Editor's Preface

It is a pleasure to share with the extended education research community the first issue of *IJREE* for 2025, reflecting our ongoing commitment to advancing studies in the field of extended education. The articles in this issue showcase the breadth and diversity of inquiry taking place in our field, offering fresh perspectives on how extended education can shape meaningful learning opportunities for children and young people. As *IJREE* continues to evolve, we found our journal to serve as a space for scholars around the world to share the outcomes and insights of their work with an international community. This issue brings together four studies that capture the richness of current research in extended education.

Fuyuko Kanefuji explores how participation in various after-school programs in Japan impacts children's inquiry skills, a key competency for the 21st century. Using data from a large-scale national survey, the study reveals that nature activities and arts and cultural programs significantly enhance children's abilities to explore, analyze, and synthesize information. These findings encourage policymakers and practitioners to design after-school programs that complement formal schooling while addressing socioeconomic disparities, helping to nurture inquiry skills through meaningful extended education experiences.

Noémie Gfeller examines the integration of a picture book app in Swiss after-school programs, investigating how digital tools can transform reading into a joyful and engaging part of children's daily lives. Through conversations with caregivers, the study uncovers both the opportunities and challenges of using digital media to foster autonomy and language development among children. The findings highlight the promise of digital tools in enriching learning, while also reminding us of the importance of fostering media literacy among caregivers and educators to fully realize these benefits.

Lisa Fransson, Lena Hansson, and Daniel Östlund provide a systematic mapping of how science is taught to children aged 6 to 12 in extended education settings. Their review reveals a variety of aims, from sparking curiosity in science and developing practical skills to encouraging academic and career interests, alongside a diverse range of teaching approaches from teacher-led to student-centered models. This study offers valuable guidance for extended education professionals and program designers seeking to cultivate scientific literacy and sustained interest in science through extended education.

Finally, Jule Schmidt, Haiqin Ning, Jan Willem Nieuwenboom, Marianne Schüpbach, and Nanine Lilla explore how extended education can better support primary school children from disadvantaged and migrant backgrounds, drawing on expert interviews from 16 countries. They identify key dimensions of process quality—interest- and needs-oriented learning, varied methods, and supportive staff-child interactions—as central to the effectiveness of extended education in addressing educational inequalities. Their work highlights the importance of embedding diversity-sensitive, socially grounded approaches in extended education programs to ensure that all children have opportunities to thrive.

We hope that the articles in this issue will inspire further exploration and spark new studies within the extended education research community, while encouraging practical improvements in programs that influence children's lives. I would like to express my appreciation to the reviewers whose thoughtful feedback made this issue possible, and I warmly invite

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researchers from around the world to consider *IJREE* as a space to share and grow their work with colleagues internationally.

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