

Editorial

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Contested spaces in early childhood research: advocating a dialogic approach

I am writing this Editorial from my study in central England which, as part of the UK, is in the process of making a momentous and life changing decision about leaving the European Union, a decision that will have a transformative impact on our country and its peoples for many decades to come. This process has generated some of the harshest, negative, poorly informed and adversarial dialogues I have ever participated in and witnessed, and as a citizen I long for something different. The experience has made me deeply aware that the quality of our civic life, and its ethical underpinning, is diminished by such public discourse and that we each have a responsibility to work to ensure we realise a more civilised and civic form of interaction in all domains of our personal and professional lives.

So, in this Editorial I wish to examine the roles we, as early childhood researchers, play in generating respectful and egalitarian dialogues which reach across our diversities and differences, and to consider how we handle the contested nature of these dialogues. In particular, I want to think about how we in EECERA and in our Journal, contribute to the perpetuation and disruption of ‘contested spaces’ in the discourse about, and practice of, research into early childhood policy and practice. By ‘space’ I mean the opportunities we have as researchers to ensure our work feeds into the development and transformation of early childhood policy and practice in an ethical manner. ‘Space’ is a complex concept which describes the encounter between researchers and those whom they wish to influence (be that other researchers, funders, politicians, practitioners, parents and more) who hold a wide range of world views, cultures, ideologies, values, politics, histories, hopes and intentions. Promoting these paradigmatic spaces are important if we wish our work to make a difference but they are often contested and shaped by the nature of the discourses we promote in our research. These spaces have always been contested as the field of early childhood research constitutes a fascinating interface of various, and often conflicting, social, political and economic visions and realities. The Journal, like our Association, is a contested space that shapes, and is shaped by, our actions and interactions, which in turn, have a significant impact on the way our work is perceived and used by those within the sector and beyond.

EECERJ is a forum that acknowledges and explores the complexity and richness of current approaches to the construction and transfer of knowledge in our field. It provides a platform for open-ended dialogue and critical debates which are intended to promote an open and inclusive exchange of ideas and questions, exploring conceptual, methodological and disciplinary boundaries, and asking social and political questions. The journal is also a place where research topics, processes and results are presented and questioned, and I am aware that in doing so we contribute sometimes to a tug-of-war around who gets what funding and what research gets profile and status. As custodians of this influential journal we have to be very transparent in all questions about authenticity, ownership, voice and relations of power, to be aware of ways others may view, name, and describe what we present, and strive to challenge unequal control and access to the resources and platforms which we represent.

In this somewhat risky and challenging context I believe that adopting and promoting a dialogic approach in the journal is a way forward. Working dialogically means we promote respectful and mutual exchange of knowledge, methodologies and ideas in the journal, examining these with critical and egalitarian intent and making editorial decisions based on authenticity, trust, rigour and social utility rather than power. The approach is not a new one and draws inspiration from many sources. Within our Western and European tradition we can historically point to the Socratic dialogues but it is also visible in other traditions from India and Asia. More recently, we can be inspired by the work of Freire (1970) and the theory of dialogic action; Wells (1999) and the dialogic inquiry approach; Habermas (1984) and the theory of communicative action; Bahktin (1981) and the notion of dialogic imagination; and Soler (2004) and the idea of the dialogical self. I have also been much influenced by the work of Wenger (1998) and the idea of learning communities or communities of practice, which seek transformation of educational settings through dialogic learning, emphasizing egalitarian dialogue among all community members, including teachers, children, families, local bodies and volunteers. At the heart of all these dialogic approaches is a commitment to interaction, communication, curiosity, openness, criticality, argumentation, equity, respect, social responsibility, collaboration, creativity and of course action for transformation.

In this issue of EECERJ we have ten papers presenting research that is located in a wide range of European and non-European cultural, social and geographical spaces, including Finland, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Serbia, Spain, Turkey and USA. In this diverse set of papers we can identify many contested spaces, but I wish to focus on four: firstly, the choice of topic for study; secondly, the study design; thirdly, the methods of data collection; and finally, the ethical processes adopted.

