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## **Wonder and Curiosity in Early Childhood: Pedagogical Inspirations from Catherine L'Ecuyer's 'The Wonder Approach'**

**Zadziwienie i ciekawość we wczesnym dzieciństwie:  
inspiracje pedagogiczne  
„The Wonder Approach” Catherine L'Ecuyer**

**Abstract:** The article examine concepts of wonder and curiosity in early childhood, challenging traditional perspectives and advocating for a more profound understanding of their significance. Contrary to conventional educational focuses, L'Ecuyer emphasizes the critical role of arousing curiosity and the exploratory drive in early childhood education. Drawing on the works of Rachel Carson and Piaget, the text highlights the intrinsic link between wonder, curiosity, and the child's development. The author examines the values of longing and anticipation in shaping a child's behavior of wonder, emphasizing the importance of valuing simplicity and patience in a child's development. The paper concludes by stressing the need for an internalized learning approach, urging educators and caregivers to embrace the mystery and protect the sense of wonder in children, resisting societal pressures for accelerated development. In essence, this work challenges conventional educational paradigms, urging a shift towards a more holistic and mindful approach that recognizes and nurtures the innate wonder and curiosity in every child.

**Keywords:** wonder, curiosity, learning theory, internalized learning, approach to learning.

## Introduction

At the outset, it is essential to justify the significance of the concepts formulated in the title of the work as the subject of analysis and research reflection. The explanation necessitates understanding the concepts of wonder and curiosity. L'Ecuyer suggests considering "The Wonder Approach" not merely as an approach to learning but as a theory of learning, contrary to her own advocacy in her book and articles.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, curiosity, firstly, refers to a person focused on an object, making a person curious about something, meaning "an eager wish to know or learn about something." Secondly, curiosity itself can make a person pay attention to something. Furthermore, curiosity is something that can arouse someone's interest. Thus, in these considerations, curiosity should be understood as a child's orientation towards gaining "something" during exploration. Therefore, curiosity appears wherever a child finds potential opportunities for satisfaction during exploration. Many efforts in the field of education focus on content that often arises from goals formulated in educational practice (Klus-Stańska, 2010, 2012; Żytko, 2020). This explains why, generally, not as much attention is given to arousing curiosity or, in a broader sense, the exploratory drive as it deserves. The exploratory attitude, defined by openness and attentiveness to a wide range of stimuli shaping our environment, immerses the child in the most intense forms of concentration and engagement. The challenge for early childhood education is not only to maintain this internal source of motivation in the child but also to encompass all areas related to the reality surrounding the child. The concept of "curiosity" described above aligns with the so-called Piagetian thinking, viewing it as a child's need to explain something unexpected (Piaget, 2011).

Interest in the concept of wonder can also be observed in the works of Rachel Carson (1998). In her book "The Sense of Wonder," she begins her reflections with an account of a walk she took with her 20-month-old nephew to the beach on a stormy autumn night, where large waves thundered, "and we laughed together in pure joy" (Carson, 1998, pp. 8–9). Carson advises all caregivers of young children to seek opportunities to share the wonders and excitement of nature as the emotional foundation for curiosity and a lifelong connection to nature. Her book, republished several times, sparked a widely debated discussion on pedagogical awakening of ecological awareness in children (Gruenewald, 2003; Johnson, 2013; Taylor, 2013; Egan et al., 2013; Chawla, 2020).

Wonder, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, means “a feeling of great surprise and admiration caused by seeing or experiencing something that is strange and new,” as well as “an object that causes a feeling of great surprise and admiration.” This word is related to the “mental state of a person who sees that someone or something is different than expected or that something has happened that was unexpected.” Therefore, the duality of the definition of the word “wonder” becomes apparent, as it can be something considered “for the first time” or “repeatedly,” and this process is incomplete. On the other hand, it can also refer to an emotional reaction to the object of wonder, which may be its natural consequence, but as emphasized by C. L’Ecuyer, not necessary (2014). As she further explains, wonder is more than curiosity; it surpasses its traditional boundaries. Wonder does not have to be related to something new; on the contrary, a child can continuously rediscover what is already well-known. In Catherine L’Ecuyer’s conception, she relates her thinking to its metaphysical aspect. Consequently, this approach underscores the value of a child’s subjective experience of reality and legitimizes it to a greater extent.

