

Holistic Experiences: Celebrating the wonder of early childhood education.

Editorial

Lorna Arnott

Early Childhood Education encompasses sophisticated, yet misunderstood practice. A misguided perception often portrays early childhood as a sector which is primarily focused on care in overly simplistic terms, often overshadowing the place of education and learning. It is this misconception that leads to key challenges in policy making and enacting high quality provision. You only need to look to the recent agenda to change staff to student ratios in baby rooms in England (Gaunt, 2021), to realise that those outwith practice and the field, fail to perceive the complexity and intricacy associated with educating our youngest citizens.

Those within the field know all too well, the multidimensional focus which is required to support young children's learning and development. The different 'selves' emulated by key Early Childhood staff are endless and Rose and Rogers (2012) articulate that at very least practitioners must assume the position of critical reflector, carer, communicator, facilitator, observer, assessor and creator. The varied roles required by staff go some way to articulating the vastly diverse content and contexts within which children learn in the first years of life. It positions Early Childhood Education as something far greater than the narrow focus on care, assumed by so many. The focus also moves far beyond specific curricular agendas or pedagogies. Instead, Early Childhood must be known for its attention to holistic development, supporting the whole child, their families and their communities.

In this Editorial, I therefore want to draw attention to the wonder of Early Childhood Education which is nestled in the skills needed to support holistic experiences where pedagogies are responsive and relational (Hedges & Cooper, 2018); care is rooted in Professional Love (Page, 2014); curriculum and policy guidance is broad and flexible, not directive (Crichton et al., 2020), and decision making is guided by trusting both practitioners' and children's voices from within the field. These elements require highly skilled professionals, who are confident in their own critical reflection and professional learning to make moment-by-moment decisions to enhance young children's experiences. There is no formula or model to follow in Early Childhood practice as the debates between play, learning and teaching perpetuate and are described as an 'intractable problem' (Edwards, 2017). Hence, quality sits in the hearts of practitioners, children and families who collaborate to make meaning together in idiosyncratic experiences which are tailored to the context.

This eclectic contextualisation of early childhood education stems from the multidisciplinary foci that drive our understanding of children's learning: from understandings of neuroscience and child brain development alongside infant psychology (Trevathan, 2011); from sociology and positioning children as actors in society (James et al., 1998; Uprichard, 2008); from social work and care where development requires the safe and secure spaces and places for children to flourish (Lumsden, 2018) to psychology and understandings around relationships, communication, intersubjectivity and attachment (Marwick, 2017). This is not an exhaustive list, but it demonstrates that in Education, we draw on these broad fields, not to replicate the work of other disciplines but to use evidence to expand our knowledge and curate our own field of applied study. Lessons from outwith the field form the basis for enactment in practice. In this sense, high quality pedagogy in Early Childhood Education is the realisation of all of these key foundational principles which guide our knowledge of how children holistically develop, coming together in a synergistic relationship which creates possibilities for learning. Pedagogy in early childhood education is therefore the bridge between

theory and practice, which when used to its fullest potential maintains its relevance to supporting children holistically.

For some, the breadth of knowledge required to support children holistically can be challenging and scary. Questions are raised continually about how to apply all of the possible selves (Rose & Rogers, 2012) simultaneously or fluidly. In areas of the world where the focus rests on 'outcomes' rather than process, paradoxes arise between what good quality research tells us is fundamental for early childhood education and what policy and guidance mandates. In these scenarios, the disparate elements which shape children's learning becomes overwhelming and problematic.

For me, however, the broadness of conceptualising learning and development from multiple angles demonstrates why Early Childhood Education is full of wonder. Learning is never complete, for children or for adults working in the field, and there is always a new insight, perspective or lens to explore. It also demonstrates why the story is never complete and as a community those of us within the field - scholars, practitioners, children, families and communities - are perpetually learning and collaborating to make sense of this evolving culture. We engage in perpetual critical reflection to consider how to keep this dynamic field progressing in a positive trajectory.

The concept of wonder is not new to early childhood education as we know that fostering a sense of wonder in our young children becomes a central aspect of exploration and inquiry. Wilson (1993) argued for the need to foster wonderment when engaging children in the natural environment. Similarly, Hakkarainen and Ferholt (2013) considered wonder in creative and imaginative play-worlds. While, Haiman (1991) used the concept of wonder to advocate for the holistic nature of early childhood education, driving the focus away from discussions of purely cognitive and academic learning.

