Early childhood education and care in a global pandemic [1]

How the sector responded, spoke back and generated knowledge

Author: Herderson, L.; Bussey, K. & Ebrahim, H. B.
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Book description

Early Childhood Education and Care in a Global Pandemic is a book that highlights how the international early childhood education and care sector responded to the global COVID-19 pandemic. It shows the resiliency of the sector around the world as it grappled with a rapidly
changing environment of uncertainty and complexity.

Drawing on a diverse range of early childhood education and care contexts, the book captures real-life examples of how COVID-19 impacted children, educators and teachers, and families. Chapters present cases of the particular challenges that COVID-19 presented in a wide range of countries and then how they responded to these challenges – challenges that tested the resilience of children, educators and teachers, and families. By forward anchoring, each chapter examines the opportunities that arose from these challenges and how new local knowledge was produced as new ways were found to support children, educators and teachers, and families during this time.

This book offers early childhood education and care a timely resource on lessons learnt from a once-in-a-lifetime event. It offers the sector a way forward to commit to developing new ways of thinking and working that stem from the lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table of contents

Foreword

We write this foreword from England which over these last months has struggled to manage and contain the spread of the coronavirus despite its privileged status as a highly developed and wealthy nation. We have learned much about COVID-19 since the pandemic hit and have come to respect more deeply the capability of medical scientists and their expertise and phenomenal achievements in the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of the virus. At all levels of society, no one has been untouched by this pandemic, but clearly some have been affected more than others (Howes et al., 2020; Pascal et al., 2020). The pandemic has shone a light on gross inequalities, hierarchies of power and inequitable access to resources, whether they be financial, practical or knowledge based. Investigations are revealing the lack of preparedness for this kind of event globally, and there is an urgent need for more studies which shine a light on how the lives of each of us have been affected and changed, so that we can do as Freire suggests (1970) and name our world, explore and share our realities and raise our consciousness about how we might move ahead with more intelligence, wisdom, solidarity and social ethic. This book marks a significant contribution to our knowledge about the impact of COVID-19 on those lives touched by it.

As with most areas of society and human life, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed additional challenges to young children growing up in the modern world (Andrew et al., 2020; Hunnikin & Blackburn, 2020; Pascal et al., 2020; Paull & Wilson, 2020; UNICEF/Save the Children, 2020). The economic and public health consequences of the crisis are threatening to deepen the well documented existing patterns of vulnerability and under-achievement for young children and families, especially attributed to those living in poverty and disadvantage (Andrew et al., 2020; Howes et al., 2020; Pascal et al., 2020; UNICEF/Save the Children 2020). The impact of the additional stress, depression and mental health issues caused by the pandemic crisis is likely to be grave, especially in low income households and for disadvantaged young children and their families (Fegert et al., 2020; Howes et al., 2020; Pascal et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020). Evidence is beginning to emerge about how the anxieties linked to COVID-19 are affecting the everyday life of young children (Howes et al., 2020; Pascal et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020). It appears that the impact of restrictions on social interaction and participation in society's cultural life is highly individual and structured by many hierarchies, including hierarchies of age.

Studies of young children's development show clearly that remote contact cannot satisfy the need for the human contact and interaction that is offered by early years communities and which are crucial to healthy development and inter-subjectivity (Trevarthen, 1980). It is well established that children thrive in the company of other children and interested adults, and many children have been experiencing total isolation from this during the pandemic (Howes et al., 2020; Fegert et al., 2020; Pascal et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020). Giving these young children the opportunity to express their lived experiences and felt realities acknowledges their agency, wisdom and also their strong need for companionship and also enables them to process these feelings and so have greater confidence in participating in community life. Research by Pascal et al. (2020) indicates that in the pandemic fallout there is a risk of isolated young children developing issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, attachment problems or a sense of grief which could have fundamental and long-term effects.

Collectively, the studies reported in this book have succeeded in enhancing and supporting the expression and realization of children's, parents' and practitioners' voice in early childhood policy and practice, with authors seeing this as an essential mission, particularly to realize children's rights and the civic role of early childhood settings. It informs, and is informed by, the clear view that early childhood education and care are a political project in which children's citizenship and rights to participation are embodied and embedded (Pascal & Bertram, 2009; 2012). This mission in our own work has been strongly influenced by liberation theorists such as Freire (1970) and the sociologist Bourdieu (1990) whose work highlights how power and agency are distributed in society to maintain and control social order.

We strongly agree with the authors in this volume that young children, who are at a formative stage in their lives and in their growing civic awareness, have equally valid knowledge, views and feelings about the pandemic which they are capable of expressing if given the opportunity. They have powerful and specific narratives about how they have been and are affected by the COVID lockdowns and the subsequent gradual opening up of public spaces and places, which deserve serious consideration and which provide important evidence to inform how early years provision and policy should respond. We believe that giving young children the opportunity to express and document their lived experiences and felt realities can enable them to process these feelings and so have greater confidence in participating in community life. The narratives can also help parents and practitioners, many of whom are also highly anxious and fearful, to have a fuller understanding of their children's responses and help them to emerge stronger from this crisis.

This book contains narratives from 15 countries, demonstrating that the COVID-19 pandemic is a global phenomenon and has impacted dramatically on human life in all affected countries, but the scale and impact have been differentiated significantly by the responses of governments and populations to it. This is illustrated through the various chapters which set out the differentiated policy responses between East and West, and Northern and Southern hemisphere countries. Early years education praxis inside the West is underpinned by constructivist social theories and psychosocial theories of development, (Gupta, 2006; Yang et al., 2020). Play-based early childhood systems, the language of instruction and ideas around developmentally appropriate early years praxis, are often regarded as progressive by other countries outside the West (Yang et al., 2020). Learning theories such as socio-emotional, physical and cognitive development are generally viewed through the philosophical prism of constructivist learning theories and psychosocial development, and profoundly shape curriculum and pedagogic approaches to early years education (Campbell-Barr, 2019).

It is important to recognize that these dominant notions are not universal, and some chapters in this collection perform an important reminder of difference in perspective and philosophy as well as similarity. This plurality of national perspective is also layered with

plurality of voice, with perspectives of children, parents, practitioners, teacher educators, researchers and state decision makers: thus there is a plurality of actors and respondents. Methodologies and methods in evidence gathering also include a plural range of qualitative approaches, including phenomenology, case study, action research, ethnography and auto-ethnography, and there is a plural range of disciplines and services highlighted, including health, care, education and family support, with a strong suggestion of the value of an interdisciplinary approach not only to research but to policy development and service delivery. The chapters in this collection then offer a set of plural narratives which exemplify and illuminate the COVID-19 experiences and actions of different actors in this global event, and these are set against descriptions of policy decisions, against which the experiences of citizens, both children and adults, might provide a benchmark for evaluating their appropriateness and impact.

We also believe that this point in our history provides an opportunity for a
deeper reflection on where we are in the early childhood field, how we got here and how we might move ahead to better address the global challenges of inequality, climate change, planet sustainability, the role of new technologies and, most importantly, how we can live together more peaceably, equitably and ethically in this changed and changing world. We suggest that moving forward begins
with dialogue and at the heart of dialogue is listening more carefully and inclusively to each other and acknowledging the plural narratives that co-exist and vie for attention and action. This book is full of wisdom to fuel such dialogues.

Tony Bertram and Chris Pascal
Region: International [3]
Tags: COVID-19 [4]
      workforce [5]
      child wellbeing [6]
      ideology [7]