

Transparency in Early Childhood Education: What the West Can Learn from Australia's Focus on Well-Being

Elizabeth J. Erwin
Montclair State University

Abstract

The landscape of early childhood education and care has become unrecognizable in many countries, particularly in the West. There is an increasing pressure to focus on outcomes over process, prescribed curricula, standardized assessments, and unrealistic academic expectations for young learners and the adults who work on their behalf. This shift in educational practice has become a harsh reality for many young children, families and educators.

The purpose of this paper is to challenge these mounting pressures through an in-depth examination of how early education and care in Australia places well-being as one of the top priorities for young children. Australia was deliberately identified for this analysis because of international acclaim received for its highly praised national early childhood framework as well as the steadfast and visible commitment to education and care for its youngest citizens.

Using multiple contexts and narratives, three key features are described that demonstrate *how* early education practices in Australia counter Western beliefs about who children are and how they learn. These three features are: (a) a strong sense about holistic well-being, (b) truth about place, and (c) living in harmony with the natural world. Ideas for global education reform are proposed as one way of joining with other voices to protect young children across the world.

Keywords

Early childhood education, young children, global education reform

Introduction

The world is witnessing increasing pressure to focus on outcomes over process, prescribed curricula, standardized assessments, decreased play and increased academics for young learners and the adults who work on their behalf. The challenges faced in the West, particularly in the United States, may be the result of growing external forces in which educators have little influence. For example, Ravitch (2014) suggested that under the guise of school reform,

public funding is now given to private corporations and entrepreneurs, who typically possess and hire persons with limited to no knowledge or experience in education.

Corresponding Author:

Elizabeth J. Erwin, Montclair State University, College of Education and Human Services, Department of Early Childhood, Elementary and Literacy Education, Graduate Programs in Inclusive Education, 1 Normal Avenue, Montclair, New Jersey 07043.
E-mail: erwinel@mail.montclair.edu

This shift in educational outlook, particularly in the West, has become a harsh reality for many young children, families, and educators across the globe.

Silin (2014) further noted “now the threats are coming from outside: the demand for an increasingly academic curriculum by politicians and policymakers, the insistence on easily quantified and measurable results, and the incorporation of early childhood classrooms into elementary schools” (pp. 53-54). These external challenges, which are typically, but not exclusively, driven by political or corporate power, are having an impact on the field in ways that are unprecedented. The early childhood field, which has been somewhat protected from assessment-related pressures endured by researchers and educators of older students, is now forced to shift its focus from the social-emotional and cognitive lives of young learners to the demands and burdens of constant assessment (Adair, 2014).

Around the world childcare costs are not automatically covered by individual states or countries. In the United States, costs for childcare is not covered by federal or state funding, and many families elect to keep their young children at home since it can be more cost effective than working and paying for childcare services. Although some families send their young children to private childcare or family day care centers, other families opt to send their 3-5 year olds to preschool programs that may be publicly funded by states such as Head Start,¹ special education,² or other funding sources that offer block grants³ to states. State licensing is required for every child care or preschool program although this can vary greatly. Early childhood programs can also seek professional accreditation through meeting standards from the National Association for the

Education of Young Children Children in the United States typically start formal schooling

at age 5 years when they enter kindergarten. A lead pre-school – Grade 2 teacher working in a public school is generally required to hold a bachelor’s degree or master’s degree, although a teacher in a private setting might only be required to hold an associate’s degree in early childhood education. Despite the lack of affordable childcare across the United States, there remains equally pressing issues about the overall climate in early childhood education and care.

The Growing Dilemma

This paper explores several key ideas related to early childhood education and the Global Education Reform Movement for this special issue including (a) current dilemmas in early childhood education such as teacher-directed instruction, standards-based curriculum, and developmentally inappropriate expectations, b) ideas for what *successful* practices in response to the global education reform movement look like, and c) alternative educational understandings for school readiness. As the field experiences ongoing pressure to increase focus on academics, implement prescribed, teacher-directed curricula and participate in standardized and other assessments, it appears that there is an emerging set of ABCs. These new ABCs represent unrealistic expectations for early childhood programs to “Assess, Behave and Conform” (Erwin & Robinson 2015). Similarly, some may notice a similar set of ABCs for young children that emphasize “accountability, behavior and compliance.” As with traditional and often academic notions of young children learning their ABCs, these newly emerging ABCs, reflect the same limited assumptions about how young children learn and what they need to thrive. This may not be a problem experienced solely in the West even though that is where much of the concern about early childhood care and education exists. Over a decade ago, Fleer (2003) suggested that since many English-

speaking countries share similar beliefs, histories, values, and practices, a Western view of early childhood has emerged over time and is now considered typical and customary.

