

# Global Early Childhood Policies: The Impact of the Global Education Reform Movement and Possibilities for Reconceptualization

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The field of early childhood education is being emphasized in an unprecedented way, with much public, political, and academic attention focused on the importance of the early years. Brain research has drawn global attention to the potential of early childhood education and provided our field with the approval of a “real” science, although the insights and application are quite often over-simplified and over-stated (Bruer, 2002; Moss, 2014; Sayre, Devercelli, & Neuman, 2013). With social and political attention focused on the great potential of the early years, providers in the public and private sector have been clamoring to meet the needs of young children, extending to the public provision of universal pre-kindergarten. While this advocacy for children and recognition of our field is refreshing and should make us content, why is it that so many experts, professionals, and scholars in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) are concerned about the current state and development of their field? Or, as Peter Moss asks: “What is not to like about this story?” (2014, p. 26).

Although our field has received recognition and subsequent funding, the reason for such attention is troubling, as it is mainly rooted in economic theory and neoliberal thinking, which is often reductionist and

singular in its viewpoint. Neoliberal thinking has trickled into our field without much resistance and is impacting the policies and practices of early childhood care and education (ECEC), the result of which is, in our view, policies and practices misaligned with the goals of early childhood education (although this is debated, too). ECEC may have more attention, but is it for the right reasons and are we going into the right direction? Or are we being manipulated for economic and political purposes, resulting in negative consequences not only for our field, but at the expense of children’s well-being?

The reason for this double issue of the *Global Education Review* is to explore how the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) has affected both policy and practice around the world. The first issue will focus on policy, and the focus of the second issue will be practice. ECEC has the attention of those in power, but is being utilized as a means of economic and political gain, not for the child’s well-being, even though that is a politically appealing motivation to set forth. The single, undisputed narrative is about quality and competition in our current

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capitalist system. This seems to be the only way most policymakers and many scholars and professionals view the field. However, this dominant way of thinking needs to be questioned. We believe that our field is in need of alternative stories and a democratic, scholarly, and professional dialogue about the purpose of early childhood education and care (Moss et al., 2016; Urban & Swadener, 2016). Our issue is an effort to do this, by allowing those from various countries tell their stories, hopefully to provide a glimpse of an alternative to the current GERM narrative.

### **GERM: A Global Trend**

The major reason for discontent with the current state of early childhood education and care is an unease with the prevailing way of thinking about and organizing of ECEC: the “story of quality and high returns, the story of markets” (Moss, 2014, p. 6). It is the worldwide trend described as “Global Educational Reform Movement,” (GERM), recently popularized by Sahlberg (2011) and his influential book, *Finnish Lessons*.

GERM is not a formal global policy program, but “rather an unofficial educational agenda that relies on a certain set of assumptions to improve education systems” (Sahlberg, 2011, 99). These assumptions are rooted in neoliberal thinking, and the values and assumptions it clearly embodies (Dahlberg & Moss, 2008, 5). As Roberson pointed out: “Global education reform movement policies have neoliberalism in their DNA” (2015, 11). In the eyes of GERM supporters, early childhood education is “a world built on relationships of competition, contract, and calculation; inhabited by a breed of autonomous, flexible and utility maximising individuals; and actualised through markets, individual choice and technical practice” (Moss, 2014, 17). As almost anything in neoliberal thinking, early childhood education is simply perceived as any other market, a

commodity, an object of social investment that can be “purchased as a means to high returns (individual, corporate, societal); or as the object of market transactions between parent-consumers and provider businesses” (Moss, 2014, 67). Such thinking is the very antithesis of education as a public good meant to serve as the foundation of an educated citizenry.

Even though GERM is not a formal policy program, there are common features, although their implementation may look different in various countries. These features include (Moss 2014; Robertson, 2015; Sahlberg 2011; Sahlberg 2016):

- The first feature is the standardization of teaching and learning. The focus is on learning outcomes and it is assumed that “setting clear and sufficiently high performance standards for schools, teachers, and students will necessarily improve the quality of desired outcomes” (Sahlberg 2016, 177).
- The next feature is the increased focus on core subjects, such as literacy and numeracy. The performance on these subjects is seen as an indicator of student and school success. Other subjects, such as science, the arts, and health education, are neglected and not seen as important: GERM views tests as the only way to measure ‘important’ subjects.
- This leads to the third feature: test-based, high-stakes accountability. Schools, as well as teachers, are evaluated based on their performance on standardized tests with clear consequences in the form of rewards and punishment. Both have to compete: the schools for students and the teachers for merit pay and job stability.
- To achieve this end, another feature is necessary: teaching for predetermined learning outcomes by using prescribed

curricula. It is the “search for safe and low-risk ways to reach learning goals” (Sahlberg 2016, 178). Standardization is attempted by detailing the delivery of lessons and evaluating with predetermined measures, without consideration of local, cultural, or individual differences. Such control is viewed as necessary to assure success.

