

Global Trends in Early Childhood Practice: Working within the Limitations of The Global Education Reform Movement

Elena Nitecki

Mercy College, New York, USA

Helge Wasmuth

Mercy College, New York, USA

In the last issue of *Global Education Review*, titled “Global Early Childhood Policies: The Impact of the Global Education Reform Movement and Possibilities for Reconceptualization,” we discussed the unprecedented policies affecting the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Wasmuth & Nitecki, 2017). The Global Education Reform Movement, also known as GERM, is rooted in economic theory and neoliberal thinking, which is often reductionist and singular in its viewpoint (Moss, 2014; Sahlberg, 2011), yet it has consumed our field. The trends associated with GERM – such as the standardization of teaching and learning, over-emphasis of core subjects of mathematics and literacy, test-based high-stakes accountability and testing, prescribed curriculum, privatization, parental choice, and increased control over students and teachers – have infiltrated the everyday practice of teachers and practitioners in the field and remain a deep cause for concern. As Nancy Carlsson-Paige, one of the most renowned American early childhood development experts, expressed it in her acceptance speech for the Deborah W. Meier

Hero in Education Award, regarding the situation in the United States:

“So never in my wildest dreams could I have foreseen the situation we find ourselves in today. Where education policies that do not reflect what we know about how young children learn could be mandated and followed. We have decades of research in child development and neuroscience that tell us that young children learn actively—they have to move, use their senses, get their hands on things, interact with other kids and teachers, create, invent. But in this twisted time, young children starting public Pre-K at the age of four are expected to learn through ‘rigorous instruction.’

And never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that we would have to defend children’s right to play.”
(2015)

Corresponding Author:

Elena Nitecki, School of Education, Mercy College, 555 Broadway, Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522
Email: enitecki@mercy.edu

These trends are reshaping the very essence of ECEC. Many practitioners struggle with finding common ground between the imposition of GERM policies and with what they know is best for young children. This issue examines the implications of GERM in everyday classroom and school settings, including how they affect teachers, parents, and children. Policy and practice, what Dahlberg & Moss (2005) called “major politics” and “minor politics,” exist symbiotically and depend upon one another. A democracy needs both. As Penn (2011) stated, “To consider policy without being grounded in practice and having ideas about good practice, is also a partial exercise. The trick is to move from one to the other seamlessly” (p. 65).

This issue will explore how GERM policies have created new trends within the practice of early childhood education in various countries and how some practitioners have found ways to operate effectively within GERM’s narrow focus. As we stated in the last issue (Wasmuth & Nitecki, 2017), we believe that our field is in need of alternative stories and an open, democratic, scholarly, and professional dialogue about the purpose of ECEC (Moss et. al., 2016; Urban & Swadener, 2016). This dialogue should extend beyond best practices and effectiveness in meeting measures to include deeper questions at the foundation of ECEC, including what is the purpose and function of our work with children? What is our image of the child? What are diverse ways to support a child’s learning? How can different ways of supporting children look in practice? We cannot continue to ask only questions of effectiveness, how to achieve specific and often externally determined goals. Instead, we need to challenge this narrow understanding of ECEC. This issue is an effort to ask these questions, to go beyond criticism and think about alternatives. We can begin to do this by highlighting stories of how GERM policies influence practice in diverse contexts –

and how we can think about alternatives and work within their limitations.

How GERM Influences Early Childhood Practice

GERM policies have resulted in substantial changes in the way ECEC operates all around the world. This is especially true in predominantly Anglo-Saxon countries, such as the United States, England, Australia, or New Zealand, but even in a social democracy like Sweden, GERM has changed practice tremendously. In addition, GERM policies are increasingly shaping the educational fields in less developed countries, where the privatization of public education remains a cause for concern (Wasmuth & Nitecki, 2017). What used to be a place for children to socialize, play, and explore together, has become a highly structured, measured preparation for later schooling. Academic content has been pushed down into the Kindergarten level or even earlier. Examples include countries such as Australia (Barblett, Knaus, & Barratt-Pugh, 2016), Iceland (Gunnarsdottir, 2014), New Zealand (Gibbons, 2013), the United Kingdom (Whitebread et. al, 2012), and the United States (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016). Too often, this is sold as a means of preventing society’s problems through “high-quality” ECEC, even though such complex social problems do not have a quick fix (Moss, 2014). It is the “story of high quality and returns,” as Moss (2014) calls it, the dominance of neoliberal thinking, which has resulted in the perception that early childhood education is like any other market, a commodity, an object of social investment that can be “purchased as a means to high returns (individual, corporate, societal); or as the object of market transactions between parent-consumers and provider businesses” (Moss, 2014, 67). Such thinking is the very antithesis of education as a public good meant to serve as the foundation of an educated citizenry.

