

Special Issue: Pedagogies of Social Emotional Development

Guest Editor's INTRODUCTION

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There are several reasons for our choice of the topic of “pedagogies of social emotional development” as the theme for this guest-edited issue of the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education*. From its beginnings, early childhood education emphasized children’s social emotional development. This was true both for the nursery and play schools attended by children of the wealthy and the settlement house preschool programs intended to give children of immigrants and the poor proper (that is, white middle class) emotional dispositions and values. Later in the 20th century, the core of the preschool curriculum became play and social interaction, with an emphasis on making friends, sharing, and self-expression.

However, this tradition of emphasizing the role early childhood education can play in children’s social and emotional development is at risk in the contemporary era, where investment in preschools is increasingly justified in terms of its contribution to academic success and longer term economic payoffs.

One of our goals with this special issue is to push back against the emphasis on academic preparation that, in our estimation, is having deleterious effects on early childhood education in many countries. Anxiety about the level of academic readiness of young children, falling scores on international academic achievement tests, and economic

competitiveness of the work force have led policy makers in many countries to put pressure on preschools to get children off to a fast academic start. Over the past twenty years or so this has led to a “pushing down” of the curriculum and pedagogical practices of primary school into preschools, with the result that classrooms for four-year-olds in many countries now look and function much like classrooms for first graders did a generation ago.

These days, while policy pressures are making preschools more academic, research in a variety of fields is making the case for attending to the importance of young children’s social-emotional development. For example, recent research by developmental and cognitive psychologists is shedding light on the roots of what psychologists call “self-management,” “executive functions,” and “empathy related responding” (see, for example, Nancy Eisenberg, 2014). This research is demonstrating that young children’s ability to control their impulses to fight over toys, delay gratification, and anticipate the consequences of anti-social behavior develops along predictable pathways, while at the same time being highly individually variable. Policy makers are drawing on these psychology studies to argue that investing in early childhood education programs makes good economic sense because children who attend high quality preschools do well later in life not only academically, but also socially and emotionally.

The emerging field that the Spencer Foundation is calling “The New Civics” includes a focus on the foundations of citizenship and argues that long before they systemically are introduced to the concept of democracy, young children are working through what it means to participate in society (http://www.spencer.org/content.cfm/the_new_civics). Books such as Vivian Paley’s *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play* (1993) and Jane Katch’s *Under Deadman’s Skin: Discovering the Meaning of Children’s Violent Play* (2002) demonstrate that one of the most important things children learn in preschools is how to negotiate disagreements and establish and live by rules that feel fair and just. As Paley and Katch show and as experienced preschool teachers know, four-year-olds’ notions of fairness and justness are very different from those of adults.

Research also shows that social emotional development is intricately connected to cognitive development and therefore to academic learning. This is a point emphasized some years ago by Vygotsky, who argued that learning is social and collective before it is individual and (purely) cognitive. Academic learning is dependent on such social-emotional factors as perseverance, motivation, and feelings children have about both their teachers and the subject matter. For example, Gail Boldt argues in her 2006 essay "Resistance, Loss and Love in Learning to Read" that acquiring new knowledge is a process not of filling empty space and but of displacing previous understandings, ways of being in the world, and notions of oneself.

The articles in this issue explore a range of social-emotional issues and pedagogical approaches as they play out in diverse settings. Akiko Hayashi and Joseph Tobin use examples of everyday practices in preschools in Japan to question some Western assumptions about young children's social-emotional abilities and about how social-emotional issues can be addressed in early childhood education. Kyunghwa Lee asks us to question the bio-medical paradigm of ADHD, and to consider our empathetic responses to children in danger of being labeled deviant because they can't sit still when we want them to. Marilyn Fleeer, Marie Hammer, and Sue March draw on Vygotsky to argue for the pedagogical value of fairytales in children's emotional development. Jennifer Keys Adair and Kiyomi Sánchez-Suzuki Colegrove explore what they call the "communal agency" of young children in a first grade classroom, and suggest that when teachers relinquish some of their impulse to control social interactions, children can be more agentic than we often give them credit for. Judith Schickedanz makes the case that in supporting early literacy we should give greater attention to both comprehension and to social-emotion learning. Megan Adams, who also employs a Vygotskian perspective, explores the experience of "third culture children" who move as young children with their parents to a new culture where they attend preschool, living between cultural worlds. Eunae Son draws on Jerome Bruner's concept of "folk pedagogy" in her review of how children's "social competence" is defined differently by early childhood educators in different countries. Thelma Rabago-Mingoa, Therese Estacio, and Joanna Perlas make a case for the key role of playing traditional Filipino games for young children's social development.

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- Eisenberg, N. (2014). Empathy-Related Responding and Its Relations to Socioemotional Development. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education*, 8(1), 1-17.
- Katch, J. (2002). *Under deadman's skin: Discovering the meaning of children's violent play*. Beacon Press.
- Paley, V. G. (1993). *You can't say you can't play*. Harvard University Press.