- In addition to controlling the curriculum, there is also an increased demand for control over teachers. Teachers are neither trusted nor granted professional autonomy. This general distrust is often accompanied by attacks on teachers’ unions, which are described as the enemy of students and only interested in maintaining benefits for their membership. At the same time, there is a push for lowering the requirements for teacher certification and demanding faster (and cheaper) paths such as the global *Teach for All* network. This seems to be counterproductive for improving the quality of a school.

- Another characteristic is the transfer of administrative models from the corporate world. Reform ideas are not developed from within by considering unique characteristics of the educational field or the local community, but are lent from the corporate world as a packaged solution to “fix” a school.

- The seventh feature of GERM is the call for parent choice regarding their children’s schooling. This puts schools in the position of having to compete for students, setting the stage for privatization. Parents should have the right to choose the “ideal” school for their children. Vouchers are often viewed as the avenue to achieve this goal.

- Perhaps the most worrisome feature is privatization. Privatization outsources the provision of government services to independent operators, whether nonprofit or for-profit. In the field of education, it can take the form of nonprofit (such as charter management organizations or CMO) as well as for-profit (educational management organizations or EMO) school management. This trend moves education away from the goal of a public good for all citizens to a commodity to be sold in the marketplace to those who have the means and access. Education is turned into a market to make money.

- Related to privatization and the reliance on corporate world models, education delivery and its measurement have become dependent on technology. There is push for technology, such as tablets as a means of learning and assessing very young children, even if the consequences of such technology in the early childhood classroom are questionable.

The problem is not with these features, per se; most experts and professionals would probably not argue against standards, competence in numeracy and literacy, nor assessment – but in “the *over-preoccupation* with these elements” (Robertson, 2015, 14, emphasis added). Even worse, these benign elements are accompanied by more troublesome features such as competition, high-stakes testing, and performance-based pay, all of which are clearly problematic and destructive in the educational field. The excess of standardization, testing, and control of schools and teachers, damages children’s learning and detracts from the goal of fostering the child’s well-being – something we will discuss in more detail in the second issue. While scholars and practitioners may have varying opinions regarding these

features of GERM, the foundation of the movement is problematic for sure and warrants examination.

### **Human Capital Theory as The Foundation of GERM**

GERM is rooted in human capital theory (HCT). The idea is that “the economic productivity of individuals over time and the situations in which it might be maximized [has] undoubtedly contributed to a rethinking of macroeconomic policies for education” (Penn, 2010, 51). Since the American economist and Nobel Laureate James J. Hickman highlighted early childhood intervention as an especially effective economic investment, this “story of quality and high returns” (Moss, 2014, 19) has become attractive for policy makers worldwide (Moss, 2014; Penn, 2010). The most common rhetoric is that “high-quality ECEC programs are an investment in human capital that will lead to innumerable societal gains and strong economic returns in form of reduced cost for social and educational remediation and a more productive workforce” (Nagasawa, Peters, & Swadener, 2014, p. 284). The belief is that these interventions will reduce negative outcomes, such as unemployment, crime, teenage pregnancies, and numerous other social ills, and at the same time improve positive educational and economic outcomes. Each individual simply needs to acquire the skills, knowledge, competences, and attitudes that strengthen his or her productivity (Moss, 2014, 19). That is the reason that we need “high quality” ECEC (whatever this means) is not because children have a right to a satisfying childhood, but because we have to invest in them as future, productive citizens in a competitive global economy.

Although this logic seems reasonable and it is often argued that HCT and GERM reduce inequality, two major flaws exist with this

perspective. First, HCT, while attractive to policy makers, is far too narrow. An investment in early childhood will not solve the vast problems of poverty, poor prenatal care, unemployment, and numerous other social ills, many of which are rooted in inequality. Such a narrow economic-oriented approach is problematic because it oversimplifies complex problems, marginalizes poverty and inequity, ignores children’s rights, and very often, regards children as “creatures to be manipulated” (Penn, 2010, 61). There are never quick and easy answers to complex problems stemming from inequity. ECEC is not a fix for all social maladies; rather it has become “part of the problem, the balm to the inflamed conscience” (Moss, 2014, p. 68). By framing ECEC as the quick, easy, and failsafe solution to society’s problems, other possibilities for real reform have been silenced, while the far-reaching effects of inequity fester.

Secondly, education reform needs to achieve more, beyond the defined academic outcomes. Education simply is and must be more than that. As Hargreaves has emphasized, educational reforms “should attend to the advancement of the economy and the restoration of prosperity, but not at the price of other educational elements that contribute to the development of personal integrity, social democracy, and human decency. It has to be concerned with the furtherance of economic profit, yet also with the advancement of the human spirit.” (Hargreaves, 2009, p.89). It is this other part, the “advancement of the human spirit,” that we feel is being lost through the implementation of HCT through GERM policies.