Across the globe, values shaping educational decision-making echo the beliefs embedded within society. Some of the mounting expectations (i.e., standardized assessments, restricted opportunities for play, increased academics, teacher-directed instruction, and prescribed curriculum) faced by early childhood educators can be seen as a mirror for societal values emerging in the West (i.e., uniformity, speed, outcomes). More specifically, these Western values are likely propelled by an underpinning desire for accumulation or “more”

A culture dominated by the accumulation, not just of wealth but also of concepts, ideas, actions, knowledge, and more. In fact, many of us from the West seem to be perpetually busy *doing* the things we feel we need to do in order to *have* the things we believe we need to have. While on this treadmill we miss the present, we fail to simply be here, to be mindful.

(Dachyshyn, p. 36, 2015).

As troubling as this pursuit of accumulation may be, these values appear to be shaping education for young learners in the West and could threaten early care and education globally.

Global threats to early childhood education and care are being challenged. Resisting dominant discourses related to young children is not new. The notion of reconceptualizing early childhood education emerged in the early 1990s from work done by researchers in multiple disciplines (e.g., anthropology, sociology, philosophy) who were confronting issues of equity and power in early childhood practices, theories, relationships, and institutional structures (Bloch, 2014).

Twenty years later O’Loughlin (2014) argued to those who challenged notions of

“...normative childhood, linear development, and prescriptive pedagogies, often artfully disguised as student-centered and humane education, might take seriously the need to articulate a comprehensive critical alternative vision to the status quo” (O’Loughlin, 2014, p. 66). Although the global trend of increased academics and unrealistic expectations for young children is growing, there are strong, collective voices in the West, and beyond, resisting dominant discourses about the current state of early childhood education (Block, Swaderner, & Cannella, 2014; Iorio & Parnell, 2015); as well as confronting the notion of what is quality in early childhood education, particularly how it is constructed (Moss & Dahlberg, 2008). To shed light on and transform the current challenges in early childhood education and care, a powerful and lasting momentum is required.

Seeking Answers

The underlying intention of this paper is to voice resistance and to propose a global call to action to counter the growing pressures in early childhood care and education. Through an in-depth examination of *how* Australia positions well-being as a top priority, we can begin to re-frame practices in the West about who young children are and how they learn. Australia was deliberately identified for this examination because of the international praise for its well respected national early childhood framework as well as the steadfast and visible commitment to its youngest citizens.

It was the notion of accumulation that first led me to ponder *how* to resist the dominant discourse around the growing challenges faced in early childhood care and education in the West.

Australia’s national curriculum framework, Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF): Belonging, Being and Becoming (Australian Government Department of

Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009), continued to receive international respect and acclaim. EYLF embraced a clear vision which recognized that “Fundamental to the Framework is a view of children’s lives as characterised by *belonging*, *being* and *becoming*. From before birth children are connected to family, community, culture and place” (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 7). The notion that children are deeply connected to the world in which they live is not inconsequential or isolated in the EYLF, but rather transparent and an anchoring belief that is thoughtfully embedded throughout the entire guidelines.

Another noteworthy reason Australia has gained global respect regarding EYLF, is the steadfast *holistic* focus on children’s identity and well-being. For example, the EYLF identifies five Learning Outcomes or expectations for children from birth to five years of age that clearly articulates who young children are and acknowledges how and where they live in the world. The Learning Outcomes in the EYLF declare that children: (a) have a strong sense of identity, (b) are connected with and contribute to their world. (c) have a strong sense of well-being, (d) are confident and involved learners, and (e) are effective communicators (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009).

Not typically observed in dominant discourses in early childhood in the West, although visible throughout the EYLF, was a deliberate and integrated focus on ecological well-being and sustainability (i.e., a deep respect for the natural world and commitment to the long term survival of the planet), as well as citizenship and personal agency (i.e., autonomy, inter-dependence, and influencing events and the world through decision-making). Although these ideas are acknowledged by many educators and are not necessarily new in the West, they are

the cornerstone to Australia’s approach to learning for young children. Further, these elements stand in stark contrast to the recent push for academics, standardization and uniformity in the West. Even though some inadequacies have been identified regarding the EYLF (Krieg, 2011; Peers & Fler, 2014; Sumsion et al., 2009), Australia maintained a clear commitment to protect and care for *all* of its young children. It is for these reasons, among others, that I made the decision to pursue my sabbatical in Australia and learn firsthand about their early childhood care and education for its youngest citizens.

The Inquiry Process

Spending 5 weeks in Australia for my sabbatical provided an unprecedented opportunity to examine policies, practices and discourses in a concentrated and uninterrupted way. Haraway (1988) asserted that all production of knowledge needs to be situated and that “translation is always interpretive, critical and partial” (p. 589). This work was influenced by my background as an able-bodied, highly educated, middle class female, who has lived all my life in the United States with economic, social, cultural and other advantages.

