Editorial

Social, emotional, and relationship development of young children

Christoph Teschers
New Zealand Tertiary College

The development of emotional, social and relationship competencies are seen by many (Aubrey & Ward, 2013; Pahl & Barrett, 2007) as key development areas for children in early years. The age range that is seen as crucial varies however, and where and how these competencies can and should be developed is also contested (Macvarish, Lee & Lowe, 2014). Pahl and Barrett (2007) state that early childhood education (ECE) is often seen as a time that should prepare young children for their later school success, and parents, politicians and sometimes even ECE educators see this as a call to focus on academic skills and intelligence development. Therefore, the arguably more important aspects of emotional and social wellbeing and competencies in a holistic educational understanding might not get the attention they should. Pahl and Barrett argue for the importance of social-emotional competence for school success as more important than early academic achievements. Heckman (2007) supports this notion, stating that

> An important lesson to draw from the entire literature on successful early intervention is that it is the social skills and motivation of the child that are more easily altered – not IQ. These social and emotional skills affect performance in school and in the workplace. We too often have a bias toward believing that only cognitive skills are of fundamental importance to success in life. (Heckman, 2000, p. 7, as cited in Pahl & Barrett, 2007, p. 82)

This focus on a holistic development of young children mirrors the approach taken in New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996), which features wellbeing, belonging and communication as three of the five key strands for early childhood education. What, however, do we understand under the notion of social-emotional competence or wellbeing? Pahl and Barrett (2007) define social-emotional wellbeing "as cooperative and pro-social behaviour, initiation and maintenance of peer friendships and adult relationships, management of aggression and conflict, development of a sense of mastery and self-worth and emotional regulation and reactivity" (pp. 82-83). Based on this definition, social-emotional wellbeing concerns, among others, positive social interaction, relationships and emotional self-regulation, all aspects that will be picked up by the articles in this issue.

Aubrey and Ward (2013) indicate that the roots for a healthy development towards social-emotional competence "lie in children's earliest years" (p. 435), which is mirrored by psychological and neuroscience research (see, for example, Simon Rowley's commentary in this issue); others, however, warn not to adopt a too deterministic view on the importance of brain development during the first two years of age (Macvarish et al., 2014). However, considering the increase of infants and toddlers in ECE centres in New Zealand between 2000 and 2015 by 53%

(Educational Review Office, 2015, as cited in Katie Sandilands article in this issue), it seems pertinent to explore the factors that play a role for the healthy development of social-emotional and relationship skills in the early years.

Three aspects that have been identified as important for the healthy development of children in relation to social-emotional wellbeing are *maternal sensibility*, *secure child-parent (significant other) relationships*, and *'maternal mind-mindedness'* (Aubrey & Ward, 2013). The latter concept has been introduced, according to Aubrey and Ward, by Meins and colleagues and "refers to a mother's recognition of her infant as a mental agent and her use of terms related to mental states in her speech" (p. 437). This seems to place a strong emphasis on the importance of the mother (or the main caregiver) for the development of a child during the first one to three years. Macvarish et al. (2014), however, question a too deterministic view of the impact of early development and argue that, despite the importance of the early years, social-emotional development is hardly finished and over with once a child has finished pre-school.

In this issue of He Kupu, the social, emotional and relationship development of young children is explored from a range of perspectives, including an overview of neuroscience results, socio-cultural approaches to child development, practitioner research on supporting structures for social-emotional development in ECE settings, as well as recent research projects undertaken by national and international scholars. The **Practitioner Researcher Section** will start with an enquiry by Mandy Burr, who looks into the support pets can give children in their emotional and social development. Burr explores how small animals can be used in ECE settings as pedagogical tools or as part of the centre environment and how their presence, handling and care can teach children social-emotional skills, such as sharing, taking care of others, respecting others' space (animal and human) and much more.

This is followed up by an article by Mariette Zoeppritz, who reviewed the concept of *peace education* in the New Zealand early childhood education context. Zoeppritz discusses the meaning of peace education in ECE in relation to current global developments, connects peace education with *Te Whāriki*, and explores how peace can be created around the child, as well as fostered within the child, for example through mindfulness practices. Connected with the notion of mindfulness is Guneet Sachdev's discussion of *Spirituality in ECE* from a New Zealand perspective and beyond. Sachdev explores the meaning and relevance of spirituality in early childhood education and the holistic development of young children.

Moving into the **Special Theme section** of the issue, Kay Albrecht, Michelle Forrester and Jennifer Fiechtner present an article exploring *Emotional and Social Development during the Early Childhood Years* from a Northern American perspective. Based on their research in recent years, the authors discuss the relevance of current neurobiological findings in relation to the emotional and social development of young children, and seven teaching strategies are suggested to assist teachers to build relationships with children that are likely to support their emotional and social development.

A more detailed engagement with what is and what is not known from a neuroscience perspective is presented in a summarising commentary by Simon Rowley from New Zealand's *Brainwave Trust*. Rowley takes the reader on a tour

through current findings from neuroscience research in relation to children's emotional development in the early years and provides a more detailed but still accessible introduction to physiologic and neurological aspects of children's holistic development and wellbeing.

Moving from a neuroscience to a developmental psychological perspective, Helen Lane is *Seeking a richer line of understanding* by exploring social and emotional development of young children form a psychoanalytic perspective. Lane introduces the reader to key theorists in the area of attachment theory and child development to support ECE practitioners in their understanding of children's emotional and social development through the formation of healthy attachments.

A different approach is taken by Katie Sandilands, whose article explores the ideas behind *Resources for Infant Educators* (RIE) as a pedagogical approach for infant and toddler education and care in ECE nurseries and under-two rooms in New Zealand. Building on pioneering work by Pickler and Gerber, Sandilands discusses relevant aspects of implementing RIE in New Zealand ECE centres, reporting on interesting findings from a recent research study involving RIE philosophy and teacher professional identity.

From infants and toddlers, the issue moves into a discussion on *Emotional, social and relationship development for gifted and talented children* by Andrea Delaune. Delaune discusses two groups of theories that consider gifted children's emotional development to be advanced, but which propose different implications that follow of this advanced development. Delaune problematises the discourse of gifted children in relation to their social and emotional development and proposes some recommendations for pedagogical practice in ECE.

To round up the special edition, Jean Rockel and Norah Fryer are *Exploring the socio-emotional aspects of reciprocity in early relationships*. Rockel and Fryer draw on research in the area of self-regulation to discuss how a deep reflection of teachers on their own level of emotional functioning can relate to the social-emotional development of young children through reciprocal relationships between teachers and children in ECE settings. The authors explore questions such as the impact that teachers' emotions can have on infants, their sense of wellbeing and their development of self-regulating abilities, and they draw consequences for responsible teaching practice and teachers' self-reflection.

This issue of *He Kupu* concludes with three **book reviews**: Binky Laureta has reviewed Michelle M. Forrester and Kay M. Albrecht's (2014) book *S. E. T. Social emotional tools for life: An early childhood teacher's guide to supporting strong emotional foundations and successful social relationships*; Sean Dolan has looked at S. J. Alcock's (2016) book *Young children playing: Relational approaches to emotional learning in early childhood settings*; and last but not least, Marjolein Whyte has reviewed the latest book by Jayne White (2016) *Introducing dialogic pedagogy: Provocations for the early years*.

As always, we hope that you will enjoy reading the articles and positions presented in this issue and that the discussions on the various topics will spark further reflection for future research and practice. Please note that we invite submissions for our upcoming special edition on *ECE Leadership in our times*, to be submitted by 20 January 2017.

References

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