

Inconvenient truths about early childhood education and care: Workers' lives matter

Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood

2020, Vol. 21(2) 93–95

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1463949120934755

journals.sagepub.com/home/cie

In late 2019, we were offered the great privilege of taking up guest editorship on this special issue on the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce. The changing academic climate in Australia and personal circumstances had made it impossible for the originating editors of the special issue to continue. Our sincere thanks to Yarrow Andrew, Lara Corr, Karen Sinclair and Hani Yulindrasari, who, through this issue provide an invitation to contest notions of work in ECEC. We have endeavoured to honour their conceptual and theoretical framework, and have curated an issue that we hope provides opportunities for ‘thinking otherwise’ (Ball, 1998: 81) about the ECEC workforce.

The collection of articles (four empirical research and one conceptual), two colloquia and book review that make up this special issue share many of the important, uncomfortable and ignored topics that the original editors of this special issue foregrounded in their call for papers. Together, the works contained in this issue make visible truths about the ECEC workforce across the globe that have long been ignored or marginalised. The inconvenience of these truths – why they are so and to whom – has been laid bare. Also included are the many reasons why the inconvenient truths are significant and deserve to become the focus of priorities within the early childhood sector and government policies. Ultimately, recognising and acting to better support educators is critical if we really do want children to have the high-quality experiences that make a difference to their lives now and in the future. It is also critical that the work of millions of educators – most of them women – be recognised and valued for the skill it requires and for the social good it provides, and because the goals of social justice that we work towards for children and families should also be extended to educators themselves.

In the first article, Cumming, Logan and Wong locate educator well-being as crucial for early childhood policy and curricula, and note the limited research attention afforded to this issue. Their focus is turned to discourses that shape the invisibility of the ECEC workforce, with a theoretical application that draws on Foucault’s notions of discourses and the dividing practices of discursive regimes. Continuing to work with theory, the authors then turn to Deleuze and Guattari, and Tronto, to make a case for thinking about ways of attending to children’s and educators’ well-being, and making a concern for care central.

Nganga, Madrid Akpovo, Thapa and Muthoni Mwangi present perspectives on the influences of globalisation and neocolonialism on the ECEC workforce in Nepal and Kenya. The findings from their ethnographic research demonstrate the ways that class and social status intersect with globalised discourses to shape Eurocentric early childhood environments and practices in Nepal and Kenya. Their thought-provoking work draws attention to the need for contextually appropriate ECEC that also enables localised approaches to women’s agency and resilience through work. Nganga et al.’s work contains uncomfortable reminders for minority-world early childhood workforce scholars that notions of a ‘quality’ early childhood workforce can themselves be colonising.

The third article, empirical research by Sullivan, Coles, Xu, Perales and Thorpe, examines 'men's place' in the ECEC workforce through understandings of women educators' attitudes and beliefs. The authors outline that making attitudes visible is important for workplace well-being and the 'retention of minorities' (in this case, males). Drawing on sex-segregation theory to analyse interviews with women educators, the findings and associated implications provide catalysts for further discussion and reflection on some of the 'inconvenient truths' this article conveys.

Oosterhoff, Oenema-Mostert and Minnaert's work focuses on perceptions of professional autonomy amongst teachers working in the early years of school in the Netherlands. The authors identify tensions resulting from an ostensibly autonomous policy-level approach to schools choosing pedagogical approaches and forces of accountability that constrain the ability of teachers and schools to realise these choices. Drawing attention to the impacts of these tensions on practice and on the teachers' emotions, they also illustrate the importance of the head teacher in amplifying or mediating these tensions. This work contributes important evidence of the experiences of ECEC teachers working in the school context and the damage to professional autonomy wrought by external forms of regulation.

Powell, Langford, Albanese, Prentice and Bezanson use feminist critical discourse analysis to explore the marginalisation of care work in the campaign platforms of three political parties in Ontario, Canada. The findings from their analysis reveal that apparently progressive messages concerning the 'maternal care burden' concealed persistent gendered discourses about care as women's work. Notably, they draw attention to the marginalising effects of the transferral of working mothers' 'care burden' to another group of women – the early childhood workforce. Similarly to Cumming et al., then, the authors argue for the recognition of care labour as an essential public responsibility and as a critical concern in political dialogue.

This special issue includes two colloquia. The first, by Moss and Urban, focuses on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS). The authors outline the results – what they tell us, what they do not and what might come next. The conclusions in this colloquium support arguments for comparative studies of early childhood education, but there is caution against studies such as the IELS. The second colloquium, by Press, turns to the complexity of early childhood educators' work. Press provides an overview of Australian research using innovative methodologies to make visible what exemplary early childhood educators do. The issue concludes with a book review. **[AQ: 1]**

As we write this editorial, the world is in the intensity of the worldwide coronavirus pandemic, with many countries now transitioning out of many months of 'lockdown'. In this unprecedented time globally, the title of this special issue – 'Inconvenient truths about early childhood education and care: Workers' lives matter' – is eerily now more pertinent than ever. The coronavirus has brought to the surface both the critical role and the marginalisation of early childhood educators. In Australia, whilst commentary about teachers in school settings gained traction, ultimately seeing them shut down except for children of 'essential workers', prior-to-school settings (kindergarten and long day care) remained open. Educators' daily resilience and gracious willingness to 'be on the front line' – and the risk and stress this has entailed – has not been acknowledged with the same (highly warranted) applause accorded to health workers. The invisibility of educators is evidenced by the last-minute emergency Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package, which was only made available when it became clear that the sector could not financially weather plummeting enrolments and remain open. Hence, ECEC became recognised as an essential service – but only by default.

In this 'moment of arising' (Foucault, 1984: 83), we have seen how essential the ECEC workforce is and, at the same time, the recurring taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of the work. As you engage with this special issue, we invite you to consider the following: Could it be

that we are on the precipice of a discursive shift which may elevate the importance and worth of the ECEC workforce? Or, is the entanglement of inconvenient truths too entrenched to traverse? Are we at a point in history, a ‘moment of arising’, where this coronavirus event will solidify the very discursive features of early childhood work (as undervalued care work that anyone can do and only women ‘should’ do) with little regard for disruption? Let us hope it is the former, where, in a post-coronavirus ‘new normal’, work with children is viewed as important, valued *and* essential.

Tamara Cumming
Charles Sturt University, Australia
Megan Gibson
Queensland University of Technology, Australia

References

- Ball S (1998) Educational studies, policy entrepreneurship and social theory. In: Slee R, Weiner G and Tomlinson SLF (eds) *School Effectiveness for Whom?* London: Falmer Press, pp. 70–83.
- Foucault M (1984) Nietzsche, genealogy, history. In: Rabinow P (ed.) *The Foucault Reader*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 76–100.