Introduction

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Abstract The introduction explores selected issues discussed in the papers in this special issue. The papers are timely in their focus on the need for research on the experiences of children under three years in early childhood education and care settings across seven European countries. Research in early childhood education and care programs for children aged birth to three is a youthful research endeavour and consequently needs to build capacity. A future research agenda needs to consider the audiences for such research, policymakers and practitioners, as well the beneficiaries of such research, the youngest children in early education programs.

Résumé L'introduction explore certaines questions discutées dans les articles de ce numéro spécial. Les articles arrivent à point nommé en se centrant sur le besoin de recherche sur les expériences des enfants de moins de trois ans dans les services d'éducation et de garde de sept pays européens. La recherche sur les programmes d'éducation et de garde préscolaires pour les enfants de la naissance à trois ans est encore jeune et par conséquent a encore besoin de construire son expertise. Un agenda de recherche à venir doit prendre en considération les auditoires de telles études, les décideurs politiques et les praticiens ainsi que les bénéficiaires de ces travaux, soit les jeunes enfants qui fréquentent les services d'éducation préscolaire.

Resumen La introducción explora temas seleccionados discutidos en los papers de esta edición especial. Los papers son oportunos en su enfoque referido a la necesidad de investigación sobre las experiencias de los niños menores de tres años en los centros educacionales preescolares y centros de cuidado de 7 países europeos. La investigación en la educación preescolar y los centros de cuidado para niños recién nacidos hasta 3 años, es un tema muy poco maduro aún, y en consecuencia se necesita construir una mayor capacidad al respecto. Una agenda de investigaciones

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futuras necesita considerar al público de tales investigaciones, políticos y practicantes, tal como a los beneficiarios de tales investigaciones: los niños y niñas más pequeños de los programas de educación.

In the last two decades, there have been significant increases in out-of-home child care for very young children across all developed countries. Thus, it is timely for this special issue to focus on the policy and research agenda concerning services for children aged birth to three. A report for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) by Adamson (2008) showed relatively high rates of out-of-home child care, against the OECD average of 25%, for children aged birth to three, in countries such as Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland. The relatively large proportion of children in this age range attending an early childhood education and care (ECEC) program is also noted in a number of papers in this special issue, allowing for some further national comparison of the countries represented. This is important to note since the level of policy interest and research activity will be proportionate to the level of service provisions determined by the demand for out-of-home care in formal settings. It is also clear in the published literature (Leseman 2009; Penn 2009) that birth to three care is still not fully recognised as a level of education in its variations across European countries—the manner in which it is then understood by policy makers and the community is important to the amount of funding accorded to research in this area.

Political priorities and social values within national contexts will shape the manner in which services are provided. Variations in the approaches to early childhood education and its systems can be explained by each country's differing historical and economic foundations. Moss (2008) has noted that variations in how services are organised and delivered across countries will arise from each country's image of the child and its understanding of the purposes of out-of-home care for young children. In this issue, there are strong distinctions between countries in the nature of services and the manner in which services for the youngest children have evolved, as is explained by the various authors.

With respect to policy for children from birth to 3 years, as for all ECEC services, there is global recognition of the key role that these programs play in achieving policy objectives (OECD 2001, 2006). These objectives include: an increase in women's labour market participation as economic prosperity demands a high employment to population ratio; a reconciliation of work and family responsibilities on a basis that is more equitable to women; recognition of demographic changes in the population such as falling birth rates; and the need to address issues of social and education inequalities for children from economically disadvantaged and newcomer families. Support for the view that ECEC is a public good has grown as a result of the research from educational economists such as Heckman (2006). Thus, research with the youngest children in child care/preschool needs to take account of the range of issues that influence policy in this area, including the economic investment arguments; the importance of quality as a contribution to lifelong learning and social mobility accrued through the benefits of early education; the importance of women's income to the family; and children's rights to participation and early education.

Current Research

The papers in this special issue also point to the ‘youthfulness’ of this research field, which is indicative of the recency in which early childhood education has emerged as an academic discipline. A stronger research culture and knowledge base about the experiences of very young children in ‘birth to three’ programs across European countries still needs to be built. Important considerations in this endeavour will be the nature of the children’s experiences in early childhood programs, the features of effective programs, and the longer-term outcomes for children who have extensive experience in ECEC programs from a young age. Research is more likely to be supported if it is timely and relevant; uses relatively uncontested methodologies; and indicates actions that are achievable within existing resources, systems and structures (Lewig et al. 2006). To research generously by mentoring new researchers interested in this field will be important in any future research agenda.

A high proportion of the research discussed in the papers in this issue stems from doctoral dissertations, as discussed in the papers from Finland, Sweden and Norway. For example, Maritta Hännikäinen from Finland presents short reviews of eight dissertations that were defended during the years 1994–2009. Such dissertation work is the basis for the development of new programs of research, as is the case presented in the Swedish paper by Eva Johansson and Anette Emilson. In general, a new generation of doctoral researchers have become, or can become, the leaders in this field with the objective to build research capacity. The authors of all the papers in this issue are now also in a stronger position, through their exploration of the policy and research agendas in their country for ‘under threes’, to be advocates for this field of knowledge.

