CHAPTER

1

YOUNG CHILDREN IN GLOBAL CONTEXTS: DIVERSITIES AND INTERCULTURAL POSSIBILITIES IN THE EARLY YEARS

Ann Farrell and Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson

INTRODUCTION

New global contexts are presenting new challenges and new possibilities for young children and those around them. Climate change, armed conflict, and poverty combine with new frontiers of discovery in science and technology to create a paradoxical picture of both threat and opportunity for our world and our children. On the one hand, children are experiencing unprecedented patterns of disparity and inequity; yet, on the other hand, they have seemingly limitless possibilities to engage with new technologies and social processes. Seismic shifts such as these are inviting new questions about the conditions that young children need to learn and thrive. In this introductory chapter, we paint a picture of two key aspects of the new global contexts: globalisation and disparity. We show how these forces frame early childhood education and care (ECEC) and point to the challenges and opportunities they might present. We define diversity and intercultural work in ECEC and highlight some of the complexities involved in such work.

YOUNG CHILDREN AND GLOBALISATION

The global contexts in which young children live and learn are embedded, to varying degrees, in the endemic phenomenon of globalisation. Put simply, globalisation is a theoretical construct for understanding current economic, cultural, and technological change. Rather than being universal, experienced by all children everywhere across the globe, globalisation is experienced in 'complex, uneven and varied ways, by different people in different places' (Singh, 2004, p. 9).

Not only is globalisation experienced within new localities, it is giving rise to new spaces. What, then, is the architecture of such spaces? What are their physical, social, linguistic, and cultural dimensions? Perhaps the spaces in which young children operate are no longer tied to physical 'place'; perhaps we are talking of 'post-place' communities (Bradshaw, 2008, p. 6) that, due to new technologies and new social practices, defy the conventional social geography with which we are familiar (see Amit & Rapport, 2012). Perhaps the spaces are more akin to Speier's notion of 'arenas of social action' (1976, p. 402), the everyday contexts in which people interact, the everyday practices of life, and the broader global contexts that frame their lives. What might these new spaces offer in terms of children's agency (or influence), participation, and protection in ECEC? What are the opportunities for intercultural learning and teaching in those spaces? And what is the connection between the global and the local for ECEC? Where does the global end and where does the local begin for young children and their everyday learning?

Perhaps the answer is in what Gruenewald and Smith (2008) refer to as 'new localism' (p. xvi), a social movement 'reclaiming the significance of the local in the global age' (p. xiii). So too, Cohen and Rønning discuss the possibility of 'learning that makes use of local economic activities and the unique history, culture and tradition and other community reference points to engage more effectively with children and young people in the context of their lives' (2014, p. 112). 'New localism' holds the possibility of new forms of educational provision in the early years that draw upon global and local realities.

The idea of 'new localism' ties in with the concept of interculturalism. More than a decade ago, Luke theorised that globalisation was giving rise to new, hybridised educational opportunities or 'eduscapes' (2004, p. 95), capable of catering for the linguistic and cultural diversity that may be present or needs to be. There have also been considerations of how globalisation impacts on education and knowledge production in the schooling sector (Apple, Kenway, & Singh, 2005) and in early childhood education (Grieshaber & Yelland, 2005). During the same period, Hickling-Hudson (2003) argued that global conditions call for intercultural pedagogies and pedagogical identities, ones that can move easily between the local and the global. Intercultural work, a major theme of this book, is discussed further below.

> ### Reflection
>
> Think about an ECEC setting with which you are familiar. In what ways do you think globalisation has influenced the setting? Consider the children and families in the setting, as well as their language and culture.