I propose that a sense of wonder should not just be reserved for children in our field. Rather, as scholars and practitioners driving forward practice, a sense of wonder is the gateway to progress when seeking to position Early Childhood Education as a highly sophisticated and skilled field of study and practice. To understand its scope, complexity and multidisciplinary narrative we need to embrace diverse concepts, theories and positions across research and practice.

This Issue of the Journal, contributes to this debate by showcasing the wonder that it Early Childhood Education, through its breadth of discussion. The eclectic mix of papers, demonstrates a small snapshot in the scope of exploration when seeking to support children's learning. In the papers we see discussion of play from a practical and theoretical lens, children's voice across varied contexts, pedagogies for listening which could translate into research methods with young children; varied stimuli to support and enhance learning; elements of formal and informal learning contexts; and interpretivist stories versus experimental designs. All of these elements from just seven papers; all under the banner of Early Childhood Education. That, to me, is pure wonder. A new insight, a new frame or lens, a new perspective towards understanding children's learning and care experiences in a holistic sense. It is with great pride, therefore, that we present the following papers for this Issue of the Journal which were deliberately chosen to be disparately and seemingly unlinked to convey the extensiveness of the field.

Starting with a highly theorised discussion, *Play, power and pedagogy: A reinterpretation of research using a Foucauldian lens* offers an insightful exploration in to power dynamics between adults and children (aged between 4-6) during pedagogical interactions and play in Ireland. Shifting focus from the dominant socio-cultural lens which drives forward much of the research about play, this paper draws on Foucault's notion of power to offer new ways of thinking about play interactions. The

findings explore how children and adult both use Foucault's (1979) concepts of sovereign and disciplinary power in their play interactions.

Moving forward, we switch focus towards more practical application with *The impact of rules and rewards on children's transition experiences*. Set in Belgium this research explores the experiences of six children, parents and teaching staff to better understand the role of sanctions and rewards systems during the transition process. This paper offers an insight into the complexity associated with such systems as children did not view the processes as purely positive or negative, as some might expect given the debated nature of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation systems. Instead, the processes were perhaps considered ambiguous by children, in some cases. This paper recommends that educators give careful consideration to the ways in which rules and rewards impact upon children's experiences of transition.

Maintaining our focus on practice, but from an entirely new context, *Young Children's Responses to Teachers' Metacognitive Questions* demonstrates the potential for metacognitive questioning. They specifically explore 'how' and 'why' questions, to create learning opportunities with children between 4 and 6 years old. Offering new perspectives by demonstrating very young children's capabilities with metacognitive thinking, this paper drives forward the need to include metacognitive practices within normal classroom activities.

In the previous paper we considered the rather abstract concept of metacognition. Social play is similarly abstract but with a physical manifestation, which can make it easier to observe and unpick. As we move forward to the next paper we begin to uncover how the abstract nature of social play manifests in *Metacommunication in social pretend play: Two dimensions*. By using audio and video recordings with 24 5-year-olds, this work articulates the importance for metacommunication in increasing the complexity of the narrative content of social pretend play. This interesting insight has key implications for education practices, demonstrating the potential to foster social pretend play which helps guide how teachers may scaffold play experiences.

The role of the adult in early childhood settings is significant, as has been demonstrated by the papers so far. The facilitatory nature of their engagement and interaction during direct questioning or during play is extensively discussed. Yet we know in Early Childhood that the adults' roles form only one part of the puzzle and we strive for practice where children have agency and a voice in leading their learning. Noticing and understanding children's play, or everyday experiences, is the cornerstone of Early Childhood Practice in this sense and *Slowing Down: Documentary Photography in Early Childhood* offers a novel approach to unearthing children's perspectives. Drawing on Visual Sociology this paper focuses on new ways of listening to children through the conceptualisation of 'presence' which is described as more than just being in the moment. The authors demonstrate how the use of documentary photography can support adults to capture the essence of the situation and context.

