

IJEIEC

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Editorial

The articles in this edition of the International Journal of Equity and innovation in Early Childhood address diverse topics, but most share the belief that each of us - regardless of age - negotiates who we are in our everyday lives. Faced with a world that won't stand still and with circumstances that change continually, we affirm or amend who we are continually - sometimes negotiating different identities in and for different circumstances. This view of ourselves - adults and children - as social agents with fluid and mutable identities is both unsettling and attractive. It is unsettling because it can make it hard to recognise ourselves: 'If I'm ever-changing, can there be a real me? Can anyone ever know the real me? Can I ever know the real you?' That lack of certainty can also be attractive, because in the absence of an essential 'me', I can be who I want to be and do what I want to do. Ironically, both the unsettling features and the attractive features of that view of ourselves neglect the fact that inevitably we create and re-create our identities within - and sometimes in opposition to - our specific circumstances. We make our own

histories and our own identities, but rarely in cultural or material circumstances of our own choosing. Consequently, who we are and how others see us is always an outcome of negotiation; and some of us enter those negotiations with more ability, strength and resources than others.

The continuing interplay between children's ability to create identities and the constraining (and, sometimes, enabling) effects of their circumstances is at the heart of the articles in this edition of the journal. **Deevia Bhana** explores children's conversations in contemporary South Africa to show children enacting or performing gender and sexuality as aspects of their identities; and doing so within and against circumstances where AIDS is an ever-present possibility and where adults continually deny that children are gendered and sexualised beings. Bhana draws close links between children's enactment of identities and their enactment of rights, emphasising that identities and rights are never simply present or absent, but always in a process of becoming. She invites researchers to see research from an equivalent perspective: research is an occasion at which specific researchers and research subjects continually enact particular identities with particular rights, rather than a clinical encounter between

identities somehow 'caught' in time and space. **Anne Houghton** suggests that if we wish to involve children in decisions about their circumstances, we need to see them as active agents. She draws on her experience of exchanges between Japanese and Australian kindergarten staff as she reflects on the influence of two different models of the child on adults' relationships with children. Later in the journal, **Jane Page** reviews Helen Penn's book, *Understanding early childhood: issues and controversies*, developing Houghton's reflections. Page writes of Penn that, 'she seeks to introduce students to the broader political dimensions of teaching by illustrating how the ways in which we view children will influence and structure then opportunities we afford children to participate as social agents across a range of social settings.'

The articles by Janice Kroeger, by Kym MacFarlane and Karen Noble and by Karen Wohlwend explore in their different ways the influence of institutionalised discourses in children's identities. **Janice Kroeger** tells a story of a school in the USA that used a 'community-focused curriculum' to promote and foster virtues such as trust, belonging and kindness; had clear policies to discourage discriminatory language and behaviour; and introduced children to elements of cultures other than their own. Nonetheless, children still discriminated against each other on the grounds of race, gender and sexuality. Kroeger argues that this happened because the school failed to recognise that children are active meaning-makers, albeit in circumstances suffused with oppressive relationships and stereotypes; and that without specific intervention such as an actively anti-discriminatory curriculum, children will reproduce those oppressive relationships and stereotypes, albeit

beyond institutional scrutiny. The non-interventionist, lead-by-example approach that Kroeger associates with a 'community-focused curriculum' is also the focus of the article by **Karen Wohlwend**, which examines events in her classroom in the USA a year after the events of '9/11'. Wohlwend had worked hard to maintain a 'democratic, child-centred classroom' that encouraged 'free expression'. However, when Hanan, an Arab-American girl, 'freely expressed' her Arabic identity, she found herself in conflict with particular discourses of nationalism and patriotism in post-9/11 America. Hanan constantly had to assert her Arab-American identity against demands by her classmates to be a 'real' American: 'The ideal of community in the democratic classroom, when layered with a nationalistic institutional agenda, operates as a mandate for conformity, enforcing a sameness in expectations of expression and equating a monocultural, homogenized America with an authorized patriotism.' Like Kroeger, but in very different circumstances, Wohlwend concludes that, 'teachers need to do more than mediate disputes or provide seemingly neutral spaces for free expression (if they are) to support children, particularly children who face obstacles in accessing power in the classroom or in society at large.' Institutional influences are at the core of the article by **Kym MacFarlane** and **Karen Noble**, who challenge the accepted wisdom that children's academic success is enhanced when their parents engage with their schooling. Their research in Australia shows that such positive relationships assume and rely on children performing the role of 'proper' learners, while their parents engage in 'proper' ways with schools that are increasingly corporate and managerialist. The institution's reaction to any 'impropriety' by the child-as-

learner is likely to lead to the child disengaging from school, irrespective of their parents' engagement with it; and as schools emphasize the centrality of 'lifelong learning' (in academic terms) to a child's later success, for a disengaged child, 'lifelong learning' becomes lifelong failure.

Hyacinth Kulemeka is a forceful advocate of children's right to high-quality education - indeed, their right to a decent quality of life. She examines several international 'standard-setting instruments' including the United Nations Charter of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and sets these against a comprehensive overview of children's position in contemporary Malawi. The nub of Kulemeka's argument is that children under five years old are not included in government strategies to reduce poverty and to spread education, yet research shows increasingly that neglect of young children's mental and physical well-being in their early years can have fundamental effects that undermine such strategies. **Alan White** and **Margaret Coady** take discussion about the effectiveness of such international 'standard-setting instruments' further. They suggest that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child confirmed the idea that children are a 'special case' in discussions of rights and they commend the General Comment 7 from the UN's Committee on the Rights of the Child as a step towards recognising young children even those who are pre-verbal and pre-literate - as active meaning-makers with definite views on their circumstances. Like Houghton and Page, White and Coady remind us of the influence of models of the child, advocating the rights of the child as 'being' in the here-and-now, rather than as 'becoming' in the future.

Between them, the authors in this edition of the journal live in four continents; and their articles examine children's agency in three continents. Increasingly, we need an international perspective to understand young children's contemporary experiences. Young children exist in a world where governments are weakening national barriers to foreign investment and trade (including the arms trade) at the same time as they strengthen 'border security' to exclude the very people displaced by economic 'restructuring' and by wars. One consequence is a growing population of dispossessed, stateless and homeless people around the world - the living casualties of economic and military conflict. Young children form a significant proportion of that population, yet we hear their voices only rarely. Many of the articles in this edition of the journal affirm the value of listening to young children as social agents with opinions about their world and the right to have them recognised. However, within the early childhood field, rights-based models of the child are in a continuing contest for legitimacy with 'age-and-stage' models that effectively subordinate children to adults who claim to act in children's best interests. The articles in this collection demonstrate - each in its own way - that when adults listen to young children, we don't lose our age-based power. Instead, we create new forms of the power that has always been associated with collaborative, collective endeavours - the power to create and sustain a vibrant, dynamic and, above all, inclusive citizenry.

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