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International Journal of Early Years Education, 2013, 21, (2/3)

**Twentieth Anniversary Double Issue: International Perspectives on Progress,
Change and Development in Early Childhood Education and Care, 1993 to 2013**

Edited by

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Editorial: Elizabeth A. Coates and Dorothy Faulkner

International Perspectives on Progress, Change and Development in Early Childhood Education and Care, 1993 to 2013.

It is a privilege to have been asked to put together this special double issue to mark the Journal's 20th anniversary. As founding Editor and Reviews Editor we were members of a team that, recognising the increasing global interest in early years education, launched the *International Journal of Early Years Education* at the *First Warwick International Early Years Conference* in March 1993. At the time, this interest was inspired by international efforts to redress the material and social inequalities, economic exploitation and violation of children's rights that persisted (and continue to persist) across the world. The year 1989 marked the 30th anniversary of the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* and the 10th anniversary of the *International Year of the Child*, and in 1990, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* came into force. The 42 articles of the UNCRC commits governments to provide a legislative framework and services for children that protects for example, their right to education, their right to develop their personalities, talents and abilities to the full and their right to proper care and protection, (UNCRC Articles 28, 29, 30 and 20).

Thus, in the editorial of the first issue, Elizabeth wrote: 'The care and education of all young children must be seen as an area of paramount importance both now and in the future, and it seems appropriate, therefore, that the last decade of the twentieth century should see the birth of a new journal devoted to the promotion of effective early years education world wide. This decade has been and promises to continue to be a period of change, as boundaries, cultural and national, are re-defined.'

Reflecting these concerns, the first issue of the Journal contained articles on children's rights in South Africa; the reform of early childhood education in Poland; German and British research on the importance of family and friendships to young children; arguments for the need to raise the status of early childhood professionals in Australia and elsewhere and, from New Zealand, a theoretical rationale for abandoning

the distinction between care and education in favour of a system of early childhood *educare* for all young children including indigenous minorities.

As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, once again we are in the grip of political, economic and environmental changes that are re-defining cultural and national boundaries and that have profound implications for the distribution or redistribution of global resources. The impact of these changes on children's development and their right to protection, care and education is an on-going and serious international concern. Against this backdrop, UN member states set an ambitious target of meeting eight, measurable *Millennium Development Goals* by 2015 as outlined in the Millennium Declaration. This was signed on 2nd September 2000, by the leaders of 189 member states and details their commitment to building a safer, more prosperous and equitable world. The eradication of social and material inequalities that directly affect children (such poor access to primary education and health care) is articulated in several of these goals and remains of paramount importance.

As in the first issue, the international contributors to this special issue are researchers and educators who have been and still are closely involved with the journal. Over the years they have contributed to and informed debate in their own countries and further afield. Their articles review and reflect upon national and international research and development activities that have led to significant initiatives and innovations in policy and practice in early years education and care over the past twenty years. Readers will note several common trends and issues raised by these contributors that relate to relevant Articles of the UNCRC and the Millennium Development Goals although their contributions inevitably reflect differences in national agendas, priorities and approaches. Many authors focus on the impact of early intervention programmes on children's development and outline the need for policy change to address social and educational inequality. Other authors discuss the development of innovative early years pedagogy and approaches to training pre-school teachers. A common theme running through many of the contributions relates to the political tensions that arise when governments and educators hold fundamentally different views about the nature and purpose of early years education and the needs of children and families .

Seeking changes in provision for children under the age of three, forms the basis of Vasconcelos's article where she interrogates the way Portugal has responded to the 2001 OECD evaluation of its early childhood education programme. As a strong advocate for young children's right to education, Vasconcelos has been heavily involved in the drive for coherent guidelines for the education and care of children from birth to eight years. Her main focus, however, is on the processes involved in drawing up the *Public Statement on Early Childhood Education in Portugal*, which was approved by the Portuguese National Council of Education, but which has yet to be put into practice. The eleven recommendations contained within this Statement will be familiar to anyone working with young children, as these stress the importance of the quality of the services and of the environments provided for children, as well as the status, qualifications and pay of early years educators.

Similar concerns are raised by Lui and Pan who examine the dramatic rise in the number of kindergartens in China over the past three decades. High fees, lack of qualified teachers and large classes have caused major social concerns resulting in the recognition by the Chinese Central Government, of the status of early childhood education as an integral part of education and social public welfare. Lui and Pan question the ability of local governments to interpret and implement the latest policies, particularly in relation to the difficulties in providing accessible kindergartens in many rural areas. They recommend that central government should identify developmental goals, which relate to actual regional conditions, that that they should reform the public revenue and tax system and the early childhood education funding system. In addition they examine existing public services for early childhood and suggest that new models of service delivery are required.

The situation of young black children under Apartheid is the starting point for Atmore's discussion of children's right to education in South Africa. His description of their life of hunger and malnutrition, with little access to health care and education is powerful. This is a salutary reminder of why the UNRC and Millennium Development Goals are needed, although there have been many positive moves to alleviate the situation in South Africa, from the introduction of a pre-school year to an increase in social development budgets, with more children in good quality provision than before. However, Atmore highlights that even in 2012, when the South African

Constitution laid down the right of all children to a basic education, many young children still suffer the consequences of social and economic inequalities. Finally, he outlines how the audit of early childhood provision he undertook in 2000 provided the foundation for a series of recommendations aimed at improving the opportunities and educational experience of all young children.