In contrast to research in naturalistic settings and *slowing down* to collect data with children in the moment, the next paper brings in a more experimental design to unearth a different dimension to Early Childhood research. In a field dominated by qualitative enquiry, this paper demonstrates the scope to engage in positivist paradigms to understand the impact of specific resources on children's learning and development. In *The Effects of Three-Dimensional Cartoons on Pre-School Children's Conceptual Development in Relation to Spatial Perception* we understand that cartoons had statistically significant impact on pre-school children's levels of conceptual development. The use of visual prompts - just like in the documentary photography paper but this time using cartoons -

remains central but the ways in which the data collection is conducted offers an alternative lens to understand research with young children, while maintain its applied significance.

Across the Issue we have thus far presented research from multiple countries and paradigms. The work articulates the context specific differences in children's experiences. In this final paper, *Participatory story sharing practices in the early years with Central and Eastern European families in Scotland* this focus on context and culture shines through further. We begin to understand how story sharing practices can support practitioners to engage with children's linguistic and cultural heritage as a part of their process of belonging in the setting. In this paper we start to explore relationships and understanding individuals in practice in encompassing ways, optimising the importance of wholeness and holistic understandings of children in education and care.

These papers represent a mere snapshot of concepts, theoretical positions, methodological approaches and applications of knowledge across Early Childhood Education. Yet, even across only seven papers we are challenged in our thinking to see anew, to investigate differently, to question and to debate what has come before. We are also encouraged to debate across the papers as varied insights are presented, which at times challenge each other. That in itself demonstrates just how sophisticated this field really is. It highlights how much knowledge is required by those practitioners and teachers diligently supporting young children's development.

Marvelling at the array of ways that perpetual development and progression is understood and supported in these key works, provides us with an opportunity to see wonder in early childhood research and practice. This Issue of the International Journal of Early Years Education is a celebration of that wonder and is a call to action to strive for holistic understandings of experience and learning when working and researching with very young children. Wonder is not just for children's learning and engagement, it's for ours too!

References

- Crichton, V., Carwood-Edwards, J., Ryan, J., McTaggart, J., Collins, J., MacConnell, M. P., Wallace, L., Diamond, C., Grogan, D., & Carey, J. (2020). Realising the Ambition-Being Me: National Practice Guidance for Early Years in Scotland.
- Edwards, S. (2017). Play-based learning and intentional teaching: Forever different? *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 42(2), 4-11.
- Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by A. Sheridan. Pantheon.
- Gaunt, C. (2021, 04/10/21). Ministers reportedly planning to change staff: child ratios for under-twos 'to cut childcare costs'. *Nursery World*.
<https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/ministers-reportedly-planning-to-change-staff-child-ratios-for-under-twos-to-cut-childcare-costs>
- Haiman, P. E. (1991). Developing a sense of wonder in young children: There is more to early childhood education than cognitive development. *Young Children*, 46(6), 52-53.
- Hakkarainen, P., & Ferholt, B. (2013). Creative imagination in play-worlds: wonder-full early childhood education in Finland and the United States. In *Wonder-Full Education* (pp. 211-226). Routledge.
- Hedges, H., & Cooper, M. (2018). Relational play-based pedagogy: theorising a core practice in early childhood education. *Teachers and Teaching*, 24(4), 369-383.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2018.1430564>
- James, A., Jenks, C., & Prout, A. (1998). *Theorizing Childhood*. Polity Press.
- Lumsden, E. (2018) *Child Protection in the Early Years: A practical guide*. London: Jessica Kingsley. There's a chapter in there on nurturing environments

- Marwick, H. (2017). Supporting Concordant Intersubjectivity and Sense of 'Belonging' for Under Three-Year-Olds in Early Years Settings. In (pp. 101-112). Springer Singapore.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2275-3_7
- Page, J. (2014). Developing professional love in early childhood settings. In *Lived spaces of infant-toddler education and care* (pp. 119-130). Springer.
- Rose, J., & Rogers, S. (2012). *The Role Of The Adult In Early Years Settings*. Open University Press.
- Trevarthen, C. (2011). What young children give to their learning, making education work to sustain a community and its culture. *European early childhood education research journal*, 19(2), 173-193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293x.2011.574405>
- Uprichard, E. (2008). Children as 'Being and Becomings': Children, Childhood and Temporality. *Children & society*, 22(4), 303-313. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2007.00110.x>
- Wilson, R. A. (1993). *Fostering a Sense of Wonder during the Early Childhood Years*. Greyden Press.