### **Wonder versus Curiosity**

Although Catherine L’Ecuyer and Jean Piaget differ in their approach to the topic of curiosity versus wonder, both emphasize the idea that children’s development is stimulated by efforts to understand the unknown. In the works of J. Piaget, curiosity is most often justified by the child’s instinctive action, expressing a desire to learn more (Piaget, 1966b). They differ, however, in how they think about the child. Piaget, despite numerous discoveries and merits, described the child in his works as “not yet an adult” (Piaget, 1966a, p. 78). In his conception, the child is indeed curious about the world but dependent and developmentally reliant on the environment. C. L’Ecuyer proposes a vision of the child as someone fascinated anew by everything, as the creator of their observations. This approach, as C. L’Ecuyer notes, is not new; children have been asking questions since time immemorial: Why doesn’t it rain upwards? Why is the moon round and not square? Children have been asking these questions from time immemorial. When children ask these questions, they may not demand answers. Instead, they may wonder in the face of reality. They wonder because it’s raining, and because the moon is round (L’Ecuyer, 2014, p. 2). This perspective on the child is not new; it is vividly present in the works of Janusz Korczak, whom L’Ecuyer does not quote. Janusz Korczak laid the foundations for children’s rights, including the child’s perspective: “not a little world but the world, not petty but important,

not innocent but human – values, virtues, flaws, aspirations, desires” (Korczak, 1987, p. 11). The resemblance between J. Korczak’s observations and C. L’Ecuyer’s is evident in many notes of observations he made, including: “He dropped the glass on the ground. Something very strange happened. The glass disappeared, and completely different objects appeared. He leans down, picks them up, cuts himself [...]. Everything full of mysteries and surprises” (Korczak, 2012, p. 94). Janusz Korczak encourages a change in perspective, an analysis of situations from the child’s point of view. C. L’Ecuyer’s works are not present in Polish-language literature. They are also not – as advocated in this article – innovative. However, they provide a valuable insight into the process of a young child’s learning, especially in the context of pedagogical practices, which, in the vast majority, deviate from what C. L’Ecuyer proposes, as exemplified in a limited number of institutions caring for young children.

### **Wonder as a Mindfulness-Based Method**

In her works, C. L’Ecuyer (2014, 2019) argues that the interest in the concept of wonder in children dates back to the times of Greek philosophers, namely Aristotle and Plato. Plato, in particular, demonstrated that wonder reaches to the foundations of philosophy, becoming a manifestation of something elusive that brings humans closer to reality, as described by Plato as a “desire to learn” (Plato, 2014, cited in: L’Ecuyer, 2019).

Catherine L’Ecuyer proposes wonder as a new learning theory (2019), placing its foundations in Greek philosophy (Aristotle) and the natural ability of children to philosophize. Infants wonder when they first see the sky, stars, their mother’s face, touch grass, see shadows, or experience gravity (L’Ecuyer, 2014, p. 2). She also bases it on the works of Maria Montessori, particularly emphasizing Montessori’s proposition that we are not solely dependent on experience but rather expect it (Montessori, 2018).

In her work “From the Philosophy of Childhood to the Child’s Philosophy of Life,” Maria Szczepska-Pustkowska reflects on the idea of a child as a philosophizing person, defining this attitude as oriented towards seeking answers. She dedicates a significant portion of her book to wonder as a concept denoting an open attitude to daily marvels in the surrounding world. Reflecting on the ambiguity of this concept resulting from various philosophical considerations, she begins by presenting two approaches to philosophy. The first characterizes humans existing in the surrounding world, while the second characterizes the world that surrounds humans. Despite the tension in literature arising from the antagonism of these approaches, M. Szczepska-Pustkowska suggests recognizing them as complementary,

proposing a thesis about their complementary nature (Szczepska-Pustkowska, 2011). However, unlike C. L'Ecuyer, M. Szczepska-Pustkowska situates childhood wonder in a child's ability to ask questions: "just like adults, they are wonder, and their wonder takes the form of curious questioning, and from that moment, they begin to think philosophically, seeking answers" (Szczepska-Pustkowska, 2011, p. 139). This ability becomes evident in a child as dialogic speech, which emerges around the age of 5. In contrast, C. L'Ecuyer perceives childhood wonder in the child's nature to appreciate beauty and the child's sensitivity to the surrounding world, observable even in a few-month-old child: being amazed by the slow descent of a balloon to the floor (L'Ecuyer, 2019, p. 3). Wonder is something that captures a child's attention, thereby cultivating mindfulness. Young children possess a sense of wonder because they do not take the world for granted. Wonder is an internal mechanism with which a child comes into the world (L'Ecuyer, 2019, p. 13).

