



Working Towards a Sustainable, Responsive, Inclusive, and Diverse Global Education Future

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Sara Weuffen, Jenene Burke, Anitra Goriss-Hunter, Margaret Plunkett, and Susan Emmett

Abstract

In this chapter, we synthesise the interwoven narrative presented in this edited collection that interrogates discourses and policies of inclusive education, foregrounds the lived realities of diverse cohorts, and offers new ways of thinking and acting through a process of capacity building. Through thematic analysis, we analyse emergent themes pertaining to diversity and inclusion to illuminate the divergence between rhetoric and practice where the provision of quality education is concerned. Ultimately, we question whether the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 of quality education for all is being actualised in the twenty-first century and offer provocations on the possibilities of actualising

a sustainable, responsive, inclusive, and diverse education future globally.

Keywords

Inclusive education · Diversity and inclusion · Sustainable education · Responsive education · Capacity building · Lived realities

Author Positioning Statements

Sara: As an educator for over 10 years and early-career researcher with considerable academic and life experiences with equity, inclusion, and social justice matters, I am driven to champion change for a responsive, diverse, and inclusive educational future for all. My personal experiences with intersectional marginalisation based on gender, sex, body image, education, and socio-economic status throughout my life heavily influences my understanding, choices, and ideation of transformative education processes for sustainable futures.

Jenene: As an educator for over 40 years, I have been actively involved in teaching across a broad range of education settings. My interest in disability as a socially constructed concept emerged from my doctoral studies into children's experiences of play in purpose-built inclusive play spaces.

S. Weuffen (✉) · J. Burke · A. Goriss-Hunter · M. Plunkett · S. Emmett
Institute of Education, Arts and Community,
Federation University Australia, Ballarat, VIC,
Australia
e-mail: sl.weuffen@federation.edu.au

J. Burke
e-mail: js.burke@federation.edu.au

A. Goriss-Hunter
e-mail: a.goriss-hunter@federation.edu.au

M. Plunkett
e-mail: margaret.plunkett@federation.edu.au

S. Emmett
e-mail: s.emmett@federation.edu.au

Anitra: I constantly draw on my experiences as a FiF, working-class woman of colour in predominantly middle-class education settings to inform my teaching and research. Working collaboratively on this collected edition, I have come to renew my commitment to teaching and researching in equitable and inclusive ways.

Margaret: My interest in diversity and equality of opportunity stemmed from three decades of teaching and researching in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs in a regional university. My extensive involvement with rural and regional students, who although highly academically capable often did not achieve to a level commensurate with their potential, fuelled my passion for providing guidance and resources to help pre-service and practicing teachers and school students understand the important relationship between aspirational outcomes and opportunity.

Susan: My teaching and research experience over 40 years in diverse communities including inner city kindergartens with many refugee families, rural early childhood centres and remote Northern Territory Indigenous communities has enriched my understanding of diversity, inclusivity and social justice. I have learned that to transform education so that all children and families have opportunities to thrive requires a curriculum which integrates pedagogies that advance emotional, social, and moral development and learning as well as critical reflection.

Nations (UN) n.d.). The main avenues through which this was envisioned included targeted and specific strategies tied to improving health, education, and climate outcomes. SDG 4: *Quality Education*, was put forward as a meta-goal to advance success and equality through the provision of “inclusive and equitable quality education and promot[ion of] lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN n.d.). Providing a framework for achieving this goal by 2030, ten targets were specified, aimed at bridging divides between sexes, abilities, academic success, and occupational outcomes; increasing the supply of qualified teachers; and ensuring more sensitive, responsive, and safer spaces for human rights-based education (UN n.d.).

While the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted rates of progression towards meeting the SDGs, in the six years since their release, there have been substantial improvements made globally towards achieving them. Gains in areas linked with Goal 4: *Quality education*, including Goal 3: *Good health and wellbeing*, Goal 5: *Gender equality*, Goal 10: *Reduced inequality*, and Goal 16: *Peace, justice and strong institutions* explored within this edited collection, were announced in the 2020 annual UN report (UN 2020a). However, the release emphasised that more investment and targeted strategies were required to ensure that people “in vulnerable and disadvantaged communities [were not] at risk of educational exclusion”, and that the pandemic would not continue to “deepen the education crisis and widen existing education inequalities” (UN 2020a, p. 34). While successive UN reports over the past six years communicate gains on a global scale, the content presented in this edited collection offers richness and nuance about the current realities of quality education for all, across a range of nation states, including Afghanistan, Australia, China, India, Kenya, Scotland, Sweden, and Zambia.

