

Young Children are Human Beings

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11th September 2017 was a big day for Tommy, my four-year-old nephew in England: it was the day he started school. Tommy is the middle child of three in his immediate family; he is an active, inquiring little boy, disposed to becoming deeply involved in activities that interest him. He likes playing outside, he loves playing with his toy cars and he enjoys baking cakes. But at 4.5 years old, Tommy's opportunities to engage in activities that he values have already diminished. Now, he must focus on another agenda: learning to use phonic knowledge to decode and read words, on spelling correctly and on counting and ordering numbers to 20. These are examples of the 'schoolified' knowledge that Tommy must acquire in preparation for the English National Curriculum which he will follow from next September when he reaches 5.5 years old. Tommy has entered a space where he is viewed, measured and valued according to what he will become, rather than the human being he is now (Qvortrup, 1994).

Meanwhile, Tommy's peers in other countries which educate their children more effectively than the UK, according to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2016) will not start school until they are 6 years old (e.g. Singapore, Hong Kong, Slovenia, Canada) or 7 years old (Estonia, Finland) (World Bank, 2017). In England, children must start school in the term after their fifth birthday, a statutory school starting age that is earlier than almost any other country in the World. Yet most children in England start school even younger, as Tommy has done, at the beginning of the school year when their fifth birthday falls, so that many English children spend much of their first year in school as four-year-olds. Often, this happens because schools are funded for the children they have on roll, so the school that parents have chosen for their child who is young in the academic year may refuse to hold a place until after the child's fifth birthday. Sometimes children start school at four years because parents simply do not know that their child does not *have* to start school at the beginning of the school year. On occasion, it happens because parents worry that their children may miss opportunities their peers will have.

Children starting school in England aged 4-5 years join a primary school reception class where their teachers are required to follow the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (Department for Education, 2017). The EYFS framework guides the work of all settings in England in receipt of government funding to provide early childhood education and care for children aged 0-5 years. EYFS practitioners must give attention to young children's safeguarding, welfare, learning, development and assessment. EYFS principles articulate that every child is unique and that all children are constantly learning and developing at different rates, in different ways, in enabling environments where practitioners and parents/carers work together to address each child's needs as an individual. Therefore, in principle, every child starting school in a reception class should experience a bespoke package of early childhood education and care. However, by the end of the reception year, it is expected that every child in England has achieved the same set of early learning goals 'to ensure they are ready for school' (p.7), although almost all are already in the reception class of the primary school. The goals children must reach by the end of the reception year include formal learning requirements for literacy and mathematics, for example, reading and writing sentences and adding and subtracting numbers. Early childhood practitioners in England are required to satisfy a paradox, then: they must support every child's individual and holistic development needs, whilst also ensuring that every child achieves an homogenous set of goals to be 'ready for school'.

And what is this 'school' for which England's young children must be prepared? At the end of their reception year, children in state maintained schools in England continue their journey through

England's education system, an increasingly narrow offer on which they are assessed intensively from five years old (Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value, 2015; Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017). Contemporaneously with increased testing of children in England's schools, Public Health England (2016) reports that 10% of children aged 5-16 are diagnosed with a 'clinically significant mental health illness' (p.6).

For Tommy at 4.5 years, the formal learning at school that takes him away from playing outside, baking cakes and playing with his toy cars also penetrates his time at home. From his earliest days at school, he has been set homework each day, requiring him to practise writing sentences. This is not uncommon practice among English schools. Yet the proposition that homework enhances young children's academic achievement is not supported by evidence (Cooper, Robinson and Patall, 2006; Hattie, 2009); on the contrary, there is evidence to suggest that homework may be harmful to children (Silinskas, Kiuru, Aunola, Lerkkanen and Nurmi, 2015; Galloway, Conner and Pope, 2013). As I have argued elsewhere (Murray, 2015), the imposition of 'schoolification' into the family home is a form of colonisation. Homework is an intrusion that places a burden on parents and children, denies their right to a family life and distracts children from activities that may support their rich, holistic development in the home. For young children, homework may also promote inequalities: because it is imposed by the school, it reinforces inequitable parent-practitioner partnerships and for children whose families' funds of knowledge are not aligned with those of their teachers, it can become another barrier to achievement.