This way of thinking is the foundation of the GERM movement. Specifically, GERM characteristics have affected the early childhood experience in these ways:

Standardization of Teaching and Learning

In many western countries, it is now a given that schools and ECEC institutions must have high standards (Penn, 2011). These expectations are dictated by professional standards, laws, or accrediting bodies. There is little regard for local context and individual differences, even though the early childhood years are not at all standardized, given the individual and cultural variances that exist. Standardization within, but also between countries, excludes some voices and ways of doing things, leaving some groups on the fringes. What can be witnessed currently is the increasing dominance of a certain way of thinking about ECEC and how its practice should look. The western idea of “appropriate” ECEC is more and more dominating, while local contexts are ignored or even worse, belittled. As Urban & Swadener warn in regard to the International Early Learning Study (IELS), the idea of a “Baby-Pisa,” an international assessment of early learning outcomes: “Instead of careful, culturally and contextually appropriate consideration of the achievements of early childhood systems in diverse countries, and of systemic evaluation of the actual outcomes for children, families and society, IELS appears to adopt a strategy that favours largely decontextualised comparison and measurement of narrowly defined predetermined outcomes” (2017, p. 4).

In addition, this standardization narrows the curriculum to the point that other important aspects of a child’s experience are ignored. “We now witness uniformity and standardization. . . . creative learning, risk taking, customized teaching and learning, and a culture of shared responsibility and trust have almost no place in

the educational systems that are shaped by GERM” (Sahlberg, 2011). Instead, what is happening in many countries is the “schoolification” of early childhood education, the school-like approach of early childhood education with the goal of preparing young children for compulsory school education (Moss, 2014, p. 37). Teacher-directed learning is on the rise in many of the countries that are influenced heavily by GERM policies, simply due the fact that the highest value is placed on the curriculum that is tested. Teaching for the test is now commonplace in ECEC.

Over-Emphasis of Core Subjects of Mathematics and Literacy

Standardization and its “one size fits all” approach have dominated virtually every educational measure in the field from PISA to the IELS (Urban, 2017). The focus is primarily on mathematics and literacy, placing little value on holistic development or other content areas. What about an early learning experience that values play, the arts, science, social sciences, physical education, or social-emotional development? Instead, literacy, mathematics, and standardized testing have become the focus of the curriculum, while other content areas are vanishing. In addition to this content being emphasized at the expense of other content, critics in various countries worry that the expectations in literacy and math are inappropriate for young children (Campbell, 2015; Cannella, 2008; Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin, & Almon, 2015, Kamii, 2015). Often, teachers are forced to engage in practices that are in opposition with their own beliefs and knowledge about how children learn best: “Growing numbers [of early childhood teachers, the authors] are convinced that they’re committing malpractice, that they’re actually doing harm. Many have used the term *child abuse*” (Ochshorn, 2017).

Test-Based High-Stakes Accountability and Testing

Educational measurement is not an exact science and with young children, it is even less reliable and valid. Some argue that such assessment is actually a mis-measure for younger children (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004). Such “testing” is almost impossible with some children, yet the reliance on standardized tests, often with high stakes attached, continues to persist. Young children are tested earlier and earlier, too often in ways that are clearly not meaningful or age-appropriate.

The issue is not assessment in general. It is probably hard to find any expert who would argue against or would downplay the importance of assessment in ECEC. There is no question that assessment of young children and their learning is one, if not *the* most important, tool in a meaningful practice in ECEC. Findings in different international contexts actually emphasize the importance of assessment and documentation of young children’s learning (Carr & Lee, 2012; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Leu et al, 2007; Rinaldi, 2001). However, such an assessment needs to be meaningful and respect the complexities of learning. The current trend of standardized testing of predominantly decontextualized and meaningless knowledge, often done on a computer, and as a means of an early preparation for taking tests, is the opposite of meaningful assessment. It does not help the teachers to better understand their students in order to support their learning in a meaningful way, but it puts unnecessary pressure on both young children and teachers, with the purpose of collecting meaningless data. Such an assessment is not supporting young children’s development, but obstructs the complex tasks associated with assessing, teaching, and learning.