Thus, these “reforms” are reductionist and narrow in their view and do not reflect a sincere interest in children’s overall well-being. Rather, the child’s well-being and education are convenient and socially acceptable reasons to support programs that have a less appealing motivation: to shape and control the formation

of children into law-abiding, socially acceptable adults, which are necessary to keep countries economically competitive in an increasingly competitive global market. The underlying motivation of social control of the next generation for economic purposes is masked by the narrative that we must ensure “quality” education for the “proper development” of the child.

### **The Impact of GERM on Early Childhood Education and Care**

Despite the limitations of HCT and GERM, the ideas have grown quickly and are impacting policies and practices in social welfare, healthcare, and education all over the world. In terms of early childhood education and care, the effects are in direct opposition to what our field was built upon - a genuine concern for the child. Such thinking and reform efforts are not new; their genesis can be traced to the Education Reform Act, launched in 1988 in Margaret Thatcher’s England (Sahlberg, 2011, 174). In 2001, Hargreaves stated:

A new, official orthodoxy of educational reform is rapidly being established in many parts of the world. This is occurring primarily in predominantly Anglo-Saxon countries but through international funding organizations such as the World Bank and the global distribution of policy strategies, elements of this orthodoxy are increasingly being exported in many parts of the less-developed world as well. (Hargreaves et al. 2001, p. 1).

However, what is new is the overwhelming dominance of this ideology. Currently, such thinking is the only way that many of those in power, especially policy makers, can imagine what ECEC is and what its goals should be. Alternative narratives are rare and without much impact on practice in the field (Cannella,

2008; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007; Moss, 2014).

GERM-influenced policies are promoted globally by nationally and internationally-located education policy entrepreneurs, including government departments, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, philanthropic individuals and groups, education consultancy firms, media outlets, publishing companies, such as Pearson, private equity investors, corporate lobbyists, and especially private corporations engaged in education policy change (Robertson, 2015, 10; Sahlberg, 2016). As can be seen from the above-mentioned list, GERM supporters are an diverse group with different interests. A perfect example exists in the US, where not only conservative Republicans, but Democrats too, are supporting such policies (Ravitch, 2017). Support transcends party lines and ideologies. For this reason, it is extremely difficult to understand the rationale of why specific, and sometimes opposing, groups support certain policies rooted in GERM ideology. As Lafer (2017) asks, regarding the US educational system:

But how are we to make sense of these? If a state chamber of commerce advocates the expansion of charter schools, for example, is this because members companies are concerned they won’t have enough skilled labor to hire and see this as a means of solving that problem? Perhaps it is because charters are cheaper, and companies see them as a way to cut taxes, or they have financial interests of their own that will benefit from charter industry growth. Or is it simply because companies are concerned about American education and support this cause for the same reasons they donate to parks and hospitals?

Whatever the answers may be, these are questions that cannot be answered easily. Interests and intentions vary, which makes it even more complicated to fully understand GERM policies and the reasoning behind their growth and persistence.

Variations of GERM policy have been adopted in predominantly Anglo-Saxon countries, such as the US, England, Australia, New Zealand, and even in a social democracy like Sweden. Through international funding organizations, such as the World Bank, and the global distribution of policy strategies, elements of this reform logic have spread to other countries as well, especially in the less developed parts of the world (Sahlberg, 2016). Even if many European countries such as France, Germany, Norway, Finland, Belgium, as well as Japan and Singapore, remain distant to the ideology of GERM (Sahlberg, 2016), certain assumptions have started to trickle into these countries as well. Right now, education in almost every country in the world is subject to the overwhelming grasp of GERM.

The most powerful effect of the imposition of GERM, HCT, and the economic perspective of ECEC as a market is its objectification of the child to be controlled. GERM policies are accompanied by “a shared instrumental and performative rationality and a shared belief in leadership, managerial methods and other technical practices” (Moss, 2014, 67). In this thinking, children and child services are reduced to “a calculation of economic cost and benefits” (Moss, 2014, p. 67). To achieve the goals, so the argument goes, more regulation or governing is necessary because only consistency, continuity, and predictability can assure the success of such a system. *New* terms, such as “standards,” “accountability” and “effectiveness,” are now commonplace in education policy discourse and have replaced “autonomy,” “trust” or “pedagogy” (Sahlberg, 2016). Many countries and states

have developed new standards, even for the youngest children, and are introducing more frequent assessments and examinations to test students and teachers. Professional autonomy is increasingly replaced by the standardization of schooling and education; standards, pre-defined learning outcomes, prescribed curricula, testing and accountability are more and more dominating and shaping the field. The effects of GERM have been “weakening or abolishing teachers’ unions, cutting school budgets and increasing class sizes, requiring high-stakes testing that determines teacher tenure and school closings, replacing public schools with privately run charter schools, diverting public funding into vouchers that may be used for private school tuition, replacing in-person education with digital applications, and dismantling publicly elected school boards” (Lafer, 2017, 130). Essentially, GERM is assuming control of our field for economic purposes.