YOUNG CHILDREN AND DISPARITY

There is now a widening divide between and within the richer Global North (those countries or regions that are more affluent in education, social, and economic resources) and the poorer Global South (those less affluent), where the differences between the two in education, social, and economic resources predispose children to unequal life chances (see Parkes & Roberts, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Typically, countries recognised within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) fall within the Global North, while poorer regions in Africa, the Indian sub-continent, and Central America fall within the Global South. The world's children are facing unprecedented 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 155), many of which are geopolitical, and associated with rapid urbanisation, cataclysmic climate change, and exponential technological and social change.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), conducted since 1995, reveal the nature and extent of the disparity among the world's children. Two hundred and fifty MICS have been conducted in more than 100 countries and areas since 1995, and the 2005 report shows that the world's 2.2 billion children are the largest and most complex population of children in recorded history, facing unequalled geopolitical shifts and new technologies (UNICEF, 2015). UNICEF (2014) reports that, of the 18,000 children under five years old who die every day, a disproportionate number are from areas without basic services. So too, in 28 of the world's developing countries, children from the richest families are ten times more likely than the poorest children to participate in early childhood education (ECE). They are also more likely to have girls participating in education and to have an adult (rather than a minor who is usually a female) caring for the youngest children (UNICEF, 2012). Oxfam (2014) claims that 70 per cent of the world's poorest people live in middle-income countries and the bottom half of the world's population own the same as the richest 85 people in the world.

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This disparity leads to inequities in education. In many parts of the world, linguistic diversity, exacerbated by transnational mobility, is largely overlooked by education systems (García & Frede, 2010). And where linguistic and cultural diversity is the focus of ECE (usually in better resourced pockets in the Global North), the language of instruction may not be the child's home language and/or the teacher may not have had direct experience with diversity, either in their preservice teacher education or during their teaching career.

Further, one billion children under the age of 18 years (including 300 million children under the age of 5 years), live in countries or regions impacted by armed conflict (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SGCAC) and UNICEF, 2009). Moreover, whether related to national or family income, to climactic conditions, or to armed conflict, poverty is seen as a major impediment to children participating in ECE. Redressing such adverse conditions and their results is the global remit of the United Nations *Millennium development goals* (2010).

Conditions such as these pose an acute threat to the wellbeing of young children and those around them (Wessells & Monteiro, 2008). In effect, the dominant majority eclipses the subordinate minority, rendering invisible children's linguistic and cultural diversity, and the contribution of the minority (Taussig, 2003). Penn (2012) argues that the field is replete with work *by* majorities *about* and *for* minorities. Similarly, Okwany, Ngutuku, and Muhangi (2011) and Ebrahim (2014) contend that dominant narratives of child development from the Global North and epitomised in Euro-American policy can overlook local knowledge and practice (see also Eju, 2013; Nsamenang, 2009). In turn, Chakrabarty, in his work, *Provincializing Europe*, challenges conventional Euro-American approaches that, by and large, subordinate minority histories and peoples, and calls for perspectives 'from and for the margins' (2000, p. 16).

Despite the stark situation for children across the world, young children can be seen as providing a way forward. UNICEF affirms that, 'Children drive change. Children are experts on their own lives. They can contribute valuable knowledge to validate and enrich the evidence base—if only they have a chance to be heard' (2014, p. 15). Children are, thus, recognised as competent people who can influence their families, communities, and ECEC services (Kurt Lewin Foundation, 2012). These affirmations speak to the transformative potential of young children operating as active participants and competent interpreters of their own worlds, as persons with the right to be seen and heard within their sites of experience on issues that affect them (Christensen & James, 1998; Mayall, 2003; Tisdall 2012).

Case study

GLOBALISATION AND DISPARITY: YOUNG CHILDREN'S USE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Rather than being a liminal influence on children's lives (see Grieshaber & Yelland, 2005), the digital world has become a global force for children and their communities.

In the US, as typifying the Global North, almost all homes with children aged eight years and younger have a television (96%), a significant proportion have a laptop or desktop

computer (76%), and a substantial proportion a smartphone (63%) (Rideout, 2013). Pew Global (2014) reveals that mobile device ownership, worldwide, has increased for families at all socio-economic levels, although there is a gap based on household income, with 63 per cent of higher income children having a tablet at home compared to only 20 per cent of lower income children (Rideout, 2013).

