

## Commentary to Part II: Internationalising Early Childhood Education, or Embedding International Children into Local Contexts?

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“Internationalisation” has been the focus for a growing field of higher education and secondary education research, but has so far received little attention in scholarship on early childhood and primary education. The three contributions in this section thus offer timely forays into uncharted ground by exploring ways in which internationalisation processes might actualise themselves and be understood in the context of early years education. Interestingly, the three contributions come to similar conclusions regarding “internationalisation” in early childhood education—despite the different national contexts examined—that also point to marked differences between this sector and the higher education and secondary school phases.

Before engaging with the findings of the three essays, it may be useful to reflect on the core concept itself for a moment. To start with, the term “internationalisation” identifies a temporal trend—something is becoming more international than it was before. That “something”, however, is not clearly defined; thus, “internationalisation” can point to many things:

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firstly, it can mean that the people involved in education—the students and/or teaching staff—are becoming more international; secondly, it can refer to education providers increasingly operating cross-nationally or internationally; thirdly, it can mean the strengthening of international and intercultural aspects of the curriculum, that is, the educational content and purpose; and lastly it can signify new modes of governance pointing to the increased influence of international policy discourse, international evaluations and league tables and the role of international organisations such as the OECD or the European Union in shaping national education policy and the strategies of individual education institutions.

As there exists no shared definition of “internationalisation”, the study of any one of these aspects, or a combination thereof, can be found in higher education and secondary education research (e.g. Ball 2012; Grek 2014; Martens and Wolf 2009). The same holds true for the budding research field on internationalisation in early childhood education: a number of studies have examined the role of international organisations in shaping policy discourse and governance in early childhood education (e.g. Mahon 2006, 2010; White 2011) and internationalisation trends in curriculum development (Hayden 2013); others have pointed to the ways market-based early childhood education and care and primary school providers are operating internationally (e.g. Lim 2017; Sumsion 2012; see also, Press and Woodrow in this volume); and the three contributions in this volume provide case studies on how national policy and/or individual providers in the early childhood education and care and primary school sectors respond to the needs of children and parental preferences against the backdrop of international migration and intercultural diversity.

Already a brief overview confirms that “internationalisation processes” are taking place across the whole spectrum of education, from the early years to higher education. The question is whether internationalisation trends follow the same underlying logic across all education stages, and the intriguing and clear answer of the three case studies on early childhood education and care and primary education in this volume is that they do not.

Much research on higher education or secondary schooling starts from the assumption that internationalisation processes are based on intentional strategies by education institutions to selectively attract high-achieving and internationally mobile students and to position themselves as high-quality, if not leading, educational providers. Internationalisation in education has thus come to be understood as strongly linked to elite education (the key question being examined in this book). Does this assumption hold for

education in general? If this were the case, we should also be able to find a strong link between internationalisation and elite segregation in the early years, and this is the question Mierendorff et al. and Press and Woodrow examine in their German and Australian case studies respectively.

At the outset, an important finding across these studies is that researchers should be wary of assuming similar trends and developments across all educational stages—or across national boundaries for that matter. Put another way—a child/young person’s learning at various stages of their life is shaped by quite different legal frameworks, requirements, resources and constraints, as well as the historical traditions and trajectories of the institutional settings in which that education takes place. Higher education and early childhood education and care are both optional phases of education, whereas primary and (part of) secondary education are compulsory. While compulsory education across all OECD countries is dominated by the state as the main educational provider, there is a stronger role for non-state actors (for-profit and non-profit) in the pre-primary and tertiary sectors. With this in mind, we might expect more scope for parent and student choice, and thus internationalisation could function as a mechanism for segregation and the creation of elite tracks within the provision made available.

As Mierendorff et al. point out first, the fact that early childhood education and care targets young children considerably limits the scope for internationalising within early years education. As the term “early childhood education and care” suggests, a large part of what early childhood education and care institutions do is “care” for young children, and depending on the age of the child and the type of institution, care may be the most dominant aspect of early childhood education and care. Furthermore, due to the age of the children, many internationalisation strategies such as international exchanges or foreign language acquisition are not applicable, or only to very limited extent.

A second, further key distinction between higher education and early childhood education and care is that higher education is by definition selective, with access to higher education programmes being based on the criteria of academic achievement (in some countries or with some institutions more competitive than others). Higher educational qualifications also tend to be nationally, and oftentimes internationally, accepted. Thus, higher education is, from the outset, usually linked to educational segregation and, in many systems, aims to produce educational elites. Early childhood education and care does not attempt to do this, as a general

matter of principle. To the contrary, as the essays by Mierendorff et al. and Press and Woodrow emphasise, equality of access is a core mission of early childhood education and care policy both in Germany and in Australia—and this holds true for other OECD countries as well (e.g. Naumann *in press*; van Lancker 2013). There are no selection criteria for nursery attendance other than the age of the child—and sometimes the particular care or learning needs a child may have—nor are there any certificates or “grades” awarded at the end of early childhood education and care attendance that could create distinction or “elite access” to certain forms of primary school education. Furthermore, historically most early childhood education and care institutions developed out of social welfare initiatives aimed at children in need and, as Press and Woodrow emphasise, “the legacies of these institutions are grounded in a commitment to redress disadvantage, rather than the education of elites” (Press and Woodrow, this volume). The orientation and purpose of early childhood education and care thus strongly contrasts with the selectivity and elite orientation of higher education (although recently, “widening access” demands have started to gain ground also in higher education).

