Informal Early Childhood Education:
The Influences of Parents and Home on Young Children's Learning.
Editorial

As policymakers across the World begin to consider how we may rebuild after the COVID-19 pandemic, we have heard calls for children to make up 'lost' learning (Schleicher, 2021; UNICEF, 2020a). This narrative focuses on children's formal learning in education settings and disregards what they may learn when settings are closed. Yet there is acknowledgement that the COVID crisis has highlighted the valuable role informal education can play in supporting learning (UNESCO, 2020). Formal learning is an organised framework with specified outcomes, featuring an identified person who facilitates learning and assessment (Eraut, 2000). The informal learner, on the other hand, engages in activities with no pre-determined learning goals: informal education evolves in an organic way during everyday activities and there is no formal assessment (Hodkinson, Colley and Malcolm, 2003).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the novel target focused on early childhood development within the Sustainable Development Goals proposed that by 2030, States would:

> *'... ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education'* (United Nations, 2015, 4.2).

However, the coronavirus pandemic forced closure of early childhood education provision with at least 40 million children denied the opportunity to attend pre-primary settings across the World (Gromada, Richardson and Rees, 2020). Since the start of the pandemic then, young children have missed stimulating early experiences in formal education settings with potential to translate to successful lifelong outcomes (Shonkoff and Richter, 2013). At the time of writing, although some children have returned to formal pre-school education in some countries, this is not the case universally, as many countries remain in the grip of coronavirus (Garcia, Whiteside and Malli, 2021). This editorial focuses on young children learning at home, and how primary carers support their learning. I consider some of the evidence that has emerged to date of young children's experiences of formal and informal learning in the context of COVID-19 restrictions, ahead of introducing a collection of articles focused on the role of primary carers in young children's learning and young children's experiences of learning in family homes.

Young Children's Homes

Although the importance for learning of a secure and stimulating home environment is widely recognised (Maslow 1943; Sylva et al., 2010), relatively little research about young children's lives has been conducted within their home environments (Pellegrini (2004:2). Homes are diverse and the term 'home' is framed in different ways (Mack, 1993). Every home is a unique cultural construction: a '…foundation to build individual and group identity and a sense of self' (Busch, 1999; Werner-Lin *et al.,* 2010:132). For some, home is an intimate private place: the 'centre of family life' offering security and comfort (Moore, 2000: 208; Saunders and Williams, 1988). Home may combine a sense of place and emotional attachment (Altman and Low, 1992). However, others experience home as a hostile, violent space characterised by familial dysfunction (Judge et al., 2006; Murray, Harper, McClean-Trotman and Stewart, 2019). Equally, many young children are displaced from their homes, for example through conflict or migration (Ataullahjan, Samara, Betancourt, and Bhutta, 2020; Maldonado, Swadener and Khaleesi, 2019), often leading to experiences of exclusion and alienation (Mack, 1993; Wahle et al, 2019).

Young Children's Experiences of Inequalities

In recent months, as children across the World have been confined to their homes as governments have endeavoured to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Overall, children have been affected disproportionately by the effects of COVID-19 confining them to their homes, as more have experienced poorer nutrition, increased poverty, escalated domestic violence, and fewer opportunities to learn than before the pandemic (OECD, 2020; Edwards, 2021). Many have been denied the rich, stimulating experiences necessary to support them to develop and learn optimally (UNICEF, 2020b). In the United States, existing inequalities have been exacerbated by enforced closure of early childhood settings during the pandemic, with children with disabilities and Hispanic and black children affected particularly badly (Barnett, Grafwallner and Weisenfeld (2021). Equally, in rural India, socio-economically disadvantaged children have been worse affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than those living in spacious homes with educated parents with money to buy them educational resources (Tiwari, 2021). In the United Kingdom where socio-economic inequalities prevailed before the pandemic (Alston, 2019), family income inequalities in respect of time spent learning and available activities and resources have affected children's COVID-19 lockdown experiences, with poorer children disadvantaged (Andrew, Cattan, Costa-Dias, Farquharson, Kraftman, Krutikova, Phimister and Sevilla, 2020a).

