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Editorial

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EDITORIAL



Being asked to guest edit EECERJ has reinforced what I see as one of the great contributions of EECERA (through both its conferences and journal) – that of sharing ideas, practices, beliefs and theories on the care and education of young children. Any analysis of theoretical and empirical explorations of early childhood education illustrate that as a community there is a long history of sharing ideas on the care and education of young children (Georgeson *et al.* 2013; Miller and Cameron 2014). Sharing and comparing different approaches to early childhood education offers the advantage of helping to reveal what is taken for granted within our own cultures and opening up alternative possibilities (Tobin *et al.* 2009). However, despite the advantages of sharing ideas on the care and education of young children, the increased analysis of early education services by supra-national organisations risks ‘global panopticism’ (Lingard *et al.* 2013), whereby the global construction of early childhood education services acts a regulatory gaze as to the purpose of services and how they should be delivered and structured. The OECD’s proposed International Early Learning Study (IELS) is illustrative of the normative ways of thinking about early childhood education, whereby services are identified as a social good, supporting children’s lifelong learning (based on predefined desirable indicators) and offering early intervention to those from socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances (Moss *et al.* 2016). However, advocates of contextualised approaches to early childhood education would caution against a convergence of perspectives (Moss *et al.* 2016), identifying a need to appreciate that culture and history are central to explaining and understanding differences (Oberhuemer 2014; Tobin 2005; Tobin *et al.* 2009). Thus whilst considering the ‘other’ can offer alternative perspectives and open up new possibilities, the transfer of ideas may not always be possible or desirable.

In reading the papers included in this issue of EECERJ, two things struck me. Firstly, those interested in early childhood education are motivated by a want to improve the lives of young children but (irrespective of one’s perspective on the concept of the regulatory gaze) there is a need to consider our own normative ways of thinking about early childhood education. Throughout the papers, the want to improve the lives of young children is underpinned by a set of assumptions about who children should be and what they should be able to do that warrants further exploration. Secondly, in sharing ideas on how to care for and educate children there is often only a small window through which to note how other countries approach early childhood education but also that in looking through that window we have in front of us our own window that informs what it is that we see. Thus the acceptance or questioning of a different perspective will be motivated by our own standpoints (Kelly 2014) and so I would suggest that the papers in this issue of EECERJ can be used as a tool to reflect on our normative assumptions.

My own window has been shaped by 18 months living in Hungary, undertaking a cross-European project on the early childhood education and care workforce. As I travelled to visit early childhood education settings in different countries I was conscious that I was only observing just one or two centres. Thus I only had a small window into, and small glimpses of, the provision of early childhood education in the respective countries I visited. Further, I was living in Europe to undertake a research project that had been motivated by my interest in quality early childhood education, particularly what quality meant for the workforce. Whilst research had demonstrated the importance of the workforce for the quality of

early childhood education (Early *et al.* 2006; Early and Winton 2001; Mathers *et al.* 2011; Sylva *et al.* 2004), less is known about the attributes that contribute to a quality workforce with regards to their knowledge, skills and attitudes. My intention is not to present an overview of my own research in this editorial but to draw attention to how my positionality has shaped the window through which I read the articles presented in this issue. There are no doubt countless themes that I could have identified in the papers presented, such as considering the methodological issues raised in each of the papers and the challenges evident in having to translate research instruments into native dialects only to have to re-translate for the purpose of disseminating findings. However, the themes that I identify as evident in the papers are that of quality and its inextricable relationship to understandings of desirable child development. As I discuss the papers, my positionality draws me to consider both the concepts of child development and (related) constructions of early childhood education that are present in the papers and to question their consequences for those who work with young children and ultimately, the ever increasing expectations of workforce.

Quality

Debates on the quality of early childhood education are well rehearsed (Campbell-Barr and Leeson 2016; Dalli *et al.* 2011; Penn 2011), with explorations of whether quality can be defined and, if so, how can it be measured and is there a need for culturally situated measures? Such debates are evident in ‘The role of preschool quality in promoting child development: Evidence from rural Indonesia’ (Jung *et al.*). The research adopts the internationally recognised ECERS-R (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised) and the Early Development Instrument to consider associations between the two. The analysis contributes to the evidence base of the contribution of quality early childhood education to children’s development. However, Jung *et al.* also discuss the limits of the ECERS-R in the Indonesian context, preferring to adopt a localised interpretation of the tool that is related to the early childhood education standards present in Indonesia. The findings illustrate the importance of the workforce for the quality of early childhood education but also illustrate the challenges of data collection. Not only was there a need to adapt the quality measure but ensuring consistency in assessing both quality and child development was problematic.