In this chapter, we synthesise the interwoven narratives about diversity and inclusion presented in this edited collection as they pertain to the UN SDGs (UN n.d.). Through thematic analysis, we interrogate discourses and policies of inclusive education and foreground the lived experiences of

19.1 The State of Quality Inclusive and Diverse Education in the Twenty-First Century

When the United Nations (UN), as a governmentally-neutral organisation dedicated to promoting peace and security through harmonised international cooperation, finalised the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, 193 countries across the world became responsible for working towards a future where disadvantage and inequality was reduced (United

diverse cohorts. We explore also how processes of capacity building offer new ways of thinking and acting about diversity and inclusion for those marginalised by education practices. While analysis of emergent themes offers glimpses into the divergence between rhetoric and practice, and issues still concerning the provision of quality education in the twenty-first century, we raise the question about whether the UN SDGs are a utopian ideal, or a practical and achievable “shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future” (UN 2020a).

19.1.1 Discourses and Policies

An invariable interplay of discourses, policies, and practices exist where inclusion and diversity in education are concerned, regardless of political or social contexts. Taking up Foucault’s (1972) argument that language is contextualised and functions to evoke meaning and social cohesion about the worlds in which people operate, Burke et al. (2022) highlight that educational endeavours are often conflated with processes of learning and teaching. While perhaps being considered a reductive and side avenue of inquiry, understanding how nomenclature is used to mobilise different educational agendas is critical to forming a nuanced comprehension of the ways in which diversity and inclusion function in mainstream education communities. The cyclical process of learning, unlearning, and relearning is, as Klein (2008) articulates, a significant component to managing the “tension between insider and outsider expertise” (p. 91) and therefore possibilities for transformative change. With greater understanding of the language used in education spaces, awareness for the conditions of inclusion and exclusion emerge, and perhaps, insights into the practices that require change in order to provide quality education for all.

In the twenty-first century, it is an established human right that everyone has access to education, regardless of their sexual orientation, socioeconomic status (SES), cognitive capacity, or any other perceived difference (Ballard 1999).

This is because, education is considered the primary avenue through which one may develop relational understandings in context to others, different environments, and the connected global world (Donati and Archer 2015). For education that is inclusive to become a realistic possibility in the future, learners, their educators, and the schooling environments in which they are situated must be open to (re)creating new ways of thinking and being through critical reflection on existing discourses. This is crucial given the increasing use of technology in mainstream education communities has become an integral component of knowledge collation and transfer in contemporary times, let alone the exponential rise of technology-mediated learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Rana and Daniel (2022) argue, the existing inequalities concerning access to resources have been exacerbated as a result of technologically-focused education endeavours. Challenges to the collective beliefs—what everyone knows—formed within social power/knowledge relations, forms the basis for understanding and defining what is *normal*, and therefore, what is different or *other*. In the case of mainstream education communities, a *normal* learner is one who speaks the primary language of communication in the nation, adheres to the socially-accepted ways of being, has resources and skills to access and use technology, and performs academically, socially, emotionally, and physically in alignment with set markers of progression and success. Students possessing capabilities or ideologies different to the norm are considered different or deficient (Larsen and Frost-Camilleri 2022).

While many nations seek to make education an attainable endeavour for their citizens, in reality, this is operationalised through a systematic process of acquisition versus deficit. Through these discourses, learners identified as different are *included* into the mainstream education machine which aims to produce a nationalised citizen through a homogenised set of intellectual, social, and economic standards (Weuffen and Willis 2022). Despite a focus on inclusive education gaining traction in the 1980s, the contemporary reality of creating more diverse

and inclusive learning spaces cognisant, accepting, and responsive to the needs and aspirations of all students has failed to endure (Burke et al. 2022). Because of the perceived complexities of moving towards a more sustainable, responsive, inclusive, and diverse education space globally, and perhaps the challenging process of (un/re) learning that thrusts individuals to be immersed in “unknown worlds” (Klein 2008, p. 95), Larsen and Emmett (2022) argue that inclusive education has been pushed to the margins; inclusivity is still visible but not really a key agenda.

