

The Early Advantage



Early Childhood Systems That Lead by Example

A Comparative Focus on International
Early Childhood Education

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Foreword by Marc Tucker



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Changing the Narratives

Sharon Lynn Kagan

On Saturday, August 27, 2016, Yale President Peter Salovey addressed an anticipant group of incoming freshmen. No one missed the fact that Salovey was speaking to the class of 2020, a number associated with perfect vision. Yet Salovey elected not to dwell on either perfection or vision; rather, he focused on the narrative stories that propel and encase these visions. Noting the advent of a national zeitgeist characterized by inflamed skepticism, exaggerated emotions, and the stubborn simplification of social and political issues, Salovey begged for disciplined, reasoned, and careful searches for light and truth. Predictable, you might say.

What wasn't predictable was Salovey's focus on personal narratives—those majestically constructed, tenaciously guarded, and often instantaneously transmitted “truths” we each hold and cherish. Calling on those present to acknowledge narratives' predictive power over us, he implored students to use their college years to forego “drenched ideologies and entrenched assumptions” and think afresh. Salovey provided strategic guidance as he advised students to rethink “the heart and soul of the [democratic] enterprise”: to carefully examine and use empirical data wisely and cautiously; to engage honestly in challenging discourse and tough controversial exchanges; and to ask themselves tenacious, unanswered, and yet-to-be-imagined questions.

Though seemingly remote from early childhood education, Salovey's call to the class of 2020 is the very call that prompted this volume. In an era characterized by rapid change, unbridled rhetoric, and scattered policy action, early childhood education has lived off entrenched narratives that have prevailed for decades, narratives that this volume contends are stale and must be revisited. Defining early childhood education and care (ECEC) as a critical component of the panoply of comprehensive early development (CED) services for children aged 0–8 and their families, this work audaciously reconsiders the “heart and soul of the enterprise,” seeking to learn from diverse countries around the world that have exemplary services for young children. It explicates and challenges prevailing discourses as it confronts deeply held assumptions and historic narratives; moreover, it privileges judicious inquiry,

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unconventional data, and intellectually unbounded discourse. Using the contemporary context, advanced knowledge, and fresh ways of knowing, this volume offers a revisionist stance regarding what matters for young children and the individuals and institutions who serve them. Grounded in lessons from six jurisdictions (Australia, England, Finland, Hong Kong, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore), it offers a set of stories that posit fresh perspectives and narratives, along with the requisite ingredients for leaders working to design and usher in a new era of ECEC.

To travel this essentially re-contoured journey, this book, the first of two based on this inquiry, will proffer alternate paths for consideration. Chapter 1 begins by reviewing entrenched narratives that frame contemporary ECEC as a prelude to reconstructing them. Each of the six chapters that follow (Chapters 2–7) tell individual country/jurisdictional narratives. Leading scholars who are also renowned for their policy work share their distinct and expressive stories, analyzing how and why their countries/jurisdictions hold and enact contemporary services to young children and their families. In the final chapter (Chapter 8), common themes are extracted and restructured to suggest a set of emerging narratives that are both empirically grounded and, hopefully, helpful and prescient. Using these emerging narratives as the path, the book creates a new approach to envisioning and enacting early childhood education and care services.

To do so and to render cohesion to the volume, several frequently used terms warrant explication. First, as briefly noted, CED is used as an umbrella term that includes health, mental health, nutrition, protective, education, and care services provided to young children from birth to age 8. ECEC, in turn, is the subset of CED that focuses on care and education services, typically serving children from birth and continuing until they enter formal primary education. Second, for ease of understanding, and because five of the six jurisdictions presented herein are independent countries, we take the liberty of referring to all six as countries. Throughout this volume, though sometimes termed a country in the aggregate, Hong Kong is understood as a special administrative region of China. Third, for the sake of brevity, the Republic of Korea is frequently abbreviated to simply “Korea,” with the two terms being used interchangeable throughout.

MULTIPLE NARRATIVES: HISTORIC, EXISTING, AND EMERGING

Historic Narratives: The Seminal Rationales for ECEC

Throughout the episodic history of ECEC globally, three significant rationales have shaped the early childhood discourse and its services. Sometimes functioning in isolation and sometimes in union, each emanates from a different time and place, and offers a distinct lens for enlivening early childhood

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education and care. Notably, these rationales have produced quite distinct and often durable approaches for serving young children around the world.