Altogether, this trend has led to a strong “governing of the child” (Moss, 2014). There is no place for the hallmarks of early childhood: uncertainty, experimentation, or unexpected outcomes, for surprise or amazement, for context or subjective experiences. Outcomes need to be predicted. Everything needs to be effective and based on evidence, even though life is the opposite: messy, complex, diverse, and unpredictable. There is little to no attention paid to the “advancement of the human spirit” (Hargreaves, 2009). Hillevi Lenz Taguchi has characterized this process of increased governing: “[T]he more we seem to know about the complexity of learning, children’s diverse strategies and multiple theories of knowledge, the more we seek to impose learning strategies and curriculum goals that reduce the complexities of this learning and knowing” (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, 14). There is a feeling of discomfort among so many professionals about

the current state of early childhood education. The objectification and governing of young children is narrow, limiting, and potentially harmful. Why are we doing what we are doing, even if we know that it is wrong, and we can see that our children are not learning in a meaningful way and are unhappy with being in class and learning?

### **Holding GERM Accountable**

Most professionals in education would probably grudgingly accept GERM policies if they actually worked and generated the promised results. In the end, if something works, what can be argued against it? However, this question warrants examination. Are children who have been living in countries that are shaped by these policies really learning better or more (or in GERM thinking: achieving better on the tests)? Are they happier, and do the policies lead to more equity? What if we hold GERM policies accountable?

It is, of course, impossible to answer such questions with absolute certainty or reliability. As mentioned before, education alone does not have the power to change a child's outcomes, since many other social factors play a part in shaping their lives. However, many signs point to the fact that GERM policies are do not improve young children's well-being or even learning. Do these policies make children happier, healthier or smarter? The answer to such a question, so it seems, must be a clear no (Hargreaves, 2009). If children's well-being is not the goal of these educational reforms, the follow-up question should be, what are the goals and who is benefitting? As Lafer asks: "What does it all mean, and where does it all lead?" (Lafer, 2017, p.148).

First, how do such reforms impact children's lives in general? Children who live in countries shaped by GERM policies, so it seems, are not living a very happy life, according to available measures (Hargreaves, 2009, p. 93).

The UK and US, two of the "most assessment-obsessed Anglo-American nations" (Hargreaves, 2009, 93), are infamous for ranking at the very bottom of UNICEF's list of child well-being in rich countries. After being last and second to last in the 2007 list, both countries still do not perform very well. While the UK has at least risen up to a mid-table position, the US ranked 26 out of 29 in 2013 (UNICEF, 2013). Further, we have anecdotal evidence of a soaring amount of children starting to develop a negative disposition toward institutionalized learning from an early age. Many children suffer when attending schools with an exaggerated focus on proficiency in the core subjects and doing well on standardized tests, as the time for recess, socialization, and play is reduced. School probably has not been a place of pure joy and happiness for all children, and institutionalized learning has always been disliked by a number of children; however, the current complaints from children, as well as parents and educators, seem unprecedented. Young children learn better when they enjoy what they are doing and have time for recess and to play (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Miller & Almon, 2009). Yet, the argument that child-initiated play must be restored to early childhood education is "dismissed and even ridiculed in some quarters. In spite of the fact that the vital importance of play has been shown in study after study, many people believe that play is a waste of time in school" (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 1). Although it is difficult to measure well-being or blame GERM-related policies for poor performance, there is, at the very least, an indication that such policies in the field of health, social welfare, and education are not resulting in a "happier" life, based on the UNICEF scale.

GERM policies seem not only make children's lives more miserable, but they are also counterproductive regarding the major goal: improving learning outcomes. If we look at the

learning outcomes, which are supposedly reliable, valid, and based on their own measures, the results are not very convincing. Evidence from PISA demonstrates that countries that have implemented GERM features to varying degrees are facing lower and facing declining student performance (Adamson, 2016; Sahlberg, 2016). This may, of course, be related to factors outside the educational system, such as child poverty or a non-functioning health system. However, even a country such as Sweden, which was number five on UNESCO's list of child well-being in rich countries (UNICEF 2013) and once a model of high-quality education, has faced a tremendous decline in student learning outcomes since it started to adopt GERM policies, such as parent choice and privately run schools funded by public money. Between 2000 and 2012, Sweden's PISA scores dropped more sharply than those of the other participating countries (Adamson, 2016). In 2012, Sweden was ranked 28th out of 34 OECD countries in math, and 27th in reading and science, respectively. Sweden has declined from a position of being above average for OECD countries to below the average in a short period of time (Adamson, 2016). Another example is Chile. Chile's PISA scores demonstrated a decline between 2009 and 2012 in nearly all socio-economic groups, even the wealthiest and highest performing students in Chile scored far below average (Adamson, 2016). On the contrary, Finland, a country that has not adopted elements of GERM in the same way as many other countries, is a consistent high-performer of PISA (Adamson, 2016; Sahlberg, 2011, p. 181).

