

Review of *Early Childhood Education: Society and Culture* (edited by Angela Anning, Joy Cullen and Marilyn Flear)

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I think perhaps I am about to learn as much about socio-cultural theories of learning in early childhood settings from the writing of this review as I have from reading and using the material in *Early Childhood Education: Society and Culture* (Anning, et al. 2004). In a similar way to my reading of this book, not in a straight path from beginning to end, this review is shaping up to be something of a ‘nomadic journey’ as I ‘travel in the thinking that writing produces’ (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 258). As a student of curriculum theory/philosophy and an early childhood teacher educator, my non-linear meanderings through the book meant that I frequently followed Deleuzean ‘lines of flight’ (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 265) for my own research and that I often paused in ‘smooth spaces’ (p. 263) as I embodied various ideas into the teaching of my classes. This afforded me other dimensions of understanding as I presented concepts to these pre-service teachers, participated in discussions and listened to conversations that enabled shared understandings, and as I observed them applying some of their understandings within their practicum experiences. The sociocultural approach (in which there are neither experts nor novices) to teaching and learning is as applicable to teacher education as it is to early childhood settings. Relating to early childhood teacher education, Sue Novinger, Leigh O’Brien and Lou Sweigman (2003) say, ‘A view of teacher as learner via collaborative and action-oriented classroom research positions teachers very differently than the expert discourse does: it puts them in charge of their own learning’ (p. 24). Similarly, of early learning experiences Marilyn Flear and Jill Robbins (2004) say, ‘Learning and development are seen as occurring as a result of participation with others in culturally relevant contexts and tasks’ (p. 23). As well, Deborah Britzman (1999) says, ‘teachers’ own educational experiences reverberate through each classroom they occupy, ultimately shaping the learning experiences of the children they teach’ (p. 179). Thus the socio-cultural processes the pre-service teachers were experiencing in the classroom was likely enhancing their theoretical understandings of this perspective on learning and affecting their practical teaching of young children. In this broad landscape of early childhood education, there are complexities of theorising~teaching~learning~doing as/of student~teacher in theoretical~practical spaces of early childhood settings and teacher education contexts. *Early Childhood Education: Society and Culture* provides a comprehensive overview of research from various socio-cultural perspectives enabling meaningful understandings of this theoretical approach.

Early Childhood Education: Society and Culture comprises contributions from practitioners and scholars from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. They present socio-cultural perspectives about practices, theories and policies covering the dynamics of teaching and learning, the nature of knowledge, assessment, and evaluation and quality within early years settings. These four thematic parts include a chapter from each of the three countries, bringing a transnational perspective to the research-based evidence and to

the emerging research discourse that challenges individualistic developmental explanations of learning and foregrounds a cultural and socially constructed approach.

In Part one, about conceptualisations of learning and pedagogy in early years settings, Elizabeth Wood (UK) examines the pedagogy of play with an awareness that ‘while there is substantial evidence on *learning* through play, there is relatively little evidence on *teaching* through play’ (p. 19, emphasis in original). While I acknowledge the ‘importance of professional knowledge and expertise... [and that] teachers have a strategic role in planning for play... combining intended learning outcomes and the possible outcomes that emerge from children’s interests, engagement and participation’ (p. 30), there is still a tendency here towards adult ‘expertise’. This highlights that an ongoing challenge for researching and developing a pedagogy of play will be to find ways of understanding more of teachers’ participatory roles while simultaneously disrupting power relationships between learners and teachers.

The challenge resonates in Barbara Jordan’s (NZ) clearly articulated chapter about ‘scaffolding learning and co-constructing understandings’, within which ‘teachers identified that children were more empowered when interactions were co-constructive in comparison with the outcomes of scaffolding interactions’ (p. 31). As well as presenting us with an accessible resume of scaffolding and co-construction by explaining these theoretical concepts within practical vignettes from her research, she provides information about how teachers, by becoming active and equal partners in interactions (i.e. developing intersubjectivity), disrupt the historically traditional power relationship of expert teacher and novice child.

The child’s understandings are as valid as the adult’s and on many occasions the child will be acknowledged as more of an expert than the adult. Each participant listens to the other’s ideas, contributes from their own, and together they develop their own ‘shared meaning’. The child’s voice is heard and valued and both participants make links between experiences, across time and distance. (p. 37)

So scaffolding *for* children’s learning transforms into co-constructing understandings *with* children, enabling children to enact empowerment. At this moment in my reading of the book, I paused to take these ideas into the content of the courses I teach and into the processes of my teaching.

However, within this moment of feeling secure in my partial resolution of unequal power relationships between child and adult, Glenda MacNaughton (Australia) perturbs this supposed security – ‘meanings are bounded by our culture and the meanings we construct most often reflect the meanings of those who have the most power within our culture to articulate and circulate meanings’ (p. 46). Within my poststructuralist thinking, I am reminded that ‘We cannot be or think “outside” of culture’ (p. 47). But now, MacNaughton’s chapter about ‘Exploring critical constructive perspectives on children’s learning’, in its critique of dominant perspectives as seen in children’s understandings of gender distracts, my linear reading – moving sequentially from one chapter to the next –and the nomadic me goes off in search of explicitly minority cultural perspectives within the book.

