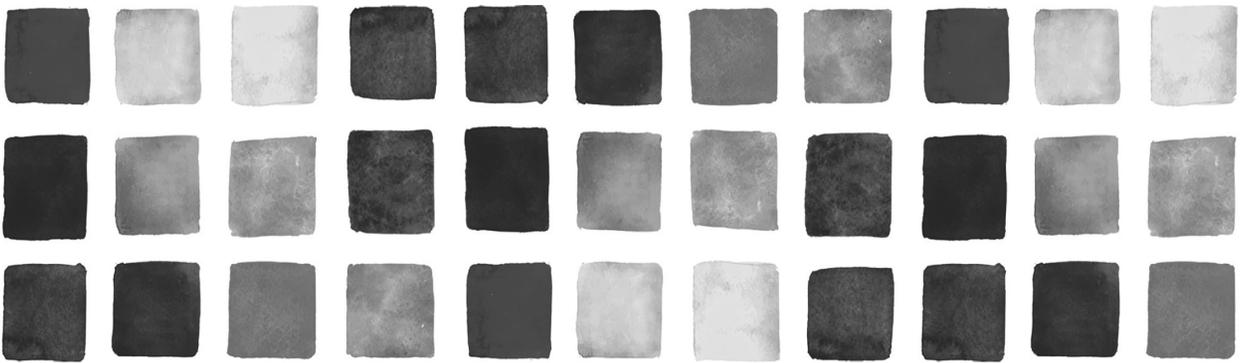The SAGE Handbook of
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Early Childhood Research: An Expanding Field

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INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEMPORARY STATE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD AND THE CALL FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH

Early childhood is an expanding research field that is concerned with young children, their families, and their communities. Drawn from a range of disciplines and conducted within a range of contexts, empirical evidence generated within this field demonstrates the importance of the early years for individual, community, and global outcomes. Strengthened international and national commitments to early childhood are inviting new high-stakes questions for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers. These questions are occasioning a heightened focus on research concerned with young children and heralding a call for new insights into its design, conduct, and impact. Against this backcloth, this volume provides thought-provoking, empirically-based insights into the range of extant early childhood research

that addresses the diverse contexts of children's lives and speaks to the transformative conditions under which children's rights are fostered and their developmental and life chances are optimized.

The issue has captured much attention. On the international stage, early childhood research has been an empirical driver of many notable efforts to bring young children and their life chances to the forefront of policy. Prominent international bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2001, 2006, 2012) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2008, 2014) attest to the importance of early childhood research in shaping government and non-government priorities across a range of jurisdictions. A key catalyst for early childhood research influencing priorities is the 'starting strong' agenda. Exemplified in a series of OECD international comparative reports on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (2001, 2006, 2012). Starting Strong agenda draws upon

early childhood research and its methodologies within human development, sociology, children's rights, and econometrics to demonstrate the affordances of investment in quality ECEC. Early childhood research has, therefore, become part of an internationally recognized discourse, pushing for the strongest possible start for children's life chances and life outcomes. Starting Strong is a significant global challenge given that the world's 2.2 billion children (UNICEF, 2014) represent the largest and most complex population of children in human history and a generation who face the unprecedented and seismic challenges of new technologies and geo-political shifts. The rhetoric of Starting Strong resonates with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), with its focus on children's rights to participation, provision, and protection in areas of their everyday lives. The UNCRC, in concert with traditional and emerging theoretical understandings of young children and their lives, has come to shape the expanding and complex field that is the focus of this volume.

EARLY CHILDHOOD AND EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH DEFINED

Given this attention, it is important to underscore that early childhood and research in early childhood take place within a complex field, replete with undergirding theories, content, and methodology, all of which demand examination. Indeed, because this handbook addresses these issues and because the field is diverse, it is important to begin by presenting diverse definitions and constructions of early childhood, which in turn frame early childhood research. To do so, we provide an orientation to what is 'considered' as early childhood research in a range of contexts and what 'counts' as credible and robust research within those contexts.