Dockett and Perry take a more global approach and focus on the trends observed when reviewing recent ‘starting school’ literature, which encompasses readiness for school, the transition to compulsory schooling and support for families. In their article, they first discuss the situation in Australia, which has seen the introduction of a national curriculum framework for early childhood education and an early years reform agenda. These aim to improve educational provision for all, including the indigenous population. Next, in a move away from national issues, Dockett and Perry provide an informative survey of research from numerous countries that has examined problems relating to starting school. A key focus here is on marginalised groups who do not enjoy the same access to early childhood services as other groups. The evidence suggests that children belonging to these groups are ‘less school ready’ than their peers. Dockett and Perry highlight the importance of a positive transition into school for all children and call for more research to establish how this can be achieved.

Unlike Australia, the Netherlands has no National Curriculum and schools and early childhood settings have a legal right to choose their own pedagogical approach. Van Oers points out, however, that this is not as liberal as it might seem. Centrally imposed standards and formal assessment regimes create tensions between schools and the Government. According to van Oers, successive governments have taken a particularly narrow view of early childhood education and see it largely as a way of solving social problems related to disadvantage. Providers are expected to privilege language development, and the development of literacy and numeracy skills over and above other aspects of young children’s development, such as their social, personal and emotional development. In his article, Van Oers outlines several alternative approaches to early years education and care and discusses one of these, Developmental Education, in depth. This, high quality, evidence-based pre-school initiative is based on holistic principals and formative assessment practices designed

to safeguard young children's well-being and allow them achieve their full potential, as is their right.

Although mainly concerned with education provision for young children, other articles raise questions about the nature of the training offered to student teachers. Kourti and Androussou discuss two new areas; intercultural education and media education, recently introduced into early years initial teacher-training programmes. The need for intercultural education was prompted by recent waves of immigration, the recognition that immigrant children were in danger of educational marginalisation, and the recognition that Greek society needed to embrace a more multi-cultural ethos. The inclusion of media education was prompted by government educational initiatives to introduce information and communication technologies into pre and primary schools. Kourti and Androussou argue that as the current school system in Greece is highly centralised and traditional, many teachers have only a limited understanding of the educational needs of young children growing up in a world increasingly dominated by new media. They describe a pedagogic approach to these new courses that encourages critical reflection and challenges students to question their cultural biases and assumptions about education and the role of the media. The dominance of traditional educational practice in Greece, however, results in student resistance and unwillingness to embrace innovative pedagogies.

Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson examine debates related to children's learning and well-being in Swedish pre-schools and discuss how their own research has informed these debates. Their theoretical framework is based on interactionist perspectives, which bring together theories of learning in which individuals and the environment influence and are influenced by one another in continuous interaction and communication. They discuss pedagogical quality as an educational phenomenon and stress its importance in relation to the conditions for children's learning. Their studies show how changes in policy and views on children's learning have affected pedagogy, which they see as moving from a Froebelian tradition to one based on new theories and empirical research. The introduction of a revised curriculum with integrated goals is designed to emphasise the importance of keeping precise records of children's development including more searching evaluations.

A research programme of a different kind is reported by Turkish academics Bekman and Koçak who discuss a long-standing intervention programme involving five countries. The Mother-Child Education Programme (MOCEP) emphasises the interrelationships between the child, the family and social support systems. Bekman and Koçak first outline the original aims of MOCEP and discuss previous evaluations of the programme. This longstanding intervention programme originated in Turkey in 1993, the same year that this journal was founded. The intervening years have seen several large-scale evaluations of MOCEP. The current article, however, reports new, research that focuses on mothers' perceptions of the programme and the changes they have noticed in their children and in themselves. This research replicates the findings of earlier MOCEP evaluations: more importantly, it offers new insights on how early intervention programmes empower mothers by encouraging them to envisage different possibilities for their children and mother-child relationships.

In the final article in this collection, Faulkner and Coates offer a critical review of twenty years of Government initiatives and interventions that have brought about significant changes in early years education and other services for children and families in England. They discuss how and why the 'children's workforce' has become increasingly professionalised over the years and outline how major research programmes such as the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project (EPPE) and the Millennium Cohort Study have informed our understanding of the effects of social disadvantage and the characteristics of 'high quality' pre-school provision that can alleviate this. There is now persuasive evidence that investment in state maintained, early education is highly cost effective, particularly for disadvantaged children. The current government, however, is shifting the burden of funding training and high quality integrated services for children and families in England from the state to the private and voluntary sector. It remains to be seen whether this is a backward step or move in the right direction,

The articles in this special issue demonstrate that despite differences in culture, governmental support and access to education, it would seem that the work and concerns of early years educators transcends frontiers. The commonalities highlighted in these articles show a universal solicitude for the disadvantaged and recognition of the need for high quality provision and a highly qualified work force.

The concern for the rights of the child expressed in the very first issue, are still evident today, and although there has been much progress, it seems unlikely that universal acknowledgement of these rights and the Millennium Developmental Goals can be achieved by 2015.

Elizabeth A. Coates and Dorothy Faulkner.