These results are even more worrisome if we consider that institutions or countries who put an emphasis on doing well on such tests are doing even worse in subjects that are not tested. They often neglect subjects that are not formally assessed, such as the arts, social science, foreign languages, physical education and even writing

(Abrams, 2016, p. 161; Lafer, 2017, 135). In this sense, GERM is not only performing poorly on their own measure, but furthermore, damaging the holistic development of children, a topic that will be discussed in a topic that will be discussed in *Global Trends in Early Childhood Practice: Working within the Limitations of the Global Education Reform Movement*, the next issue of *Global Education Review*. Altogether, such findings "should capture the attention of policymakers globally leading them to question of whether GERM really is the best way to conceptualize change and improve student learning" (Sahlberg, 2011, 181). Why would we continue with something that is obviously not yielding the desired results?

Are GERM policies at least beneficial in other ways, such as in reducing inequality? This is one of the most popular arguments offered by proponents of school choice: that competition, parents' choice, and a free market would ensure that all children receive an equal education. There is not much evidence that supports such an assumption (Henig, 1995; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). Again, Sweden is an interesting example. Since the implementation of GERM policies, inequality in Sweden has increased (Weale, 2015). Currently, Sweden, previously at the top of UNICEF's overall league table of inequality in child well-being in rich countries, is now positioned marginally above the bottom third (UNICEF, 2016). As the Swedish minister of education in 2015 pointed out: "Instead of breaking up social differences and class differences in the education system, we have a system today that's creating a wider gap between the ones that have and the ones that have not" (Weale, 2015). In Chile, where the public schools consist mostly of low-income students, and only a few low-income students can afford to attend voucher schools, the dissatisfaction with the poor and unequal educational system led to student-generated



riots in 2011. Another example, pertaining to early childhood education and care, is the system in the US, as Jones (2017) calls it, a “perfect example of the market-based approach” that only exacerbates inequities because “quality will only increase for those who can afford to pay top dollar.” In the US – even with current initiatives such as *Universal Pre-Kindergarten* which is portrayed as a first step to providing equal opportunity in early childhood education – high quality education depends on the parents’ ability to spend thousands of dollars for private preschools or have the capacity to navigate the complex system of options. Low-income parents have no choice but to enroll their children in programs that are “within their financial means but often are lacking in quality” (Jones, 2017). These children often enter kindergarten behind their more privileged peers. Canella (2008) describes the result of such policies as a two-tiered system: “Early childhood education has played a role in the construction of a two-tiered system and in the continued segregation of diverse groups of people... perpetuating societal beliefs that particular groups are inferior to others” (p. 159). Privatization does not fight inequality, it increases it, but behind the ruse of choice. We do not need more choice and competition. A sustainable solution would call for investing the resources necessary to make all ECEC institutions solid and of high quality, but would not create a market with “winners” and “losers.”

The phenomena of GERM and privatization is also gaining ground in less developed countries around the world, where inequality is even greater. Again, the promise is that privatization will improve education for all children. So-called “low-cost private schools,” a term that summarizes “schools that target relatively poor households by offering education at a low cost, but also in most cases, often low quality” (EACH Rights, 2017, p. 12), are

expanding and offering new opportunities. Low-cost private schools have developed over the last few years in many developing countries worldwide, such as India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania or Uganda (Pedró, Leroux, & Watanabe, 2015,). Features of such low-cost private schools are similar in all these countries: low fees, but also poor infrastructure; multi-grade; and low-paid, young teachers often recruited from the local community with minimal qualifications who must follow prescribed curricula. The idea is to keep prices affordable for low-income families (Pedró, Leroux, & Watanabe, 2015). However, most families cannot afford to pay these fees, so they have to forego basic needs or cannot send all of their children to these schools. As a result, female children are predominantly not send to school.

Privatization in the global south has become a huge concern. Recently, Liberia has outsourced all primary and pre-primary schools, opening the door to a far-ranging privatization of its educational system. The push for privatization looks more like a modern form of colonization and exploitation than a sincere investment in children or in the development of sustainable educational systems. The outsourcing of educational systems to private providers without adequate regulations is viewed by many human rights and child advocates as a threat to the right of education (EACH Rights, 2017; The Global Initiative for Economics, Social and Cultural Rights, 2016). *The Oxford Review of Education* recently published a whole issue on non-state actors in the global south, in the same year the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution that urged all states to “address any negative impacts of the commercialization of education” (The Global Initiative for Economics, Social and Cultural Rights, 2016). Other UN human rights bodies, such as the UN Special rapporteur on the right

to education, also raised serious concerns regarding the explosive and unregulated privatization of education in less developed countries. Courts in Uganda and Kenya have ordered the closure of schools run by Bridge International Academies, a global chain of low cost schools supported by illustrious names such as Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Pearson, and the World Bank, because they violated educational norms and standards in these countries, a fact that speaks volumes (The Global Initiative for Economics, Social and Cultural Rights, 2017). Sylvain Aubry of the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has stated that the privatization of education in these countries “raises serious human rights concerns that must be dealt with urgently” (The Global Initiative for Economics, Social and Cultural Rights, 2016). It seems very unlikely that such efforts will solve the issue of poor children who cannot access schools. On the contrary, it may even increase segregation and reinforce inequalities in educational opportunity. In such countries, GERM features and especially privatization work as “catalysts for social inequalities” (Pedró, Leroux, & Watanabe, 2015, p. 5).