### **Wonder versus Stimulation in the Learning Process**

Examining child development in the context of learning can be situated on two opposing poles, which can be illustrated by the question of whether the learning process in children originates from within, supported by contact with reality, or solely occurs externally through continuous bombardment with external stimuli to which the child is passively subjected. C. L'Ecuyer seeks answers to this question, on one hand, in the works of Maria Montessori, who believed that the learning process begins within the child, with the external environment serving as a facilitator. On the other hand, L'Ecuyer demonstrates that approaching the learning process based on external stimuli results in the design of milestones that the child should achieve. These milestones are constructed based on what society deems useful, and methods are adjusted to ensure the child can attain them. Furthermore, the "mechanistic" or "behaviorist" approach persists in educational practice due to its utility, as there are rare instances of rejection or opposition to what is deemed useful (L'Ecuyer, 2019, p. 32). Although there are challenges in maintaining a model of education based on external motivation today, it still prevails in daycare, preschool, and school settings, triumphing in education due to its utility and effectiveness in achieving short-term goals.

### **Discovery Learning - Guided Exploration**

C. L'Ecuyer conceptualizes wonder as a learning theory, beginning her considerations by accepting the thesis that a child exhibits spontaneous inventiveness and curiosity, requiring guidance in this process, which may

be provided by a teacher. However, the teacher should ensure not to “replace the child’s natural desire for knowledge” in this process (L’Ecuyer, 2019, p. 40). In formulating her concepts further, she advocates for combining a child’s inventiveness with discipline, considering it a natural combination. Discipline is understood as creating a space for a child’s spontaneous movements and play, with the teacher acting as a facilitator in these situations. The spontaneous activity of the child aligns with Montessori pedagogy, frequently referenced by C. L’Ecuyer in her book. Moreover, she agrees with social constructivists that our understanding of reality develops through social interactions and prior knowledge. However, neither the child nor the teacher can create reality (L’Ecuyer, 2019, p. 41). The teacher prepares the environment - similar to Montessori - leaving it with items of simple structure, without any multimedia toys inducing a sense of alienation and overactivity. The author bases her assumptions on the belief that children between 3 and 6 years of age should not be excessively stimulated for creativity. At this age, a child’s creativity is naturally infinite and does not require additional stimuli. C. L’Ecuyer adds that if a child is bored with the environment, it is a sign of earlier overstimulation (L’Ecuyer, 2019, p. 46).

### **Longing and Anticipation as Values**

The basis for a child’s behavior of wonder is having a small number of things. The value of a particular thing or situation can be reinforced by its unavailability, effort, and patience. The nature that can captivate children’s attention for long hours through their interest in exploring plants, insects, and creating play with mud and water also deserves emphasis. Scientific research indicates that activity in a natural environment can alleviate attention deficit symptoms in some children (L’Ecuyer, 2019, p. 54). This acts as a form of participation for our children in the authentic world, teaching them that valuable and beautiful aspects of life require time without providing immediate gratification. This process contributes to shaping children’s character strength, developing patience, and the ability to control impulses. This, in turn, contributes to developing a more balanced approach to life, reducing life costs. It is related to respecting the pace and rhythm of children’s development, also encompassing respect for different stages of their cognitive and emotional development, as well as preserving their innocence, avoiding the temptation to shorten the childhood period (L’Ecuyer, 2019, p. 61). Peaceful developmental pace - as an example - is contrasted with overstimulated education based on the “Baby Einstein” trend. Here, the author recalls a situation where her son was invited to a classmate’s birthday party: I couldn’t

believe it. The parents hired a professor to present chemical experiments to eight-year-old children. It seems that clowns are out of fashion... In the end, she poses the question: how far are we willing to go to prepare our child's future career? (L'Ecuyer, 2019, p. 63). Early childhood (up to the age of 6) is a preparatory period during which less-structured time is crucial because it allows children to develop executive functions necessary for learning, such as working memory, attention control, and planning (Barker et al., 2014; Brazendale et al., 2022).

