Cultural and Linguistic Challenges
in Early Childhood Education and Care

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Global migration along with birth patterns among immigrant groups has greatly impacted the demographics of child populations in developed countries (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development & United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013). At the same time, the *Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development* (OECD) reported increases in the availability of early childhood programs as well as the growing consensus on the value of investing in early childhood education and care (ECEC) as a strategy to enhance educational attainment (OECD, 2006). As ECEC services grow, questions arise about the quality of programming, professional training, and credentialing particularly as the child population rapidly changes. Early childhood professionals across the globe are increasingly focused on the issues surrounding the diverse backgrounds of child populations (UNESCO, 2008); implementing culturally and linguistically relevant programming comes to the fore as a critical element of best practices in ECEC.

The OECD has tracked initiatives and policy development in early childhood services and identified research on issues of diversity as a growing focus among its member nations (OECD, 2006). As a result of these efforts, the *Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training* (DECET) network was created to bring together European organizations to research and promote "valuing diversity in early childhood education and training; studying democratic child care; acknowledging the multiple (cultural and other) identities of children and families; and to effectively address prejudices and discrimination" (www.decet.org). Likewise, the *International Step by Step Association* (ISSA) was formed in the Netherlands to connect early childhood professionals across Europe and Central Asia in a mission to ensure social inclusion and quality care for young children (www.issa.nl). In the United States, prominent organizations such as *Head Start* and the *National Association for the Education of Young Children* (NAEYC) have clearly articulated principles that guide programming for culturally and linguistically diverse child populations (Head Start, 2008; NAEYC, 1995).

Undergirding the principles promoted by these organizations is the notion that best practices call for honoring children's home languages and cultures. In the early childhood

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setting this means preserving the home language as a means of promoting positive cultural identity, connecting with both the child and his or her family, and, notably, as a means of promoting academic achievement. However, this perspective remains controversial and politicized across the globe. As recently as December of 2014, Germany's conservative Christian Social Union party advocated for immigrants to adopt the German language (abandoning all others) in all public spheres as well as in their homes in order to achieve integration into German society (Smale, 2014). While the statement was met with widespread criticism and unfavorable commentary, the incident is reflective of the message often leveled at culturally and linguistically diverse immigrant populations: if you want to belong, shed your language and foreign ways.

Pitting multiculturalism or multilingualism against integration poses a double bind to an immigrant population. Oftentimes it is the children of immigrants, born in the host country, who must resolve the conflict at their own expense. In the United States, for example, sacrificing one's ancestral language or culture for the sake of assimilating not only represents painful personal losses, but it is still no guarantee of success in broader society (Haller, Portes & Lynch, 2011). In fact, the betrayal of such closely held markers of identity can contribute to a spiral of *downward assimilation* leaving the second generation to experience greater rates of disenfranchisement, poverty, and unemployment than their own immigrant parents (Haller et al., 2011).

Implementing best practices of ECEC in diverse communities across the globe implies pluralistic approaches that embrace children's cultures and languages. This means being willing to challenge closely held beliefs about parenting or family life, for example, in order to make room for the diverse perspectives of other cultures (Sanagavarapu, 2010). It also means adopting heteroglossic ideologies that recognize

and value the unique unfolding of language skills in the multilingual child rather than privilege a single national language for gaining status or citizenship (Flores & Schissel, 2014). To effectively serve the multilingual child, all of her languages need to be at her disposal for learning and meaning-making. Elevating the status of one language over others, or strictly controlling the use and purpose of a language, runs counter to the nature of multilingualism and creates subtractive conditions where children are at risk for language loss.

This issue of *Global Education Review* seeks to understand the cultural and linguistic challenges confronting young children across countries experiencing marked changes in demographics. Conditions across three very different contexts (Bhutan, Luxembourg, and the United States) inform a discussion on the tensions between promoting assimilation and preserving cultural affiliations; likewise, preserving children's home languages can be seen as inconvenient, irrelevant to their learning or, perhaps worse, threatening to their full membership in society. Even where children are encouraged to learn more than one language, it is not necessarily to preserve ethno-minority languages but rather to introduce the languages associated with political power (such as English) or the language conveying a national identity. These tensions consume public attention and thereby forestall the exploration and discovery of the inherent benefits of cultural and linguistic diversity among young children.

