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EDITORIAL

Jane Murray (2017)

Title: Small is Beautiful

We are currently navigating an unprecedented level of international policy focus on early childhood development. For so long a space characterised by low status and funds to match, early childhood development is now in the sights of large global organisations with money. The World Bank, the OECD and the United Nations have recognised the potential of investment in children's earliest years to return human capacity. Now, along with many national governments, these organisations' policies are beginning to reflect that recognition. Mechanisms to monitor investment return globally are beginning to emerge, among them, the OECD *International Early Learning and Well-Being Study* (IELS). The IELS will assess children's performance between 4.5 and 5.5 years across a range of domains 'predictive of positive life outcomes', likely to include social skills, language and emergent literacy, mathematics and numeracy, self-regulation, locus of control and executive function. The OECD (2017) states its purpose in developing the IELs is:

'...to provide countries with a common language and framework, encompassing a collection of robust empirical information and in-depth insights on children's learning development at a critical age. With this information, countries will be able to share best-practices, working towards the ultimate goal of improving children's early learning outcomes and overall well-being.'

At face value, IELS may seem a worthwhile project for helping those with money for early childhood development to decide where to direct their funds. IELS may also capture the immediate interest of researchers and practitioners in the field of early years' education. However, deeper consideration quickly leads to questions.

The '*collection of robust empirical information and in-depth insights on children's learning development at a critical age*' sounds useful, albeit familiar. Has this not, after all, been at the heart of the work of the *International Journal of Early Years Education* and other established peer-reviewed journals in our field for many years? The ambition that is '*...working towards the ultimate goal of improving children's early learning outcomes and overall well-being*' may appear laudable at first glance. However, who decides those 'early learning outcomes' and who decides what counts as improvement in this context? Equally, by aligning young children's learning with the need for improvement, might we be in danger of regarding children as deficient? We should also question the assumption that 'improving children's early learning outcomes' is an activity commensurate with

children's 'overall well-being'. Moreover, what is the value of countries sharing their 'best practices'? Who decides what are 'best practices' and what are the criteria for those decisions? Is it reasonable to claim that what works in one context will work in another?

Setting these questions aside it may be argued that the point of greatest concern in respect of this global monitoring tool is its aim '*...to provide countries with a common language and framework*'. How will the 'common language and framework' be decided and whom will they serve? In whose interests is global homogeneity in early childhood education and care? Is it of value to the individual young children, parents, practitioners and early childhood settings and homes in different countries, cities, towns and villages? Or is it congruent with the interests of global policymakers and international organisations seeking a simple, convenient way to channel their investments and measure the return on them?

Increased funding is likely to bring many advantages for young children across the World, and there is a place for large-scale data. However, we would be wise to exercise caution in respect of using such data too readily to inform our field. The ways in which large-scale monitoring could be used have the potential to lead to perverse outcomes for young children, by redirecting the focus of provision towards meeting the requirements of a single global framework designed by adults who do not know the young children who must conform to it. Such focus would detract from an appreciation of each child's individual needs and their distinctive capacities. Whilst large-scale data and global policy may have their place, there is merit in valuing the diversity and reflexivity inherent in smaller scale enterprises in the field of early childhood education and care.

The value of small scale is important for research in early childhood education and care. This issue of the *International Journal of Early Years Education* is no different from others in that it brings together a collection of reports of small-scale research that have the potential to inform practice and policy in our field as well as informing new research directions. Their warrant lies not only in the quality of their methodologies but also in their diversity and the evidence-informed messages they carry from many different countries, contexts, practitioners, caregivers and young children across the World to our eclectic audience of readers.

This issue opens with Camilla Björklund and Eva Ahlskog-Björkman's article '*Approaches to teaching in thematic work – early childhood teachers' integration of mathematics and art*' in which she explores how 27 Finnish and Swedish teachers perceived mathematics learning and teaching integrated with art and found their how approaches to be diverse. An article from Joseph Abenyega, Deborah Tamakloe and Sunanta Klibthong reports on a study that adopted stimulated recall with 23 children aged 5-6 years and two grandparents who engaged in storytelling with them in Ghana.

'Folklore epistemology: How does traditional folklore contribute to children's thinking and concept development?' reveals how children's experiences of storytelling influenced their learning and development. Minsun Shin and Thomas Partyka's case study focused on play in a child care centre in the USA. Their article *'Empowering infants through responsive and intentional play activities'* relates how a small-scale case study revealed the value of play for ten young children's learning and development and how their teachers promoted meaningful play experiences for the children aged 10-21 months.

The next article in this issue is also based on a case study and returns to art combined with other areas of learning in early childhood: *'Literacy as a Social Practice in the Early Years Settings and the Effects of the Arts: A Case Study'*. Evgenia Theodotou captured data concerning the use of the 'Play and Learn through the Arts' programme with 22 children aged 5-6-year-old in a Greek early childhood setting and found links between the arts and literacy as a social practice among the participating children. Following this article, Margaret Brennan shares how she adopted Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to explore four early childhood teachers' 'subjective and affective experiences views of infant care' in New Zealand. In her article *'Reflect, reveal or refract: Sociocultural explorations of teacher subjectivity in infant care'*, she reveals the challenges experienced by the teachers in articulating key aspects of their work.

The last three articles in this issue differ from these articles about small-scale studies. Two report larger scale studies and the third is a non-empirical article. In their article *'Equal access to early childhood education in Korea using GIS'*, Lee Jin and Younjoo Jang report on a study that used the Geographic Information System to assess accessibility to early childhood education for South Korean children; their findings indicate inequalities in relation to affluence and geography affecting young children's access to provision. In a German study, Annette Lohbeck, Ditmar Grube and Barbara Moschner used quantitative questionnaires to ask 68 elementary school children aged 7-8 years about their perceptions of their successes and failures in school subjects. The findings they reveal in their paper *'Academic Self-Concept and Causal Attributions'* indicate that gender played a part in the children's responses. An Australian article from Grant Webb, Bruce Allen Knight and Gillian Busch is the last in this issue. In this non-empirical paper, the authors ask of *'Children's Transitions to School: "So what about the parents?" or "So, what about the parents?"'*. In their article, the authors explore important themes around parenting and young children's transitions into formal schooling.

A selection of abstracts from other journals, curated by our ERA Editor Elizabeth Coates, completes this second issue of 2017. The abstracts that Elizabeth has selected signpost research reports with cohort sizes ranging to 5 to 3250, typical of the variety of research that informs the field of early years' education and indicative that there is space in our field for large-scale and small-scale studies.

However, it is how we use the data they provide that determines their value for informing policy and practice in the many diverse early childhood contexts. Whilst large-scale data have their place, we cannot assume that the evidence they provide is transferable to every context and to all children. In the field of early years' education, uses of data to inform policy and practice that accommodate the individual needs of young children will be the most pertinent and to that end, there may yet be value in small things.

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