

Editorial: Young Children's Emotional Experiences

Guest Editors: Jane Murray¹ and Ioanna Palaiologou²

¹*Faculty of Education and Humanities, The University of Northampton*

²*Nottingham University*

jane.murray@northampton.ac.uk

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2015) posits that positive lifetime outcomes rely on the acquisition of a balance of cognitive, social and emotional skills during childhood, while securing emotional skills, along with social skills, has been shown to correlate positively with academic achievement (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger, 2011; Gutman and Schoon, 2013). Further research on young children's emotional development and experiences emphasises that their emotional competencies are *'critical aspects of the development of overall brain architecture, and that it has enormous consequences over the course of a lifetime'* (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2011, p. 1) and *'critical for children's success in school, as well as in other settings and in later phases of life into adulthood'* (Darling-Churchill and Lippman, 2016, p. 2). Among researchers in the field of early childhood education and care, there is a growing acknowledgement of the importance of emotional development in children's overall well-being and how it affects young children's lives on multiple domains of their development as well as their ability to form and sustain secure and successful relationships through life (Dunn, 1993; Bowlby, 1988; Thompson and Lagattute, 2006; Dowling, 2010; Gerhardt, 2014; Denham *et al.*, 2015). Evidence from extant research therefore suggests that positive emotional experiences in early childhood may provide an important foundation for a fulfilling life.

On these lines, Yates *et al.* (2008, p. 2) regard emotional development in young children (0-5) as the ability to *'form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experiences, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn-all in the context of family, community, and culture'*. This view echoes the Vygotskian idea that emotions do not exist and develop in a vacuum: *'the emotions are not "a state within a state"',* but rather need to be examined and understood as part of the *'[...] dynamic human life. It is within this context that the emotional processes acquire their meaning and sense'* (Vygotsky 1987, p. 333).

From early research, therefore, emotional development and health has been closely linked to the environment and the emotional characteristics in which children live, including families

and the broader context of their communities, such as early childhood education and care (Glasser, 2000, Davies and Forman, 2002, Denham *et al.*, 2003). Extending discussion on the importance of the environment, Steiner (1997, p. 11) proposes we should rethink emotional development through the lenses of the concept of emotional literacy as *'the ability to understand your emotions, the ability to listen to others and empathise with their emotions, and the ability to express emotions productively. To be emotionally literate is to be able to handle emotions in a way that improves your personal power and improves the quality of life around you. Emotional literacy improves relationships, creates loving possibilities between people, makes co-operative work possible, and facilitates the feeling of community.'*

More recent contributions examine the role of the environment in relation to the emotional development of young children (e.g. Andrew, 2015; Salamon, Sumsion and Harrison, 2017) and build on Bourdieu's (1986) notion of symbolic capital. This introduces the idea of 'emotional capital' that focuses on emotions *'as resources, or a set of assets, which can be circulated, accumulated and exchanged for other forms of capital within a particular field that allows those resources to "count"'* (Colley, 2006: 25). The notion of emotional capital takes into consideration children's repertoire of emotional skills they use to relate to and interact with the environment around them (Andrew, 2015; Salamon *et al.*, 2017).

Thus, a consensus emerges among researchers that early childhood education and care must create an equilibrium between academic achievements, such as literacy and numeracy, and attention to the 'emotional capital' of young children. At a policy level where measurement, school readiness, time-bound outcomes and economic imperatives tend to be foregrounded, the potential value of nourishing affective engagements for infants and young children may be overlooked. Indeed, while the OECD's measurement and testing approach introduced in 2017 focuses broadly on young children's acquisition of skills not only in early language, literacy and numeracy, but also in social behaviour, empathy, memory and self-regulation, the *International Early Learning and Child Wellbeing Study* (IELS) has been identified as highly problematic (Moss *et al.*, 2016), in part because its key rationale is economic. Research evidence highlights the paucity of adequate measurement tools designed to test emotional development (Campbell *et al.*, 2016).