In *Using a Policy of 'Gross National Happiness,'* Jessica Ball and Karma Chimi Wangchuk identify societal, familial, and economic shifts in Bhutan that are driving the demand for ECEC programs. These programs are expected to promote school readiness and provide a much needed transition to formal education for children in Bhutan's over 20 different language groups. However, only Dzongkha, the national language, and English, are the languages of instruction in primary

schools while English is the language of instruction for the remainder of grades. The excusive focus on learning Dzongkha and English means that ethno-minority linguistic proficiency is not supported, which can lead to a loss of languages. To avoid such a loss, Ball and Wangchuk argue for a "Made in Bhutan" approach in accordance with Bhutan's unique Gross National Happiness Policy. Such a multicultural model aims for importing and implementing well-proven western approaches, while at the same time valuing local knowledge, goals, and practices.

In *Lost in Translanguaging? Practices of Language Promotion in Luxembourgish Early Childhood Education,* Sascha Neumann introduces Luxembourg as one of the few officially *multilingual* states in Western Europe which maintains the largest proportion of foreign immigrants in Europe. Its "super diversity" of languages has created a population of *translinguals* who, not only speak multiple languages, but routinely use languages in combination. This fluid and dynamic use of languages exemplifies García's (2009) description of *translanguaging*.

In recent years there has been an enormous expansion of the child care system, both public and private forcing the question of how to address the many languages spoken by young children. While there is a strong commitment to multilingualism as a special feature of the Luxembourgian society, multilingualism is perceived as a challenge to the national identity. Neumann describes two approaches for this dilemma: one is the promotion of Luxembourgish as the so-called "language of integration." The other is the maintenance of multilingualism through concepts such as "one face - one speech" where each adult working with children would speak only one language at all times. Both of these approaches, however, are in contrast with the *translanguaging* in the lived experience of Luxembourgish society. Neumann argues that

multilingualism viewed through a monolingual lens still results in limitations imposed on children's various language resources.

Finally, Linda Espinosa examines conditions in the United States for young children called "dual language learners" (DLLs) who are learning English while continuing to master their home language. In *Challenges and Benefits of Early Bilingualism in the U.S. Context,* she describes how the DLL population has tripled in the last several decades and now accounts for 25% of all children in the United States. Despite research highlighting children's innate ability to learn multiple languages and garner long-term social, cognitive, cultural and economic advantages from being bilingual, English-only instruction is the most common approach offered in ECEC. In the United States, learning English as a second language often comes at the expense of continued first language development. Thus, DLLs are unlikely to benefit from the cognitive advantages of bilingualism. In addition, in many U.S. early care settings young DLLs show first language loss as they become more proficient in English. Espinosa argues that the United States needs to re-examine the science of early bilingualism, recognize the unique developmental contexts and characteristics of young DLLs without concluding that these differences are deficits, and design instructional and assessment approaches that are responsive to their needs.

The articles in this issue highlight the struggles early childhood professionals face in embracing multiculturalism and multilingualism as ECEC expands. Eager to adopt research-based approaches, they nevertheless struggle with political realities and ideologies that control program development in ways that jeopardize children's linguistic potential. This seems a contradiction of the very purpose of expanding ECEC across the globe.

World census figures indicate that immigration will continue to drive demographic changes (Organisation for Economic

Cooperation and Development & United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013). As diverse families and children across the world avail themselves of ECEC programs, there will be a greater call for early childhood professionals well versed in multiculturalism and multilingualism. It will also be a call for greater engagement in advocacy on behalf of children. If we are to safeguard the inter-cultural dispositions and the multilingual skills we will need in the next generation, we must preserve these competencies in young children now. Likewise, if we are to create effective ECEC programs that contribute to children's eventual educational attainment, we cannot begin by disregarding their cultures and eradicating their home languages. We imagine instead ECEC programs that promote cultural competence; that invite children to speak and develop their home languages; programs that promote language learning not just for children but for the adults who work with them; and programs that embrace diversity in all its forms, welcoming diverse young children, in the broadest sense, as citizens of the world.

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