Prescribed Curriculum

In order to maintain control and achieve success on these imperfect measures, curriculum has

become increasingly narrow, with little space left for the teachers to improvise or be creative. “It appears to be against our better judgment, but the more we seem to know about the complexity of learning, children’s diverse strategies, and multiple theories of knowledge, the more we seek to impose learning strategies and curriculum goals that reduce the complexities of this learning and knowing” (Lenz Taguchi, 2014, p. 14). In fact, Cannella (2008) described a “pedagogical determinism in the field of child development... [that] legitimizes power of covert control” and shapes most of the prescribed curriculum in early childhood.

It is alarming that this approach is rarely questioned. Is such a goal even desirable and such an approach beneficial for children’s learning and development? Standardization, its testing and prescribed curriculum leaves little room for the hallmarks of early childhood: wonder, awe, and surprise, the “essence of early childhood” (Moss, 2014). Early childhood education is turning into a “trivialised idea of learning and knowledge” (Olsson, 2013), instead of natural discovery of the world through the child’s eyes and at the child’s pace. Paley (2005) notes that “the expectations for children have become so instrumental and fixed that the potential for surprise is largely gone” (p. 47). Without time for these aspects of early childhood, how will children have the capacity to develop into the imaginative, creative thinkers that we need to solve the problems of the future?

Increased Control Over Students and Teachers

Since the administrative models in education have been largely borrowed from business world, there is a “top-down” model of control. The result is voiceless children (and in some cases, parents) and teachers being degraded and losing their creativity and passion for the field, an “increasingly authoritarian system of governing” (Moss, 2014, p. 69) of young children

as well as adults. The complexities and diversity of young children's lives are ignored and reduced, "the otherness or singularity of the child is grasped, not respected, to make the Other into the Same" (Moss, 2014, p. 42). Children are not seen as individuals, but have to match the norms of child development and predetermined learning outcomes. At the same time, teachers, as well researchers, are under great pressure to deliver written accounts of their practice and live up to expectations and standardized norms of what is globally considered to be "excellent" and "best" practice (Olsson, 2013). Many early childhood professionals know how children learn best, but they find it more and more difficult to provide hands-on, exploratory, and play-based learning activities due to the escalating pressure of having to meet developmentally inappropriate standards (Campbell, 2015; DEY, 2016; Katz, 2015; Ochshorn, 2016). As Alford et al. (2015) have found, regardless of grade level, teachers are now more likely to use "whole class, didactic, teacher-centered instructional practices"—an approach that "discounts the range of differences and contexts that are present within an early childhood classroom" (p. 10). Early childhood settings worldwide nowadays look more like elementary school classrooms. Children sit in chairs for far too much time, being forced to memorize meaningless facts, and their stress levels are rising. Children are not allowed to be children anymore; instead, they worry about not knowing the right answer and begin hating school from an early age. All of these developments, as so many critics have voiced, are harmful to young children (Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin, & Almon, 2015; Rawitsch, 2016). Too often, there is no joy in early childhood settings anymore and the question whether children should be happy when spending their time in such institutions seems to be naive for most people in power, who are making decisions about our field.

It is further disturbing that the voices and concerns of experts in the field of ECEC are too often completely ignored. A perfect example is the so-called revision of the Common Core Standards in New York State, the home of the editors of this issue. Although many similar examples can be found around the world, a local example that is affecting our own personal practice deserves mention. These "revisions" did not take the concerns of experts seriously, despite months of soliciting open comments and expert opinions. Rather, such voices were ignored or patronized (Ochshorn, 2017; Tanis, 2017). The revisions presumably never intended to address such concerns in a meaningful way. It was no more than a rebrand of the old standards. It still ignores the decades of research documenting how young children learn best. As Bianca Tanis stated to the point: "You Can't Make a Silk Purse Out of a Sow's Ear" (2017).

Privatization

Privatization outsources the public good of education to private operators. In the field of education, it can take the form of nonprofit (such as charter management organizations or CMO) as well as for-profit (educational management organizations or EMO) school management. This privatization relies on corporate models of operation, and ultimately leads to inequality under the illusion of choice (Jones, 2017). Lafer explained the result of privatization as increasing inequality: "Despite prolific claims to the contrary, corporate-led education reform does not represent an agenda to improve American education or expand the life chances of poor urban youth...the corporate agenda would lead to a divided country, where the children of the wealthy will be taught a broad curriculum in small classes led by experienced teachers, while the rest of the nation will be consigned to a narrow curriculum delivered in large classes by inexperienced staff – or by digital applications with no teachers at all"

(2017, p. 130). This is not only true for the United States, since examples of privatization are apparent worldwide. Privatization does not fight inequality, but actually seems to enhance it.

