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EDITORIAL

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Literacy is inadequate: young children need literacies

According to a narrow definition of literacy – ability to read and write, exemplified by understanding 'a short simple statement on everyday life' (UNESCO 2021) – the global adult literacy rate is currently 86% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2020; The World Bank Group 2021). This figure represents an 18% increase from 68% over the past 40 years, which may seem, *prima facie*, to represent powerful progress. However, as I argue in the editorial for this issue of the *International Journal of Early Years Education*, there is little room for complacency regarding global literacy. The figure reveals that millions of people remain marginalised by illiteracy in a World that has become increasingly techno-rational. It also serves as a reminder that measuring literacy at the level of purely technical print level fails to recognise the value of a broader understanding of literacy that encompasses the myriad ways humans communicate with one another and understand the world (The National Literacy Trust 2017).

In a global context oriented to comparing countries' gross domestic product (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2020a), national governments tend to pursue high literacy rates when they believe their ability to compete economically with other countries may be impeded without achieving them (Yeoh and Chu 2012). It has been estimated that the World's economy loses more than $1 trillion each year due to poor basic literacy skills, with low rates particularly prevalent in Central and West Africa as well as South Asia (World Literacy Foundation [WLF] 2018; Save the Children n.d.). Low levels of literacy result in high costs to governments: they are correlated with higher crime rates, poor health and higher welfare costs (Anser et al. 2020; Dewalt et al. 2004; WLF 2018). However, that correlation has much to do with those who cannot read and write finding themselves excluded from opportunities that others enjoy. In that sense, rising levels of basic literacy skills across the world serve only to marginalise further those who have not mastered them.

Several international actions since World War II have been key in influencing governments to focus, to varying degrees, on literacy (UNESCO 2017). Among them, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights highlighted literacy as a human right (United Nations 1948). Then in 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR] 1989, Article 28) enshrined literacy as a universal right for children specifically, articulating that 'States Parties recognize the the right of the child to education … in particular with a view to contributing to the elimination of ignorance and illiteracy throughout the world'. That association of ignorance and illiteracy is noteworthy. In 2000, the Millennium Goal was created to 'achieve universal primary education' and it included a literacy target (United Nations [UN] 2015a). More recently, in 2015, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 followed (United Nations [UN] 2015b): 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' featuring the target 'By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy'.

International measurement and comparison of literacy attainment is conducted regularly: the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Organisation for Economic

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Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2018) has charted a steady rise in 'reading literacy', defined as ' … understanding, using, evaluating, reflecting on and engaging with texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society' (Mo 2019). Whilst this is 'an expanded definition of reading literacy, which recognises motivational and behavioural characteristics of reading alongside cognitive characteristics' (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2019, 23), focus remains fixed on the written word. In its *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS), the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) attends to reading comprehension among 8–9-year-olds and highlights improving trends globally over the years 2001–2016 (IEA TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Center 2019). Yet many children who become competent readers in a performative context choose not to read once they have learned how to do so (Clark and Teravainen-Goff 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2011).

Increasingly, the global imperative to raise basic literacy rates has begun to impinge on the lives of the youngest children, even before they start school. In part, this is reflected in the global SDG 4 focus on preparing young children for primary education (United Nations 2015b). Equally, the *International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study* (IELS) (OECD 2020b) piloted its test of specified aspects of pre-school children's emergent literacy in 2018, including phonological awareness, vocabulary and listening comprehension, and identified differences between the only three participating countries England, Estonia and the United States (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2020b). Many questions have been raised concerning IELS' form, content and function, and, as indicated by its low uptake globally, IELS remains strongly contested (Moss et al. 2016; Urban 2018).

Despite the many efforts of international non-governmental organisations and national governments, however, global targets for basic literacy have not been met. Notwithstanding the second Millennium Goal to 'achieve universal primary education' by 2015 (UN 2015a), by 2015, 57 million primary aged children were still not enrolled in school, and 103 million young people did not have basic literacy skills (Millennium Development Goals 2020; MDG Monitor 2017). Equally, of course, school attendance does not equate automatically to literacy gains (World Bank 2019). Even before the global pandemic, the United Nations had recognised that progress towards SDG4 was not on track, with 200 million primary and secondary aged children unlikely to be in school by 2030 (United Nations [UN] 2020). Then, during the pandemic in 2020, school attendance reduced to 10% globally, a phenomenon forecast to overturn progress made in respect of children's access to education (UNDESA 2020; UN 2020). Inequalities in basic literacy rates that existed prior to the global pandemic look set to worsen, therefore.