There is no universal definition of early childhood and, indeed, no universal definition of early childhood research with regard

to the terms used to define it and to the ages of children it includes. With respect to the former, the field is peppered with many and varied terms, including early years, early childhood development, early care, early care and education, and early childhood education and care. While definitions abound and debates are lively, the terms 'early childhood' and 'early years' are among the two most popular internationally, and are often used interchangeably by researchers and policy personnel. Thus, the two terms 'early childhood' and 'early years' are largely used throughout this volume.

There is also controversy regarding the age span of children that should be included in early childhood, with most using the term to refer to children from birth to age 8. Some, however, suggest that the pre-natal period should be included, and others proffer that early childhood should include children up to 12 years of age. Despite the contested nature of the ages to be included in early childhood education, the vast majority of the international world adopts the nomenclature of early childhood or early years as embracing birth to age 8 years. As such, we adopt this age span as we consider early childhood services and research, whilst fully acknowledging debates over terms and age-based definitions.

Beyond the issues of terms and ages to be used when discussing young children, there is also controversy regarding the range of services to be examined. In many countries, the context is regarded somewhat narrowly, to include center-based provision primarily. In other settings, the context includes an array of services for young children, including center-based and home-based services, as well as those that include health, mental health, nutrition, and protection services. We adopt the more inclusive definition of early childhood services. Further, in examining early childhood research, we note that it is not confined to services, but embraces broader contexts, such as neighborhoods, communities, as well as political, social, and policy contexts.

EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH: A COMPLEX CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FIELD

The field of early childhood research is conceptually and methodologically complex, with different disciplinary and professional lineages, multiple methodological and analytic approaches and multiple stakeholders. Its conceptual underpinnings of respect for childhood and child competence, for example, have given rise to methodologies that open up possibilities for children's participation in, and decision-making regarding, research. The rhetoric around child competence and child participation, theorized within childhood studies (c.f. Qvortrup, 2000), for example, has been accompanied by legislative and policy concern for children's rights in research that affects their everyday lives and life chances.

So too, the contexts in which early childhood research occur and the governance of its contexts predispose the field to complexity. Health services as sites of research, for example, are often distinct from education and care services, bringing their own corporate governance cultures and structures that, in turn, contour the research that is sanctioned, facilitated, and disseminated. Institutional and disciplinary orientations are difficult to overcome, given the long histories and methods associated with each. Another layer of complexity is that research is bounded by human and fiscal resources, budget cycles, labor force patterns, and the push towards using research to advance speedy policy decisions. Such factors mean that research can be truncated due to financial or human factors outside the researcher's control. So too, there is the cycle of research dissemination that can oscillate between rapid knowledge transfer, on the one hand, and protracted or even stymied dissemination of findings, on the other. Moreover, mapping the field of early childhood research is beset by the frailty of the published literature to represent accurately the research that is occurring and

by the temporal factors of time, space, and resources. The exponential change in policy and the press to translate research into policy and practice, with greater rapidity, thus, contribute to unprecedented complexity and urgency in the conduct and dissemination of research.

TRENDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH

A Growing Range of Research Studies

Against the backcloth of these challenges and complexities, research in early childhood services has yielded a wealth of studies, both in quantity and diversity. Barnett's (2008) review of a range of significant preschool education studies, for example, reveals the depth and breadth of empirical work which has come to justify investment in the early years. Barnett's (2008) sample of studies includes: randomized control trials (e.g., *Abecedarian Program*, Campbell et al., 2012; *Head Start National Impact Study*, Puma et al., 2001); quasi-experimental studies (e.g., *Michigan School Readiness Program*, Xiang and Schweinhart, 2002); and longitudinal studies (e.g., *Effective Provision of Preschool Education*, Melhuish et al., 2008). So too, a meta-analysis of early education intervention studies produced by Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, and Barnett (2010) provides a snapshot of the impact of early intervention on children's cognitive and social development. Such analyses complement the growing corpus of cost-benefit studies (Cunha et al., 2005; Heckman, 2011) to show the merit of early intervention and, in turn, to justify systematic research in this area.