Valuing young children's lives at home

In contrast to some of the experiences outlined above, New Zealand's national *Te Whāriki* kindergarten programme transferred effectively from kindergarten settings to young children's homes, with children and their parents empowered to continue early learning at home during the pandemic (May and Coulston, 2021). It may be argued that the 'funds of knowledge' concept (Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez, 1992) that is foundational to the Te Whariki framework will have supported this transition. Attuning to children's and families' 'funds of knowledge' affords recognition that "people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge" (González, Moll, and Amanti, 2005: ix-x). The 'funds of knowledge' concept resonates with Rogoff's theorisation (1990) of the role of socio-cultural factors in cognitive development, and also with the construct of 'family learning' which recognises 'parents as children's first and most enduring educators' (Alexander, 1997: 13). *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2021) promotes 'a sense of belonging for all', values knowledge children bring from home and advocates that kindergarten professionals and families share responsibility for children's learning. This orientation acknowledges the value of informal learning that children acquire by watching and taking part in family activities at home. Indeed, Borisova (2020) posits that enforced confinement to home for many families during the pandemic has highlighted the value of young children's informal learning outside their formal educational settings. In this novel context, parents are acknowledged as 'first-line responders responsible for their children's learning, health, well-being and care' (Borisova, 2020).

Formal learning at Home

Neverethless, in many countries, there has been an exponential rise in the intrusion of formal learning into young children's homes during the coronavirus pandemic. By August 2020, 90% of countries had implemented a remote learning policy for schools and 60% had done so for pre-primary provision (UNICEF, 2020c). The distinction between online learning and remote learning became clearer: whilst online learning is a pre-planned digital instruction offer, remote learning is more collaborative, and features scaffolding and active learning within an ethic of care (Kaiper-Marquez, Wolfe, Clymer, Lee, McLean, Prins and Stickel, 2020). The global increase in remote learning has exacerbated the schoolification of many young children's lives, a trend was rising before the pandemic (Formosinho, 2021). Early childhood settings and schools that were required to close for months during COVID-19 restrictions sent work for young children to complete at home, positioning parents as

unqualified teachers (Borisova, 2020; Brossard, Cardoso, Kame, Mishra, Mizunoya, and Reuge, 2020). Many had to juggle supporting their children's learning at home with doing their own paid work, leading to increased stress for some. Toran, Sak, Xu, Şahin-Sak and Yu (2021) reported that parents in Turkey and China found it difficult to cope with the disruption to their daily routines. Equally, in Australia, Craig and Churchill (2021) found that mothers' unpaid work time at home increased during COVID-19 rsetrictions, leading to more stress and disatisfaction among mothers. Wasmuth and Nitecki (2020: 697) observe that parents' experiences of homeschooling during the pandemic may increase recognition 'that teachers cannot be easily replaced by unqualified people and that public schools are an essential part of communities and their lives'.

However, while there have been reports of young children's increased uses of digital technologies for learning at home during the pandemic (Nugroho, Lin, Borisova, Nieto and Ntekim, 2020), children's access to remote learning has been patchy. In the US, although many pre-school children were offered remote learning at the start of the pandemic lockdown, this did not continue for most (Barnett et al., 2021). Around one third of children have not accessed remote learning at all during the pandemic (UNICEF, 2020c). Children's access to formal education via remote learning has been dependent on their access to digital education and devices (Blundell, Costa-Dias, Joyce and Xu, 2020), exacerbating inequalities that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Barnett et al., 2021; Gupta and Jawanda, 2020; Mantovani, Bove, Ferri, Manzoni, Bianchi, and Picca**,** 2021). Equally, Chamberlain, Lacina, Bintz, Jimerson, Payne, and Zingale (2020:252) note that while 'online instruction is a valuable tool (it) cannot substitute, much less replace, a teacher', and it may be argued that this is especially the case for young children who have yet to develop a sense of themselves in relation to others and 'real world' experiences (Bailey and Bailenson, 2017).