The analysis of ‘Tensions in constructions of quality in Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy history’ (Logan) also considers the cultural context in relation to the discursive production of quality early childhood education. Logan’s analysis identified three discourses that mould understandings of quality in Australia: community, market and investment. The discourses are not unique to Australia, as there is evidence of the market discourse within Zhou’s analysis of China, with elements of the investment discourse being present in all the papers. Logan illustrates the tensions that exist between the discourses but also their consequences for early childhood education services and access to them. Ultimately the market model is creating a two tier system of ‘quality’ or ‘budget’ early childhood education, posing a clear challenge to equality of access to quality early childhood education services.

There is arguably something of a two-tier system present in China, where the market model is shaped by a lack of early childhood education services, resulting in the wealthy being the most likely to access services (Zhou). In ‘Variations in Chinese parental perceptions of early childhood education quality’, Zhou draws on consumer choice theory, whereby parental choice acts as a regulator of quality as demand will drive up quality. Market models of early childhood education have more widely been challenged (Goodfellow 2005; Lloyd and Penn 2010; Penn 2009) with Zhou contributing to debates through considering whether parents

are able to judge quality. An analysis of parental assessments and ECERS-R assessments illustrates that parents generally overestimate the quality of early childhood education services. At the most simplistic of levels there is a given logic, as why would any parent admit to choosing poor quality services for their child? However, there are also deeper questions as to how the desired outcomes of early childhood education services will have a bearing on what is deemed to be quality and, perhaps, parents have different drivers to those of an assessment tool such as the ECERS-R. Zhou does touch on this issue when identifying that within the Chinese culture there is a preference for whole-group approaches to learning, again raising the issue of culturally located assessments of quality.

Child outcomes

Each of the papers on quality draws attention to how understandings of quality will be dependent on the outcomes that are desired from early childhood education services. The papers on quality illustrate that there are very different perspectives on the relationship between quality and outcomes, from socio-economic perspectives to those involving a process of deconstruction. In reviewing the papers, I have begun to consider how a country's socio-economic history interplays, whereby being further along the path of economic development affords a greater level of criticality. This view is mere pondering as opposed to being based on in-depth analysis, but in considering Hammond and McConney's analysis of 'The impact of village based kindergarten on early literacy, numeracy and school attendance in the Solomon Islands' the discourse of investment that was identified by Logan has a different interpretation, whereby those involved in early childhood education seek to prove its positive benefits for child development in an attempt to generate further financial support for the provision of services. Hammond and McConney's analysis demonstrates the effectiveness of early childhood education for children's numeracy and literacy through comparing an intervention and control group. However, in a context where early childhood education services are only beginning to be established the focus is on generating buy-in from stakeholders (such as the Education Ministry in the Solomon Islands) and teachers rather than critical analysis.

I do not look to dispute the benefits of early childhood education for children's development but there are evidently different windows through which those researching early childhood education look. In some instances the windows are characterised by a more specific focus on a group of children or particular aspect of development. Zakai-Mashiach *et al.* represent both a focus on a specific group of children and an aspect of development in 'Preschoolers' social interest toward a child with ASD and their ToM abilities'. Zakai-Mashiach *et al.* draw attention to the widespread adoption of inclusion approaches for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Inclusion is based on the belief that it will support children with ASD to learn social skills. Whilst the paper draws attention to children with ASD and the development of their social skills, through focusing on friendship formation, Zakai-Mashiach *et al.* analyse who it is (out of the children) that shows an interest in the ASD children. Those children with higher Theory of Mind (ToM) scores are found to be more likely to approach ASD children, indicating that integration might not always require a process of mediation.

Whilst Zakai-Mashiach *et al.* focus on social relationship, Gol-Guven considers 'The effectiveness of the Lions Quest Program: skills for growing on school climate, students' behaviors, perceptions of school, and conflict resolution skills'. Both papers draw attention to how education is no longer a question of academic attainment but encompasses social relationships and, relatedly, social-emotional relationships. Gol-Guven identifies the role of education in supporting children to make good decisions about their health and well-being, developing resilience, recognising feelings of self and others. The study analyses the intervention of the Lions

Quest Program, demonstrating its positive effects on the school climate and students' behaviours but given the intervention is focussed on teacher development, changes in pupils may take longer to emerge. As an intervention, the Lions Quest Program is illustrative of the increasing expectations of those who work with young children. Whilst Zakai-Mashiach *et al.* draw attention to staff knowing and understanding about inclusion, for Gol-Guven it is a question of supporting children in their social and emotional development.