In their respective case studies, Mierendorff et al. and Press and Woodrow thus find that no strong links exist between internationalisation and the formation of elite education tracks within early childhood education and care at a (sub-)national level. To the contrary, their examination of different early childhood education and care centres demonstrates how some nurseries use internationalisation activities and practices (such as the availability of bilingual support workers) to address social disadvantage and to bolster the coping strategies of children and families from immigrant backgrounds at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. However, Press and Woodrow also caution us that internationalising and intercultural practices in early childhood education and care are not necessarily new developments. In fact, there has been a long-established focus within Australian early childhood education and care programmes on supporting integration and providing a multicultural anti-bias curriculum. This can also be found embedded in the early childhood education and care curriculum and practices of other nations with multicultural populations and a history of immigration, such as New Zealand. In this sense, we could argue that internationalising processes have always been integrated into the purpose, function and delivery of early childhood education and care where it has needed to cater for an international and multicultural population. This is understood as a core aspect of preschool pedagogy—to support the child

in exploring and understanding their natural and social environment (Naumann *in press*) and helping children to learn how to mediate between different cultural experiences. Such principles have arguably been a more central feature within early childhood education and care provision than found in compulsory schooling which has traditionally been geared towards achieving nationally set educational standards and goals.

On the basis of the two national case studies on early childhood education and care found in this section, we could conclude that internationalising activities and practices in early childhood education and care are more closely related to strategies aimed at “closing the gap” of educational inequality than to aims of elite formation. Additionally, whether and in what ways internationalisation manifests itself in early childhood education and care is linked to the ways in which historic multinational or multicultural developments and broader globalisation trends are being embedded in local contexts and communities. Mierendorff et al., therefore, suggest the notion of “embedded internationalisation” as a more precise and useful concept when studying internationalisation in early childhood education and care.

Internationalisation in early childhood education and care does not, therefore, appear to follow the same logic of elite formation processes as found within higher education or secondary education. Nevertheless, Mierendorff et al. and Press and Woodrow, as well as Breidenstein et al. (the latter examine internationalisation in the context of primary education in Berlin, Germany), also point to more recent developments in early years and primary education that might suggest that similar trends are emerging as noted within higher education and secondary education—the role of marketisation. In theory, internationalisation activities could be used by providers as a marketing strategy in response to preferences for an “international education” by internationally mobile or national elite families. However, all three contributions identify only small niches in the German and Australian childcare and primary education market, where for-profit providers attempt to attract clients through a focus on internationalisation practice. This suggests that there is neither a high demand amongst parents for the internationalisation of early childhood education and care, nor do providers rely on it as a main strategy for increasing their competitiveness. Internationalisation aspects, where present, tend to be directed either at families who “wish to be amongst themselves”, for example diplomats, other internationally mobile professionals or “expats” (see in particular the contribution by Breidenstein et al.), or highly edu-

cated, resident middle-class parents who seek a comprehensive education for their child, which includes aspects of an international education. However, these internationalisation activities such as foreign language classes tend to be no more than “add-ons” to the early childhood education and care activities on offer (in line with other extras such as the catering to specific nutritional standards, extracurricular activities or “flexibility” of opening hours). Interestingly, Press and Woodrow found in the Australian childcare market, that while some providers included in their promotional activities internationalisation practices as part of their “education package”, oftentimes such claims to quality were not always confirmed by external evaluations of this provision. Thus, exactly in what ways internationalisation may add to the quality of early childhood education and care is far from clear. It could be argued that interpretation of internationalisation practices by early years experts may in fact be very different from that by parents and providers.

Reflecting on the findings of these three contributions on early years and primary education, it is clear that we cannot assume comparative equivalence of concepts between different educational stages. Instead, the three essays provide fascinating insights into the temporal and institutional layering of different, and partly contradicting, internationalisation trends in early childhood education and care and primary education. On the one hand, we find a tradition of “internationalising strategies” and intercultural awareness in early childhood education and care deeply committed to equality, which precedes the development of (to date small) parts of elite early childhood education and care sectors. On the other hand, there is a newer trend emerging, which seeks to offer comprehensive early childhood education and care as a means to develop a child’s human capital and potential international agility. Such an interpretation is more in line with the internationalising processes found in higher education research. The question of how these different internationalisation trends play out in combination with, or against each other in the early childhood education and care sector opens up an interesting new field of study. It is important to note, however, that it may not so much be the presence or absence of “internationalising activities” in whatever form, that shapes or counteracts processes of segregation and exclusivity in early years education, but more generally the socio-economically differentiated access to high-quality early childhood education and care that sets some children on the path of successful educational achievements whilst widening the educational gap for others (van Lancker 2013).

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