

When Preparing for an Uncertain Future, Let Your ECEC Values Guide You

Denisha Jones

Helge Wasmuth

ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. – Robert Fulghum

The future has always been unpredictable, and the inability to know what lies ahead has been a cause for concern and a source of inspiration for many. Educators spend their careers preparing young people to grow up and become adult leaders who can navigate the world and all its challenges. Thus, preparing for an uncertain future is a huge part of what teachers do every day. Many believe that by instilling students with knowledge, skills, and dispositions, they will be equipped to face whatever the future has in store. But what about the educators? How do they prepare for the future? What do they need to know and do to be ready for whatever might come?

Given that the future is uncertain, our preparation must rely on enduring values and beliefs that can guide our decisions and strengthen our resistance. In this special issue, we asked early childhood educators, researchers, advocates, and activists to contribute articles that explore how a commitment to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) values can support the field in facing global challenges of today and tomorrow. Though the field lacks a single set of confirmed foundation values, we articulated 10 values we believe are central to our work in early childhood education. From

building healthy relationships to recognizing children as inherently worthy of dignity and respect, to embracing play as the leading activity of development, and to valuing diversity as an asset in the lives of children, we invited scholarship that examines how a commitment to values can support our ability to navigate the challenges we face today and those that may emerge in the future.

Given the growth of neoliberal ideologies and policies that threaten to replace our values with free-market goals and standardization desires, it is imperative that we align all aspects of our work, including our resistance, with our values. An examination of our professional values can be used to educate policymakers who often focus on the economic value of ECEC to the exclusion of values that are important to the work of educating young children and supporting families (Murray, 2018). Although a limited number of studies have examined early childhood policies in relation to the values they transmit (Gunnestad et al., 2022), we offer a collection of research articles that explore how different values show up in early childhood pedagogy and curriculum.

One value mentioned frequently in the issue's articles is, which does not come as a surprise, play. Play is one, maybe even the value, that the field of ECEC is committed to, even as it increasingly disappears, and ECEC practitioners and advocates literally must fight for play. Young children learn through play and, therefore, need

to play, real play, of course, not educational instruction that tries to disguise dull memorization or boring activities as 'joyful activities. Play is not, as everyone who works with young children knows, a pastime or frivolity; it is rather a deep expression of learning, of joy, and relationships with other human beings, young and old. However, play is also important when thinking about an uncertain future and what is dissolving before our eyes right now. Through play, children make sense of the world and their place in it, and this entails learning what it means to be a citizen in a democratic society, at least if we adhere to such values. Playing means practicing everyday democracy; it is the form of everyday democracy. When children engage in play, they learn to practice cooperation and shared responsibility, principles essential to democratic participation. Playing involves disagreement, and when children are allowed and encouraged to resolve these conflicts on their own, they practice negotiation, compromise, and perspective-taking. And play requires rules, rules that everyone agrees to follow, and that might need to be revised if they don't work (or don't bring fun). Playing means sharing and listening to other opinions, another core democratic value. And finally, play brings together children from different backgrounds, abilities, and perspectives. Through play, children learn to value differences and respect others' opinions.

However, play is important not only for children in ECEC settings. As the authors in this issue argue, play and the insistence on it can become a tool of resistance against neoliberal ideologies and policies that threaten ECEC values. Thus, play is important for both children and adults in the field. Especially in a world that has become ever more uncertain and a time when we experience the erosion of democratic values, the insistence on play must be

maintained. Three of the articles pick up the value of play and serve as forceful reminders of why play, together with other core values such as relationships, children's agency, environmental consciousness, and social justice, is and must continue to be the core of our profession.

Fincham et al., in *Safeguarding ECE Values in Elementary School Classrooms in the United States: A Photovoice-Centered Inquiry of Teachers' Beliefs and Practices*, discuss the importance of key ECE values, such as play and relationships, emphasizing that they remain essential to the work of early childhood education (ECE) practitioners. Such values, though, are threatened by current trends such as the "schoolification" of ECE, not only in the US, but around the world. Far-right policies, neo-liberal and neo-colonial tendencies, and the current attacks on initiatives to promote diversity and equity, so the authors argue, have resulted in a legacy of education policy focused on standardized outcomes. Those who are suffering are too often young children, their learning and social needs, as well as the practitioners, with "teacher burnout" and inadequate support for children becoming increasingly common. These tendencies, so the authors point out, do nothing to move us to a more just system.

In their article, which is based on data from a larger study involving five rounds of in-depth photovoice-centered focus group discussions on culturally responsive, equitable, and socially just practices, the authors then discuss how graduates of their teacher preparation program at a regional state university on Coast Salish territories in the Pacific Northwest (US) fare in their ability to implement and live ECE values. As the authors convincingly argue, these programs are essential because they and the discourses they provide shape teachers' practices and identities, thereby

promoting certain ways of being a teacher. Their question is: how can future teachers resist the trends and assumptions mentioned earlier while at the same time uphold the early childhood values they consider important? For many teachers, values such as play, relationships, and diversity are seen as essential to children's learning and development. Children's rights, their agency, and individuality need to be upheld. But those values are not only important for children. They can, the article shows, furthermore lead to forms of non-compliance and resistance to challenging injustices, even though they are often constrained by sanctions or the fear of job loss. This is important, as the authors state, "that when envisioning ECE as a space for solidarity and liberation rather than assimilation, we embody acts of hope and resistance."

