

## Editorial: Revisiting diversity and difference in early childhood through children's news media

Children's access to certain knowledge, often deemed inappropriate for children by adults, has been at the core of many controversies in children's early education. This is particularly the case in terms of the censorship associated with children's access to what has been broadly viewed as 'difficult knowledge' – bodies of knowledge pertaining to sexuality, death, war, poverty, and violence, for example. In some western countries, the discourse of childhood innocence has been a powerful mediator/regulator of children's access to knowledge and has influenced how children are viewed as active citizens in their everyday lives (Robinson, 2013). However, it is now more widely accepted that children are competent, knowing beings in and of the world, readily taking up, processing and challenging messages about a raft of uncomfortable and inequitable realities, from global warming, to sexism, to racial intolerance, to class prejudice (Osgood et al., 2016). This view of children and childhood requires that approaches to pedagogy, policy and practice around diversity and difference in early childhood education attend to children as knowers and doers in the world (Osgood, 2012; Osgood and Robinson, 2019; Robinson and Jones Díaz, 2016).

In the wake of recent global political developments and the rise of popularism (e.g. Brexit in the UK, the election of President Trump in the USA, the marriage equality plebiscite in Australia) – all of which have reignited debates about racial intolerance, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, gender fluidity and sexism – it is important to investigate how children make sense of this as it unfolds in their daily lives and local contexts. Whilst there are long traditions within early childhood education globally (e.g. the anti-bias movement) and localised practices within early childhood settings that seek to advance children's understandings of diversity and difference, adults generally continue to feel uncomfortable addressing such issues. A notable exception though is children's media where real-world issues are deftly addressed. For example, according to Matthews (2009), *Newsround* in the UK effectively shapes the production of news to offer a selective and simplified news agenda for children that respects their cultural rights as active citizens.

This special issue of *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* provides a space to consider the constitution of children's knowledge through the medium of children's news media. It attends to the political machinations at play in the ways in which media, both that intended for children and that which they encounter but is intended for an adult audience, is produced and consumed. The collection of articles in this issue offer investigations, critiques, appraisals and reconfigurings of the significance of media in children's lives and attends to what adults (researchers, parents, teachers) might want to consider and enact in their practices with young children. This special issue considers the significance of children's news media in addressing, tackling or diluting real world issues, that directly impact upon children's lives and the sense they make of the world and their place within the world. The collection of articles offers a range of approaches from various geopolitical contexts and historical moments, deliberating on how events are selected, framed and presented in children's news media, with a particular concern to explore what gets silenced and/or framed in particularly narrow ways.

The issue begins with an article from Robinson, Jones Díaz and Townley, which builds upon and extends Robinson's and Jones Díaz's existing work (Robinson and Jones Díaz, 2006 and 2016) to interrogate the hegemonic constructions of knowledge and childhood with a specific focus on how current affairs relevant to diversity and difference are represented in children's news media and negotiated by parents in discussions with young children. The authors write from the Australian context but turn attention to both global and national news events, examining the discourses associated with same-sex marriage equality, refugees and Islamophobia. The discussion draws upon focus group interviews with parents of children in early childhood; and a thematic and Foucauldian discursive analysis of stories from 2015 to 2018 in *Behind the News*, the primary digital news media source for Australian children, aged 8 to 13 years. Within feminist post-structuralist, post-developmental and critical theorist frameworks, the authors examine the dominant discourses of childhood foundational to the regulation of children's access to certain types of knowledge through media and family practices. Robinson, Jones Díaz and Townley argue that children's news media is closely scrutinised and regulated with major news stories framed within dominant discourses of childhood, childhood innocence and developmentalism. Similarly, these discourses underpinned parents' censorship practices related to their children's access to knowledge deemed inappropriate and unsafe for children. The authors argue that children are a heterogeneous group that come from a broad range of social, cultural, family and political backgrounds and are exposed to a diversity of experiences in the world and to 'difficult knowledge' that can impact on their lives. They conclude that children's and young people's access to critical, evidence-based reporting of current

affairs, in a manner that scaffolds the building of their knowledge and critical literacy skills, should be core to the early childhood education curriculum.