While these works are concerned (predominantly) with program-based intervention, other large-scale, longitudinal cohort studies are concerned with wider health and social matters for children and their

families. Examples include: *Longitudinal Effects of Parenting on Children's Academic Achievement in African American Families* (Qi, 2006) in the USA; the *Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children* (since 1991) (2012) in the UK; and the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (since 2004) (2011), *Effective Early Childhood Education Experiences Study* (E4Kids) (since 2009) (Tayler and Thorpe, 2012) in Australia, and a range of birth cohort studies from South East Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean regions (McKinnon and Campbell, 2011). Thus, studies of intervention in early childhood services, as well as studies of young children's experience in a range of other contexts, reveal the complexity of the field that has come to be known as early childhood research.

A sobering point is that reviews of widely cited and influential studies show a preponderance of work from the Global North, that is, from those countries or regions that are wealthier in education and in social and economic resources than those of the Global South. Barnett's (2008) sample of 28 studies (by research strength), for example, features only three from outside the USA: the *Mauritius Study* (Raine et al., 2003), *Effective Provision of Preschool Education* (EPPE) (Melhuish et al., 2008), and *Effective Preschool Provision in Northern Ireland* (EPPNI) (Melhuish et al., 2006). Such reviews reveal differential research resources, research infrastructure, research personnel, and research networks across and within the Global North/Global South configuration. Reducing the disparity between those rich in resources and those with much less was the remit of the United Nations' *Millennium Development Goals* (2010). Although such declarations are not ostensibly focused on research, they form part of the macro-context for the volume's examination of early childhood research.

There is lively debate about what constitutes *bona fide* early childhood research. A case-in-point is the debate as to whether evaluation is research and/or a sub-set of research or whether research and evaluation are mutually exclusive (Beney, 2011; Donaldson, Christie and Mark, 2009; Mark, 2009; Patton, 2008, 2014; Renger, 2014; Scriven, 1991, 2003, 2013). We find research publications peppered with evaluation studies, research bodies with evaluation studies in their cadre of funded works, and the emergence of scholarly journals devoted to evaluation – a scenario likely spurred by an imperative for research-to-practice evidence, using impact studies for government and other stakeholders.

Patton (2014) distinguishes between research and evaluation, arguing that research is concerned with empirical evidence, theory testing, peer review, and generalizability of results, while evaluation is concerned with determining the effectiveness, quality, or impact of a specific program or model and drawing evaluative conclusions for stakeholders and end-users. Renger (2014), in turn, refers to the continued blurring of evaluation and research as hybridized terms and the frequent use of similar designs in both research and evaluation, such that confusion over their distinctiveness is inevitable (see also Levin-Rozalis, 2003; Renger et al., 2013). A related newcomer is the field of 'evaluation capacity building' (ECB), a design and implementation process that seeks to assist individuals, groups, and organizations to develop an evaluative stance (see Labin, 2014; Preskill and Boyle, 2008). While not explicitly addressed as an extant field within this volume, these ideas and practices form part of the context in which early childhood research practitioners, policy makers, and end users operate.

A Growing Range of Researchers

Not only has the field seen a growing range of research studies and approaches, it has seen the emergence of a growing range of researchers. Once the primary province of university-based research academics, early childhood research, in embracing *in situ* approaches and methodologies, has welcomed new research players such as those from non-traditional

disciplines such as neuroscience or economics, along with parents and, indeed, children. A particular category of early childhood researcher to emerge is the early childhood practitioner-researcher, particularly in the UK, the USA, Australia, and New Zealand. Practitioner research is defined by Goodfellow (2005: 48) as 'systematic inquiry-based efforts directed toward creating and extending professional knowledge and associated understandings of professional practice.' In England, for example, early childhood practitioner research has proliferated in tandem with the universal rollout of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) for children up to 5 years of age. The Mosaic approach championed by Clark and colleagues (2005) in the UK and addressed in Chapter 5, for example, has been taken up by early years practitioner-researchers to make 'listening' visible through documentation and reflection (see Clark and Moss, 2001; Clark et al., 2005). So, too, there has been exponential growth in research resources for use by early years practitioners (Arnold, 2012; Mukherji and Albon, 2009).