The consequence of inequality and imposition of Western definitions of education have become a major issue, especially in the global South, where it has become a human rights concern. The push for privatization in the global South in form of so-called low-cost schools looks more like a modern form of colonization and exploitation than a sincere investment in children or in the development of sustainable educational systems (Wasmuth & Nitecki, 2017). This trend of privatization is a blatant expression of how the common good of the education of our youngest children has become an open market, driven by profit. The pioneers of privatizing ECEC are the western, capitalist countries, such as the US and UK. Not only are business models transferred, but also teaching and learning methods, as well as standardized forms of assessment. Western conceptions of child development are assumed to be indisputable facts that can be easily transferred to any cultural context. Such a Western arrogance ignores local ideas and traditions of ECEC. Such local peculiarities are not valued, but seen as a hindrance to the further extension of their own business model (Urban & Swadener, 2016). For example, there is a reason why Bridge International Academies, one of the largest enterprises pushing the privatization agenda in the Global South, relies on standardized, prescribed lessons that can be delivered via a tablet and often in English (The Global Initiative for Economics, Social and Cultural Rights, 2017). It is not because such an approach necessarily supports the learning in the local context, but rather enables the easy transfer to other countries in “need” of privatization.

Technology

Although the use of technology is questionable with young children, it is flourishing all over the world. Often summarized as “personalized learning,” technology, especially in the form of tablets, has found its way into more and more early childhood classrooms. The use of technology is described by its promoters as the new “silver bullet,” which will support the development of all children and at the same time will close the achievement gap and fix the problems of many educational systems. However, there is not much reason to believe such bold claims. Currently, we do not know very much about what happens in a child’s brain when they use a tablet, simply because it is such a new device and not much research exists. However, it seems doubtful to support optimistic claims because the research that exists shows the opposite. To learn, children need to give meaning to the world by constructing new knowledge, but this cannot be done in front of a screen, which is often an abstract representation of reality. Children need to spend more free time playing outdoors, regardless of the weather, making meaning of the real world, instead of sitting in front of a glowing screen playing so-called educational games and apps that are based mostly on inopportune behaviorist and/or transmission theories of learning. Children need to read and use their imaginations. Children learn best by interacting with people; technology is simply a poor substitute for personal interaction. Many experts are concerned that tablets have a serious negative impact on children’s social and physical development. As Denisha Jones (2017) points out: “What I did not describe is a five-year-old sitting at a computer, watching an animated video while he clicks a mouse to build a train station and has to solve problems by moving the pictures on the screen with the mouse. That is the ‘personalized learning’ promoted today and it has no place in an early childhood classroom.”

Most experts would probably not argue against online learning for older students or even occasional well-planned and supported tablet-based activities with younger children. However, this is not what is happening in many classrooms. Instead, young children are used as guinea pigs as no one can really say at this point if the overuse of technology has the potential to harm the development of young children. So why is this unsound push for technology happening? Education technology is estimated to become a \$60 billion industry by 2018 (Karadas, 2016). “There is an entire parasitic industry making billions of dollars selling us things we don’t need – standardized tests, Common Core workbook drivel, software test prep THIS, and computer test crap THAT” (Singer, 2017). It is a “hoax” (Karadas, 2016), that does not aim on helping children, but rather helping the companies to sell their products.

How to Operate Within GERM’s Limitations

So, what can we do in this situation? First, scholars as well as teachers need to see the system for what it is, a field being manipulated for economic and political purposes, as we discussed in the first issue. It is far too easy to do what we are told to protect our jobs and the status quo, or to give up and sneer at the current state of affairs, but then we are part of the problem. As Steven Singer, a teacher, stated with regards to the use of technology in classrooms: “We didn’t decide to use it. We didn’t buy it. But who is it who actually introduces most of this garbage in the classroom? That’s right. US. We do it. Often willingly. We need to stop” (2017). Without pointing the finger at teachers, Singer clearly has a point by emphasizing that everyone who sees her- or himself as an advocate for young children at one point simply needs to take a stance. GERM is only one of many viewpoints, one with many flaws.