The goal of this sabbatical leave was to study early childhood education policies, practices and discourses in Australia. Most of the five week visit was spent in two geographically diverse states, Victoria and New South Wales (with the majority of time spent in metropolitan Melbourne to become immersed in its beauty, rhythm, landscape and diversity). There were many planned interviews as well as informal and impromptu experiences, with individuals and in groups, which provided a multi-layered context for understanding how Australia approaches education and care of young children. Meetings were arranged with families, educators, scholars, researchers, university faculty, university students,

administrators, senior policy officials and others responsible for the lives of children birth to five years.

In the field, time was spent touring and conducting in-depth observations in three different programs responsible for young learners; holidays, scheduling constraints and other factors prevented visits with even more schools. In addition, I conducted an in-depth review and analysis of documents including, but not limited to, current research and literature, policy statements, welcome packets and brochures from schools, university course syllabi (referred to as unit guides), and child-generated products. I attended several faculty meetings as well as several university classroom lectures for undergraduate students pursuing an education degree, and was also invited and delivered a guest lecture in one undergraduate course.

Throughout the 5 weeks in Australia, as well as the 4 months following my return to the U.S., I reviewed on an on-going basis extensive field notes, school documents, journal articles, research summaries, cultural artifacts, video, photographs, and other relevant information that led to a rich contextual understanding of early childhood care and education. The iterative nature of the process provided me with meaningful and frequent opportunities to reflect on what I was noticing, as well as to form questions and impressions that deepened this inquiry. For example, when I was introduced and it was explained why I was in Australia, responses such as, “don’t think we got it right - we still have a long way to go,” “we are not where we want to be” “we are experiencing the same pressures with regard to academics,” and “there are still many contradictions here,” reflected a combination of humility and frustration at the slow progress made. There was a consensus that the road to excellence and equity for all young learners was still unfolding.

Although not to the same degree, Australia seemed to be experiencing some of the same

tensions around early childhood education and care experienced by the West, although they appeared to be overcoming these mounting pressures. I came to understand *how* Australia was able to sustain a focus on what matters most in the lives of young children despite current pressures faced by some of their global neighbors: there was a clear alignment between early childhood teacher preparation and classroom practice. In other words, there was alignment between what prospective teachers were learning in their university classrooms, and how these very same practices and principles were reflected in classrooms of young learners. This observation regarding the alignment between higher education and classroom practice in early childhood, helped to create a contextual understanding about how the investment and interest in children were consistent across practices, perceptions and narratives. Examples of this transparency is discussed in the next section.

Although I spent time at one university, numerous materials, articles and research from a variety of university teacher education programs across Australia informed and reaffirmed my observations. In addition to the parallel between teacher education and classroom practice, there was another pattern that shaped my initial impressions about early education and care in Australia. There was consistent acknowledgment and application regarding *deep engagement* with materials, interactions and experiences. Specifically, learning (for both children and adults) was understood as a process of deep inquiry that was not bound by time but rather approached by discovering multiple layers as opposed to a cursory, hasty or surface-level examination. Within this framework of *alignment between teacher education and classroom practice* as well as from *a perspective of deep engagement*, the rest of this paper describes three key elements which shaped impressions about what

Australia deemed as most important for young children.

Engaging Deeply in What Matters Most

There were three key features that demonstrated how early education practices in Australia reflected a solid understanding of who children are and how they learn: (a) a strong sense about holistic well-being, (b) truth about place, and (c) living in harmony with the natural world.

A Strong Sense of Holistic Well-Being

First, I noticed that educational narratives and practices concerning citizens in Australia, particularly the youngest, reflected a central emphasis on *well-being from a holistic perspective*. I observed that *well-being* was not only uniformly considered significant in the lives of young children, but was actively encouraged and supported across environments and with people responsible for care and education during the early years.

Well-being was simply a natural part of the cultural fabric and embraced as a core value, particularly at the policy level. For example, from a national perspective well-being was identified as one of the five key learning outcomes of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), acknowledging a strong and holistic interdependence between health in mind, body and spirit (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Specifically, holistic health was at the core of Australia's national policy demonstrating an unquestionable priority placed on an interconnectedness to learning and well-being during the early years.