Presented as a “wicked problem” (Larsen and Emmett 2022), the deficit positioning of othered students emerges in relation to a series of dominant discourses considered to underpin education communities globally. Students perceived to be lacking the required skills for success are caught up in meritocracy inequities underpinned by neoliberal discourses that define value based on economic investment (Larsen and Emmett 2022). Yet, in an attempt to be inclusive, nation states espouse social justice discourses that posit transformational possibilities emerge from the rhetoric of all citizens being offered *a fair go*. While appearing to be inclusive, such discourses continue to reinforce the adversarial positioning of those who can versus those who cannot, all the while creating superficial educational policies focused on bridging gaps (Weuffen and Willis 2022). To move beyond deficit discourses formed on the basis of race and/or culture, Marsh et al. (2022) suggest that there is an urgent need to readdress and implement counter-hegemonic and disruptive understandings within education spaces. Chapters within this edited collection, along with internationally-renowned scholarship (Freire 1970; Smith 2012), argue that one way in which this may be achieved is through the (re)-centering of *othered* perspectives, knowledges, voices, languages, etc., through processes of (un/re) learning. While the nomenclature and practices around inclusivity have shifted over the decades, a remaining, pervasive deficit discourse continues to impact the lived realities of othered groups.

19.1.2 Lived Experience

Generally, education evokes images of classroom-based practices; children sitting, reading, and writing, or perhaps, participating in carefully structured and monitored outdoor activities. Yet, from the chapters presented in this edited collection, and from the wealth of existing literature, in reality, education reaches beyond the bounds of that which is formalised. Education is a lived experience—often one that spans a lifetime—for many people, regardless of sexual orientation, intellectual or physical capacity, socio-economic status (SES), and/or academic, cultural, linguistic background, or any other characteristic that is categorised as *different*. It is from these wide-ranging experiences that a picture about the current state of quality inclusive education in the twenty-first century begins to crystallise.

The deficit discourses and adversarial positionings that have been argued to permeate education communities is a lived reality for many learners. For young people in regional locations, for example, Glowrey et al. (2022) highlight the challenges of aligning career aspirations to situational realities. While career guidance has become a standard feature of many Westernised mainstream education communities, Glowrey et al. (2022) argue that the reality of such guidance is often orientated towards higher education studies and exclusionary towards occupational careers. As another example, in Kenya and Zambia, the situational factors of economics, sex, and culture intersect to shape how girls participate in schooling; that is, once again, marginalised and in deficit to the privileged (Oxworth 2022). Oxworth (2022) highlights that the tensions between African girls’ aspirations for schooling compete with their lived realities. While school communities make concerted efforts to overcome these barriers, the SES conditions faced by individuals, families, and the wider society result in African girls needing to choose between education and work for survival; a choice that socioeconomically privileged cohorts do not have to make (Oxworth 2022).

The stories presented by a diverse authorship across these chapters emphasises that quality and inclusive education cognisant and responsive to diverse student cohorts, and their associated needs, are not always being realised across the globe currently.

While individual schools, teachers, and educational settings have been reported as trying to do better, engage in lifelong professional development to address deficit discourses, and move towards more inclusive and diverse practices, overcoming the systematic barriers constructed by education systems globally seems to be preventing real and sustainable change. Despite policy and practices being developed as equity measures to enable quality education for all learners, certain identity factors such as cultural background, gender, and low-SES are still key indicators of academic achievement, especially at university level (Meinck and Brese 2019; Nieuwenhuis et al. 2019; OECD 2020). Goriss-Hunter et al. (2022) contend that when teachers and students with similar identity markers work together to (un/re)learn knowledges and processes that have been ingrained in normative everyday education practices, inclusivity based on lived experiences emerges and pivots success outcomes towards the relevant, purposeful, and practical. At the same time, however, the intersectional diversity connections between particular cohorts of students and teachers can lead to tensions with their privileged peers and to neoliberalist organisational agendas (Goriss-Hunter et al. 2022). While the chapters in this edited collection emphasise the advantages of diversity and inclusion for learning and teaching, the deficit positioning of the *other* is reinforced and legitimised and privileges those considered *normal*. In doing so, the responsibility for addressing deficits is shouldered subtly as a burden on the they are superfluous *othered*. By way of example, Browne (2022) highlights that despite inclusive rhetoric in education policy, teachers living with a dis/ability navigate a range of barriers as they attempt to operate equitably with their able-bodied peers. Because of the systematic but subtle discrimination focused on the capacity of teachers living with a dis/ability to