By drawing on new empirical research focused on children's emotional experiences, this special issue is therefore timely. Its articles concern challenges and opportunities inherent in young children's emotional experiences in 21st century contexts of early childhood education

and care. They are intended to provoke debate, discussion and critique as well as asking significant questions of policymakers, practitioners and carers who may influence young children's emotional experiences. As a collection, the articles promote the idea that we must continue to further our understanding of children's emotional experiences. Nevertheless, the findings they highlight indicate that a test-based approach may detract from young children's emotional development and the positive emotional experiences in early childhood which have potential to provide an important foundation for a fulfilling life.

The special issue features eight articles. The first two papers address early childhood practitioners' views of affective aspects of their work in England. Peter Wood's article draws on evidence from case study interviews conducted with early years and primary school practitioners in England to argue that practitioners' recognition of the complex nature of young children's emotional and social skill acquisition is preferable to attempts to fit these skills into a normative model. In the second paper concerned with practitioners' and managers' reflections on emotions as they present in nursery interactions, Peter Elfer, Sue Greenfield, Sue Robson, Dilys Wilson and Antonia Zachariou share early findings from their evaluation of a Work Discussion intervention in England. Elfer *et al.* refer to their findings in order to explore the potential of Work Discussion for enhancing how practitioners engage with children and their families.

The three articles that follow are all concerned with early childhood practitioners' interactions with young children. Belinda Davis and Rosemary Dunn discuss findings from interviews they conducted with educators in Australia about emotional relationships the educators built with infants aged up to two years. Davis and Dunn suggest that while such relationships may characterise the complex nature of pedagogy for infants, they are not always recognised in statutory curriculum documentation. In another article based on case study narratives contributed by practitioners about their nurturing touch practices with toddlers in Danish early childhood education and care settings, Lone Svinth investigates how such practices affect toddlers' emotional well-being and learning and the practitioners' relationships with the children. The final article in this section highlights findings from an ethnographic case study conducted with children younger than three years in two Greek day-care settings. Eleni Katsiada, Eirini Roufidou, Jonathan Wainwright and Varvar Aggeli found that these very young children were agentic in forming interpersonal relationships with adults in their day-care settings.

The final set of articles in this special issue addresses young children's self-regulation as an aspect of their emotional experiences. Lorna Arnott draws on data from two studies conducted in pre-schools in Scotland for which child-centred play-based methodologies were adopted. Arnott identifies ways that young children interpreted cues in their settings to decide how to manage and regulate socio-emotional interactions and their play and her findings support identification of four elements of early childhood education and care pedagogic culture. In the second article in this section, David Ferrier, Samantha Karalus, Susanne Denham and Hideko Bassett report on key aspects of the *Teachers As Socialisers of Social-Emotional Learning* (TASSEL) project conducted in the USA. The TASSEL project investigated the affordance of emotional competence through cognitive self-regulation in young children. Ferrier and his team found young children's abilities to express and experience their emotions were significantly affected, both directly and indirectly, by cognitive self-regulation and the ability to understand and identify emotions. The final article of the special issue - '*The Hare and the Tortoise go to Forest School: taking the scenic route to academic attainment via emotional wellbeing outdoors*' - by Mel McCree, Roger Cutting and Dean Sherwin focuses on the potential of outdoor play and learning to affect young children's biophilia, wellbeing and academic attainment. This longitudinal mixed methods study conducted in south west England reveals that young children's outdoor experiences may support the development of their emotional learning and wellbeing as well as their academic development.

We have been privileged to edit this special issue. Each article contributes further empirical evidence to the burgeoning corpus that indicates the vital role of young children's emotional experiences in laying strong foundations for fulfilling lives. The research findings reported in them also reveal ways that adults can support this process and suggest that policymakers would be wise to exercise caution before attempting to apply simplistic measurement to young children's emotional capital.

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