Gunn and Surtees pick up some of the threads offered in the Robinson, Jones Díaz and Townley article by attending to the ways in which children's news media texts might be deployed as curriculum resources in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. They argue that by engaging with current affairs and news within the school curriculum there is pedagogical potential to address children's knowledge, perspectives and agency in the world. The authors found that teachers' good intentions become compromised by the tension between news media content and the curriculum as it is planned and enacted. The article reports on a study investigating two children's news media publications designed to support the school curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand. The article focuses on the content within children's news and traces the associated discourses that emerge about Aotearoa New Zealand, life in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the world. Sport (both national and international) featured heavily as a category of news reported within the texts. A critical analysis of this category identified particular discourses and constructions of New Zealand, New Zealanders and 'Others' within the texts. Individual and collective sporting heroism was a dominant discourse in both the news items and children's published responses. Aotearoa New Zealand was discursively constructed as a relatively safe and non-corrupt place to live. These prevailing narratives raised questions about what is important to know, how children are engaging with such value-laden knowledge, and the implications for teaching and teachers' practices. The authors are concerned that this preoccupation with sports and heroism within children's news may come at the expense of opportunities to engage with a broader range of real-world issues that includes 'difficult knowledge' that potentially impacts upon young children's lives. This was particularly pertinent given that at the time of writing Aotearoa New Zealand was in the grips of national shock and grief at the mass shooting that took place at two mosques – a horrific event that reverberated across the national and global news, and of which young children had difficult questions to ask.

The special issue then goes back in both time and space to 8 November 2016 and specifically the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA. In this article, Salazar questions whether and in what ways, children's news media acts as a conduit for 'unbiased' news. She argues that children were not immune to the public displays of the long-held sexist, racist and bigoted views (on women, people of colour, LGBTQ+ communities and Others) that Trump made the cornerstone of his election campaign. This was extensively covered in the media both nationally and internationally; and was not limited to news intended for adult-only audiences. Scholastic's *News Kids Press Corps*, a free online publication for and 'by kids' aged 10 to 14, joined the conversation in 2015. The article offers a critical analysis of *News Kids Press Corps*' coverage of Trump's campaign, theorized through a women of colour feminist lens. Major themes to emerge from the analysis included: teaching children how to be unbiased reporters; the importance of being part of the political process and voting; social and policy issues; and Trump's disposition/sexism. Whilst the topics covered were both broad and controversial, the reporting failed to provide critical reflections or attend to the historical contexts that frame the issues being reported. The author concludes by offering suggestions for expanding conceptualizations of news media for and by children and, furthermore, how educators can engage in critical media literacy with children across multiple age groups, including the early years.

The next article in this special issue takes another geopolitical and theoretical shift, in which Osgood and Andersen undertake a feminist new materialist experiment as a means to explore *what else* gets produced through encounters with children's news media. The authors undertake a speculative and uncertain excavation of the myriad ways in which real world issues directly impact children's lives and go on to ask what else gets produced through encounters with children's global news media specifically within the contexts of the UK and Norway. Through Haraway (2008, 2016) inspired practices of story-telling and worlding, the authors attempt to open up generative possibilities to encounter and reconfigure difficult knowledges. They take two contemporary events – the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire tragedy in London, UK and the 2018 Marjory Stoneman High School shooting massacre in Florida, USA – as a means to attend to ways in which affects are materialized across multiple times and spaces. News reports of these harrowing events written by and for children, as well as those intended for an adult audience, were addressed. However, the authors are concerned with what such events and the media coverage produced in terms of child activism, racism and toxic masculinity. Encountering these news reports and the affective flows that were set in motion provided a catalyst for a feminist new materialist experiment in generating other knowledges through material-affective-embodied encounters. In addition to foraging through their everyday lives lived as academic-mothers working and researching in the field of early childhood, the authors facilitated a speculative workshop with a small number of early childhood researchers. In the article they dwell upon the potential for material-affective-semiotic encounters (with newspapers, glue, sticky tape, string, torches, bags and a cartridge for a firearm during the workshop) to generate other ways – sensory, affective and embodied – to (re-)encounter children's news media and difficult knowledge. Following

Erin Manning (2016), the authors recognize that to avoid getting stuck in familiar ways of thinking and doing, research needs to be undertaken differently. The article offers interwoven and diffractive accounts that collectively attend to the affective work that high-profile news events perform, and how they then become rearticulated through embodied encounters with materiality. Attending to how these events worked on the researchers involves staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016) as it becomes reignited, mutated and amplified across time and in different contexts. The goal was to resist comforts of recognition, reflection and identification by reaching beyond what is already thought and known about how children are in the world, and instead consider children's entanglements with difficult knowledges through world-making practices.