Overall, the persistence of GERM, despite its poor outcomes related to both learning and well-being, has only perpetuated existing inequalities, both within countries and worldwide. Not only does inequality exist *within* countries, but such privatization of education has led to increased inequality *between* countries.

### **Why GERM Policies Cannot Fix The Problems of Educational Systems-and Maybe Don't Want To**

GERM is not doing well, as defined on its own measures; it seems to not contribute to children's happiness or their learning, and it

exacerbates inequality. GERM policies simply do not work. This does not really come as a surprise to anyone who knows a little bit about ECEC. Many GERM features clearly contradict research and what we know about how children learn, how schools work, and how to achieve the goal of providing good education for *all* children, not only the “winners” of a competitive market. A stark example is the GERM-based endeavor to weaken teacher education. Well-trained and experienced teachers are much more successful in supporting student's learning. To push for inexperienced and minimally trained teachers does not make any sense if the goal really is to improve the educational field. For exactly this reason, Lafer (2017) called the educational reforms “an evidence-free zone of public policy” (p.139). They not only have little or no evidentiary basis, they are also extremely unpopular and opposed by the majority of people (Lafer, 2017, p. 130).

The problem with GERM policies extends beyond the fact that they are not very successful. The entire foundation of the approach is flawed. As Samuel E. Abrams in his book *Education and the Commercial Mindset* (2016) described convincingly, privatization does not work in a field like education. Education systems “do not fit the commercial model because of a particular type of ‘market failure’” (Abrams, 2016, 175). It is ironic that one economist after the other has revealed “clear boundaries to the business model” (Abrams, 2016, p.171) because they understand that education is a field in which markets cannot work alone and intervention is required. Yet, educational policies are still pushing for such reforms based on this flawed application of the business model. Free, private markets will not solve the problems that education systems face. The assumption that GERM policies can improve educational systems as a whole is a bad idea rooted in misconception about how economic theory is applied. As

Abrams points out: “Privatization accordingly amounts to a flawed response to state failure, not a solution. The solution calls for investing the resources necessary to make all neighborhood schools solid in the way all neighborhood schools are solid in middle- and upper-class suburbs, with well-paid teachers, good working conditions and smaller classes” (Strauss, 2016).

Many GERM features are based on this mistaken conception, essentially assuming that education can be a private, not a public, good. Parent choice and school competition create a situation in which there will be winners and losers. There are parents who find and get the right institution for their child (and parents who will not). There are schools that will “succeed” because they offer the right product (and schools that will not). However, education is both a *private good* and a *public good*, an important aspect of a functioning democracy and we need a system that provides excellent education for all children, not only for the winners of such a competition. The goal needs to be an educated citizenry and this can only be achieved by a shared investment, because public goods “cannot benefit anyone without benefiting everyone” (Abrams, 2016, 184). There are certain public goods that simply cannot be privatized without damaging a society, and education is clearly one of these areas.

If GERM policies are not working, based on a mistaken application of the market approach, and seem to defy common sense, the important question is: Why is there such strong support for the persistence of these policies? What is the intention of its supporters, if it is not the child’s well-being? Such a question is not easy to answer, especially because the intentions may vary and because there are, without question, individuals and organizations that implement GERM features by acting in good faith. However, for us, it seems that those

acting in good faith are unaware that the purpose of their work with children has been hijacked. Lafer (2017), in his book, *The One Percent Solution*, concluded convincingly that the underlying goals of many GERM supporters are rooted in economic motivations. While he only analyzed the reform movement in the US, his findings likely hold true in other countries as well.

We think it is important to raise these questions, so that all professionals in the field of ECEC can reflect upon their implications. It is worth mentioning Lafer’s explanation regarding the teacher and school evaluation:

We must look for an underlying rationale that makes sense of these not as contradictory but as complementary policies. High-stake tests are designed to undo tenure and close public schools. As that is accomplished, a new education system will emerge, which runs on cheaper high-turnover instructors who follow canned curricula geared around test preparation and thus have no need for the levels of professionalism aspired to by previous generations of teachers (Lafer, 2017, 148).

We believe that there are many reasons for the persistence of GERM policy, ranging from well-meaning professionals simply complying with their funders’ or superiors’ requests to those seeking economic gain by profiting from the educational “crisis.” For this reason, we need to ask, *Cui Bono*: Who is really benefiting from such policies?

## **Alternatives to The GERM Narrative**

Although this depiction of the current state of our field seems dark, there is hope. ECEC is receiving much attention, so it is the perfect time for our voices to be heard.

What can we, the academics in our field, do?