perform their roles adequately and safely, many teachers choose not to disclose forms of difference if they can hide it (Browne 2022). So, while there is a global focus on increasing the number of qualified teachers to promote valuable outcomes for all learners, it is evident that a systematic breakdown of policy and practice exists across all countries, and not just those in developing countries targeted by the SDGs, that encompass holistic and multi-dimensional processes of inclusion.

Missing from discussion about equitable and diverse learning communities is the role of parents in supporting, advocating, and contributing to quality education outcomes. Interestingly, Claughton et al. (2022) identified that when parents possess knowledge of both the educational system and the situational intricacies of students with a diagnosed dis/ability, they are bought into the educational process as paraprofessionals. While teachers and schooling professionals appear to undergo a (un/re)learning process as a result of these discussions, despite this degree of inclusion, students with a dis/ability continue to be *othered* and treated through deficit discourses, evidenced through the language and practices used to define and manage them (Claughton et al. 2022). Outside the formal education environments, parents have been identified as a significant influential factor in developing children's sense of social justice, inclusion, and diversity (Davis et al. 2014). Yet, in order for parents to support their children developing academically, Kewalramani and Kidman (2022) uncovered the importance of intersecting social and cultural capital, particularly for those outside the dominant group, being acknowledged and woven into the fabric of education as a key factor in the provision of quality education.

19.1.3 Capacity Building

As a means of moving beyond the disassociation of inclusive policy and practice to the lived reality of *othering* experienced by some learners in diverse cohorts, increasing attention is being

paid to capacity building processes and subsequently the impact for real and sustainable change. Interestingly, there appears to be an acknowledgement that the systematic procedural changes required of education globally to pivot towards more quality and inclusive outcomes for all learners are beyond achievable targets in the short-term (McGreal 2017; Webb et al. 2017). However, the critical question needs to be asked about whether sustainable and transformative change can ever be achieved if the system itself is not challenged, over focusing on practitioners as change agents. This is of particular interest given Klein's (2008) comments nearly 14 years ago that "teachers continue to find that the strains on them to increase equity in the classroom and lay bare their practice is too great to be managed on their own" (p. 95). The lack of emphasis on changing the system could be one explanation for the focus of capacity building projects orientated towards individual teachers' pedagogy. Elvey and Burke (2022) demonstrate that curriculum approaches possessed and demonstrated by teachers are critical to guaranteeing learning contexts that are equitable and inclusive. To overcome the systematic barriers associated with *othering* occurring paradoxically within an inclusive framework, teachers are seen as the points at which real change may occur in the lived realities of diverse cohorts.

The degree of knowledge about one's own positionality, epistemic foundations, and relational behaviours seem to be considered the threshold concepts to working within interpersonal contexts, particularly where differences between individuals and groups exist (Camicia 2015; Sawyer and Liggett 2012). Elvey and Burke (2022) argue that the development of an inclusive mindset applied to teaching knowledge through professional development within the schooling environment, may be one way for holistic practices aligned to inclusivity to emerge and/or become visible. To ensure these practices are sustained over a period of time, Holcombe and Plunkett (2022) tout the benefits of a strength-based model to supporting success among diverse student cohorts. Understanding the intersectionality of diversity—in that a person

associating with a particular group (i.e. disabled, female, and non-Indigenous) may not identify with the commonly understood characteristics connected with the group (i.e. loss of cognitive functioning, physically inferior, or inherently racist)—ought to be of primary importance in the capacity building among the teaching workforce for the development and operationalisation of inclusive and quality education for all (Holcombe and Plunkett 2022). Through professional learning activities orientated towards strength-based practices, Cacciattolo and Aronson (2022) argue that more effective interpersonal communication is facilitated through the development of nuanced and empathetic standpoints. They argue that intercultural learning opportunities where educators are encouraged and supported to develop deeper understandings of themselves first before drawing connections to, and facilitating more responsive environments with, the cohorts they teach, is a central tenet to inclusion (Cacciattolo and Aronson 2022).