Tesar et al., then turn to children's literature in China to revisit ideologies of childhood and agency. The everyday media that are reflected within a sample of children's literature in China offers an interesting point of departure from which the authors examine how particular images of childhoods find expression. The authors consider historical and contemporary ideologies of childhood in China to critically examine notions of 'child' and 'childhood' in Chinese children's literature. They identify a set of themes that relate to relevant historical and contemporary political events and policies, and how these contribute to the production of childhoods. Three images of childhoods in China – the Confucian child, the Modern child, and the Maoist child – are identified and explored. Each of the images reflects idealised constructions of what a child ought to be and become, and what their childhood should look like. Everyday media are reflected in the texts and stories examined, and portray both 'imagined' and 'real-life' narratives of children and their childhoods. The stories, and the connected power relations, represent an important link between the politics of childhood and the pedagogy associated with these politics, including large-scale state investment in the production of desired, ideal and perfect childhoods. Through such an examination of contemporary and historical children's literature and media in China the ways in which contemporary media revitalises particular notions of child agency are unearthed and troubled.

Lange and Meaney also offer an historical account of how images of the child are produced through children's literature, in this instance Danish children's magazines from the 1920s. The authors attend specifically to what the mathematical puzzles and handicrafts in these magazines reveal about childhood. They argue that media for children has long reflected societal views about appropriate childhoods in a given context. These views are based upon adult ideas about what is appropriate for children to engage with. The authors take the mathematical puzzles and handicrafts in a selection of Danish children's magazines from 1925 to 1930 as a focus of analysis to identify the childhoods that adults at this time considered appropriate. The classification of the puzzles and handicraft tasks according to the mathematical activities involved provides insights into the cultural practices deemed suitable for children and whether these cultural practices were differentiated according to gender. The analysis shows that there was a predominance of measuring and designing activities with children engaging in adult-equivalent tasks, such as building a hen house. These tasks had limited specific instructions, indicating that children needed to persevere in working out the details and have the possibilities to adapt them to their own situation. As well, there are only a few features which aligned tasks to a particular gender. The puzzles and handicrafts indicate that appropriate childhoods were considered those which treated children as autonomous and which valued the importance of doing things. The claims that Lange and Meaney put forward in this article connect to the assertions put forward in the other contributions to this special issue regarding the image of the child as knowing, capable and, ultimately, endlessly entangled in world-making practices.

Finally, we are taken to the elementary school library to contemplate the tensions between children's access to difficult knowledge and how it has been routinely censored. Rumberger builds upon the issues identified in the preceding articles in this issue to highlight the ways in which children are often narrowly constructed by adults, and consequently regulated, contained and confined in unhelpful ways. Yet what this collection forcefully illustrates is that children are of the world, actively participating in knowledge consumption and production in ways that adults can never fully comprehend. The school library is an interesting site to investigate how children encounter and consume information about the world around them. Rumberger argues that school libraries were originally conceived as democratic spaces of access to information where students could pursue their own inquiries. Originating as reading rooms, school libraries have evolved to integrate digital texts, news media and multimodal learning. In practice, however, school libraries often become regulatory spaces, where young children are encouraged to read on their 'level' and actively directed away from texts that are deemed 'inappropriate' due to violent content. However, despite attempts in classrooms, libraries and communities to limit access to sensitive issues, Rumberger argues that even our most emergent readers engage in lively critiques of their world. Research with one librarian and four first-grade children at a public elementary school in the north-east of the United States presents a counter narrative to childhood innocence, developmentalist logic and protectionism. Through observations, interviews, photographs, mapping and drawing, this study demonstrates that the school library (despite its democratic principles) often became a space where children had limited

access to content deemed in some sense inappropriate. The author concludes by arguing that the school library can be an open space for children to explore their world through a variety of formats, topics and social interactions with texts and digital media.

This special issue offers a broad and eclectic collection of articles which together address the significance of news media to the ways in which we form our image of the child and in turn the ways in which policy, pedagogy and our everyday encounters with young children are shaped. Together the articles underline the imperative that we recognize children as knowing, curious and competent. Despite attempts to control, regulate and restrict access to certain forms of knowledge, children are actively participating in world-making practices everyday which include consuming, producing and reworking difficult knowledge. As adults invested in early childhood, we have a responsibility to take them seriously and to find ways in which to critically appraise how we work with them to negotiate 'difficult knowledge' often perceived by some as inappropriate for children.

Finally, the issue concludes with a thoughtful review from Nikki Fairchild of the recently published book: *Feminists Researching Gendered Childhoods: Generative Entanglements*, edited and written by Jayne Osgood and Kerry Robinson. Like this Special Issue the book brings together multiple ways in which to study childhood. By interrogating how knowledge about children is produced through research and theorisation the book challenges the reader to think about children and childhood more expansively. We invite you, the reader, to engage with the various approaches that have been presented throughout this Special Issue, which collectively work to unsettle ideas about how children actively produce the worlds of which they are a part, and from which we have a great deal to learn.

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