

BOOK REVIEW:

***CHILD AND YOUTH CARE: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON
PEDAGOGY, PRACTICE, AND POLICY (2011)***

Alan Pence and Jennifer White, Editors

Reviewed by Rebecca Raby

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Child and Youth Care: Critical Perspectives on Pedagogy, Practice, and Policy is an edited collection that importantly contributes to critical, postfoundational analyses of child and youth care. Child and youth care covers a broad, multifaceted range of professional practice that is powerfully positioned to reproduce and/or challenge singular truths and social inequalities in work with young people and their families, thus pointing to the importance of critical reflection. Contributors to this collection are primarily faculty and graduate students from the Department of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, Canada, who also share a wealth of practical experience in the child and youth care field. These authors draw on a range of theoretical approaches including postmodernism, poststructuralism, governmentality studies, postmarxism, queer theory, feminism, and postcolonialism. The chapters link such theory to personal teaching, research experiences, and literature review to draw attention to, and problematize, features of modernist practice in child and youth care.

Three dominant themes emerge across most chapters. First, there is concern with the process of professionalization of child and youth care, a process that seeks legitimacy and status but also creates boundaries around what is considered acceptable knowledge and what is not. This theme is particularly well-addressed in Brooke Alsbury's chapter on professionalization in Canada's North. The concern with professionalization relates to the second broader process of categorization, evaluation and normalization, elements that contribute to reproducing "the centre" and "the other". Kathleen Kummen's chapter concludes this volume with a particularly cogent analysis of such governmental processes regarding school readiness. Thirdly, there is a strong, consistent concern with individualizing practices that hold young people and their families solely responsible for their own difficult circumstances while neglecting the broader context. As Jennifer White quotes from Judith Butler: "to take the self-generated acts of the individual as our point of departure in moral reasoning is precisely to foreclose the possibility of questioning what kind of world gives rise to such individuals... What social conditions help to form the very ways that choice and deliberation proceed?" (p. 38). The contributors counter that those working in child and youth care must recognize and seek to address wider inequality, prioritize context, attend to the effects of their practice, and listen more closely to young people and their families. These authors then propose alternative approaches to child and youth care provision.

This collection is organized into four sections. The first section sets the stage for the rest of the book by raising questions about some fundamentals of child and youth care professional practice: modernism, developmentalism, and codes of ethics. It opens with a preface by Alan Pence who outlines his personal movement from scientific modernism and professionalization towards critical, postmodern thinking. This preface is followed by an inviting introduction by Alan Pence and Jennifer White which provides initial explanation of how the dominance of modernist ideas in much child and youth care work is challenged through critical, postfoundational views which foreground power, privilege, and diversity. They caution that one paradigm does not replace the other; rather, they seek a both/and position that engages with modernist and postmodernist ideas.

In Chapter 1, J. N. Little embraces feminist, poststructural, postcolonial, and relational approaches to complicate the binary between academic and practitioner. Little highlights the overlaps and connections between the two sides of this binary in her everyday work activities to ultimately recommend a theo-practivist model which holds together the three elements of child and youth care that Little considers imperative: theory, practice, and activism. Little's chapter embraces the multidisciplinary history of child and youth care, challenges essentialist theorizing, and advocates activist teaching and methodologies. Little covers a lot of ground in this chapter to contend that there is significant room within child and youth care for multiple philosophies and differences.

Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw challenges the use of developmental theories as facts in child and youth care in Chapter 2. She argues that while it is important to teach developmental approaches, such education needs to address the historical context of developmentalism to de-centre it. She then provides some of this context. The developmental paradigm comes under scrutiny, for example, for its Western assumptions, its colonial links, and its role in the ordering of disciplinary societies through classifying universal stages of development and ideal outcomes.

Drawing on Gilles Deleuze, Pacini-Ketchabaw argues that alongside the disciplinary society, developmentalism is part of the current “society of control”, which requires flexible subjects who are continually monitored and self-monitoring based on ever-changing evaluating criteria. Pacini-Ketchabaw echoes Hans Skott-Myhre’s call that we rethink subjectivity to embrace our own creative productions and to challenge closures – thus decentring basic assumptions of developmentalism.

Jennifer White’s Chapter 3 scrutinizes the development of standard codes of ethics as part of professionalism. White argues that mainstream codes of ethics in child and youth care present ethics as clear-cut, detached and technical, focus on the individual rather than oppressive circumstances, formulate only on a blatant understanding of harm, and assume a clear separation between clients and professionals. White counters that child and youth care practice is much more complex on the ground, for “what is considered to be good and right in one context might be quite different in another” (p. 37). In White’s practice with suicide prevention, she finds that the standard codes of ethics fail to consider the broader context leading to the contemplation of suicide and how a practitioner may need to actively address this context. Rather than considering a code of ethics as a neutral, technical tool, White contends that ethics should be understood as discursive practice that makes room for social justice.