Empirical Rationales. Collectively, empirical rationales emanate from the long-held premise that science can and should contribute to the general public good (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979). Depositing the philosopher-king as the primary bearer and user of knowledge, they suggest that research in diverse fields is obligated to inform the public and, hopefully, the public good. So much the better if such science is predicated on interventions that have proven their effectiveness and if the results are used to create wise, efficient, and cost-effective policy.

Moving to ECEC specifically, this rationale is eminent. Years' worth of policies and programs to serve young children and their families have been catapulted to prominence predicated on an empirical rationale and the evaluation results that attest to the benefits of specific interventions for children, families, and society (Marope & Kaga, 2015). More specifically, early childhood evaluation research has played a prominent role in advancing pedagogical efforts at the classroom level, particularly when such research demonstrated gains in children's academic and social competence. Moreover, the holy trinity of longitudinal American early childhood evaluations (the Abecedarian Project, High Scope/Perry Preschool, and Chicago Child-Parent Centers) has served as the basis for preschool program expansion in this country and globally (Barnett, 1995; Nores & Barnett, 2015; Reynolds & Temple, 2008). Data, particularly drawn from well-constructed longitudinal studies of interventions, have solidified empirical results as a critical elixir of ECEC domestically and internationally.

Social Need Rationales. Another, and very different, rationale also undergirds the imperative for establishing services for young children. Predicated on addressing broader social and economic conditions, the inspiration for this rationale emanates from societal needs, either temporary crises or more trenchant phenomena (Kamerman & Kahn, 2001). In social need rationales, children are not the *raison d'être* for policy creation; rather, policies for children are established as a means of addressing broader, more contextualized problems (e.g., wars and their aftermaths, economic depressions). In some countries, such as the United States, commitment to young children burgeoned at times when female labor force participation was deemed essential to mitigating broader social and economic ills. Evoked both by the Great Depression and two World Wars, child care was seen as a means to free up women's time and thereby incentivize their labor force participation; to meet these social crises, universal and ubiquitous child care was established (Cahan, 1989).

Alternatively, in World War II-ravaged Europe, depleted citizenries gave rise to widespread pronatalist maternal and child policies that incentivized

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population growth, including liberal parental leave and child care provisions. These social need rationales elicited some of the most comprehensive and fast-paced expansions of services to the young. Interestingly, while European war-borne efforts came to serve as the bedrock of many contemporary policies, efforts predicated on other social crises were short-lived in the United States, quickly disbanding after the crises had passed (Grubb & Lazerson, 1982).

Obligation-Rights Rationales. Emanating from a totally different stance, some countries—primarily the Nordic nations—began their commitments to children and families with a primary premise grounded neither in science nor social or economic needs; rather, ECEC was regarded as a part of the natural repertoire of services that countries owed their citizens. ECEC services constituted a cornerstone of the social contract, based in the fundamental obligation to serve all citizens and to serve them well. If such obligations were the duty of the government, they were entitlements for all citizens. This rationale fueled the provision of broader, more comprehensive, and more durable systems and services for young children as a part of normative and essential social obligations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2000).

Existing Narratives: A Revised Story

As seminal as they are, the historic rationales convey only part of today's early childhood story. Layered on top of these fundamentally different and highly formative rationales are a set of existing narratives, etched from the contemporary context, that contour the services provided to young children worldwide. Pervasive, these evoke their own challenges, with which current early childhood services—no matter where located—are contending. Five existing narratives, discussed here, offer both a frame within which to understand ECEC in the countries in this volume and a magnifying glass that provides a clear prelude to the emerging narratives that these country stories will reveal.

Globalization Narrative. The young children of today will grow up in a world that is totally different from that of their parents. Whether talking about a “flat” and globalized world where ease of transport and interconnected economies prevail or the technological revolution through which instant communication, handheld technologies, and online learning are ubiquitous, it is an unequivocal reality that the world is changing, and changing rapidly. Environmental changes are inescapable, as are transformations of gender roles that are propelling women into leadership and same-sex partnerships into legitimacy. Global migration means that once comparatively homogeneous societies and cultures are becoming more diverse, posing new challenges for leaders and citizens. For young children and those who serve

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them, these 21st-century realities raise fundamental questions regarding if and how old narratives and strategies will prepare children for the worlds of flux they will encounter. Such questions beckon ECEC to consider how to best serve the changing needs of young children.