Within the past two years, the intersectionality of diversity and multitude of factors impacting all learners, let alone those *othered* within society, have been crystallised through the lenses of the COVID-19 pandemic and international relations. Since 2020, there has been an exponential wealth of experiences and scholarship available around the impact of the pandemic on quality educational outcomes across the globe (e.g. Banerjee 2020; Burke 2021; Chaturvedi et al. 2021; Couch et al. 2021; Herrenkohl et al. 2021; Kumar et al. 2020). Depending on the SES and intellectual capital available, the rapid transition to remote learning, as a result of the pandemic, has set back projected targets on the provision of quality education for all (UN 2020a). Coker and Mercieca (2022) argue that the traditional power relations between teachers and learners have been challenged by the mass introduction of digital technology to schooling activities. Yet, the integration of digital technology within mainstream education communities has resulted in an inequitable foundation for learning and a more inclusive education environment being created (Coker and Mercieca 2022). At the same time, depending on the learners' geographic location, access to education

is variable and unstable. Most recently, the withdrawal of peacekeeping troops in Afghanistan has created worldwide concern for the human rights of women to access education (Najibi and McLachlan 2022). The *othering* and lesser positioning of women in a religiously-patriarchal society prevents the development of the human and intellectual capital required for inclusive and diverse education communities to thrive (Najibi and McLachlan 2022).

While this edited collection has opened up the space for a more nuanced understanding of the barriers and enablers that are needed for ensuring quality education is experienced by all, the lived reality recollections from a diversity of perspectives make clear that further progress is required. Furthermore, despite the capacity building processes orientated towards individual teachers and education contexts, the systematic processes at the foundation of education systems across the globe have stunted the possibility for the provision of quality education for all learners free of discrimination based on sexual orientation, intellectual or physical capacity, SES, and/or academic, cultural, or linguistic background, etc. It becomes apparent that although there has been reported gains and developments in the processes of inclusion throughout education endeavours globally, in the twenty-first century, limited space exists for further progression while deficit discourse and *othering* are the foundations upon which diverse and inclusive practices are operationalised.

19.2 Is a Sustainable, Responsive, Inclusive, and Diverse Global Education Future Possible?

The holistic picture provided by the interwoven narrative in this edited collection offers a glimpse into the state of education in the twenty-first century, across a number of countries, globally. While the voices of *othered* peoples provide insights into the less visible components of inclusive and equitable quality education, that is, those in the margins, the question remains as to whether it is possible to achieve a sustainable, responsive,

inclusive, and diverse global education future for all. One of the foundational problems to creating a more sustainable, responsive, inclusive, and diverse educational future, as identified by Burke et al. (2022), is the conceptualisation and processes of learning, around *normal* as it pertains to human rights and access to education.

Of the nearly 8 billion people on earth in 2021, while there is a parity generally between males and females globally, nearly 60% of the world's population lives on the Asian continent (UN 2020b), 55% reside in urbanised settings (UN 2020b), 15% function with a dis/ability (World Health Organisation 2021), the median average years of schooling attainment sits at 8.4 years (United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) 2021), and the global average income is just over \$15,745 GDP per year (UNSD 2021). Over the next thirty years, the world's population is expected to increase by two billion people, children will be outnumbered by the elderly, migration due to violence, oppression, and climate change will increase, and two-thirds of the population will reside in an urbanised setting (UN 2020b). Waiving any forecasted statistics around the diversity of peoples and contexts discussed in this edited collection, the evidence indicates that diversity will become the norm, not the exception as it is currently presented in mainstream education communities.

Even though it may appear that mainstream education communities globally are failing to provide safer and more equitable access to education for all learners, there are clear messages of what does work. To achieve the UN SDG of quality education for all, this edited collection provokes the following attributes as keys to bridging the divergence between the rhetoric of inclusive learning environments and the lived realities of diverse cohorts:

- Respecting the human rights and intersectional identities, capacities, and aspirations of individuals and their contribution to collective success and wellbeing,
- Working to understand and respond more empathetically to the differentiated provisions required to experience success,

- Reorientating deficit discourses of *othering* to strength-based practices ensuring individual needs are supported,
- Reimaging the dimensions of quality teacher education and practice, and
- Restructuring the ideological and physical structures of education systems.