Holistic approaches to teaching and learning recognise the connectedness of mind, body and spirit. When early childhood educators take a holistic

approach they pay attention to children's physical, personal, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing as well as cognitive aspects of learning. While educators may plan or assess with a focus on a particular outcome or component of learning, they see children's learning as integrated and interconnected (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 4)

Further, the EYLF curriculum guidelines identified the concepts of belonging, being, and becoming as the cornerstone in young children's lives, leaving little doubt about the significant role that an integrated, holistic approach to health played in early childhood education and care. In one school's literature, the multidimensional nature of well-being was emphasized including domains of cognitive, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual well-being. Similar philosophies were echoed across all programs.

The concepts of belonging, being, and becoming will be discussed later and in more detail. Although belonging and becoming are essential concepts, I wish to cast light on *being* because this notion presents one of the greatest challenges for many in the West. I noticed that in classrooms *time and space were not constrained* in Australia, as they often can be in the West, so children had unlimited opportunities to investigate, create, discover, and to simply be in the present moment. In one children's center, the children were getting on their shoes, sun block and sun hats to go outside and one child spoke up.

Child: "I don't want to go outside"

Teacher: "That's fine. The other children want to go so we can leave the door open in the other room and you can stay with them. And I can keep this [outside] door open to still see you"

The teacher honored the child's choice to remain inside and at the same time assured the child she was not alone or forgotten. This was one example how children can often make decisions about where and how long they wanted to engage in their desired activities with no pressure to conform to what the rest of the class was doing.

In addition to acknowledging the importance of social and emotional health, the Early Years Learning Framework also stressed children's independence and participation in "tak[ing] responsibility for their own health and physical well-being" (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 32). This transparent focus on how physical well-being was as valued as social-emotional health, was consistently demonstrated across settings not only in writing but in daily practice as well.

In addition, the EYLF supported the idea that young children were capable, dependable, and responsible for learning how to take care of themselves. The EYLF also advocated that resilience is necessary for teaching children to manage daily stress and risks. Teaching children specifically how to live a healthy life was a value that was clearly articulated in the EYLF: "learning about healthy lifestyles, including nutrition, personal hygiene, physical fitness, emotions and social relationships is integral to well-being and confidence (p. 30). Further, it was customary to observe this value about living healthy across early childhood settings. Children routinely tended to the vegetables, fruits, and/or herbs in their large, beautiful gardens, as well as preparing and enjoying meals from these bountiful spaces.

Another observation about well-being throughout my observations in Australia was that young children were positioned as capable of making informed decisions and sufficiently trustworthy to handle risks. These impressions were the rule, not the exception. In one early

childhood center outside Melbourne, children aged three and four took turns to make their way across a considerable running creek by stepping on large rocks which served as a bridge amid the high level of water. One teacher positioned herself in the middle of the "bridge" and extended her hand only when children requested assistance or looked uncertain. There was an underlying assumption, not dominated by notions of safety, that children had the competence and confidence to assess risks and cross the creek. This is just one example of how children's emotional as well as physical well-being was encouraged and supported.

In another's children's center, there was an outdoor, open and fairly large, fire pit that was used often with children. In both centers, children were taught and encouraged to use authentic tools such as hammers and saws that were not hidden in bins, only accessible to adults, but available for all children to use. Children, in cooperation with teachers or family members, co-designed and created from scratch upholstered chairs, pillows, bookshelves and other useful furniture for the classroom, in addition to beautiful crafts and artwork. There seemed to be a fundamental belief that young children could be trusted to handle authentic real-world learning experiences early on to navigate the world in which they live. A strong sense of well-being was naturally and consistently threaded into the fabric of daily experiences - physically, socially and emotionally.

Truth About Place

During my sabbatical in Australia, one of the most striking observations was how a deep understanding of *place* shaped discourses and practices for, with and about young children. An understanding of *place* was not new to Australia, and yet in the West there is little if any consideration of place. The notion of place in Australia continues to evolve and is

conceptualized as a much broader construct than simply land, geography and terrain. Across early childhood settings and university environments, there was a transparency about the truth regarding place, particularly its indigenous historical, social, and cultural roots.

Massey (2006) suggested “an understanding of both place and landscape as events, as happenings, as moments that will be again dispersed” (p. 46). Duhn (2012) suggested that although there is still much uncertainty about what place is and who constructs place; generally for most people, “place is where everyday life happens” (p. 103.) Duhn further explained that within early childhood pedagogy in order to ensure for place to be understood and to receive the substantial attention it deserves, there must be a fundamental repositioning of the child only with regard to place to the child’s *entanglements* as they relate to place. In other words, place must be contextualized within an interconnectedness of all living beings and things.