It is important that we are not manipulated by all of the attention and follow the “trends” in our field. We must show why many of the advocated policies are not only failing, but will damage children and our field. We have to actively deconstruct many of the myths surrounding GERM policies. We do not have to accept the troubling reductionist approach of GERM, which has blocked out other stories and voices without much resistance and reduced ECEC to a formula for school readiness. As Cannella (2008) pointed out, “Educational truths have been constructed and accepted as universal without critique or recognition of the political power context from which they have emerged” (p. 159).

However, we believe that it is not sufficient to simply criticize such policies. We need to seek alternatives, create new narratives of early childhood education and care, we need to develop “real utopia” (Moss, 2014). The loss of a utopian vision is actually one of the negative effects of GERM that is not realized or even problematized. GERM has resulted in a dominant and very narrow way of thinking about early childhood education and care, its goals, and its implementation; a way of thinking about ECEC in economic terms: *high quality, efficiency, proficiency, accountability* – in the language of GERM. As Tony Judt (2009) in his famous speech *What Is Living and What Is Dead in Social Democracy?* asks: “Why is it that here in the United States we have such difficulty even imagining a different sort of society from the one whose dysfunctions and inequalities trouble us so? We appear to have lost the capacity to question the present, much less offer alternatives to it. Why is it so beyond us to conceive of a different set of arrangements to our common advantage?” Too often we feel that exactly the same could be said about early

childhood education and care, not only in the US, but increasingly worldwide.

This is why we think that such an issue of *Global Education Review* is necessary. We need to question the status quo; we cannot simply continue to ask if certain methods or approaches are efficient and working. Of course, quantitative research has its value and is important; however, what is missing is the ability to question whether the current state of ECEC makes sense in the first place. What is not asked is how ECEC could be or what it should look like. Missing are bold and innovative visions of childhood or how ECEC could support happy, curious children. Moss has summarized some of the questions that are missing, but would be absolutely essential to ask to change the current state of our field: “What is [...] the ‘diagnosis of our time’? What is our understanding or image, of the child, of the educator, of the early childhood center? What does education mean?...What are the purposes of education? What are its fundamental values? What ethics?” (Moss, 2014, p.14). Due to the increasing dominance of GERM policies, such questions are not asked nor even perceived as important anymore. In our eyes, this narrow-mindedness of current research and thinking in ECEC is one of the most troubling negative effects of the dominance of GERM.

It is important that we find alternatives. We must listen to other voices and hear the stories of those who have seen a glimpse of what ECEC would look like with less GERM influence. That does not mean that traditional research and academic work should be ignored and dismissed; we think that a real dialogue from various perspectives is of utmost importance. However, a real dialogue requires both sides to listen. During the current period of transformation and growth in our field, we must ensure that our field is not manipulated to serve economic or political purposes. Scholars and

researchers have a unique role to play and can contribute to a real dialogue, whereby a renewed commitment to generating high-quality scholarly inquiry has the potential to reconceptualize the field (Hatch, 2014, 45). Early childhood communities around the world need to raise their voices and start a democratic, scholarly, and professional dialogue (Moss et al, 2016; Urban & Swadener, 2016). As Dahlberg & Moss (2005) have pointed out, this is a critical time in our field:

We are at a historical moment when we need new inspiration about the meaning of education; inspiration that can help us to contest neoliberalism and managerialism, with the great value they attach to instrumentality, calculation and the autonomous subject, and their powerful technologies for governing and subjectification. Inspiration that can confront what we have termed the dominant Anglo-American discourse in early childhood education, with its universal and normative thinking and totalising practices that smother difference through giving the teacher possibilities to possess, comprehend and govern the child (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, 92).

Our issue is a response to this call within the field to share scholarly inquiry, as it relates to GERM, its impact on policy, and the potential for alternatives. With Peter Moss, we believe that early childhood is “in need of transformative change” (2014, 73). Such change begins with listening to the stories and viewpoints of all stakeholders involved, not only those in power or in privileged positions. There has been little outrage or widespread reaction to GERM policies, which are not only ineffective based on their own measures, but have also resulted in inequality and works against a child’s

well-being and happiness. Organizations such as Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education (RECE), and voices like Bloch, Cannella, Dahlberg, Moss, Pence, Pinar, Silin, and others have provided an outlet for such stories. In response to OECD’s International Early Learning Study (IELS), there is a growing voice within the early childhood community “to raise concerns about its assumptions, practices and possible effects...in the hope that early childhood communities around the world will raise their voices, and that the OECD will enter into dialogue with them” (Moss et. al 2016). We agree with these voices that question the status quo, call for reconceptualization, and encourage others with alternative stories to do the same. The authors in this issue present alternatives and critiques of the GERM infusion into early childhood policy and raise questions and issues that provide a glimpse of what early childhood education could be, and should be.