Following the ideas and directions of GERM blindly means nothing else than doing harm to our children. However, it does not have to be this way. To fully consider the issues, we must seek alternatives. There is hope, if we are willing to think differently. Cannella (2008) described this possibility: “To reconceptualize a field in which social justice and hearing the voices of younger human beings is the foundation, we must be willing to go beyond our possibilities, to go beyond the ways we have been taught to perceive” (p. 173).

Paolo Freire’s theory can be applied here. Freire discussed the potential of individual action within the “limit situation” (Freire 1970, 1985). “Limit situations” are “impediments to transforming action,” such as the narrow focus and limitations imposed by GERM policies, which create impediments to the transformation we know can occur in early childhood classrooms where play, imagination, and freedom are possible. “Limit-situations imply the existence of persons who are directly or indirectly served by these situations, and of those who are negated and curbed by them. . . those who are served by the present limit-situation regard the untested feasibility as a threatening limit-situation which must not be allowed to materialize, and act to maintain the status quo.” (Freire, 1985). The status quo is maintained by those who will benefit: those profiting from yet another common good that is privatized. Limitations are created on the macro level by policies that standardize, dictate, and assess, and trickle down to daily practice in the classroom. If one simply plays along, then he is complicit. “Washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral” (Freire, 1985, 122). Teachers and academics who study the field must not wash their hands of these problems, but seek alternatives. Freire offered hope of changing this limited structure through dialogue, starting on an individual or

small group level, which is fertile ground for change. Questioning the status quo opens a space for the possible, for “untested feasibility” (Freire, 1985). It is similar to what Dahlberg & Moss call “minor politics” (2005), the “everyday lives of children and preschools” (2005, 15). Such minor politics can take a variety of forms and there is potential on this level. Things can be changed, as long as the status quo is not taken for granted; if minor politics are understood as a critical thinking “about creating opportunities for seeing matters differently and making loud voices stutter” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 138). What if we tested what is feasible within a world that has its limitations?

To question, think differently, and seek hope in these limit situations, we must realize that our field is not facing an “either/or” situation. For example, there is false dichotomy posited between play and academics based on standards (Epstein, 2011; Katz, 2015; Snow, 2011). Too often, advocates of play-based learning are characterized as opponents of learning or high expectations. This is definitely not true and it needs to be emphasized. As Alford et al. (2015) have written: “The concept of *play* for young learners has been erroneously portrayed as directly oppositional to the more ‘worthy’ academic counterpart of academic *work*” (p. 10). Riley and Jones (2010) would agree that, “Learning and play do not have to be contradictory; learning can occur during times of play” (p. 149). We would even say that learning not only can, but clearly does occur during play. Play *is* young children’s means of learning. There is a way to infuse academic learning with play-based developmentally appropriate learning. What needs to be criticized is the way that GERM policies have changed the early childhood classrooms, the “schoolification” of ECEC, which has resulted in more teacher-directed learning, rote memorization of meaningless facts, and the loss of the Arts, Music, Physical Education, and even Social

Studies and Science. Such criticism is even more important because research clearly shows greater gains from play-based programs than from academically oriented early childhood institutions. Longitudinal follow-up studies indicate that while a focus on academics, combined with teacher-directed instruction may produce good test results in the short term, play-based programs that emphasize children’s interactive roles and initiative, while not so impressive in the short term, result in better school achievement in the long term (Katz, 2015; Levine, 2017; Marcon, 2002; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993). That is why current headlines such as the *New York Times*’ report supporting flashcards over free play (Goldstein, 2017) are so disturbing. Such oversimplified reports, that highlight minimal gains in academic performance disproportionately, ignore the decades of research on benefits of play-based learning and contribute to the false dichotomy of play vs. academic (Levine, 2017).

It is not play versus learning, but play *and* learning. By setting it up as an either/or, the overlapping influences on learning are not recognized and it creates a motivation to “fix” a broken system. In fact, “binaries are unhelpful because they bind us in a dialectic that provokes resistance and may inhibit change; and also by virtue of our opposition, we may unwittingly reify and confer legitimacy on the status quo we seek to supplant. A third path is needed” (O’Loughlin, in Bloch, Swadener & Cannella, 2014, p 65). This third path is the path of untested feasibility – the path that we can travel to navigate the complexities created by GERM policies and still foster meaningful and exciting experiences for young children.