Supporting Young Children's Informal Learning

During the pandemic, while many parents will have provided a stimulating home environment that has afforded young children high quality informal learning (Sylva et al., 2010), this will not have been the case universally. Reasons may include lack of time, physical resources or space (Andrew et al., 2020b; UNICEF 2020b), parents' lack of interaction with their young children (Hart and Risley,1995; Umek, Kranjc, Fekonja, and Bajc, 2008), or increased toxic stress levied by confinement (Ataullahjan et al., 2020). Moreover, the combination of setting and playground closures, and mandates to stay at home

have meant that young children have had fewer opportunities for outdoor play and free play (Gill and Munro, 2020). Yet the social isolation and loss of routine young children have experienced mean they need play more than ever (de Araújo, Veloso, Souza, de Azevedo and Tarro 2020; Graber, Byrne, Goodacre, Kirby, Kulkarni, O'Farrelly, and Ramchandani, 2020).

At the time of writing, some countries are emerging from the COVID-19 crisis, though it seems far from over (Grün, 2021). It may be months - perhaps years - before formal pre-primary education is restored to pre-pandemic levels, and achievement of SDG Target 4.2 by 2030 currently seems unlikely. Equally, many families will experience lost income and its effects into the future. Therefore, rather than looking backwards to focus on young children's 'lost learning' since March 2020, policymakers and educators working in the field of early childhood education may wish to attend to strengthening parents' capacity to support young children's informal learning well into the future.

Introduction to the current issue

This issue of the *International Journal of Early Years Education* comprises seven articles featuring the role of primary carers in young children's learning and young children's experiences of learning in family homes. The first article reports on a study for which researchers applied the Family Involvement Questionnaire (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000) in a Chinese context. In their article *"A Multidimensional Examination of Chinese Family Involvement in Early Childhood Education: Evidence for the Chinese Family Involvement Questionnaire (FIQ-C)"*, Xiaoying Xia, Rachelle Kisst Hackett and Linda Webster discuss differences they found in scores relating to parents' educational levels and family income during their research. In the article that follows, Sharline Cole reports on the adoption of a sequential explanatory mixed methods design with parents, teachers and principals for her study about *"Contextualizing Parental Involvement at the Elementary Level in Jamaica"*. The next article in the collection -*"The Two-Year-Old Offer: Exploring parents' choice not to participate"* - reports findings from a small scale qualitative study for which Alex Owen used a questionnaire to investigate parents' views about the reasons they did not take up funded provision for their two-year-old children in England.

Next, Myae Han, Martha Buell, Rena Hallam and Alison Hooper share findings from their study concerning a professional development programme for providers offering child care in family homes. In their article *"An Intensive Professional Development in Family Child Care:*

A Case of Promising Approach", they recount how they used the Child/Home Environmental Language and Literacy Observation (CHELLO) and the Family Child Care Environmental Rating Scale (FCCERS-R) to measure the quality of family child care among 38 providers and they discuss their study findings. In the article *"'I'm caught in the middle': Preschool teachers' perspectives on their work with divorced parents"*, Inbar Levkovich and Eyal Galit reveal experiences of early childhood educators in Israel working with parents who are separated. Levkovich and Galit adopted a phenomenological approach for their study which featured semi-structured interviews. Omayya Al-Hassan, Theodora De Baz, Fathi Ihmeideh and Ibrahim Jumiaan share findings from their study conducted in Jordan about parents' values concerning raising children. In the article *"Collectivism and Individualism: Parents' Child-Rearing Values"* they report findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with 71 mothers. The final article in this collection comes from Donald Simpson in the UK. In *"Parenting high achieving boys in poverty - critiquing 'active cultivation' as an explanation for success"*, Simpson critiques data from parents living in poverty whose children achieve well in early education.

Our regular ERA Abstracts section, curated by Elizabeth Coates, concludes this issue of the *International Journal of Early Years Education*.

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