The expanding expectations surrounding those who work in early childhood education is also evident in 'Assessing preschools using the Eco-Schools program in terms of educating for sustainable development in early childhood education'. Korkmaz and Yildez, writing from a Turkish context, acknowledge that those working in early childhood education (or any stage of education) might not know about sustainable development. However, there is an expectation that teachers will support children in understanding the economic, socio-cultural and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Whilst there is evidence that schools in Turkey engage with the environmental factors in various ways (such as visible displays, science classes and discouraging wastefulness), the analysis between public and private schools illustrates that resources will influence the process of implementing sustainable development education. The paper clearly identifies sustainable development as a desirable outcome and is illustrative of how outcomes interrelate with both expectations of staff and their pedagogical approach.

Workforce knowledge and approach

Already the papers have illustrated the increasing expectations of those who work in early childhood education. On the one hand there is the broad expectation that those working in early childhood education will ensure it 'works' by achieving the desired outcomes, but the range of outcomes is expanding. On the other hand there is the assumption that those working in early childhood education have the knowledge to achieve the expanding outcomes expected. It is worth stating that I consider the knowledge required for working in early childhood education in the plural – knowledges – and that this reflects different forms of knowledge, with different structures and processes of legitimisation, as well as the various ways in which a person comes to know (Bernstein 1999; Winch 2010; Young 2007; Young and Muller 2014). Considering knowledge for working in early childhood education in the plural draws attention to how there is no linear relationship between knowledge and practice – in other words it cannot be assumed that knowledge *x* can be applied to achieve outcome *y*. Instead, those working in early childhood education draw on a multiplicity of knowledge (from the theoretical to the practical) to inform their daily practice. However, the outcomes that are desired of early childhood education have consequences for the knowledges required of the workforce and their ways of working. The outcomes of early childhood education have so far been related to child development, sustainable development, inclusion and well-being, but these interplay with understandings of how best to achieve these outcomes, thus shaping pedagogical practice.

Nikiforidou begins with the perspective that risk taking supports children's development. In "It is riskier": preschoolers' reasoning of risky situations', Nikiforidou explores children's assessment of risk. The presence of an adult, the age of the child involved in the situation and the hazards present were all aspects that the children took into account. The study illustrates children's intuitive probability and their language skills at being able to describe risky situations whilst reinforcing risk taking as an approach for supporting children's development.

Grindheim offers an insightful piece on 'Children as playing citizens' that both questions concepts of play and raises questions as to children's active citizenship within early childhood

education. The notion of free play is often adopted in early childhood education as supporting children's development, but Grindheim challenges its democratic undertones through considering children's participation in play and both what influences children's participation and the conditions for determining what play is. The paper draws attention to the role of adults in setting the rhythms of early childhood education centres, such as when is 'play' and when is tidying time and how children do not necessarily share the adults' concepts. Amongst the other papers within this issue Grindheim's paper leads me to consider the prevailing influence of adults' concepts of early childhood education, from what quality is (or is not), to the outcomes that are anticipated. The increased expectation surrounding early childhood education services and the people working in them has come from adults, making Grindheim's exploration of child-citizens all the more pertinent.

Inevitably it is not only the adults who work in early childhood education that shape constructs of the role, purpose and outcomes of early childhood education. Many of the papers identify other stakeholders, such as policy officials, but the discussions of market models also illustrate the involvement of parents. Li and Xie bring the discussion of adults' concepts back to the influence of socio-cultural factors in their analysis of 'Parenting styles of Chinese families and children's social-emotional and cognitive developmental outcomes'. The paper analyses parenting styles in China and their relationship to child outcomes, concluding in favour of an authoritative rather than authoritarian approach. The conclusion is determined by positive impacts on children's science and mathematics outcomes, alongside recognition that punitive approaches can be damaging for children's social and emotional well-being. Both the more academic outcomes and those of social and emotional well-being further illustrate the assumptions that are present as to appropriate outcomes for children. Outcomes for children, constructed by adults, have consequences for determining the apparent success of a child, their parents and early childhood education.

Concluding remarks

The papers in this issue all illustrate a continued interest in how best to care for and educate children but there is evidence that this is increasingly framed by an interest in outcomes. In reading the papers it struck me that the focus on outcomes reflects adults' concepts of outcomes and that these will be shaped by the windows through which we look. Concern with inclusion or sustainable development will inform what is regarded as a successful outcome, whilst the need for additional investment in early childhood education services might limit the level of criticality of the outcomes being identified. Inevitably, we all hold different positionalities in regards to how we understand early childhood education but I would suggest that in reading the papers in this issue of EECERJ there is an opportunity to reflect on your own window and how it informs your reading the papers.

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