

Academic rigour and ideology are not incompatible in early childhood research ^[1]

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Source: European Early Childhood Education Research Journal

Format: Article

Publication Date: 23 Jan 2024

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

Excerpts

The times they are indeed a-changin'. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), today, is situated in paradoxical times. While the international awareness on the importance of the early years, of the educational quality of childcare and on the value of the early years' professions increases, many countries face a retreat of public responsibilities and a crisis of the workforce. At the same time educational scholars are increasingly accused of being biased. An interesting aspect of this paradox may be that it finally brings politics back into the nursery, as Moss (2007) pleaded for more than a decade ago.

The times where childcare was just about care, or when it was reduced to an issue of female employment lay definitely behind us. An eloquent example is how the Barcelona norms have been revised by the European Commission.

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The vision on ECEC was purely economic and, as a result, it was a policy on quantity, rather than on quality. In 2022, the Directorate General for Justice of the European Commission took the initiative to revise the Barcelona norms, after a consultation with an international group of experts. The new document not only increased the quantitative norms to 45% for the youngest children and 96% for the older ones, it also explicitly referred to the quality of ECEC (Council of the European Union 2022). The new text states (§ 21):

A high quality of ECEC is essential for ensuring that children benefit from participation in ECEC. While there is no single way to define and measure the concept of quality in ECEC settings, its essence lies in the quality of interaction between adults and children, irrespective of the ECEC system in place. Member States should ensure the provision of high-quality ECEC taking into account the various dimensions set out in the Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems, including access to ECEC services, the qualifications and working conditions of staff, the pedagogical curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and the governance and financing of ECEC services. Of particular importance are elements such as staff-child ratio, staff qualifications, and continuous professional development.

The reference to the European Quality Framework and its quality indicators (European Commission 2018) is explicit and especially the workforce element of the EQF is mentioned as key.

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It is safe to say that we have moved beyond the mere discussion on the economic function of ECEC and have now very well understood its pedagogical function, understanding pedagogy as education in the broadest sense. The most recent initiative of the European Commission (2020) is the Child Guarantee and it goes one step further. It frames ECEC as an essential right of children amidst other fundamental rights, including housing, nutrition and health. It recommends the European Member States to address barriers for childcare uptake of children from vulnerable families and promises considerable investments of ESF+ and the Recovery and Resilience Funds to do so.

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Despite the at times disappointing national action plans, in sum, international organisations, as well as researchers, agree that ECEC combines economic, pedagogic and social missions and that, in order to fulfil these missions, the workforce is essential. There is a general consensus that this requires substantial investments in staff qualifications, continuous professional development, better adult-child ratios, and leadership; in sum: a competent system (Urban et al. 2012).

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De-professionalisation?

It is a remarkable paradox that while in the last two decades the awareness of the importance of the workforce and the quality of provision has substantially increased (OECD 2022), the crisis of the workforce – often driven by the retreat of public responsibilities – has also gained ground. There are several examples to be given, but the case of France is probably one of the more salient ones.

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The result is that this 'run for profit' has put an extreme pressure on both the workforce and the quality, defined as 'dehumanising early childhood' in a book by two investigative journalists (Gastaldi and Périsset 2023) after the tragic death of an 11-month-old child, poisoned by an overworked and overstressed childcare worker 'who had lost it'. Following that tragic event, the national French inspection inquired many of these micro-crèches and published a report stating that:

(...) the effective staffing levels, professional training and the general ability to meet children's needs are disparate, leading to serious inequalities between regions. The deterioration in quality can lead to shortcomings in the emotional security and development of children, as well as burnout among professionals, who are no longer able to care for children in the required conditions. From this point of view, the shortage of professionals affecting the sector is an aggravating factor as much as a symptom. Low levels of pay, poor quality of working life and the feeling of not being able to give children the time they need make it difficult to attract and retain staff. (Bohic et al. 2023, 5)

A very similar evolution happened in Flanders.

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The problem of staff shortages is not limited to these two examples. Rather, we face more global workforce crisis, as Mona Sakr and her colleagues label it in their article in this issue. In 2021, the DG Education of the European Commission published a report on the issue and so did the OECD in 2022. Both international organisations agree on what needs to be done: increase the recognition of the profession, focus on the educational and social value of ECEC, among other by establishing a common set of core competences. And improve professional development opportunities, career prospects, salaries and working conditions.

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The education wars

The political debates on education have recently discovered a new arena: the war on woke. It has been argued that soft-hearted pedagogues who embraced postmodernism, social constructivism and child-centredness have eroded the knowledge base of education. These so-called leftist academics are accused of censoring every debate with their post-humanist, post-colonial political correctness and their ideologies of gender fluidity. To sum up the argument, the woke brigade is a threat to Western civilisation and needs to be stopped.

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Education is always intertwined with questions of what is fair, what is quality, what matters and this with explicit or implicit opinions on how the world our children grow up in, may look like. Questions of efficiency, effectivity or success, are always dependent on what we mean by 'the good life'. That is why the answer to the question what education is for, has – according to Paulo Freire – always to do with 'to understand the world in order to change it'.

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Every educational research is inevitably political in the sense that it always entails a choice: a choice of the image of the child; a choice of whose perspective is investigated and whose isn't; an opinion on what early childhood education is for; and so many other choices.

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But of course, every quantitative study (as well as every case study, focus group, interview or observation) implies a choice of what to study, what matters, which questions to ask and what variables to consider as dependent.

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