Services Imperative Narrative. Gone are the days when children were to be seen and not heard and “babysitting” was the vernacular associated with caring for young children. Under a deluge of economic evidence that investment in the early years pays off, policymakers globally have solidified their commitments to young children. Today’s existing narrative beckons investment in and support of the young, with services to children no longer a social nicety but a social and political imperative. Work by Nobel laureate economist James Heckman has shown that early investments in young children yield durable benefits, made manifest, for example, in higher adult earnings and reduced welfare dependence and criminal rates (Heckman, 2006). Thus, for many countries, investments in young children are the mark of prudent thinking and wise resource allocation, often approaching the top of the list of requisite investments. Nary a politician would reject a call to improve the well-being of young children, with much of the political rhetoric being matched by significant increases in social investments in low-, middle-, and upper-income countries worldwide (OECD, 2001, 2006; U.N. General Assembly, 2015; UNESCO, 2006). In short, the contemporary narrative proclaims young children as an essential arena for investment, beckoning policymakers toward quickly launched and often less than meticulously planned and implemented services.

New Sciences Narrative. Building on the historical need for and use of empirical data, new evidence from several research disciplines has provided a broadened scientific basis for service expansion to the young. From widely popularized neuroscience comes recognition of the importance to human development of the first 3 years of life. Eyes widen as policymakers hear that young children’s brains grow to 80% of their adult size by age 3 and 90% by age 5; pulses quicken as they understand brain fragility and that without consistent nurturing and protecting stimuli, such development can be durably impaired (Shonkoff, 2010; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Yet neuroscience is not the only science that is changing the contemporary early childhood narrative. From a content perspective, cultural psychologists are dramatically reshaping how the early childhood field understands and honors diversities (Nisbett, 2003; Rogoff, 2003). From the process perspective, implementation scientists are informing early childhood practitioners about strategies that promote effective and efficient program implementation; they examine, for example, practice-borrowing (adoption and adaptation), scaling-up strategies, and policies that promote durability and sustainability.

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And perhaps most potently, systems scientists have recognized that early childhood is fertile ground for bringing the new political and social imperatives to reality. Systems science looks at early childhood education and care contextually and holistically (Joachim & May, 2010). That is, it squarely situates itself in both historic and existing narratives (the context) while acknowledging that a focus on individual programs and services is insufficient to marshal the kinds of changes being demanded of the field in the contemporary era (Urban, Vandenberg, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012). Altogether, such reliance on scientific rationales moves early childhood from the informal domain to one that is more rigorously scrutinized and held to new accountability standards.

Pedagogical Quality Narrative. Emanating from increasingly diverse ideologies, pedagogies, and sciences, ideas about what constitutes quality for young children are taking diverse shapes. For some, group size, staff-to-child ratios, and teacher preparation continue to frame quality gold standards. Others feel these need to be accompanied by additional elements of structural quality augmented with a heavy dose of process quality variables (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2011). Still others—the postmodernists—contend that such variables require malleability and defy any universal definition that is applicable to all; rather, they argue, quality is constructed within time and place, privileging variation (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Myers, 2006). These diametrically opposed views of quality—one constant, definable, and measurable and the other contextually driven, fluid, and malleable—beg for reconciliation as increasingly varied early childhood efforts take hold. Beyond that, however, all quality narratives must be constructed to accommodate the needs of diverse children, with diverse abilities, who speak diverse languages. Indeed, the perennially difficult task of defining quality has been reframed in the existing narrative as a challenge to define *multiple* ideas about, and conceptions of, quality(ies).

Equal Access to Services Narrative. In recent years, children's rights have escalated to prominence through the international human rights and early childhood agendas. Although an obligation-rights narrative has long prevailed in a few countries globally, the equal services narrative is being positioned front and center on the global stage, with the Sustainable Development Goals enunciated by the United Nations now addressing the need to provide services for all young children. This reconstructed narrative calls on nations to serve all children—regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, family economic conditions, language spoken, or legal status—all the time. It demands the expansion of services numerically, a movement that is gaining speed worldwide.