There was a deliberate intention to honor place across a variety of early childhood contexts, and most noticeably in the acknowledgement of, and interaction with indigenous stories, culture, ceremony, history, and ways of knowing. My impression was that it was generally standard practice to recognize publicly the true settlers of the land and the ancient wisdom that still lives on. For example, at one university I observed an acknowledgement of the rightful settlers and traditional owners of the land: the Aboriginal Elders written on the first page of unit guides (e.g., course syllabi) as well as a verbal statement made by university faculty at the beginning of classes and meetings. In addition, this public acknowledgement about place was also visible upon my visits to Parliament as a written document publically displayed in a prominent location in the entry way visible to everyone who entered. This public recognition of place was not

done in a superficial or mechanical manner but acknowledged in a deep and meaningful way.

In another example, a children’s center in Melbourne, Jindi Woraback, was bestowed an Aboriginal name that means to join/unite. This early childhood program was formally named in a traditional Aboriginal ceremony by the Wurundjeri people who make up part of the Kulin Nation. Jindi Woraback consciously and proudly embedded indigenous cultural and philosophical traditions within its school walls. The school philosophy of the Jindi Woraback Children’s Center, Victoria Australia, see below, articulated a strong public and transparent recognition of place.

- Jindi Woraback Children’s Center acknowledges the Wurundjeri people as the original custodians of the land on which the center operates.
- The community of Jindi Woraback believe it is important to build effective respectful partnerships with children and families from indigenous and non-indigenous communities.
 - We believe children have the right to:
 - Maintain connection with their land and country,
 - Access education that strengthens their culture and identity
 - Access education programs so that they become empowered to achieve to their fullest potential.

At the Jindi Woraback Children’s Centre an unwavering commitment to place did not stop at the name; there was a reconditioned Aboriginal garden under construction with native plants, vegetation, and artifacts in which children had researched, designed, planned and co-created with adults. Indigenous crafts, fabric, books, dolls, toys, games, puzzles, artwork, photographs, and stories were accessible for children’s enjoyment and interaction in the

classrooms, hallways, and outdoor spaces. Children and adults alike consistently demonstrated profound respect for and interaction with place across all early childhood contexts.

Living in Harmony With The Natural World

There was one last element demonstrating the value Australia places on well-being in early childhood: the deep and respectful connection to the natural world. I observed a visible commitment to honoring nature and all living beings within higher education as well as early childhood classroom practices that extended far beyond acknowledging local geography, environment or ecology. It was almost as if there was a continuous, respectful and evolving interaction with all living things, including the earth, which simply appeared to be a way of life. I witnessed belonging, becoming and being within the natural world at every turn.

There are countless examples that demonstrated how nature and all living beings were at the center of what and how children learned each day. The natural outside world served as the curriculum, space and materials which shaped children's investigations, inquiry and discoveries. Wood blocks which were handcrafted from trees in the local environment and art materials were purposefully selected from local resources in the community. Stones, leaves, rocks, bark, dirt, water, glass, sticks, insects and other living and non-living items were brought from the outside in or were investigated directly in the natural habitat. There were no plastic or synthetic toys, games, books or materials as far as I could tell. In one school, the welcome orientation packet specifically stated: "Being connected to environment and community is key. Your child will play in natural environments, including

areas such as our rock garden, veggie garden and bali hut."

In every school I visited, children spent a large part of the day outdoors. A deep engagement and interaction with natural elements was strongly encouraged, and not necessarily limited to time or space. In one children's center I observed an outdoor mud kitchen that consisted of a play stove and table where children could wander freely. There were also indoor bins filled with dirt and children could access water, dirt and mud when they wanted. There were multiple ways that children engaged with natural elements found in the environment that were simply a natural part of classroom routines. Across settings children's natural artwork was implanted into the physical structure of school buildings leaving a lasting imprint of beauty. Gathering together around an outdoor fire pit or assuming responsibility to care for school grounds were just a couple of examples of how nature and its life force were an integral part of children's daily lives.

Positioning children as responsible and capable citizens within their local classes as well as larger global community was another common observation about living in harmony with the natural world. In one children's center brochure, the philosophy statement noted "...with teachers prioritizing learning 'in, about and for the environment'; the aim being to connect children to the natural world and to their responsibility for maintaining the health and beauty of their kindergarten, local community and in turn the planet." In another children's center, young learners were solely responsible for raking the leaves on their entire school grounds in the autumn, then they would enjoy jumping and playing in the mounds of leaves they collected. In another children's center, the director shared with me her recent decision to stop using the dryer for children's sheets after washing them. She decided not to use the dryers at the school and hang the sheets

outside to dry. Despite feeling uncomfortable about the “messiness” of how it looked, she was determined to keep the sheets outside even if visitors arrived because of her and the school’s unwavering commitment to sustainability. This and other deliberate decisions honoring the interconnectedness within and beyond the natural world was demonstrated in both philosophy and practice throughout my visit.