Play Against Efficiency: A Synthetic Analysis of Children's and Teachers' Play as Resistance to Privatization and Control in U.S. Early Childhood Education by Robin Holly & Erin Dyke also emphasizes the importance of play. Their article presents a meta-ethnographic synthesis of two separate studies and analyzes the lived realities of early childhood educators and children in Oklahoma, U.S., who are forced to navigate the constant pressures of efficiency and normative accountability metrics. While the first study engaged in teacher action research with six pre-kindergarten-to-third-grade Oklahoma teachers to understand how the increased pressures of standardized curricula and testing impacted teachers' capacity to enact play-based learning, the second study undertook a two-year critical participatory ethnography with six ECE children in a pandemic homeschool cooperative. Oklahoma, which ranks at the bottom among all states for teacher wages, per-pupil school funding, teacher-student ratios, and standardized test achievement scores, is

currently experiencing a push for privatization and a curriculum that emphasizes "pro-American exceptionalism" and "bible-based virtue education," and an "academic shove down" for children from low-income families. In such educational environments, care, cooperation, and justice are often not valued. Instead, accountability reforms such as scripted curricula and standardized testing are curtailing early childhood educators' ability to exercise independent professional judgment in their classrooms, and pressure them to conform to rigid standards and frameworks that prioritize academic outcomes at the expense of holistic child development. And play-based learning initiatives are often characterized as wasteful.

However, even within these constraints, teachers can undertake acts of reclamation and resistance. One is the insistence on play. Play, the authors argue, can be conceptualized as children's and teachers' educative enactment of public space-times and as the reclamation of agency and autonomy. Play allows children to make meaning of their world and provides important preparation for participation in democracy and social life. Nevertheless, we need to defend children's right to play. Play, so the authors argue, can reorient the purpose of learning and also transform the relations among students, teachers, and the institution itself. It can be seen as a form of resistance to curricular tendencies toward order, control, and top-down authority; play-based learning is a subversive act that challenged the primacy of data-driven instruction and reasserted the value of children's agency.

Micah Card, in her article *Why Can't You Just Honor the Professional I Am?': California Preschool Teachers' Meaning-Making and Resistance Across Policy Context*, is interested in the lived experiences of early childhood educators working across California's

fragmented “patchwork” ECEC system. The study, based on 90 to 100-minute interviews with six preschool teachers employed in public, private, and mixed-funding programs, shows how educators navigate vastly different program contexts, credentialing requirements, and pedagogical expectations.

As Card shows, teachers are indeed motivated by and committed to values such as progressive social-constructivism, active and relational learning, developmentally appropriate practice, and advocacy for young children’s particular needs and rights. To enjoy their daily work, teachers need the ability and opportunity to implement and live such values, and thus they choose, if possible, environments that allow them to do that. What matters for such teachers is the children and that they are allowed to be human beings with agency. Unfortunately, as Card’s interviews show, that is too often missing because teachers don’t feel supported. These values, which include “play as a conduit for meaningful learning,” serve as an ongoing resistance to the push for academics and standardization in early childhood settings. Teachers’ resistance to or avoidance of academic standardization in early childhood settings is an important indicator of what matters to early educators and how they navigate the field in terms of both career path and practice.

The fourth article, Jue Wang’s *Children in Action: Envisioning Sustainable Futures Through Place-based Learning and Rural Literacies*, explores a slightly different topic: children’s understanding of nutrition, food waste, and local food systems. In a participatory action research (PAR) study conducted in a predominantly white farming community of approximately 900 residents in Idaho, Wang examines how 7- and 8-year-old children in a summer program actively explore issues of food

consumption, environmental sustainability, and agricultural practices within their local context.

The article, though, is extremely timely, as the climate catastrophe in general and the Iran War, with its anticipated result of a current fertilizer shortage, will lead to poor harvests and famines. Thus, topics such as the ones discussed in Wang’s PAR must be at the forefront of meaningful ECEC. An uncertain future requires ECEC to think about how we can address issues of climate catastrophe in an age-appropriate way. We simply cannot continue doing more of the same and cannot reduce ECEC on preparing young people for a world of presumed endless growth, the race to compete successfully in a global market, which today seems nothing but a race to the abyss. Issues such as climate justice, sustainability and circularity, learning about ecological systems, self-responsibility and activism, collective action and solidarity, and questions of mobility and food must be addressed if we want young children to prepare for an uncertain future and support their teachers in reflecting on this challenge. And Wang’s study asks such questions. It shows that children have the capacity to engage meaningfully with the complex issues of nutrition and sustainability when given opportunities for authentic participation. When children can actively learn about various local food sources, they incorporate this knowledge to make more informed and conscious dietary decisions and to address environmental issues such as food waste management, so the article shows. At the same time, the article is a good reminder of what can be achieved when we really listen to children’s voices and encourage their participation as active co-researchers.

ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. – Fulghum’s famous quote suggests that kindergarten teaches us

everything we need to know. But the issue's articles reveal a more complex truth: perhaps it's not what children learn in ECEC that matters most, but what ECEC itself knows and stands for—the values that make up its core. When educators center play, relationships, children's agency, environmental consciousness, and social justice, they create spaces where both children and adults learn how to live in an uncertain world. The resistance documented across these studies — teachers choosing humanity over standardization, children engaging with sustainability, educators practicing solidarity — demonstrates that we don't need to wait for new solutions; we need to look back to the values that have always made ECEC transformative; values that will continue to be essential, even in uncertain futures.

References

- Gunnestad, A., Mørreaunet, S., Chahboun, S., & Pearson, J. (2022). Values in Early Childhood Education (ECE): A cross-cultural comparative study of values for ECE expressed in policy documents. *ECNU Review of Education*, 5(4), 577-600. DOI: 10.1177/20965311221109842
- Murray, J. (2018). Value/s in early childhood education. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 26(3), 215-219, DOI: 10.1080/09669760.2018.1490849