In turn, wealthy countries in Asia (e.g., Hong Kong Department of Health, 2009; Jie, 2012) and in Europe (e.g., Holloway, Green, & Livingstone, 2013; Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014) show children's strong media use, with children having approximately two hours of screen time per day. Use of mobile devices, such as smartphones and cellphones, features strongly in lower income families in Asia (Qiu, 2014), Africa (Tortora & Rheault, 2011), and Latin America (World Bank, 2012). However, in much of the Global South, mobile devices may have limited applications and data caps, which in turn preclude optimal performance of devices.

Indeed, UNICEF (2013) reports that children in the Global South have poorer access to the internet (and internet safety) than those in the Global North. While the phenomenon of children consuming technologies such as handheld devices is growing, it is still unevenly evident across the North–South divide.

This is not to say access to technology is always seen as an advantage. Buckingham, an author from the Global North, argues 'From the moment they are born, children today are already consumers. Contemporary childhoods are lived out in a world of commercial goods and services. Marketing to children is by no means new, but children now play an increasingly important role, both as consumers in their own right and as influences on parents … Yet far from being welcome or celebrated, children's consumption has often been perceived as an urgent social problem' (2011, p. 5). While the phenomenon of consumerism is evident in many Global North societies, it is also increasingly evident in the Global South, where urbanisation and the proliferation of handheld devices are bringing technological consumerism within the reach of many more of the world's children.

Consumerism is not the only concern. The pedagogical value of technology is not a given. In Sweden, known for the use of digital technologies in ECEC, there is the question of how teachers and children actually use technologies as part of the pedagogical experience (see Bourbour, Vigmo & Pramling Samuelsson, 2014; Nilsen, 2014). So too, in Australia, educators are considering how teachers and children use digital technologies productively in the early years setting (see Davidson et al., 2014).

So, despite the fact that digital technologies are experienced unequally by different children in different locations, it is fair to say that they are having global reach, and it is important to consider how this might impact ECEC.

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY IN ECEC

The study of diversity in ECEC is relatively new. While diversity studies have long been prevalent in a range of disciplines and professions, they have only recently come to inform the field of education in general (see Vertovec, 2014), and have had relatively little visibility, to

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date, in ECE. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Grieshaber and Canella noted that 'diversity in thought and practice is occurring in the field of early childhood and reconceptualising ways of knowing, listening to, being with and educating young children' (2001, p. 4). Since then, catering for diversity within ECE contexts has proved an enduring challenge, especially in the face of the unprecedented and exponential global changes described above.

In meeting such a challenge, having a clear understanding of diversity, and how it might look in ECEC, is a good start. Diversity, in this book, is defined as the range of social, linguistic, cultural, economic, and familial differences that are part of the lived experience of young children. Diversity in ECEC means (i) recognising and respecting diversity at a number of levels: linguistic, cultural, and familial; and (ii) catering for diversity in the pedagogical encounters afforded by the setting. These elements are relevant at the levels of both global policy, the focus of the next section, and local practice.

GLOBAL POLICIES

Diversity is prompting new high-stakes questions for early years educators and policymakers. While there are signs of progress on a number of fronts, global initiatives have their limitations.

For more than 50 years, for example, young children have been the focal point of peak bodies such as UNICEF and Save the Children. Indeed, more than 25 years ago, the *United Nations Convention on the rights of the child* (UNCRC) (1989) catalysed a global focus on young children and their rights. By recognising the diversity of children and their life experiences, the UNCRC set a new course for policy and research priorities for young children, families, and communities.

The UNCRC and prominent international bodies such as UNICEF have contributed to, among other things, an overall decline in infant mortality and increased participation in education. On a global level, though, young children have fallen short of achieving the UNCRC's universal rights to participation, provision, and protection.

The field of early years itself has become a global phenomenon, epitomised in the global agenda known as 'starting strong' (see, for example, the series of OECD international comparative reports on ECEC listed at the end of this chapter). The starting strong agenda draws upon the disciplines of human development, children's rights, econometrics, and sociology to argue for investment in quality ECEC to optimise children's life chances (Heckman, 2011). The OECD's methodology for comparing countries and systems has predisposed the early years field to intensive benchmarking and league-tabling, under the guise of accountability. Other international benchmarking of ECEC is published by UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre as 'minimum standards for protecting the lives of children in their most vulnerable and formative years' (UNICEF, 2008, p. 8). A risk in global comparative activities such as these, however well intended, is that local diversities can be eclipsed by unrelenting global agendas for performance, improvement, and evidence production.

