

# Book Review

## **Early Childhood Education: society and culture, 2nd edn**

ANGELA ANNING, JOY CULLEN & MARILYN FLEER, 2008

London: Sage

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This book is an essential read for early years students and practitioners alike because it encourages a critical examination of how we know what we know and why we do what we do. It encourages the reader to take a full account of the contextual background to children's learning and to challenge prevailing assumptions that may have a cultural heritage of their own. Whilst the book is written in a way that is better suited for university students who are familiar with educational discourse, it is beautifully crafted to link theory with evidence-based practice.

When considered as a whole, this book helps the reader to consider the social context of young children's learning experiences from a place that honours the social competence of our youngest learners. The significance of cultural influences on learning can in some way be attributed to the fact that from the day babies are born, babies and children form part of a cultural group over which they have some agency. They are part of an evolving culture that is grounded in history and yet manifested in the ways people conduct their everyday lives in the present moment. This book calls readers to reflect on the central relationship between cultural knowledge and children's own knowledge construction. When the formation of knowledge is considered from this point of view, it becomes apparent that an individual does not construct knowledge in a cultural vacuum. The cultural and professional context of knowledge formation requires further consideration.

The second edition of *Early Childhood Education: society and culture* demonstrates the growing importance of sociocultural-historical theory within the early years sector and its contribution towards a current shift in research perspectives. The book shows how this perspective may be usefully applied as a framework to help us to examine and understand cross-cultural learning contexts within early years settings. Developing the ideas put forward in the first edition of their book, Anning, Cullen & Fleer stress the importance of recognising the historical aspect of early years contexts in this second edition. From a historical point of view, two traditions can be easily recognised in early childhood education. The first is the acceptance of a belief system that sees children as having an age-related readiness for learning. The second is a curricular approach emanating from a play-based, child-centred tradition. The simultaneous development of child psychology as an academic discipline could be seen as having reinforced these two positions. In common with education professionals who used observation as a research tool to learn about children, developmental psychologists developed theories around their interpretations of child observations. Therefore the relationship between educational theory and the study of child development has been inseparable for generations. Also embedded in early childhood education is the legacy of Piagetian concepts, which have been rather uncritically developed by a great many constructivist thinkers. Despite such inherent limitations, this approach to children's learning has historical dominance in early childhood education and continues to be embedded in professional practices and understandings in many parts of the Western world. The focus on the 'individual' as opposed to the 'collective' could, indeed, be viewed as symptomatic of Western political and social structures that are familiar to us in the twenty-first century. In this book, Anning, Cullen & Fleer explain that the dominance of Piaget's notion of constructivism, which focuses on the individual's independent concept formation, has led to some slow progress in understanding the way knowledge is constructed collectively within communities.

The collective nature of knowledge construction becomes apparent when one considers the research studies held within these chapters. By drawing on research that reflects practice in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, an international perspective is achieved and insights are shared. What is particularly insightful about this book is the respectful way in which the voices of real people involved within localised settings come through. From the children and families to the practitioners and local advisors, a range of viewpoints is interwoven into the fabric of this discourse. This enables an interrogation of the conceptual frameworks and theoretical underpinning of policy in practice. The outcome is a greater understanding of the complex world of early childhood education communities.

Whilst the authors emphasise the dynamic social processes involved in children's learning, this book also reminds us that professionals construct their own understandings about *how* children learn in a similar socially mediated way. From this position, a child-adult partnership is clearly visible. The child-practitioner 'dyad' is viewed in the context of their parallel learning relationships. When a sociocultural-historical perspective is used, it becomes apparent that different forms of cultural knowledge exist and compete with each other within social groups. What is striking in this book is the elucidation of how competing agendas and ideas exist within the early years sector.

Following the same structure as the first edition, the book is neatly organised into four sections: the conceptualisation of learning and pedagogy; the nature of knowledge; assessment; and quality in early years settings. The first section includes contributions from Elizabeth Wood, Barbara Jordan and Glenda MacNaughton, and explores fundamental issues related to children's learning. These first three chapters highlight the importance of developing a greater understanding of professional expertise in order to develop a pedagogy of play (Wood) which adequately scaffolds the co-construction of understandings and which supports children's learning dispositions (Jordan). In Chapter 4, MacNaughton advocates the use of a critical constructivist perspective as she draws on an 18-month action research study in Australia to explore notions of gender equity in the classroom. From this study, Mac Naughton demonstrates how a four-year-old boy who has an interest in aftershave thinks about his gender in relation to this and reflects understanding of cultural norms.

In the second section of the book, Angela Anning describes her joint research project carried out with Anne Edwards in the United Kingdom whereby early years professionals collaborated to formulate a new set of strategies and resources focused around developing a love of learning. In Chapter 6, Joy Cullen continues the theme of adults co-constructing professional knowledge by exploring the journey towards inclusion in New Zealand. In Chapter 7, Denise Williams-Kennedy explores the building of bridges between home and school literacies using an interesting study conducted in Australia which supported the creation of a more holistic, indigenous framework for learning. These chapters provide a stimulus for the reader to think critically and reflectively about how professionals are able to generate new, improved understandings about their practices.

In the third section, Bronwen Cowie & Margaret Carr present a convincing argument that rather than focusing on the individual child in a fixed point in time, assessment strategies need to stretch over 'people, places and things' (p. 105). In their chapter, the consequences of sociocultural assessment are discussed. The theme of assessment is continued in Peter Tymms & Christine Merrell's chapter on an on-entry baseline assessment. In the last chapter in this section, Marilyn Flear & Carmel Richardson present a very interesting piece of research that demonstrates an alternative to the traditional model of observational assessment. In this instance, a cultural-historical mapping of the child's understanding is carried out within a university children's centre in Australia. In challenging traditional notions of assessment, this series of chapters opens fresh discussions around a range of assessment possibilities.

In the final section, evaluation and quality in early years settings are considered. Iram Siraj-Blatchford starts the discussion by presenting an argument that repositions the role of the teacher as being central to providing quality play experiences for children. In Chapter 12, Valerie Podmore discusses the issues of quality and evaluation in New Zealand, and highlights the importance of attuning to children's perspectives when evaluating quality. This chapter is situated within the *Te Whāriki* context. In the final chapter of Part 4, Susan Hill & Susan Nichols discuss the multiple literacy pathways between home and school that support children's meaning making. This section

highlights the importance of having an understanding of quality issues which integrate child and adult perspectives, interests and agendas.

This collection of chapters foregrounds notions of knowledge formation where intersubjective social realities are co-constructed within cultural contexts. This book cleverly uncovers how this can be seen in the professional knowledge constructed around children's learning. By using research studies that illustrate professional practices in early learning, the authors demonstrate the complexity of thinking that surrounds everyday activities. The reader receives concrete examples of early years practices within research contexts. The result is increased opportunity for reflection and expanded understanding of early learning. A reformulation of early learning processes unfurls before the reader's eyes, whilst challenging the reader to consider his or her own position. The use of real-life scenarios in this book is essential to the critical appraisal of current conceptual frameworks and the exploration of alternative viewpoints. As such, I would recommend that readers come to this book with a readiness to challenge their own interpretations of familiar learning encounters with children.

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