### **Conclusion. Internalised learning**

Children regard the existence of mystery as something self-evident, exhibiting a natural affinity for it as it sustains their desire for learning and exploration. In contrast, adults often adopt an opposing stance. Catherine L'Ecuyer contends that adults can either attempt to shield children from unpleasant realities by adjusting their environment to their needs, developmental pace, and rhythm, or accelerate their development because "it is inevitable," and eventually, "they will find out". From this perspective, it makes no sense to resist the presence of adult magazines in kiosks or initiate societal debates about children using the Internet via smartphones, spending hours watching age-appropriate TV programs, or being compelled into suggestive poses on magazine covers for clothing promotion. After all, "sooner or later, they will find out." Or "we should tell them so they won't be the last to find out." Embracing this conformist and fatalistic argumentation, we relinquish genuine education. We must teach children everything, truncate childhood, expedite development, shock them as much as possible, and deprive them of a sense of mystery (L'Ecuyer, 2019, p. 86). The inquiry pertains to discerning the distinction between stimulation and overstimulation, emphasizing that the answer lies not in a detached analysis of pedagogical materials, guidelines, or educational methods but rather in understanding the inherent needs of children at a given moment. Stimulation becomes excessive and transforms into overstimulation when it surpasses the genuine necessities of the child. The primary arbiter of a child's needs is the caregiver with a secure relationship, as studies indicate that the quality of this relationship significantly influences healthy development. The caregiver's knowledge, sensitivity to intuit the child's needs, and responsiveness are crucial factors in determining the trajectory of a child's development. The approach must be contextualized within the child's unique dynamics, the educator's paradigm of childhood, the school's management style, and the broader macro- (society) and micro- (school and home) environments.

Each case demands meticulous examination, discouraging the pursuit of standardized solutions (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; L'Ecuyer, 2019, p.110).

The study uncovered the dual nature of curiosity, emphasizing its role as a child's orientation toward gaining knowledge during exploration. This aligns with traditional definitions but also underscores the role of curiosity in capturing attention and arousing interest. Additionally, the exploration of wonder revealed its duality – it can be related to encountering something new or continuously rediscovering the familiar. Catherine L'Ecuyer's perspective expands wonder beyond traditional boundaries, emphasizing its metaphysical aspect and its intrinsic connection to a child's subjective experience of reality.

The examination of Catherine L'Ecuyer's and Jean Piaget's views on curiosity and wonder highlighted their common ground in recognizing the role of the unknown in stimulating children's learning. However, their differences lie in the conceptualization of the child. Piaget viewed the child as curious but dependent on the environment, while L'Ecuyer presented the child as an active observer and creator of their observations. This distinction has profound implications for how educators perceive and engage with children in the learning process. The proposition of wonder as a mindfulness-based method, rooted in Greek philosophy and the natural ability of children to philosophize, adds a novel dimension to the discourse on early childhood education. This perspective suggests that children, from a very early age, possess an innate sense of wonder that can serve as a foundation for mindful learning experiences. The incorporation of wonder as a learning theory challenges conventional paradigms and advocates for a more contemplative and reflective approach to education.

The study delved into the dichotomy between internalized learning, driven by a child's innate sense of wonder, and external stimulation in the learning process. L'Ecuyer's argument against excessive external stimuli aligns with Montessori principles, emphasizing that children under do not require additional stimuli as their creativity is naturally infinite. This highlights the importance of maintaining a balance between internal motivation and external guidance to foster optimal learning environments. The study explored the role of longing and anticipation in shaping a child's behavior of wonder. The findings suggest that the value of a particular thing or situation is reinforced by its unavailability, effort, and patience. This has implications for educators and caregivers, emphasizing the significance of creating environments that allow for the development of character strengths such as patience, impulse control, and a balanced approach to life.



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