Indeed, the growing prominence of early years practitioner-research is seen in the named category of research award sponsored by SAGE Publications and the *British Educational Research Association* (2012), and another similar award sponsored by Routledge and the *European Early Childhood Education Research Association* (2012). In Australia, early childhood practitioner research is featured in the Research in Practice series published by Australia's premier professional body *Early Childhood Australia* (Goodfellow, 2009; Goodfellow and Hedges, 2007). While located within the field of professional practice, conducted (typically) in early childhood services, the phenomenon of the specialist early childhood researcher is emblematic of the broader uptake of early childhood research and the shaping of the field of early childhood research. It is fair to say that the work of the early childhood practitioner-researcher has generated a significant corpus of (predominantly) qualitative data, yet the influence and impact of such activity are yet to be examined in any systematic way.

EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH: POSSIBILITIES FOR TRANSFORMATION

The transformative potential of research is to enable change in the research setting and those within it. Possibilities of research for transformation can be seen through the everyday practices of life in: home and family contexts; out-of-home contexts such as services for young children and their families; and broader societal and global contexts that pose challenges and risks for young children. Possibilities for transformation lie in conceptual understandings of research *with* children rather than research *on* or *about* children (Kellet, 2005), where children are seen as holding rights as active participants and competent interpreters of their own worlds, as persons with the right to be seen and heard within their sites of experience on issues that affect them (Christensen and James, 1998; Mayall, 2003; Qvortrup, 2000; Tisdall, 2012). Such sociological understandings contrast with and contest traditional developmental understandings of children as pre-competent (Danby, 2002; Mackay, 1991), as under-developed 'human becomings' (Phillips and Alderson, 2002: 6), who, one day, may become competent adults.

Early childhood research, in turn, has the transformative potential to tackle 'wicked' problems (see Rittel and Webber, 1973), which beset children, families, and communities. Wicked problems include the adverse impacts of climate change and geo-political instability, child poverty, rapid urbanization, transnational displacement, and food shortages. UNICEF's (2014: 3) report on the *State of the World's Children*, for example, shows that, of the 18,000 children under 5 years old who die every day, a disproportionate number are from parts of cities or the countryside that are cut off from services because of poverty

or geography, and the world's poorest children are 2.7 times less likely than the richest ones to have a skilled attendant at their birth. Despite the stark situation for children evidenced by UNICEF's current Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) (250 surveys conducted in more than 100 countries and areas since 1995), UNICEF (2014: 15) avows that 'Children drive change. Children are experts on their own lives. They can contribute valuable knowledge to validate and enrich the evidence base – if only they have a chance to be heard.' Evidence such as this points to the urgent need for research-for-transformation of the settings in which children operate.

Another 'wicked' problem that shapes research foci and settings of concern to many adults is child consumerism and children's engagement with globalized social media. Buckingham (2011) concedes:

> From the moment they are born, children today are already consumers. Contemporary childhoods are lived out in a world of commercial goods and services. Marketing to children is by no means new, but children now play an increasingly important role, both as consumers in their own right and as influences on parents … Yet far from being welcome or celebrated, children's consumption has often been perceived as an urgent social problem. (p. 5)

The pervasiveness of social media, albeit for those resourced for access, forms part of the context in which research occurs. Some argue that the phenomenon of children operating as consumers of new technologies, online services, and social media, particularly in the Global North, is posing opportunities and challenges for children, families, and communities, and in turn, for early childhood research. A quest for antidotes to exponential social and technological change and children's participation in it has seen the emergence of new fields of inquiry, such as studies of human 'happiness'. One that goes beyond the conventional correlates such as poverty to explore new evidences of wellbeing. In summary, the social conditions under which children and adults operate and the social and technological resources at their disposal inform the context in which research occurs and, to some extent, inform the methodological approaches that are taken up in research.

This whirlwind review suggests several things about early childhood research. It sits at the convergence of multiple disciplinary domains, each with their respective research traditions and orientations. While aspiring to a shared focus, the domains have historically competed with each other for recognition and influence in the policy and research funding landscape. Further, the review recognizes that the field is strong in conceptual and methodological diversity, and relatively weak in giving coherent and convincing arguments of evidence in favor of young children and their life chances. The review shows that early childhood research, however complex, is critical particularly in light of the urgent need for evidence to drive the decisions that governments and others are making on behalf of children. Despite challenges, it is worthy of thoughtful investigation, interrogation, and reflection, such as is provided within this volume.