Choice of Topic: The choice of topic for study is highly contested in our sector. Who and what drives the choice of topic by researchers who have to consider funding, resourcing, expertise, time and interest means that topic choices are not always open, transparent and equitably made. The topics studied in these papers reflect decisions made by funders,

researchers and reviewers about what aspects of early childhood policy and practice are seen to be of value and positioned to make an original, significant and useful contribution to our knowledge base. In this issue we can see three papers focusing on children's social behaviour (Rios-Gonzalez; Wang, Palonen, Hurme and Kinos; Larrea, Muela, Miranda and Barandiaran); two papers on teacher professionalism and pedagogic beliefs (Cobanoglu, Capa-Aydin and Yildirim; Bulunuz and Koç); two papers on language and literacy practices (Bulunuz and Koç; Lake and Evangelou); four papers on play, including two on outdoor play (Wang, Palonen, Hurme and Kinos; Larrea, Muela, Miranda and Barandiaran; Meland, Kaltvedt and Reikerås; and Dinkel, Snyder, Patterson, Warehime, Kuhn and Wisneski); two papers on gender issues (Meland, Kaltvedt and Reikerås; and Blagdanic, Miscevic Kadijevec and Kovacevic); and one paper on migrant children's experiences of transitions in ECEC services (Picchio and Mayer). Collectively the papers also cover the whole early childhood age range from birth to eight years of age. Each topic is presented in this issue equally and in its own right, with each paper having survived a process of rigorous blind review by at least two reviewers and a formal editing process. It is interesting to speculate on why studies on these six topics were selected and what they tell us about the current focus and interest of those involved as authors and readers.

Study Design: There is a passionate debate about the value, rigour and authenticity of studies which are focused on gathering data in the often chaotic but authentic real world of daily practice or those which collect data away from the daily life of children and services, or in a more controlled environment. Of the ten studies presented eight took place in real world, naturalistic contexts looking at the daily life of children, whilst two were more distanced or controlled, using surveys or questionnaires to gain perceptions on practice or adopting an experimental design in which controlled cohorts of children received a 'treatment' or intervention. Interestingly, all but one of the eight real world designs used structured observation instruments or assessment tools which generated descriptive statistics for analysis, as well as more qualitative and narrative data.

Methods of Data Collection: There is a glorious and fast developing feast of data collection methods and tools available to early childhood researchers, ranging from more orthodox quantitative and qualitative methods such as observations (narrative and structured), interviews, survey, tests, rating scales, focus groups and life histories to newer, less orthodox and more creative methods such as storyboarding, filming, world café, role playing and drawing. Again, the value and rigour of these different methods is hotly debated in the sector, as new technologies come in to challenge the orthodoxy. However, in this issue largely orthodox methods of data collection were adopted, with the most commonly used method being observation, with many using structured rating scales or observation instruments to record and analyse their data. Interviews and focus groups also featured and the use of filming and drawing was also evident in a couple of the studies.

Ethical Processes: EECERA has a strong, passionate and civic commitment to ethical processes and procedures in all its publications and scholarly activities. We have a published ethical code for early childhood researchers (Bertram et al, 2016) which all papers have to comply with. We are also committed to ensure all published papers state how they have addressed ethical issues arising from their study, from inception to publication. In this issue we can see that all papers have largely adhered to this guidance, although I would have liked to see more evidence of the youngest children being included in the informed consent and ongoing assent process. It is a practical example of EECERA's research community genuinely seeing our youngest children as subjects and partners in our research projects and being given the opportunity as early as possible to practice their citizenship and feel their voice is being listened to and acted upon. Being capable and confident in dialogic processes starts early and improves with practice.

This issue of the EECERJ is full of fascinating and informative knowledge which has high relevance for daily practice and policy making. It also generates critical questions for debate, contestation and further inquiry. I hope you as readers will interact with these papers, communicate about them, be curious, open, critical and respectful of the authors work and positionality, and most importantly, where you can, use this knowledge to bring about transformations in the quality of the daily life of young children and families in the work that you do wherever that may be. Working together in this spirit is the mission of our Association and also my personal ambition as we in my country move into uncharted waters.

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