Teachers should strive to maintain fun, play and freedom in our classrooms – and advocate for this necessary foundation. The latter seems of increasing importance; teachers as well as academics in the field of ECEC need to see themselves as advocates and act accordingly.

We have the responsibility to ask not only how we can implement such policies most effectively, but we also need to think critically about these practices and what they mean for the children's lives. While this is hindered in the era of GERM, it remains an essential task. Teachers still know how children learn best, that they have to be active, that they have to move, use their senses, get their hands on things, interact with other children and teachers, create, wonder, and invent. Children learn through playful, hands-on experiences with materials, the natural world, and engaging and caring adults. We have to stand up for such a learning environment; we cannot give this up because some people ask for "rigorous instruction." In fact, teachers have always addressed much of the content that is now included in many of the new, more rigorous standards worldwide. We just need to clarify how our good teaching is matching up with the standards. There is still a place for "the acquisition of important skills and techniques, for example literacy and mathematics...the issue becomes what that place is, so as to ensure the acquisition of skills and techniques is not at the expense of creating knowledge and living a flourishing life" (Moss, 2014, p. 101). We do not have to give up fun, wonder, surprise, and play and replace them with worksheets. We can think of creative ways to infuse the content required in standards into our teaching in a meaningful way. We must find the common ground, the third path, between the standards and play, between standardization and spontaneity.

The articles in this issue discuss some possibilities for what a "third path," or "untested feasibility" can look like. The contributions to this issue are examples of how researchers and practitioners are revealing GERM-influenced policies for what they are, controlling, misguided attempts to "improve" ECEC, while making a profit on the way. We are honored to open this issue with a statement from Denisha Jones, a national advisor to Defending the Early Years

and Assistant Professor in the College of Arts and Sciences at Trinity Washington University in Washington, D.C. She describes the negative impact of GERM policies in the United States, as a cautionary tale against the marketization of early childhood services. Jones describes the failures of GERM policies and calls for the protection of childhood, even as a matter of national security.

Naomi Moland examines how international organizations promote play-based pedagogical approaches in early childhood settings around the world and how local educators respond in *Sesame Street International and the Promotion of Play-based Learning: Educators' Discomfort and Resistance in Nigeria*. Moland's case study investigates Sesame Workshop's efforts to introduce play-based approaches in Nigerian classroom, which presented challenges due to the local and cultural differences. This case study is an excellent example of how Western conceptions of child development and education cannot be easily transferred to the Global South and that local traditions of learning and teaching cannot be ignored and belittled.

Maria Boeke Mongillo's piece, *Preparing School Leaders for Young Learners in the US*, examines three forces in public education in the United States: the "Universal Pre-K" movement, the impact of GERM policies, and the Professional Standards for Educational Leadership, which influence how leaders are prepared, hired, evaluated, and supported in their work. The author describes how these policies compliment and contrast each other, and how GERM policies are often opposed to the essence of ECEC. This is even more disturbing, as Mongillo discussed, because many school leaders lack a background in early childhood education and are not always prepared adequately. She points out that school leaders, if they want to understand and resist the negative impact of GERM policies, need to be better

prepared when it comes to including pre-k within the public school. Mongillo's piece illustrates how complex and sometimes contradictory early childhood policies can be, and how important school leaders are, that are aware of best practices in ECEC and advocate for them.

Elizabeth Erwin examines the early childhood practice in Australia in *Making Transparent What is Most Important: How Early Childhood Practices in Australia Counter Mounting Pressures Faced in the West*. Even if Australia is heavily influenced by GERM policies, it has received international acclaim for its highly praised national early childhood framework, as well as the steadfast and visible commitment to education and care for its youngest citizens. Erwin describes how some Australian early childhood schools have resisted the mounting pressures of GERM policies by focusing on the children's well-being. Her article shows how resistance to the dominant discourse can look like, and lead to a practice, that acknowledges and respects the children's well-being. Children's learning can look differently, and Erwin offer ideas how western philosophies, narratives and practices in ECEC can be transformed.