Conversely, however, cracks in the global economic model that the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed and exacerbated may offer us all opportunities to reconsider what is valuable, not least educators working with the youngest children. Rather than continuing to focus on a limited definition of literacy that excludes millions of people, the disruption coronavirus has wrought in 2020–2021 provides a chance for us to recalibrate by embracing many literacies as ways to promote knowledge, learning, inclusion, thinking, understanding, communication, creation, community and citizenship (Kalantzis et al. 2016; UNESCO 2019). We can choose to open our minds to multiple meaningful modalities that far exceed the written word as ways to communicate with one another and understand each other's experiences. In doing so, we enable ourselves and others to engage more creatively than is possible when we focus our attention on basic literacy skills. Opportunities to be creative are recognised for their therapeutic qualities for mental well-being (Leckey 2011), and addressing

mental health challenges is likely to become a major priority globally in the wake of the pandemic (World Health Organisation 2021).

Educators are in an optimal position to introduce young children to opportunities that enable them to recognise, experience, share, record and replay meanings manifested in literacies that are oral, gestural, tactile, spatial, action, play, visual, critical, social, emotional, and beyond (Bae 2010; Gallas 1994; Goleman 1995; Kalantzis et al. 2016; Larson and Marsh 2015; Malaguzzi 1998). Furthermore, although digital technologies are not the full picture, they can be part of it, offering increasingly exciting opportunities for young children to create and share experiences with others. For example, for children at the upper end of the early childhood phase whose sense of self has become secure, immersive technologies can offer thrilling ways to experience the world (Bailey and Bailenson 2017). Digital technologies can enable us to communicate with each other and understand the world through limitless multimodal forms that may include languages, video, music, play, emojis, icons, drama, drawing, animation, video, music, text, as well as modalities that have yet to be cconceptualised (Erstad et al. 2019; Kervin 2019). However, experiences with digital technologies depend on equitable access, and that includes the acquisition of effective skills to 'interpret, manage, share and create meaning … in digital communication channels', in other words: digital literacies (Dudeney, Hockly, and Pegrum 2013, 2).

As an educator considering all these possibilities, then, I find I must question the rationale for teaching to a narrow view of literacy and for measuring success according to that view. If, instead, we envision literacies in the broadest terms, it is in our gift to promote young children's engagements with rich, infinite, creative possibilities that empower them to communicate with others and understand the world, so they are able 'to achieve goals, to develop (their) knowledge and potential, and to participate in society' (Mo 2019). By engaging in this important work with young children, their educators have opportunities to enhance their lives, and all our futures.

This issue of the *International Journal of Early Years Education* offers a curated collection of articles that afford diverse, research informed perspectives on young children's engagements with literacies. In the first article – 'Formal literacy practices through play: Exposure to adult literacy practices increases child-led learning and interest' – Australian team Yeshe Colliver, Amael Arguel and Rauno Parrila share their findings from mixed-design ANOVAs that they used in to study an intervention intended to mitigate adults' control and coercion when supporting young children to acquire early literacy. In her paper 'Replacing a Reading Scheme with Dialogic Reading: An Action Research CaseStudy Using Fifteen London Nurseries' June O'Sullivan recounts a pilot study that was conducted to investigate the adoption of dialogic reading by nursery staff as an approach to supporting young children learning to read. In a second article from England, Karen Daniels highlights a study for which she combined an ethmographic approach and assemblage to explore 'Movement, meaning and affect and young children's early literacy practices'. In their article 'Investigating the Transition from the Personal Signs of Drawing to the Social Signs of Writing', Canadian team Nicola Friedrich, Christine Portier and Shelley Stagg Peterson share findings from a study for which they analysed video observations, observation notes, children's talk and graphical representations to investigate how children aged 3–6 years used writing and drawing to communicate their ideas.

In the article 'Children's recognition of words in familiar logos' Jamal Ahmad reports on a survey conducted with 646 children aged 5–7 years in Jordan that assessed the children's abilities to read a word presented in monochrome and manuscript form, compared with a word presented in the context of the print and colour of a logo. Rebecca Giles' article focused on museum education – 'Science, Technology, and Literacy? Assessing the Potential for

Children's Reading and Writing in Four Science Centers' discusses how experiences of visiting museums may contribute to young children's literacy acquisition. The article contains an account of the development and application of the *Museum Inventory of Literacy Indicators*, used to capture data about signs, labels and directions, writing materials, books and other reading materials and print integration in four museums in the United States of America. The title of the final article in this issue is 'Collaborative learning and instructional scaffolding in invented spelling group activities: the role of peer interactions and adult mediation'. In their article, Ana Albuquerque and Margarida Alves Martins report results from a 'double-designed experimental/descriptive study' that was used to investigate how young children's 'spelling performance' was affected by spelling activities introduced in three kindergartens in Portugal.

This issue of the International Journal of Early Years Education concludes with our regular ERA Abstracts section, curated by Elizabeth Coates.

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