But, I am disappointed. ‘Building bridges between literacies’ in Part two, ‘The nature of knowledge in early childhood settings’, by Denise Williams-Kennedy, who describes herself as Indigenous Australian, appears to be the only one. Ironically and synchronistically, Williams-Kennedy presents the explicit sharing of cultural knowledge in Figure 7 (p. 81) that situates an area of shared meaning centrally between adult and child, and between school culture and indigenous culture, which reflects Jordan’s figurative model of intersubjectivity (p. 36). Further, she deconstructs discourses of school structure and culture that assume

Western knowledge to be the norm by providing ‘researchers and teachers with a series of real contexts to begin the process of demystifying Indigenous worldviews, school learning and literacy outcomes for young Aboriginal children growing up in Australia today’ (p. 91). I am left wondering why there are no contributions included from New Zealand’s indigenous Maori or from immigrant minority cultures in the United Kingdom. Was this an editorial oversight? Is it that there has been no recent research about socio-cultural theory by minority groupings in these countries? Is it that viewing children and their learning through a socio-cultural lens is a problematic that belongs with/in majority domains? Perhaps the latter, because the Editors, in their concluding comments about a socio-cultural framework for conceptualising early years education say, ‘in foregrounding the cultural and political imperatives across nations, it is possible to critically examine many taken-for-granted practices and to begin to not only understand the “historical child” but create new and different histories for children and for early childhood education’ (p. 189). As I see it, these new and different histories are for majority cultures to be re/thinking/working/ conceptualising.

Angela Anning (UK), in ‘The co-construction of and early childhood curriculum’ and Joy Cullen (NZ), in ‘Adults co-constructing professional knowledge’ also appear in Part two with Williams-Kennedy, continuing ‘The nature of knowledge’ discussion. Anning reports on an action research project that set about creating an informed community of practice among a group of practitioners. I agree with her closing comment – the processes of confronting conflict and combining professional knowledge that were involved in creating an innovative curriculum framework for birth-to-five-year-olds may be more important to other practitioners than the resulting model. Similarly, Cullen proposes that critical to implementing the inclusive practice that *Te Whāriki*¹ espouses is the shared construction of professional knowledge that coincides with a community of practice approach. Again, throughout this part of the book, the complexity of teacher~learner~learning~teaching dynamics is explicated through the intermingling of theory, practice and research.

Part three discusses assessment in early years settings. Bronwen Cowie and Margaret Carr (NZ) say that within a socio-cultural perspective, the consequences of documented assessment, such as through learning stories, can play out in three ways: Through interactions of learners, teachers and families together in a *community* of learning, by developing *competent* learner, and by providing *continuity* (temporally and situationally) as learning becomes (a) work in progress. These researchers provide more of the emerging story of learning stories as a way of assessing children’s learning and implicitly respond yet again – through (poststructurally) elucidating its validity – to many of the ‘yes buts’ often mooted by practitioners. In sharp contrast, a markedly technicist chapter by Peter Tymms and Christine Merrell (UK) describes the development of the PIPS² computerised on-entry baseline assessment tool that supposedly provides teachers with a profile of their pupils, ‘from which to plan an appropriate curriculum and against which progress can be measured’ (p. 107). The authors’ proposal to, in effect, globalise a universal early learning assessment tool is an uncomfortable intrusion into the trans-national co-constructive discourse of other chapters. In the third chapter of Part three, ‘Mapping the transformation of understanding’, Marilyn Fleer and Carmel Richardson (Australia) report on their twelve month longitudinal study, which revealed ways in which teachers can document young children’s participation in socio-cultural activity. As they moved away from an individualistic developmental approach to assessment, the participating teachers rendered their teacher/teaching voice visible in their

¹ *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) is New Zealand's early childhood curriculum document.

² PIPS, Performance Indicators in Primary Schools, is widely used in England, Scotland, Australia, New Zealand with growing use in the Netherlands.



observations, considering also children's interactions with others and with the environment. They came to view assessment practice 'as part of a mediated process residing within the collective rather than the individual' (p. 132).

Evaluation and quality in early years settings is the theme for Part four. These three chapters explain in different ways the parent~teacher~home~school dynamics of communities of learning that occur with/in the more participatory teaching that is moving us through a fading child-centred era. Valerie Podmore (NZ) presents an action research study of 'teaching and learning stories' that concerns not only accounts of children's learning but also illuminates the role of reflective practitioners attuned to children's perspectives and the relevance of their teaching stories. Susan Hill and Susan Nicholls' (Australia) study highlights the importance of links between home and school literacies to quality learning that recognises diversity of cultural and linguistic capital thus enabling reflection of social inequalities. Iram Siraj-Blatchford (United Kingdom) calls attention to the importance of relationships between learner and teacher to quality provision, foregrounding the role of the teacher and positioning teaching as central to quality early childhood education.

Overall, perturbing dominant majority perspectives may be a bigger task than disturbing adult (expert) and child (novice) perceptions, but this collection of research evidence from transnational research and cross-cultural studies of three nations illuminates many possibilities for/from 'sharing common concerns across the particularities of national boundaries' (p. 189) and for working co-constructively within many spaces towards shared understandings. This book thus becomes a not-to-be-missed text for students (diploma, degree, post-graduate), teachers (early childhood, primary and teacher educators) and practitioners who work in early childhood settings and the first years of school. Despite a few shortcomings, such as lack of minority majority discourses and Tymms and Merrell's somewhat disembodied interlude that sits uncomfortably alongside the rest, widespread use of this text will undoubtedly contribute to significant socio-cultural growth within early childhood education. Since my initial reading of selected chapters, I have regularly returned to (re)read more as I further explored – in my teaching practice and in my studying – various aspects of socio-cultural theory. Considering the concepts presented by this group of respected scholars, the prognosis is favourable for my teaching and my studies.

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Reviewer

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