

Foreword

Throughout the world today children are routinely discriminated against. They are employed as cheap labour, sold into slavery, and even used as soldiers by unscrupulous warlords. Our attitude to the rights of children is cavalier to say the least. The United States of America, the richest and most powerful nation on earth, still refuses to sign the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1991); and some of those who have signed it regularly breach its requirements. In many cases it is not unreasonable to ask whether the signatories actually took the trouble to read what they were signing. Despite this, the UNCRC is a powerful document, containing 54 distinctive Articles covering the various rights of the child. Article 28 states that children have a right to education, while Article 29 covers the way in which that right should be enacted. Article 31 asserts that children have the right to leisure, play and culture. Taken together these statements have extreme relevance for the field of Early Childhood Education.

Unfortunately, the message is not getting through, and several countries are moving towards a version of Early Childhood Education that is focused on academic achievement to the detriment of all the other aspects of child development. This is troubling. After all, three-, four- and five-year-old children should not be sitting behind desks all day being taught an inflexible curriculum that conforms to an unimaginative agenda designed by politicians who have forgotten what it is like to be a child. On the contrary, the early years should be a time of fun, freedom and flexibility (Brown, 2014) – a time when children are able to explore and experiment, and learn from their interactions with their immediate environment. This is a time when children develop meaningful friendships for the first time, and start to find out who they really are, and who they want to be. They begin to improve their life skills, such as sympathy, empathy and mimesis. None of this can be taught in a formal classroom. No child ever learnt how to understand the feelings of another child by sitting behind a desk listening to a teacher. In fact, these things are developed while playing with other children. It is clear that Early Childhood Education is of crucial significance in a child's development, but without an approach that rich in playful opportunities, its impact will be limited.

What does this mean in practice? Firstly, in today's increasingly inter-connected world it is crucial that we are language proficient. We know that children find it easier to learn a language if they start young. Hence there is an emphasis in this book on the need for cultural and linguistic diversity, and the development of linguistic abilities within the early years. Secondly, the book stresses the significance of children's play in the developmental process. There is coverage of a number of pedagogical approaches and their relationship to children's play. These include High Scope, Reggio Emilia and Montessori, and the way in which play and inter-culturality is approached in Brazil. Finally, the book explores the impact

Foreword

of toys in the early years, and their role as cultural models for children, including the gender stereotyping that is so widespread in the toy industry, where we still find a predominance of primary coloured toys for boys, and pastel shades for girls.

Huertas and Gómez have gathered together a valuable set of reflections on the subject of early childhood education. Their book addresses many of the issues that challenge us today, and provides some real insights into the future in an increasingly inter-connected world.

Fraser Brown

Leeds Beckett University, UK

Fraser Brown is Professor of Playwork at Leeds Beckett University and a Core Member of the Institute for Health and Wellbeing. His key interests include Playwork and Children's Wellbeing. He has built up a substantial research and practical knowledge of Playwork and the value of this element of children's development. For ten years he was Director of the playwork training agency Children First, and previously held advisory posts with Playboard and the National Playing Fields Association. He spent three years as a playworker on an adventure playground in Runcorn, and managed a range of projects for the North-West Play Association. For two years he was District Leisure Officer in Middlesbrough. He has spoken throughout the UK and around the world about his research into the effects of therapeutic playwork on a group of abandoned children in Romania. He is the Chair and Co-Founder of the Aid for Romanian Children charitable trust, and a member of the International Advisory Board of the Romanian Association of Play Therapy and Drama Therapy.