Simone Lehl, Katherina Kluczniok, Yvonne Anders, and Hans-Guenther Rossbach represent the context in Germany in their study, *Longer-term effects of a high-quality preschool intervention on children's mathematical development through age 12 – Results from the German model project "Kindergarten of the Future in Bavaria."* Their study describes Germany's participation in standardization, accountability, and measurement, which is commonplace in most western countries. The quantitative analysis finds that preschool quality is associated with higher competencies in mathematics at age 12. The inclusion of this article in an issue that looks critically at GERM policies and the increasing focus on academic

learning in ECEC shows the importance of a real and open dialogue. The article shows that play versus learning is indeed a false dichotomy, and that a focus on academics does not necessarily have to lead to inappropriate practice. It also demonstrates the ongoing importance of quantitative research. A real dialogue needs to include all stakeholders in the field who are interested in improving ECEC in a meaningful way.

In *Resisting Westernization and school reforms: Two sides to the struggle to communalize developmentally appropriate initial education in indigenous Oaxaca, Mexico*, Lois Meyer describes two intense oppositional pressures in Mexico. Federal school policy has imposed on indigenous teachers and communities western-influenced views of developmentally appropriate early childhood education and care, leaving the indigenous perspective officially marginalized. The author describes the status of communalized ECEC programs in Oaxaca, given government repressions and teacher resistance to these repressive school reforms, providing a powerful example of the potential for teachers to organize to change the status quo through advocacy and activism.

The field of ECEC is facing a crossroads. "Early Childhood policy and services cannot be effective or of high quality as an isolated policy, but are part of a wider social picture" (Penn, 2011, 210). The wider social picture is a complexity composed of competing political and economic agendas. Although this context is overwhelming, there is hope, "there are always alternatives; that we cannot know what a body can do; that another world is possible; that schools and education can play a part in imagining and prefiguring that world" (Moss, 2014, 208). What is needed is a change, but not a change that remains within the same mode of thinking, built upon the GERM-based foundation that currently exists. Rather, we need

“transformative change” (Moss, 2014). A new mode of thinking is needed and stories such as the one in this issue, stories that tell alternative and different realities of ECEC as predominant ones, are a start. This issue is meant to call attention to the transformational nature of practice, the everyday work teachers around the world do with young children. Perhaps these examples will provide hope, start a dialogue, and test the untested limits of feasibility. “Only when we are willing to transform ourselves and our work do we have the possibility of transforming society” (Pinar, 1994, cited in Cannella 2008). Perhaps if we are willing to question, engage in dialogue with all stakeholders, and imagine what is possible, we can not only work within the current limitations, but also find ways to transform them.

As practitioners test these areas of “untested feasibility” and engage in dialogue with others, change from the ground up actually has the potential to occur. This is not only of uttermost importance for practitioners, but also for the academia in our field. “We should listen to other disciplines, not only developmental psychology and economics. We need to be “a community of dissensus” (Moss, 2014, 189). If we are open to real dialogue, there exists a hope; there is possibility within practice to provide good early childhood within policy constraints. However, there is more to it -- if one is willing to go beyond individual practice. Teachers may not be able to contest GERM policies, neoliberalism and managerialism in an open political context, but there is potential in the “minor politics.” This issue includes examples from teachers who have found ways to operate within the limitations of GERM policies and create change, in their practice or through their research. By sharing ideas with other practitioners, what is done in more and more classrooms changes; practice changes. Remember, policy and practice are dependent upon one another. “The trick is to move from one to the other seamlessly,” as

Penn (2011, 65) reminds us. So, what if practice then began to affect policy? After all, practitioners are the experts when it comes to the care of children. As Penn (2011) notes, “the care of the very young...may appear at odds with the demands of a competitive economy” (p. 52). So, why don’t we work within the current limit situation, not only to do what is best for the very young, but to change the limitations of our current situation?

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About the Authors

Elena Nitecki, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Early Childhood and Childhood Education at Mercy College. She has higher education teaching experience in the fields of Early Childhood Education and Social Work. Prior to teaching college, Elena held positions as a pre-school teacher and a social worker in medical and early intervention settings. Elena earned her doctoral degree in Urban Education from Temple University and holds master's degrees in both Education and Social Work. Her research focuses on various topics related in Early Childhood Education and teacher education.

Helge Wasmuth, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Early Childhood and Childhood Education at Mercy College. Prior to his position at Mercy College, he worked in various position in higher education in Germany and Switzerland. Dr. Wasmuth received his PhD in educational science from the University of Tübingen, Germany. His scholarly research interests include the history and philosophy of early childhood education, current issues in early childhood education, and innovative teaching methods in online learning. He has been interviewed by UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning as an advocate for age-appropriate early childhood education and play as a means of learning. He will be featured in a documentary on the history of kindergarten and Friedrich Froebel.