OVERVIEW OF THE HANDBOOK

This handbook provides an overview of the field of early childhood research, incorporating its conceptual underpinnings, research methodologies and future possibilities in the contexts in which young children, their families, and communities operate. It reveals the weight of evidence from human development, educational research, and economics to show that the lived experiences of children, now, impact their life chances in the future. It maps developing areas of research and research methods and notes the changing players and practices to enter the field. In turn, from a human rights perspective, the volume shows the importance of young children, in their own right, in the here and now, as worthy of ethical research and policy

attention. The volume recognizes that contexts shape the contours of children's everyday lives, in home and out-of-home settings and shape the design, conduct, and dissemination of the research that ensues.

A thread running through the volume is the importance of the ethical conduct of research with children in the contexts of their everyday lives, a substantive point made, with acuity, in those chapters that deal with the Global South and post-colonial situations of war and conflict. Another thread is the need for critique of burgeoning interest in econometrics and cost-benefit studies and a reliance on dominant neo-liberal Western formulations in shaping policy and practice.

In compiling the volume, the editors faced the challenge of a preponderance of work from the Global North and a favoring (in published work and citations) of Western research traditions and approaches. The editors embarked on a quest to enlist work from the Global South and appreciated the connections made, and contributions *from* as well as *on* the Global South. The combination of work from the Global North and the Global South extended theory, methods, and policy and practice implications, thereby showing the potential of cross-country conversations. While challenging, the initiative to include work from both the Global North and the Global South opened up a rich seam of scholarship from a number of post-colonial regions, such that new research identities and groupings are beginning to emerge in regions traditionally eclipsed in works such as this.

The volume is organized into five parts, each drawing upon specific cases to illuminate their diverse foci and to optimize applicability to the relevant context of practice:

Part I. Situating early childhood research (context focus)
Part II. Theorizing early childhood research (theoretical focus)
Part III. Conducting early childhood research (methodology focus)
Part IV. Applying early childhood research (issues focus)

Part V. Considering the future of early childhood research (prospective focus)

Each chapter considers early childhood research within its respective area of focus, the theoretical and methodological approaches that are used therein, issues of relevance for the broader field of early childhood research and/or policy, and new developments or perspectives that the area brings to the early childhood agenda. In designing the Handbook, the editors encouraged the authors to consider diversity and equity related to issues germane to their chapter and to be mindful of the geo-political contexts in which the work is located. That said, a volume of this scale and scope does not assure equal coverage of such matters across its five parts.

Part I begins by setting early childhood research, as a complex and expanding field, within its historical, conceptual, and policy contexts and identifies the significant contributions of early childhood research to the context of children's lives, thereby demonstrating the impact of research on children and on the contexts in which they operate. Morin, Glickman and Brooks-Gunn provide a thorough examination of home and family contexts for research, while Dalli and White locate their systematic analysis within the context of group-based care for very young children. Cohen and Korintus' consideration of the child and the community in context is an illuminating examination of child and community contexts in different locales.

Part II explores the significant theoretical underpinnings of early childhood research. This section opens with Tisdall's examination of young children's participation that shows affordances of children's rights in everyday research contexts. Moss's theoretical perspectives on the positionality of the researcher, her language and pedagogy, within the research context. Moss's chapter is complemented by De Graeve's theoretical understandings of identity politics, intersectionality, and discourses of citizenship, using notions of motherhood and parenthood to show the ways in which particular

discourses in particular communities nor-malize, pathologize, and devalue parenting. Gallacher provides a theorization of young children's spaces and children's rights in research. Young's analysis of the applications of the science of early human development into action in order to close the gap between what we know and what we do. The part moves to Anderson and Reid's consideration of theorizations from neuroscience and neuroplasticity, as highly influential in early childhood policy, and thus, affording critique Finally, the section concludes with a chapter on systems theory within the context of Latin America and the Caribbean, by Kagan, Araujo, Jaimovich, and Aguoyo.