Eva Johansson and Anette Emilson describe in this issue the body of research that has emerged out of Sweden that gives an alternative to the developmental psychological approach to research with very young children. This can inform a future research agenda in order to give a broad and unique picture of how toddlers participate, interact and communicate while engaged in preschool contexts; how they express their intentions and engage with their peers; and their moral values and rights. Significant understanding of the competence of very young children that has emerged from this Swedish work is extremely important to any future research agenda in order to illustrate how children’s perspectives on their everyday life can be understood. Similarly, a large body of research work out of Norway, as described by Anne Greve and Morten Solheim, has contributed to new and significant understandings of toddlers’ experiences in early childhood programs.

Advancing a Research Agenda

One way to structure research is to reflect on the *audiences* who will read and interpret the research that we produce as well as the *beneficiaries* of the research. For the purpose of this discussion, the beneficiaries of the research are the young children in ECEC programs. The audience of the research may be teachers, teacher educators, policy makers, the community and other researchers. The capacity to navigate across the borders of policy, research and practice requires researchers to understand the

different rules of evidence on which policy makers and practitioners operate and also to speak their distinctive languages while still maintaining a sense of intellectual integrity in each dialogue with an audience (Shonkoff 2000). While researchers construct and test their theories, and build conceptual models over time, in the arena of social policy, science is just one point of view. Frequently, it is not even the most influential view as policymakers are driven by political, economic and social forces. In the world of teachers' practices, science competes with personal and professional values and 'common sense'. To a large extent, much of the knowledge that is generated from research is a moving target and this is a challenge for practitioners. The knowledge base that informs the delivery of effective programs to young children is best considered as a continuous work in progress. Nevertheless, the identification of an audience's priorities and recognition of the beneficiaries of our research has the potential to provide a way of evaluating the appropriateness of research directions and methods. It can also direct researchers' attention towards answering questions that can make a difference in policy and practice.

In current early childhood research, the social construction of the child has gained increasing attention and research sway in recent years, with the primary tenet being that our image and understanding of the child is socially constructed within particular contexts and that these constructions shape policies, provisions and practices (Cannella 2002). However, the attention paid to this idea has varied. It is important to many researchers in early childhood education but rarely acknowledged by others, including policymakers. While social constructions are always present and influential, in policymaking, this is usually implicit and, therefore, not an issue for discussion. This is a caution to any future research agenda that aspects of that agenda need to be specifically relevant to policy makers.

Exploring 'quality' in programs also raises various concerns in a future research agenda. The issue of quality has been contested in much of the recent theorising on early childhood education (e.g. Dahlberg et al. 1999). Critics of the discourse on quality in early childhood education research and policy claim that a concept of 'quality' is problematic if there is a sense of closure when 'the universal norm' is attained. However, this contestation should not downplay a focus upon young children's wellbeing in birth to three programs, but should serve to highlight that approaches to good quality early childhood services should be embedded within particular cultural and political contexts and not based on a 'one size fits all' approach to quality.

Challenges to any future research agenda, as noted by Anne Greve and Morten Solheim from Norway, are to make the youngest children in Norwegian kindergartens more visible through policy and research. They note that the increased numbers of children under the age of three in kindergartens has not yet produced a corresponding increase in knowledge through research with this age group. From Denmark, Stig Broström and Ole Hansen note that new investigations are needed to describe the dynamics of the pedagogue-child relationships; the nature of the pedagogue-content relation; peer relationships; and the pedagogue's relationship with groups of children. Tullia Mussati and Maria-Christina Picchio comment on the situation in Italy and note that there is a need to support and shape a stronger early education culture to ensure good quality provisions and innovation in

practice. They indicate that while the attunement between research and educational practice to local culture has produced some high-quality educational experiences, the absence of national policies directed to support research and innovation at a national level has mitigated new initiatives. Konstantinos Petrogiannis also notes a struggle between a systematic development of research for sustainable growth and change in ECEC systems in Greece. There are tensions in integrating ECEC into a global system while preserving existing social values and practices for the care of young children in and out of the family context.

A Way Forward

Research in ECEC and, in particular, with children aged birth to three is a youthful research endeavour. In a discussion of a future research agenda, it is wise to consider the cautions from the larger domain of educational research about schooling systems and its acknowledged minimal impact on policy and practice in education. Hargreaves (1999) argued that educational research makes only a limited contribution to theory because its relevancy to practice is not always evident. The task, then, is to respond to practitioners' concerns in designing research as well as to disseminate research findings in relevant ways. Berliner (2002) pointed out that the dichotomy of hard and soft science (e.g. the social sciences) is flawed. He maintains that there is easy-to-do and hard-to-do science. Educational research is "the hardest-to-do science of them all" (p. 18) since educational programmes depend on their contexts and these contexts are highly complex. The challenges and key considerations in future ECEC research is to make it timely, informative, and relevant in order that it can inform policy and practice.

The papers in this issue indicate that much work is needed in the development of a research agenda to provide an evidence base that can usefully inform both policy and practice. While researchers, policy-makers and practitioners may share common goals, these different audiences for research can create gaps in understandings. Strategies to close the 'cultural gaps' between research, policy and practice while still maintaining a respect for the differences and commitment to a shared agenda are important (Shonkoff 2000). In this issue, Sylvie Rayna from France, within her discussion on advancing the research agenda, notes the importance of building and maintaining formal and informal networks to promote interdisciplinary approaches to research, drawing on researchers from various theoretical backgrounds and researchers from diverse national contexts. This is an important way forward in order to advance the research agenda within this emerging field of knowledge about the policies and practices to provide effective programs for children aged birth to three.

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