The glimpses around processes of inclusion, diversity, and responsiveness provided in this edited collection provide clear indicators of *when it works, it works*. It is from a social justice standpoint that the foundational hope for a transformed future where quality education is an accessible and realistic target is realised for all learners globally.

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Dr. Sara Weuffen is a teacher-researcher specialist with a Ph.D. in cross/inter-cultural education research between non-Indigenous people, Aboriginal peoples, and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia. She specializes in learning and content design for diverse cohorts across a broad range of platforms; online, blended, face-to-face. As a non-Indigenous woman born on Gundijmara Country (Warrnambool) and living on Wadawurrung Country (Ballarat), Dr Weuffen draws upon her formative grey methodological approach—where both Poststructural theory and Indigenous methodologies are brought together—and collaborations with Australia’s First Nations Peoples, to critique dominant structures and ideologies, interrogate binary discourses, and push educational boundaries for emancipatory and success-orientated shared-learning outcomes and positive social progress.

Professor Jenene Burke is the Director, Academic Operations in the Institute of Education, Arts and Community at Federation University Australia. Jenene convenes the Social Justice, Inclusion and Diversity in Education (SJIDE) research focus area in the Institute. She is the President of the World Federation of Associations for Teacher Education (WFATE) and leads the WFATE Inclusion and Social Justice in Teacher Education in Global Contexts research development group. As a researcher, Jenene is best known for her world-class research into play spaces as inclusive environments for children and their families. She is particularly interested in research that privileges the voices of participants, especially children and young people. Jenene has a secondary teaching background and 20 years of experience in Higher Education as a teacher educator. Her learning and teaching interests centre on educational responses to student diversity, with respect to inclusive education and disability studies in education.

Dr. Anitra Goriss-Hunter is the Director, Learning and Teaching and a Senior Lecturer at Federation University Australia. Her research and teaching focuses on gender and education, inclusion, and pre-service teacher (PSTs) education. Anitra was awarded the prestigious Australian Women’s and Gender Studies Association award for most outstanding PhD thesis. Anitra’s research investigates women’s careers in Higher Education; ways to improve female participation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education; and, the development of inclusive teaching approaches that offer authentic learning experiences for PSTs. Anitra’s contribution in the last field was recognized when she was awarded the Federation University Vice-Chancellor’s Award—Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning 2020.

Dr. Margaret Plunkett is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Institute of Education, Arts and Community at Federation University Australia. She has been a teacher educator and researcher for more than three decades, specialising in the fields of rural and regional education, teacher professional learning and gifted education. She has extensive research expertise in both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and across all educational sectors, particularly in relation to diverse student populations in rural and regional areas, with much of the work focusing on the intersection between aspirations, rurality and achievement. Margaret has conducted research with schools in the Gippsland region, focusing on how educational environments can help develop knowledge, skills and competencies that assist in building meaningful and sustainable relationships and emotional competence within communities. Margaret is Associate Editor of the Australasian Journal of Gifted Education, and a member of a range of national and international education associations.

Dr. Susan Emmett has been extensively involved in early childhood education and the translation of research into the practical environment for over thirty-five years. Her professional experience includes early childhood teaching in a range of settings, work as an early childhood educational consultant and teaching and researching within TAFE and Higher Education sectors. Susan is a Senior Lecturer in Education at Federation University Australia where she coordinates and teaches in Early Childhood and manages partnerships with external organisations both domestic and international. Prior to this, Susan worked as a Research Fellow within the School of Social and Policy Research at Charles Darwin University where early childhood literacy was central to her research, particularly in relation to rural and remote Indigenous education. Her research interests also include the wellbeing and resilience of children and educators including trauma informed, inclusive pedagogy and relationship-focused practice in early childhood contexts. Susan’s expertise is in the use of qualitative methodologies, including grounded theory. She has recently published journal articles, reports, and book chapters in these areas. She also applies and works with mixed methods research processes including designing and conducting randomised control trials. In 2016 Susan won the Federation University Vice-Chancellor’s Award for Contributions to Student Learning and *Teaching Excellence*, and in 2015 she was a recipient of *The Deans Award for dedication to partnership work and consequent provision of enriched learning experiences for education students from a diverse range of backgrounds*.