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Emerging Narratives: Looking Forward

This volume suggests that, intentionally or not, narratives play a key role in shaping how we think about and enact early childhood programs, services, and policies. Three historic rationales and five existing narratives conspire to create the current ECEC zeitgeist. Important to acknowledge and understand, they form the base from which contemporary and future ECEC narratives will emerge. The country stories in this volume, however, reveal that entirely new ECEC narratives are taking shape, ones that are grounded in the past, responsive to the present, and prescient for the future. They capitalize on early childhood's contemporary political momentum and the new sciences informing it, while fully acknowledging that the unit for change is not only the settings where children are present (e.g., family child care homes, early childhood classrooms/programs), but the institutional structures and infrastructure elements that encase the services. Moreover, these emerging narratives seek to honor two inescapable and often overlooked realities that characterize what early childhood is and always will be: (a) inherently multidisciplinary in orientation; and (b) composed of a complex set of loosely configured delivery mechanisms. Emerging narratives transcend classrooms and pedagogy to incorporate systems thinking. In so doing, they reset the focus, embrace beyond-the-cusp thinking, and provide a platform to design ECEC for the future.

Any emerging narrative demands contextualization in contemporary realities and, as Salovey admonished, requires bringing judiciously curated knowledge and fresh perspectives to bear on conventional or commonly accepted "truths." This volume aims to do just that. It adopts a fresh approach to empirical work, one that engages leading scholars as they critically examine early childhood practices, policies, and systems in six diverse countries around the world. Unique in approach, the analysis:

1. adopts a systems approach to considerations of ECEC services, drawing on a range of new sciences;
2. examines services across numerous sectors and across the 0–8 age range;
3. accords heavy emphasis to the critical role of culture in shaping personal and societal values, and the nature and quality of services afforded to young children; and
4. employs a comprehensive methodology that augments descriptive statistics with in-depth document reviews, high-profile policy interviews, and validity analyses.

In short, it is a new approach that yields a reformulated narrative, appropriate for its time and place.

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As noted earlier, this volume tells the stories of six countries/jurisdictions that have made considerable innovative commitments to young children and their families. Through this process, new narratives emerge. We will see, for example, how each country's approaches and commitments to young children mirror their unique contexts. This volume will unveil the gnawing persistence of the quality, equity, efficiency, and sustainability challenges and will delineate how these countries have triumphed in their distinct efforts to address them. In so doing, this comparative analysis will traverse the globe as it investigates the inherent realities (including its multidisciplinary focus and its complex delivery mechanisms) that shape all ECEC policy and practice. In the end, it will blend successful experiences and theory to unveil and explicate new and emerging narratives. This entire story is intended to serve leaders across the globe, and especially in the United States, as they seek to improve services to young children and their families by constructing, and then implementing, new narratives.

PREPARING FOR EMERGING NARRATIVES: THE FRAMING ARCHITECTURE

That emerging narratives must necessarily be grounded in systems work is well understood (Bruner, Stover-Wright, Gebhard, & Hibbard, 2004; Gallagher, Clifford, & Maxwell, 2004; Goffin, Martella, & Coffman, 2011; Kagan & Cohen, 1996; Sugarman, 1991; Vargas-Barón, 2013), as it is clear that no one program or intervention can be a proxy for ECEC. No single approach to pedagogy can begin to explicate the complicated and fascinating panoply of policies that converge to create services for young children. And no single country or jurisdiction has a monopoly on the singular right way to construct ECEC systems. In that sense, the orientation of this analysis is postmodernist; it accepts multiple constructs of the emerging system and multiple approaches to its achievement.

This makes studying and deeply understanding ECEC difficult. It is challenging structurally, because most countries do not consolidate all their comprehensive early development services in a single ministry or at a single level of government. It is challenging from a temporal perspective, because ECEC policies can emerge during one year or under one political regime, often to disappear with the next. It is challenging fiscally, because countries use different approaches (both market and non-market) to fund their efforts. And finally, it is challenging ideologically, because country rationales for services vary dramatically, as do the values that surround service delivery. With ECEC not yet deemed a right in most countries, inconsistent and sporadic practices and policies are gamed on ideological playgrounds amidst changing rules, funds, and governance structures. To make sense of ECEC systems across six distinct jurisdictions, to render thoughtful and