In sum, there were multiple and rich ways that illustrated how practices and philosophy in Australia reflected a high priority on who children are and how they learn. The narratives and observations witnessed in Australia, particularly around a strong sense of well-being, the truth about place and living in harmony with natural world, represented genuine, transparent core beliefs.

Young children were seen as capable human beings. The focus on health in both body and mind reaffirmed a holistic perspective of children’s well-being as well as clear alignment between educational narratives and practices for Australia’s youngest citizens. Acknowledging the truth about place reinforced the idea that the connection to place was a deep, authentic and evolving process. Living in harmony with the natural world illustrated how children were positioned as responsible citizens who have important connections with the living and non-living world well beyond the classroom walls. These practices, which were embedded within a culture that valued deep engagement and connection, demonstrated a profound respect for all living beings as well as the environment (which many would argue embodies a life force). The concepts threaded through Australia’s national early childhood curriculum guidelines, belonging, being and becoming, serve as a reminder to the West that there are alternative ways of knowing, being and living. Many of these ideas are also rooted in New Zealand’s landmark and world-renown early childhood guidelines,

Te Whāriki, which recently celebrated its 20th year anniversary (Ministry of Education, 1996).

A Collective Voice for Global Education Reform

The purpose of this paper was to confront growing tensions and challenge the Western culture of accumulation in early childhood education by examining how Australia places a top priority on who children are and how they learn. In the last section of this paper, I offer ideas about how we might consider embedding some of these powerful lessons from Australia into western philosophies, narratives and practices in early childhood education and care.

A global call to action, as initiated in this special journal issue, requires conscious, collective action to transform systems and create a brighter future for our youngest citizens. Sahlberg (2006) argued that, in order for a global movement to be successful, economic competition is necessary. Sahlberg further suggested that one way education reform movements within and across countries can contribute to this global effort is by fostering co-operation within schools as opposed to competition as the primary pathway to affecting change, even though cooperation appears to contradict the intended outcome of economic competitiveness.

Expanding on the idea of co-operation versus competition, I believe that young children can and should contribute to the conversation on social change. Many in the West would agree that the purpose of early childhood education is not to make young children compliant, coerced, or conforming. Nor is the intention of early education to transform children into skilled test takers or to enhance evaluation scores through rote memorization. Instead, it can be argued that the aim of early education is to help young children to discover what it means to belong

and to be capable citizens of the classroom, the local community and the planet.

As such, the recommendations below reflect the idea that children partner *with* adults when it comes to social change, particularly global action. Although the notion of children as change agents is not new (Sapon-Shevin, 2010), the research and literature on young children and social action from a global perspective is limited. Framed within the constructs of being, belonging and becoming from the Early Years Learning Framework, I propose the following as one way of continuing the conversation.

Unpacking The Gift of Presence

One of the most powerful and long-lasting ways the West can begin to return to a genuine focus on well-being in young children's lives is to experience a cultural shift. In this way, a repositioning of societal or cultural beliefs and practices would provide individuals across disciplines and around the world to instill the notion of being present. Weaving *presence* into the cultural fabric of an early childhood classroom, school or community can potentially replace the drive for accumulation (of time, interactions, space, skills, outcomes). Incorporating the concept of being present disrupts the need for constant motion and activity by embedding stillness, calm and simply *being* (without doing) as an integral part of a young child's life. Being fully present in each moment is one of the greatest treasures children can experience at an early age. When the focus is not on doing, young learners can be fully aware and engaged in the here and now and experience a deeper understanding and respect for the world that surrounds them.

Erwin and Robinson (2015) pointed out young children are naturally mindful, and therefore adults need to step aside and minimize the risk to children who may become distracted (like adults) when there are too many demands or interruptions. If adults do not respect the here

and now in a young child's life, then it is likely that the child may not have adequate opportunities for reflection, solitude, contemplation and silence. Further, the significance of the present moment for young children is greatly diminished when master narratives focus on early childhood education as preparation for the future (Evans, 2015; Kessler, 2014).

In Australia's Early Years Learning Framework, *being* is critical for young learners:

Being recognises the significance of the here and now in children's lives. It is about the present and them knowing themselves, building and maintaining relationships with others, engaging with life's joys and complexities, and meeting challenges in everyday life. The early childhood years are not solely preparation for the future but also about the present. (p. 7)

As such, it would seem most natural to embed the core value of being present across early childhood environments, discourses and practices.