Part III is devoted to conducting early childhood research, its focus being research design and the methodological and analytic aspects of undertaking research in the contexts of children's lives. The part opens with Farrell's chapter on ethics in research with young children. Its historical overview of research ethics in child research provides a conceptual platform for consideration of the design, conduct, and dissemination of early childhood research. Zubrick's chapter, in turn, contributes conceptual and methodological insights into the scope and scale of longitudinal research as a global technology, its affordances being demonstrated for data sharing, data mining, and policy formation. The part moves to a different methodological field in Konstantoni and Kustatscher's chapter on ethnographic research and its focus on child participation, participant observation, and reflexivity.

The section moves to a chapter by Clandinin, Huber, Menon, Murphy, and Swanson on narrative inquiry as a methodology in child research. Drawing on the work of Dewey, the authors discuss the importance of the ethical aspects of relationships involving children and adults in research contexts, be they in educational, family, or health care. Sidnell's chapter, in turn, highlights the conceptual and methodological contribution of conversation analysis in research with young children, in a range of everyday contexts. The chapter authored by Carr, Cowie, and Mitchell demonstrates the

research merit of documentation of young children's learning in early childhood education and care contexts, while Wood's chapter that follows demonstrates the complexity and context specificity of young children's play in intrepretivist research. The final chapter in the section, Cleveland's chapter on econometrics in early childhood research, argues for its fit-for-purpose in tackling major social issues.

Part IV considers the applications of early childhood research in the increasingly globalized, yet uneven and often inequitable, worlds of children. The section opens with Deb and Giraseen's chapter draws on evidence, largely from the Indian sub-continent, to exemplify the range of risks young children face and the importance of legislation and policy in tackling problems such as childhood illness, malnutrition, and crimes against children. O'Kane's analysis of applied research, involving young children in conflict situations within the Global South, argues for a greater prominence of child participation, ethics, children's rights to child-friendly spaces, and greater funding of collaborative humanitarian initiatives to ameliorate the adverse effects of war and its ravages on children.

Garcia's chapter on dual-language learners draws upon key examples from the Head Start program in the USA and collaborative work between the USA and Mexico, while Pence and Ashton's chapter charts the development of early childhood research in Sub-Saharan Africa since the 1970s, from a six-culture study of socialization to the growing voice of African researchers. The chapter by Yip, Levine, Lauricella and Wartella while based largely in the USA, considers the role and impact of electronic media on young children's development, with particular reference to the impact of media use on children's sleep. Their recommendations for further research into the link between media and early childhood learning stand to inform future research agendas. Rizzini and Bush draw upon early childhood research in Brazil to examine legislative, legal, and law enforcement initiatives to increase community safety and to enact the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of

the Child. Rizzini and Bush use their work to illustrate how university researchers can form networks and alliances with community organizations to engage in public discussion and impact on policy making. The chapter authored by Okwany and Ebrahim critiques dominant narratives of early childhood development, using Africa as an example to consider epistemology and contextualization of research with local scholars, children, caregivers, and communities. Drawing on postcolonial theorists, they critique the application, efficacy, and relevance of Western scholarship and early childhood development studies about Africa. They assert that there is no singular childcare narrative and that the adage 'who writes and listens what about whom' requires challenging. The part finishes with a review and discussion of cognitive research in Global South by Rao, Sun and Wang.

Part V concludes the volume with an exploration of the expanding field of early childhood research and future possibilities within increasingly complex political and social landscapes.

This part opens with Penn's analysis of neo-liberal, post-colonial, social, economic, and political aspects of early childhood education and care interventions in economically disadvantaged countries. In so doing, it provides a theoretical platform for consideration of Western paradigms and methodologies that predominate early childhood research. Marsh examines the ever-changing digital technologies in children's worlds and futures, referring to empirical evidence around children using technologies in home and out-of-home contexts. Against the backcloth of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, Pramling Samuelsson addresses the future of an environmental sustainability agenda in early childhood education by presenting some key case studies of sustainability-in-action projects.

The final chapter draws together key substantive issues addressed in the Handbook and sets the stage for future early childhood research, within changing contexts, methodologies, and agendas. The volume provides a platform from which to present powerful next-step imperatives for early childhood research into the future.

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