Can you think of how comparative activities in your national education context may ignore local diversities? How might this affect children?

Disparity, discussed above, also becomes a factor. At the level of ECEC policy and provision, there are marked differences between the Global North and South: the North leading investment in policy initiatives to optimise children's wellbeing (Britto & Ulkuer, 2011) as well as national and/or regional economic wellbeing (Heckman, 2007); and the North also hosting the majority of high-profile, high-impact empirical studies that are, in turn, used to inform such policies (see, for example, Barnett's 2008 review of 28 studies). Disparity may also mean unequal access to and participation in ECEC services for children and families.

In the face of this shortfall in ensuring children's rights, ongoing disparities, and the rate of global change we now experience, the field of ECEC is facing the dual challenge of: (i) recognising diversity in its various forms; and (ii) catering for diversity through intercultural practices in ECEC. But what is intercultural work?

UNDERSTANDING INTERCULTURAL WORK

According to the *Oxford dictionary*, 'intercultural' denotes activity 'taking place between cultures or derived from different cultures', while 'culture' is defined as the 'beliefs, customs, and arts of a particular society, group, place, or time' (2015). Accordingly, intercultural work in ECEC involves working with the whole family, being mindful of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, drawing upon their diverse experiences, and intentionally catering for diversity (Kultti & Pramling Samuelsson, submitted). A double challenge for families entering a new society is engaging with a new culture in general, and engaging with the local culture of ECEC in particular. ECEC professionals need to be willing to take time to listen and to learn from families and their experiences.

However, these definitions defy the complexity of intercultural activity in early years settings, in which children, families, and the early years workforce engage in dynamic and interactive learning and teaching. Working with the whole family, for example, while fine rhetoric, can differ from the reality. Parent participation and influence in ECEC can be hit-and-miss: in one context, it may be a democratic right, and in another, far from it (Pramling Samuelsson & Cojocaru, 2015). The case study below elaborates on one area of potential complexity: child-rearing practices.

Equally problematic is the growing body of work on intercultural competence that takes an instrumentalist view of the ways in which different cultures are experienced and known (see Deardorff, 2009, 2006). In some contexts, child rearing is seen as the direct responsibility of families, while in other contexts, it is seen as a responsibility shared between families and communities.

Case study

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSE CHILD-REARING PRACTICES

Authentic intercultural work in the early years involves understanding the child-rearing practices of the families and societies from which the children in early years services are drawn. Dominant child-rearing ideologies and practices are neither neutral nor private. Rather, they are social, values-based practices that absorb and shape the social and global contexts in which they operate. Parenting can be seen, therefore, as 'a globalizing set of ideas and practices that cannot be separated from considerations of global power inequities' (Faircloth, Hoffman & Layne, 2013, p. 4).

DeLoache and Gottlieb (2000) in their book *A world of babies* discuss seven societies and their 'manuals of child rearing'. While they reveal cultural differences in what is seen as necessary to care for and raise a child, they agree on the importance of cultural context and the role of an 'enculturated caregiver'. As Bruner notes in the foreword in relation to infancy and child rearing, 'it is not only prolonged helplessness that is special about human infancy, but its utter reliance on sustained and extended interaction with a committed and enculturated caregiver' (p. ix). While cultures vary in the extent to which interdependence versus autonomy is encouraged in children's relations with peers and adults (Pramling Samuelsson & Siraj-Blatchford, 2014), a caregiving relationship based on trust is a cultural value to which early years services orient.

This is a challenging area, with frequent incongruities between families, between families and early years professionals, and between professionals in early years settings. Miller and Petriwskyj's (2013) study of intercultural initiatives in Australian ECEC shows early childhood contexts catering for linguistic and cultural diversities in ways that are challenging yet educative for children and families. In another Australian study, Miller (2014) reveals the ways in which teachers' documentation actually concealed racism and racialising practices. These are thorny issues that need to be addressed if ECEC is to fulfil its claims to intercultural diversity and inclusion.

