

## Editorial

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*Without an understanding of history as possibility, tomorrow is problematic. In order for it to come, it is necessary that we build it through transforming today. Different tomorrows are possible. The struggle is no longer reduced to either delaying what is to come or ensuring its arrival; it is necessary to reinvent the future. Education is indispensable for this reinvention. By accepting ourselves as active subjects and objects of history, we become beings who make division. It makes us ethical beings (Paulo Freire, 1997, p. 55)*

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been, since the 1992 Council recommendations on child care (Council of the European Communities, 1992), a recurring topic on European policy agendas. The importance of high quality services for young children, families and communities has recently been further emphasised. From a European perspective, investing in accessible early childhood education and care of the highest quality is crucial to realise wide ranging strategies and goals. These goals, laid out in the Europe 2020 strategy, are based on a bleak analysis of the current situation:

*Europe faces a moment of transformation. The crisis has wiped out years of economic and social progress and exposed structural weaknesses in Europe's economy. In the meantime, the world is moving fast and long-term challenges — globalisation, pressure on resources, ageing — intensify. The EU must now take charge of its future (European Commission, 2010, p. 3).*

Europe 2020 is an acknowledgement that yesterday's solutions will not suffice to 'put Europe back on track'. Europe and its Member States will have to implement policies that ensure that economic growth is *smart, sustainable and inclusive*. Knowledge base and innovation, sustainability and social cohesion cannot be developed in isolation. Against this background, coherent approaches to education, training and lifelong learning are seen as of particular importance for 'improving citizens' employability, social inclusion and personal fulfilment' (Council of the European Union, 2010). These analyses, conclusions, goals and strategies provide the context and arguments for the attention paid to early childhood services. They do so from at least two interconnected perspectives: First, early childhood education and care for *all* children is a cornerstone of lifelong learning:

*'[. . .] there is an urgent need to reduce the current number of low achievers in basic skills — particularly reading (for which current data indicate that an average of one in four pupils is unable to read and write properly) — and to further reduce the number of early leavers from education and training, as well as a need to increase participation in early childhood education and care, to raise the number of young people with a tertiary-level qualification, and to increase adult participation in lifelong learning. Such needs are particularly acute in the case of those from a disadvantaged background, who statistically tend to perform significantly less well against each of the benchmarks. Only by addressing the needs of those at risk of*

*social exclusion can the objectives of the Strategic Framework be properly met.*'  
(Council of the European Union, 2010, p. 6, emphasis added)

Second, early childhood services (alongside other sectors of care and education) form a considerable part of the labour market; they often recruit their workforce from groups that are specifically targeted by the education and training strategic framework. Thus, the early childhood sector has the potential to play an important role in *reducing the number of early leavers of education, raising the number of young people in higher education, and increasing the participation in lifelong learning* with regard to its workforce. This argument is not without contradictions. Findings of a recent European research project on 'competence requirements in early childhood education and care' (Urban *et al.*, 2011) point out the critical issue of high percentages of the early childhood workforce in many European countries with low or no formal qualification — up to 50% even in countries with a high level of professionalisation of the early childhood workforce. The 'invisible assistants' (*ibid*) do not figure prominently in debates on the professionalisation of the early childhood workforce.

There is recognition, at European policy level, that 'quality' for children and the 'quality' of the workforce are two sides of the same coin:

*Participation in high-quality early childhood education and care, with highly skilled staff and adequate child-to-staff ratios, produces positive results for all children and has highest benefits for the most disadvantaged.*

(Council of the European Union, 2010, emphasis added)

What constitutes high quality in ECEC is a complex and often contradictory matter: definitions of quality and strategies to ensure it vary considerably across countries (Penn, 2009). There is, however, a general agreement between researchers and authors that quality is a *construct* that is value-laden and dependent on expectations and perspectives. 'Quality' is constructed in the ways we talk about it and the ways we aim at achieving it — in *discourses, practices* and *contexts* — all of which are subject to constant change. A rich body of literature provides evidence of an ongoing international debate that has examined the practices and discourses of 'quality' and argued against the dominance of technocratic and managerial attempts to universally define, deliver, measure and assess it (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999, Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007, Pence & Moss, 1994, Penn, 2011). Helen Penn (2011) suggests that the search for one final definition of quality is 'a search for fool's gold' (p. xi). But I argue that it is this ongoing search, the process of continuously questioning, debating, inventing and re-inventing, valuing and evaluating practices with and for young children, families and communities that *constitutes* quality of early childhood education and care as a democratic and transformative practice.

How we understand early childhood education and care, its purposes and practices touches on key areas of European policies. They include:

- promoting democracy, citizenship, children's and civil rights
- working towards equality of opportunity and social cohesion
- addressing diversity (linguistic, ethnic, cultural . . .) including children with special educational needs
- reducing poverty and exclusion
- promoting creativity and innovation.

Interconnected socio-economic, educational and civil rights-based rationales for investing in high quality services for young children and their families have been

laid out in European and international policy documents. Given the interconnect- edness and complexity of the matters at stake, there are no simple solutions, technical interventions or ‘quick fixes’ available. First and foremost, the critical issues identified in the Europe 2020 strategy and the Lifelong Learning programme raise questions of *purpose* of early childhood education and care, questions of orientation, participation and desired outcome. In imagining and building the future of early childhood institutions in Europe, the question is not ‘what works?’, but what should it work *for*, for *whom* and to *what end*? And, most important in a democratic society, as Gert Biesta suggests, ‘who should have a say in determining the latter’ (Biesta, 2007, p. 5).

