society, not merely keeping the present society in good repair. She treats each child as a unique individual, different from everyone else, and in this sense treats them all the same. But also she recognises that each child belongs to a community, indeed to several different and overlapping communities, and she takes heed of, she attends to, these differences. She lets each child, both as unique individual and as a member of communities, call the tune.

Being tellable

In his book *No Place Like Home*, the Black British author and journalist Gary Younge recalls a trip to a seaside which was organised by a community organisation when he was about 12 years old. A bus had been hired, and all the passengers were black – mainly children, but also there were some parents and leaders. Younge describes how the bus was attacked by a group of skinheads chanting 'Nigger…Nigger…Nigger, Nigger, Nigger'. He comments that afterwards the event was never mentioned and adds, poignantly: 'What was there to say, and whom would you say it to anyway?'

It is essential that early years educators, with regard to racist incidents as to all other incidents, should be 'askable', as the fine American term is, or 'tellable' – should be known by the children to be approachable. The children have words to tell. We must have ears and eyes to hear.

Street racism

Younge's story raises questions not only about adult approachability for the targets of racism but also about the formation of, in his term, skinheads. A term such as skinhead refers not only to racism but also to certain constructions of masculinity, and to a class location, and often to a specific patch of urban territory believed to be in need of 'defending'. The antiracist teacher has to deal with complex issues of white male identity and sense of territory, and with what one thoughtful researcher has called 'the perpetrator community', not just individuals. There are practical implications here for early childhood education as well as at all other stages.

A new view of Smarties

Show a three-year-old a tube of Smarties and ask them to guess what's inside, and they guess correctly. Tip out the Smarties and, as the child watches, put in pencils instead. 'What's in the tube?' – 'Pencils.' Right. Then you say, with pencils still in the tube, 'Suppose your friend came into the room, what would she think is in the tube?' The three-year-old, according to a well-known piece of research, is likely to reply 'Pencils'. For the child attributes to the other what she herself knows, and cannot imagine the other's ignorance. The vast majority of four-year-olds, however, can answer the question correctly.

Now whether this research really does show a significant difference between three-year-olds and four-year-olds, and if so whether it's to do with cognition, as the researchers claim, need not concern us here. What is interesting, in the context of today's conference, is to see the experiment as a vivid metaphor for

something that happens all the time in the 'real' world out there, the world reported on by Macpherson, Parekh and Cantle, the world where hegemonic and counter narratives contend with each other. Conflict is the sources (sic) of ignorance, as mentioned earlier, not ignorance the source of conflict. But the resolution of conflict does have to include people imagining accurately what is going on in other people's minds – as it were, imagining other peoples' mirrors and windows, other people's stories.

Day by day and hour by hour, this is by way of saying, early years educators are centrally engaged in a struggle that is going on elsewhere also, helping people to know other people's minds. A specialist in international relations has recently commented that the Bush administration in autumn 2001 behaved with the mental equipment of a four-year-old. This was, we know from the Smarties experiment, remarkably insulting to four-year-olds.

We are, colleagues, friends, comrades, *in* the real world – it's not somewhere out there. Let Smarties remind us, every time we ever see or taste or share them after today, that our work is the real world's work, and the real world's work is ours.

Great expectations

Dickens's novel starts with a beautiful evocation of how the good-enough carer lets the child call the tune:

> My father's name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than 'Pip'. So I called myself Pip, and came to be known as Pip.

But of course no child is ever permitted, or ever could be permitted, to name the whole world for herself. Naming involves interaction with others, and continually standardising one's own language with that of other people. Interaction and standardising necessarily involve encountering, and being shaped by, other people's expectations of you. Dickens shows throughout the novel that Pip has to contend with expectations based on his gender, appearance, clothes, accent, the social class of his carers, and so on.

Similarly every child we care for or teach is seen through spectacles-of-expectation, as the term might be, and these are to do — particularly — with gender, ethnicity and class. On often extremely flimsy evidence, we form expectations of a child's so-called ability, and of whether he or she is likely to be a trouble-maker. Then, through the well-known processes of the self-fulfilling prophecy, we may damage a child for ever.

We knew this before we read the Stephen Lawrence, Parekh and Cantle reports. We know it even better now.

The reports say to us: 'Take care!'

And that's what I say, in the triple meaning of do your work as carers; be careful; and seek and receive care for yourselves. I say it also, since this is the end of the lecture, in the meaning of good-bye.

Conclusion

This lecture has contained criteria for its own evaluation. Has the lecturer appropriately defended and appropriately challenged the world of early childhood education? Has he provided both secure base and vigorous struggle? Has he practised what he quoted someone else preaching — 'the greatest joy is that of love – loving life, loving others, loving yourself, loving your work, and the next greatest joy is the freedom to serve'? Has he acknowledged but not misused his own gender, age, social location and ethnicity, and his place on the platform at this morning's conference? Has he taken, has he given, care?

Well, let us end at the beginning. Oh, fields of wonder/ Out of which/ Stars are born,/ And moon and sun/ And me as well,/ Like stroke/ Of lightning/ In the night/ Some mark/ To make/ Some word/ To tell.

Colleagues, friends, comrades, take care.