There is also a danger of romanticising respect for diversity and intercultural work with children and families, thereby circumventing the global and structural inequities they face. Bilge (2013) warns, 'In an age saturated with a neoliberal culture of diversity an image of identities at the intersection of an infinite number of axes runs the risk of toning down the problem of structural discriminations … and depicting identities as optional consumerist choices, merely a question of lifestyle' (p. 407). Feminist theorist Iris Marion Young (2011) in *Justice and the politics of difference* envisions a good society that provides differentiated, culturally plural representation in policy and provision. Young challenges the nuanced matters of domination, oppression, and marginalisation. In the field of ECEC, these include the challenges of marginalisation of children, women, and the ECEC workforce.

THIS BOOK

The exponential global change that has occurred in recent years, and the changing political and policy landscapes of ECEC we are experiencing mean that the task of exploring intercultural work in the early years is more pressing than ever. New global conditions are challenging conventional a priori pedagogical approaches with which we may be familiar. In turn, they are opening up a raft of new possibilities for the pedagogy of learning and teaching in the early years. As noted earlier, though, diversity and intercultural studies in early years contexts have been relatively limited, pointing to the need for empirical studies and theoretical examination in this area. This book helps address this need.

In addressing these challenges, the book does not seek to provide a comprehensive or comparative coverage of diversity and intercultural practice in the early years, by country or region. Rather, it deals with a selection of timely issues afforded by changing global conditions, as experienced within different contexts. The book draws upon the long-term collaboration of the editors in different hemispheres to bring together work from the northern hemisphere countries of Sweden, Iceland, and Canada; and from the southern hemisphere countries of Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and Guatemala. Drawing together such work in a systematic and coherent manner is a complex task given the spread of jurisdictions, policy contexts, and curriculum frameworks for ECEC within which the authors operate. That said, the book speaks to broad global agendas in ECEC, while providing readers with strategies for addressing local contexts and agendas.

It is also important to note that, while the term 'early childhood education and care' is internationally recognised as the education and care of children birth to age eight (OECD, 2001, 2006), this book concentrates on ECEC services as the prime site for exploring diversity and intercultural experience.

Conceptually, the book is located in understandings of childhood whereby children are afforded rights to participate as competent agents in matters that affect them (Christensen & James, 1998; Corsaro, 1997; Mayall, 2003) and are recognised as 'co-constructors of knowledge, identity and culture, constantly making meaning of their lives and of the world in which they live' (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p. 101). Sommer's notion of the 'relatively competent child' (2012, p. 232), in turn, balances child competence with the need for appropriate support for the child. The book also draws upon new critiques of the notion of globalised childhood, critiques such as those provided by Ebrahim, from the Global South, who warns of 'an essentialist, homogenising and standardised view of childhood which privileges western ideals' (2012, p. 80). These conceptual threads contribute to the fabric of the book, and its consideration of diversity and intercultural work in the early years.

Another important thread is the authors' belief that, in ECEC, diversity can be seen as a productive force for inclusive intercultural practice, rather than as a problem to be tackled and solved.

QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How might globalisation inform what happens in local ECEC settings?
2. In what way is ECEC (from your experience) intercultural and/or multicultural?
3. How can ECEC address child consumption?
4. How can technology support or hinder diversity in ECEC?
5. What are the biggest challenges for ECEC today?

FURTHER READING

Buckingham, D. (2011). *The material child: Growing up in a consumer culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

> Children today are growing up in an increasingly commercialised world. Are they seen as victims of manipulative marketing or as competent participants in a consumer culture? Are children exploited or empowered as consumers? These are some of the central questions dealt with in this book.

Miller, M. & Petriwskyj, A. (2013). New directions in intercultural early education in Australia, *International Journal of Early Childhood, 45*, 251–66.

> This article addresses the historical and current policy context of intercultural early education in Australia, and introduces the development of intercultural early education and emergent issues as national policies. The discussion draws on responses to intercultural priorities in Australia, with a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives as a key part of Australian early childhood policy.

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> This chapter argues that language is anything but neutral. It explores the important role of language for identity in multilingual contexts.

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