This issue of the *European Journal of Education* addresses current European trends and developments in the field of early childhood education and care from three interconnected perspectives: it provides a platform for exploring *policies*, *practices* and *theoretical underpinnings* relating to the institutions set up to support young children and their families in Europe. There is no ‘safe ground’ on which to construct our research and that has consequences for design, process and outcome: it confronts researchers with the necessity to *situate* and *position* themselves in relation to the contested meanings. In designing and conducting research into the complexity of European early childhood education and care systems, we are asked not to *take sides*, but to *take a stand*. The individual contributions approach their specific topics within a shared framework that acknowledges that education is inevitably political and value based — which creates the need for constant democratic dialogue. The choice of contributions to this issue does not attempt to offer definite answers, let alone ‘solutions’ to the ‘problem’ of early childhood care and education in Europe. It insists that all suggestions can only be preliminary and are subject to constant democratic renegotiation. Rather than promoting one ‘right’ answer, the perspectives offered in the shared framework of the issue aim at exploring the critical questions we suggest we need to ask in research, policy and practice.

The articles focus on centre-based early childhood education and care. However, providing institutions such as crèches, preschools and childcare centres is only one element, albeit important, of a coherent support system for *all* young children, families and communities in our societies. Caring and learning in a much broader sense is the topic of the first article by Peter Moss. He explores the relationship between early childhood education and care provision and other policies to support families, especially the entitlement to maternity and parental leave in 25 European countries. He identifies substantial gaps between the end of well-paid leave and the entitlement to ECEC in most countries, with few exceptions in the Nordic countries and Slovenia.

Mathias Urban, in the second article, examines the renewed interest in early childhood in recent European policy documents. He asks if and how the changing policy context leads to different understandings of the purpose of early childhood education and care and discusses the implications for research in relation to policy and practice. He argues for a reconceptualisation of the role of research as an inherently political practice.

The following two contributions draw on the findings of the study on ‘competence requirements in early childhood education and care’ (CoRe), jointly conducted by the University of East London and the University of Gent. The article by Mathias Urban, Michel Vandenbroeck, Katrien Van Laere, Arianna

Lazzari and Jan Peeters explores the reciprocal relationship between quality and professionalisation and identifies systemic conditions for a professionalisation of the entire early childhood system, beyond the formal qualification levels of individual practitioners. It argues for a critical and systemic reconceptualisation of professional practice in a *competent system*. Katrien Van Laere, Jan Peeters and Michel Vandebroek, in the following article, discuss findings of a 15-country survey on competence profiles of early childhood practitioners which unveils the huge differences in the roles and responsibilities of the core professionals and assistants in most countries. This, they argue, contributes to the persistent divide between 'education' and 'care' even in countries that have integrated these in one system.

The fifth article takes a broader perspective on European and international policies towards young children and families. Maria Herzog's focus is on children's rights, which she explores in their relationships and tensions to early childhood education and care policies. She argues that great efforts are being made by various actors to promote and implement a children's rights agenda, but a comprehensive approach is missing.

Arianna Lazzari, in the sixth article, argues that a vision of ECEC as a *public good* is an essential precondition for developing and sustaining high quality services for young children and their families. She builds her argument on the analysis of the origin and development of municipal preschool education in the Emilia Romagna region (Italy). Her article investigates historical and socio-cultural conditions for municipal early childhood institutions and the trends in ECEC policy-making at local and regional level over time.

Among the many minority groups in Europe, Roma and Travellers are the most marginalised. Poverty, discrimination and racism are common experiences for members of these communities across Europe. Young children are a minority within these minorities, argues Colette Murray in the seventh article of this issue. She explores why, after centuries of oppression, Roma and Traveller issues have only recently become prominent on the European policy agenda. She discusses how this relates to developments in other areas of policy: the European children's rights agenda and the recognition that early childhood education and care is a key policy tool to combat social exclusion. The European policy developments that frame her article are examined from a local vantage point: the experiences of Traveller and Roma children in Ireland and the Irish Preschool Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups.

Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark (the Nordic countries) are regularly praised for their achievements in early childhood education and care: a universal, child-centred, holistic approach with an emphasis on participation, democracy, autonomy and freedom. But policies and institutions for young children do not exist in isolation. They have been developed in the wider context of the Nordic welfare state. The final article by Kirsti Karila explores the historical roots of ECEC in Nordic countries, their commonalities and differences. She discusses how Nordic countries develop and redefine their ECEC policies in a changing global economic and cultural context and identifies signs of erosion of the key elements of the Nordic model in recent policy debates.

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The article in Part II by Stan van Alphen analyses early school leavers (ESLrs) in the European labour market. Previous research suggests that the ongoing educational expansion is a negative development, since, in the worst case, it creates credential inflation. Findings from the 2005 cross-sectional EU-SILC data show, however, that the negative effect of early school leaving on income is reduced by educational inclusiveness at the country level. Results from two-level hierarchical analyses indicate that the influence of family background is indeed conditional upon the level of educational inclusiveness at country level. This is true for all but one of the indicators of family background included in this article.

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