



In praise of early childhood educators

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The ambitious United Nations target (2015) that all children will ‘have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education’ is predicated on the assumption that there will be a sufficiency of ‘quality’ early childhood educators across the world by 2030. In the current context of fast-paced change in early childhood education and care, issues of quality remain highly contested (Moss et al. 2016), but when Barber and Mourshed (2007) investigated the characteristics of the ‘best performing school systems’, according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) just over a decade ago, they identified that ‘the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers’ (p. 16). To that end, Barber and Mourshed (2007) found that those pre-service teachers who are willing to learn, motivated to teach and demonstrate good communication, interpersonal, literacy and numeracy skills tend to become the strongest teachers. Moreover, their findings suggested that teachers who enjoy high status and good pay, training and continuous development tend to be the most proficient worldwide.

It may be argued that it is simplistic to take Barber and Mourshed’s findings at face value and apply them to early childhood education and care contexts more than a decade later. Indeed, even the moniker is not universally agreed for those who support ‘early childhood development, care and pre-primary education’: across the world, those who do this work are referred to, amongst other descriptors, as educators, pedagogues, practitioners, pedagogical advisors, child carers and teachers (Bertram and Pascal, 2016). However, whilst policymakers have been persuaded that experiences in early childhood have the greatest effect on lifetime outcomes (Heckman 2017), in many countries, governments have yet to invest adequately in the early childhood workforce (OECD 2017). The knowledge, expertise and sensitivity that we must require of our early childhood educators cannot be underestimated if young children’s experiences in early childhood settings are to be optimal. Yet many early childhood educators continue to endure worse pay, lower training levels and poorer status than their counterparts who work with older children (Bertram and Pascal 2016; Mercer 2013). This situation is an injustice that governments may need to address with urgency if the United Nations early childhood development target is to be achieved by 2030 (United Nations 2015).

Early childhood educators require sophisticated expertise to know if, when and how to intervene to optimise young children’s learning in early childhood settings. Their interventions are many and varied, requiring educators, for example, to liaise with primary carers and other agencies, to develop rich learning environments, to provide apposite provocations, to engage in dialogue with children, to question appropriately and to co-construct understanding with young children. Equally, the expert early childhood educator knows the wisdom of refraining from intervention at times.

In different ways, each of the articles in this first issue of 2018 highlights the expertise required of early childhood educators in supporting young children’s learning. The issue opens with an article from Cathy Nutbrown and Josephine Deguara who focus on meanings that emerged in discussions between an adult and a four-year-old girl as she drew pictures in her setting and at home in Malta. By revealing enclosure and trajectory schemas while listening to the little girl talking as she drew, valuable insights into her thinking became apparent. The

‘signs, symbols and personal narratives’ that present in this study’s findings carry useful messages for early childhood practice and research.

The next three papers in this issue focus on play-based pedagogy. Maria Magnussen and Niklas Pramling report on their empirical study about discussions in the context of mathematics and play in Sweden. Their research focuses on discussions between a child (6.5 years) and an adult concerning the child’s drawing of ‘Numberland’, to provide new understanding about the ways adults may support young children’s learning characterised by play. In their article based on research in Australia, Andrea Nolan and Louise Paatsch share findings concerning the ways that early childhood teachers working with children aged 5–6 years replaced formal learning with play-based pedagogy. Their research highlights that the key challenges the Australian teachers encountered concerned legitimisation and accountability, suggesting the potential for compromising professional autonomy. Based on findings from their study into Cypriot pre-service teachers’ thinking when planning and implementing play-based art activities, Andri Savva and Valentina Erakleous identify an association between the pre-service teachers’ thinking when completing planning documentation and their reflective pedagogical practices. However, Savva and Erakleous note that the reasons the pre-service teachers gave for their practice decisions did not align consistently with their stated philosophical stance on play-based learning.

Verity Campbell-Barr’s article interrogates the knowledge that early childhood education and care professionals may need and troubles how that knowledge is legitimised. She advocates critical debate concerning the knowledge-base for early childhood education and care practice, and proposes there may be value in multiple forms of knowledge that incorporate experiential and theoretical strands. Campbell-Barr’s themes resonate with those in a study of preschool teachers’ reasoning about pedagogical goals undertaken in Swedish and Finnish contexts by Camilla Björklund and Eva Ahlskog-Björkman. The authors explored how pre-school teachers perceive and enact pedagogical goals as part of their thematic, play-based practice and their findings provide new insights into early childhood pedagogical practice. In the final article for this issue, Peter BurrIDGE and Jessica Bennett share findings from a study focused on a programme for which Timorese early childhood teachers were mentored by Australian teachers. In a context where cultural nuances were acknowledged and valued, Timorese teachers transformed their pedagogic practice.

The articles in this issue focus on different ways that early childhood educators may work with young children to understand and support their learning. The authors reveal some of the complex knowledge, understanding and attributes required of early childhood educators in their everyday work. Nevertheless, the increasingly demanding expectations of early childhood educators are too often unmatched by their status, pay and conditions. Across the world, governments have signed up to universal ‘access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education’ by 2030; in fairness to young children, they should now show their commitment by addressing the inequities that disadvantage many early childhood educators.

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