We are honored to open this issue with a statement from Mathias Urban, Professor of Early Childhood Studies and Director of the Early Childhood Research Centre at University of Roehampton in London. He outlines very clearly the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and its application to preschool. Urban details the IELS, the so-called “Baby-PISA,” and its lack of evidence regarding standardized testing of young children, as well as the disregard for diversity. Urban calls attention to that fact that there are alternatives to IELS in its current form and calls for a “meaningful, contextualised learning initiative, conducted in respectful and participatory ways.” Urban’s piece is an excellent example of questioning GERM-related policies at their foundation, instead of complying through blind implementation, without realizing the unintended consequences.

*In Incredible parenting with Incredible Years?: A Foucauldian analysis of New Zealand Government Perspectives on Parenting and*

*their Implications for Parents and educators in Early Childhood Education*, Shil Bae conducts a critical analysis of the *Incredible Years* program in New Zealand, demonstrating that it (re)produces the economic/neoliberal discourses as the desirable norm of parenting, thus reinforcing the existing power relations in society. Bae's work, from a post-structural approach, examines what and how issues are framed in parenting policy through Foucault's notion of "governmentality" and "discursive normalisation." By unpacking discourses of parenting produced by *Incredible Years* as an accepted parenting programme, Bae explores how this concept of "truth" in parenting influences the everyday life of families, evidence that GERM has even infiltrated family life. Bae argues that this notion of a curriculum for parents provides only a limited understanding of the issue and intensifies inequality and injustice, providing insights for reconceptualizing our understanding of parenting.

*When the GERM Hosts the Antidote: The Surprising New Birth of Israel's Anti-GERM Pre-K Policy*, written by Gadi Bialik & Noa Shefi, examines how Israel's educational system has resisted GERM influences, using a conceptual framework that highlights a more complex, hybrid, or dual outlook at GERM. Since the 1970s, Israel's educational policy has been undergoing a change generated by the neo-liberal agenda, eventually adopting the main characteristics of GERM. Their research focuses on a recent Pre-K policy formation process that set out as GERM-like in nature, but nevertheless ended up with anti-GERM characteristics, providing an example of local resistance to GERM influence. The authors analyze the main factors that generated the new anti-GERMian reform, which present possibilities for questioning GERM-influenced policies.

Melio Repko-Erwin conducts a critical literature review synthesizing empirical and

theoretical research centered on US kindergarten from 2001-2016. In *Was Kindergarten Left Behind? A Critical Review of Kindergarten as the New First Grade in the Wake of No Child Left Behind*, she examines the complicated nature of teaching and learning in kindergarten with implications for research, policy, and practice since the passage of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) in 2001. Connecting NCLB's increased emphasis on standards and accountability to issues of kindergarten readiness, the role of academics, play, developmental appropriateness in kindergarten, and changes in kindergarten literacy instruction, she examines the complicated nature of teaching and learning in kindergarten and how GERM's emphasis on accountability can backfire. The United States is a prime example of GERM policy and the influx of reforms intended to elevate students' academic standing in a global economy.

Stefan Faas, Shu-Chen Wu, & Steffen Geiger analyze in *The importance of play in early childhood education: A critical perspective on current policies and practices in Germany and Hong Kong* describe how the national education systems in Germany and Hong Kong have been shaped by international reform movements. They discuss how each system, with its own tradition and unique features of early childhood education, has reacted differently to the external pressure of changing and reforming the system. Their analysis shows how important cultural settings are. The focus is on play and how play is understood differently in each context, and how that understanding informs each country's reaction to external reform movements. The authors point out that such policies cannot simply be transferred one from country to the other without considering the specific context and that reform movements will have different effects in national education systems.

In the last piece, Charlotte Ringsmose explains the changes in the Nordic countries, which have been model educational systems in the past. In *Global Education Reform Movement challenging Nordic childhoods*, Ringsmose explores the challenges facing early childhood education in Nordic countries in an era of increasing globalization with focus on accountability and academic competition. In Denmark, the social pedagogical tradition has been part of the culture in early childhood for decades, but the country is experimenting with more structured learning approaches. Ringsmose explains the threat to their social pedagogical tradition and presents this Danish example as an alternative to the schoolification of the early years, which is evident in so many other countries.

Our hope is that this issue joins with others to hold GERM accountable and present alternatives to the status quo, which is clearly not working. Public attention is focused on our field, so let's make the most of it. "Policy-making...in early childhood, is rarely rational and considered, but a circular process whereby a government reacts to the immediate crises of the present" (Penn, 2011, p. 28). As politicians continue to simplify society's problems with an easy solution of trying to control the complexities of ECEC, let us respond to *our* immediate crisis of the present: that our field is being manipulated at the expense of children's well-being for economic and political purposes. What can we possibly do to stop the global force of GERM? As scholars and practitioners in the field, we are in a position to call attention to the impact of such policies and what really works in our field. "The job of academic and intellectuals...is to analyse policies and their rationales, to be sceptical. This is particularly necessary in a relatively new and emerging field of endeavor like early childhood services" (Penn, 2011, p. 29). The aim of our issue is not to

present a singular alternate view, but one of many, to be considered in ongoing dialogue with all stakeholders about the nature of our field and to envision early childhood in a post-GERM era.

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