It may be time to re-examine another paradigm related to *being present* that has been rooted in early childhood education and care for decades. In response to the special topic on early childhood education in this issue: The Global Education Reform Movement and Maintaining a Developmentally Appropriate (DAP) Focus, I offer an invitation to re-examine the notion of DAP being "maintained." Perhaps there are other considerations regarding DAP in terms of paradigm shifts. Could there be alternate ways of thinking about learning and young children? How is the importance of *being present* reflected (or absent) in DAP? Are there children or contexts in which DAP does not adequately reflect who children are? In light of considering global education reform, how does DAP work for all young children across the world? For

example, linear ways of thinking about development or advancement may limit adults' perceptions of learning, particularly for children across all aspects of diversity (i.e., economic, social, cultural, ability, gender identity, linguistic, religious). Could there be educational ways of considering contextual variables and children's learning? In other words, what are the implications of DAP for children who take diverse paths, time frames and ways to flourish or whose cultural influences play a profound role in learning? Although this notion of challenging DAP for young learners is not new or unique (Block, Swadener & Cannella, 2014), how might we engage in deeper conversations and unpack the notion of presence to re-examine well-being from a global perspective?

Belonging To and Becoming Global Citizens of The World

In addition to the concept of *being*, the importance of *belonging* has shaped Australia's Early Years Learning Framework and is worth examining here. The importance of belonging is deeply embedded throughout the Early Years Learning Framework although an understanding of how to incorporate this idea into early childhood environments is still evolving. There are some concerns about how belonging is framed, specifically related to the politics of belonging (Stratigos, Bradley & Sumsion, 2014; Sumsion & Wong, 2011). Although there are many questions that emerge around this idea of belonging such as "who decides who belongs" and "at what point does belonging happen," the fundamental principle of belonging is a deep sense of connection. Quite simply, connection is at the very essence of well-being in childhood.

The concept of belonging and membership in early childhood is not new or novel and extends back at least quarter of a century. Specifically, for young children with disabilities the importance of being a valued member was at the center of understanding and enacting

inclusive educational practices. Although the knowledge base on belonging and membership focused generally on young learners with disabilities in classroom communities (Erwin & Guintini, 2000; Kliewer et al, 2004; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009; Schnorr, 1990), the notion of belonging and citizenship has become more encompassing and extends far beyond the classroom walls. As illustrated in Australia's Early Years Learning Framework:

Experiencing *belonging* – knowing where and with whom you belong – is integral to human existence. Children belong first to a family, a cultural group, a neighbourhood and a wider community. *Belonging* acknowledges children's interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace (2009, p. 7).

The importance placed on belonging across multiple contexts is the cornerstone of the Early Years Learning Framework which acknowledges that children have a shared responsibility to engage, respect and understand the communities in which they belong. Situated as global citizens, young children acquire roots and wings as they navigate their understanding of the world in which they live. Duhn (2014) explained that young children "develop roots (a sense of belonging), and also wings (a sense of becoming) to further explore the self in the world" (p. 226). As children deepen and expand their understanding of themselves as well as the world around them, this sense of *becoming* is perfectly aligned to *belonging* to communities and *being* a global citizen.

Becoming reflects this process of rapid and significant change that occurs in the early years as young children learn and grow. It emphasizes learning to participate fully and actively in society

(Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace, 2009, p. 7).

In short, the notions of belonging, being and becoming as described in the Early Years Learning Framework can serve as one place to continue to counter Western tensions in early childhood education. Positioning young children as the global citizens they are, recognizes the intersection of belonging, being and becoming during the early years. The underlying intention of this paper was to voice resistance and propose a global call to counter the growing pressures in early childhood care and education faced in the West. This in-depth examination of *how* Australia positioned early childhood education provides one possible solution for re-framing Western master narratives and practices in early childhood education and care. The attention to and transparency of well-being appears to be the common thread that unites Australia's focus on holistic well-being, the truth about place, and living in harmony with the natural world. The emphasis on well-being provides an important context for recognizing young children as the capable global citizens of the world that they are.

Notes

1. Head Start is a federally funded program for children who are deemed socially and economically in need.
2. Special Education is funded by federal legislation specifically for preschool.
3. A block grant is money to state and local governments from the federal government or other sources for use in general areas of social welfare that states may allocate according to local needs.