What, then, is the rationale for the investment model that 'schoolifies' early childhood education and care? If the rationale is readiness for a version of school which is, itself, preparation for economic productivity, it seems that it is not working in England. Children in England perform less well than their international peers who start school later (OECD, 2016) and economic productivity in England is in a downward trend (Badia *et al.*, 2017). There are even signs that the English model may be damaging children's health (Public Health England, 2016).

So far in this Editorial, I have focused on my own country – England - and indeed my own family. In doing so, I am aware that as the Editor of an international journal, I risk accusations of parochialism. However, the points I make exemplify a concern that is truly international and therefore affects us all in the field of early childhood education and care. When national and international policies drive us to focus on the future, the value of what is happening right now in our familiar situated spaces may be lost. Those moments can never be recaptured, but as Qvortrup advocates (1994: 18), cherishing and nurturing our children as 'human beings, not only "human becomings"' might prove the better early childhood investment.

Against this backdrop of early childhood education and care in England, Julie Stirrup and Mark Evans draw on Bernstein's work for the first article in this issue of the *International Journal of Early Years Education and Care*. Stirrup and Evans report on their research concerning the status of play in three ECEC settings for children age 3-5 years in England. They critique early childhood practitioners' assumptions in relation to current discourses focused on investment return and school readiness and find that the examples of play that they captured in settings did not secure equal opportunities for the children who experienced them. In a different European context, Helmerhorst, Fukink, Riksen-Walraven, Gevers Deynoot-Schaub and Tavecchio report on evidence that the quality of centre-based child care in Germany has diminished in recent years, providing the rationale for their study focused on a program to address ECEC environment quality using rating scales. Helmerhorst's team found that measures of quality need to be highly sensitive in order to reflect quality with accuracy. The third article in this issue comes from Rose, Shevlin, Twomey and Zhao who highlight the disjuncture between a national policy of inclusive education and practice in settings in Ireland. As part of a mixed methods study, interviews were conducted with parents of early years children

and focus groups with professionals involved in the assessment process. Data from these reveal findings suggesting that the national policy is not translating to the resources and assessments that are needed to enable young children with special educational needs (SEN) to learn in inclusive settings with their peers.

In their article focused on Canadian ECEC, Prioletta and Pyle highlight the need for gender awareness and sensitivity in both ECEC policy and practice to address a gender gap in early literacy development. In a context where provincial policy requires play-based learning in early childhood settings, the authors observed that boys and girls often chose to play separately, with girls more likely than boys to engage in 'concrete literacy activities' during self-chosen play. These findings indicate that in this play-based learning environment, boys may have fewer opportunities than girls to access early literacy activities, which may disadvantage them. In the next article, Ho, Grieshaber and Walsh discuss findings from their qualitative study focused on western influences on 'kindergarten classroom discipline' in Hong Kong ECEC settings. Using classroom observations, teacher interviews, and field notes the researchers found that kindergarten teachers used established behaviour management strategies with their children aged 5-6 years, but had concerns about 'disciplining' children to secure 'good behaviour'.

Sabine Little's article focuses on attitudes towards reading in the home, as experienced by young children growing up in families of Pakistani and Indian origin living in the UK. Interviews with three generations of the families elicited evidence that has potential to inform ECEC policy and practice in respect of early literacy for children with English as an additional language. In the final article for this issue, Helen Breathnach, Susan Danby and Lyndal O'Gorman report on their ethnographic study that revealed five-year-old children's views of play and work as dichotomous experiences in their Australian primary school. The authors argue that their findings provide early childhood educators with opportunities to reflect on ways they can build on children's agentic play at school to support academic activities.

In this, our final issue of 2017, we also have an opportunity to benefit from insights into early childhood education and care in Russia. For the ERA abstracts section, Editorial Board members Bert van Oers and Nikolay Veraska have curated and translated a selection of abstracts from Russian journals in the ECEC field. In different ways, each of the articles focuses on a shared desire to enhance ECEC quality. This series of abstracts provides a valuable set of lenses through which we may further explore and develop our understanding of the early childhood education and care field.

The contents of this issue highlight fascinating research findings and rich discourses reflecting children's, parents', policymakers' and practitioners' experiences of contemporary early childhood education and care as human beings in situated contexts around the World. It is my privilege to bring you this international collection of articles about young children's lives now, each contributing valuable intelligence to inform our field.

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