References

- Adair, J. K. (2014). Agency and expanding capabilities in early grade classrooms: What it could mean for young children. *Harvard Educational Review* 84(2), 217-278.
- Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace (2009). *Belonging, being & becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved from https://www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/early_years_learning_framework.pdf
- Bloch, M. N. (2014). Interrogating reconceptualizing early care and education (RECE) – 20 years along. In M. N. Bloch, B. B. Swadener, & G. S. Cannella (Eds). *Reconceptualizing early childhood care and education* (pp. 19-31). New York: Peter Lang Publishing Company.
- Bloch, M. N., Swadener, B. B. & Cannella, G. S. (Eds). (2014). *Reconceptualizing early childhood care and education* (pp. 19-31). New York: Peter Lang Publishing Company.
- Dachyshyn, D. M. (2015). Being mindfulness, heartfelt, and ecological in early years care and education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 16(1), 13-41.
- Duhn, I. (2014). Being and becoming cosmopolitan in early childhood curriculum: 'Roots', 'wings' and cosmopolitan citizenship. *Global Studies of Childhood* 4(3), 224-234.
- Duhn, I. (2012). Places for pedagogies, pedagogies for places. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 13(2), 99-107.
- Erwin, E.J. & Robinson, K. R. (2015): The joy of being: making way for young children's natural mindfulness, *Early Child Development and Care*, DOI:10.1080/03004430.2015.1029468
- Erwin, E. J. & Guintini, M. (2000). Inclusion and classroom membership in early childhood. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 47(3), 237-257.
- Evans, K. (2015). Reconceptualizing dominant discourses in early childhood education: Exploring readiness as an active-ethical-relation. *Complicity: International Journal of Complexity and Education*, 2(1), 32-51.
- Fleer, M. (2003). Early childhood education as an evolving 'community of practice; or as lived 'social reproduction': Researching the 'taken-for-granted.' *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 4(1), 64-80.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-599.
- Iorio, J. M. & Parnell, W. (Eds.). (2015). *Rethinking readiness in early childhood education: Implications for policy and practice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kessler, S. A. (2014). Reconceptualizing the early childhood curriculum: An unaddressed topic. In M.N. Bloch, B. B. Swadener, & G. S. Cannella (Eds).

- Reconceptualizing early childhood care and education* (pp. 33-43). New York: Peter Lang Publishing Company.
- Kliewer, C. Fitzgerald, L.M., Meyer-Mork, J. Hartman, P. English-Sand, P., & Raschke, D. (2004). Citizenship for all in the literate community: An ethnography of young children with significant disabilities in inclusive early childhood settings. *Harvard Educational Review*, 74(4), 373-403.
- Krieg, S. (2011). Becoming 'wordly with': An encounter with the Early Years Learning Framework. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 12(1), 46-55.
- O'Loughlin, M. (2014). Still waiting for the revolution. In M.N. Bloch, B. B. Swadener, & G. S. Cannella (Eds). *Reconceptualizing early childhood care and education* (pp. 63-75). New York: Peter Lang Publishing Company.
- Massey, D. (2006) Landscape as provocation: reflections on moving mountains, *Journal of Material Culture*, 11(1/2), 33-48.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1359183506062991>
- Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga Mo Ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Moss, P. & Dahlberg, G. (2008). Beyond quality in early childhood education and care – Languages of evaluation. *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work*, 5(1), 3-12.
- Nutbrown, C. & Clough, P. (2009). Citizenship and inclusion in the early years: Understanding and responding to children's perspectives on 'belonging.' *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 17(3), 191-206.
- Peers, C. & Fler, M. (2014). The theory of 'belonging': Defining concepts used within Belonging, Being and Becoming – the Australian Early Years Learning Framework. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 46(8), 914-928.
- Sahlberg, P. (2006). Education reform for raising economic competitiveness. *Journal of Educational Change*, 4, 259-287.
- Sapon-Shevin, M. (2010) (2nd ed). *Because we can change the world: A practical guide to building cooperative, inclusive classroom communities*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin.
- Schnorr, R. (1990). Peter? He comes and goes...." First graders' perspectives on a part-time mainstream student. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*. 15:231-240.
- Silin, J. (2014). Through a queer lens: Recuperative longings and the reconceptualizing past. In M.N. Bloch, B. B. Swadener, & G. S. Cannella (Eds). *Reconceptualizing early childhood care and education* (pp. 53-62). New York: Peter Lang Publishing Company.
- Somerville, M. & Williams, C. (2015). Sustainability education in early childhood: An updated review of research in the field. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 16(2), 102-117.
- Stratigos, T., Bradley, B. & Sumsion, J. (2014). Infants, family day care and the politics of belonging. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 46, 171-186.
- Sumsion, J., Barnes, S., Cheeseman, S., Harrison, L., Kennedy, A. & Stonehouse, A. (2009). Insider perspectives on developing belonging, being & becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia." *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 34 (4), 4-13.
- Sumsion, J. & Wong, S. (2011). Interrogating 'belonging' in belonging, being and becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 12(1), 28-45.

About the Author

Elizabeth J. Erwin, EdD., is Professor and Graduate Program Coordinator of the Programs in Inclusive Education at Montclair State University in New Jersey, USA. Core values that have shaped Dr. Erwin's research and teaching over the past 25 years are inclusive education, family-professional partnerships, self-determination, and promoting mindfulness and well-being in early childhood settings.