The second section of this collection draws together three chapters on gender and gender inequality in child and youth care work. Chapter 4 by Jonathan Morris nicely reviews current poststructural feminist work in child and youth studies that focuses on children’s gender performance and deconstructs the male-female binary as a heterosexualizing practice. Judith Butler’s work on performativity figures prominently in this chapter as Morris considers how gendered discourses constrain and enable. Morris draws on collective biography used in a graduate course to explore students’ first engagements with awareness of developmental and gender narratives. The stories illustrate the complexities of gender as it produces subjects who embrace but also attempt to resist the unequal gender binary that so powerfully defines us. Morris argues that feminist poststructural analysis is relevant to child and youth care not only because it foregrounds the problematic role of gender in developmental expectations of children’s competency, but also children’s active participation in gender construction, regulation, and disruption.

Chapter 5, by Sandrina de Finney, Elicia Loiselle, and Mackenzie Dean, reviews the growing area of girlhood studies as it is relevant to minoritized girls. The authors argue that dominant discourses of girlhood and minoritization processes both problematically position certain girls as outsiders and others as privileged insiders. This chapter includes compelling quotations from the field to illustrate. For example, girl-centred programming often reproduces a normative femininity that can be deeply alienating to girls who identify as masculine. The chapter also examines experiences of Aboriginal, racialized, and disabled girls that exacerbate their marginality. As with many of the authors in this volume, de Finney et al. argue that child and youth care practitioners need to understand girls in context and to also consider how they themselves might be pathologizing minoritized girls. These authors advocate programming for minoritized girls that helps them to name and challenge the inequalities that they face.

In Chapter 6, B. Denise Hodgins considers how father involvement initiatives conceptualize fatherhood. While there are many forms of fatherhood across time and cultures, Hodgins finds that what is considered an involved father in North America tends to draw on dominant, Western ideas that prioritize emotional and financial family support. This chapter includes a detailed, ambitious history outlining how traditional, middle-class conceptualizations of mother and fatherhood have emerged and predominated. The unifying thread of this history is a focus on fathers as providers. Meanwhile, current initiatives seek fathers' participation yet often position them as support persons while naturalizing mothers. Furthermore, programs portend to include diverse fatherhoods but are often framed within Western assumptions and neglect to consider specific challenges, such as those faced by Aboriginal, immigrant, and refugee fathers.

The contributions in the third section of the book invite more emotive, personal engagements to expand inclusive child and youth care. Brooke Alsbury's Chapter 7 reflects on the process of professionalization after her own skills were not recognized on an extended visit to Nunavut. Professionalization brings status for some by recognizing only a certain body of skills and knowledge. Alsbury is particularly concerned to note that professionalization can undermine local wisdom when cross-cultural practices and interpersonal relations are not recognized. Alsbury instead values practice-based evidence from local contexts, and thus multiple, competing sources of evidence. She would like to see a shift towards understanding the young people and families child and youth care serves as co-experts to further prevent rigid professional boundaries. To Alsbury, such practices are congruent with child and youth care values of inclusion and collaboration.

Chapter 8 problematizes the "helping industry" for homeless youth. Mark L. Kelly considers factors in the life of a street youth named Daze to challenge the predominant tendency in the helping professions to concentrate on individual responsibility and choice over structural circumstances and context. Kelly also worries that youth work can contribute to, and even benefit from, street involvement: Outreach is frequently linked to mainstreaming youth, for example, which in turn reinforces their marginalization. Kelly is concerned that such practices neglect to consider the contribution of street youth to arts, culture, sport, and politics, but struggles to balance this contribution with his fears for young people on the street. Kelly thus reflects on his own outreach experiences, noting the influence of neo-liberal ideals on his practice and raising numerous self-reflexive questions.

In Chapter 9, Janet Newbury considers loss as an experience that can move people from individual blame towards recognition of situational context and shared oppression because it reminds us that our lives are interconnected. Newbury notably draws on Judith Butler's more recent work on communal loss to contend that loss can be a pivotal political experience leading to activism. For example, Newbury describes a workshop with Gerry Oleman of the Reservation School Survivor Society who talked with human service professionals about the profound loss connected to residential schools that has also fostered hope and connectedness. The workshop led participants to move away from individualizing theories to relational and contextual approaches in their work. Newbury is critical of positivist, evidence-based practice, which is premised on seeking standard, clear answers. She counters that our understanding is always

partial, that unpredictability is acceptable, and that we thus need to listen more and presume less. Loss helps us do this by illustrating commonalities between individuals and populations.

The final section of this book looks at policy discourse in relation to child and youth care. In Chapter 10, Lorinda Stoneman reviews Canadian policy developments in relation to young offending. Stoneman traces youth justice from the 1600s to today with a focus on how delinquent youth have been treated and understood. This history begins with young people being treated much like adults and punished individually, moves gradually towards an understanding of children as needing unique protection, and then shifts again in the late 20th century towards current debates about whether young people should be treated as victims or as accountable when up against the law. Stoneman is concerned that present demonization of youth, advocacy for greater punishment, and blaming of marginalized people for social ills reinforce social stratification and oppression. The remainder of Stoneman's chapter shifts towards a more governmental analysis, arguing for instance that processes such as youth risk screening may seem objective but are not.

The last substantive chapter of this book (Chapter 11) turns a critical eye onto the idea of school readiness, an idea central to current early years and education services. Kathleen Kummen is concerned that the use of readiness creates a singular story privileging some children over others. Standard ways of measuring readiness are used to identify children, or communities of children, who are not school ready and then to introduce interventions. Kummen draws on social constructionism to challenge this, suggesting that what seems like static knowledge of readiness is really created, contextual, and partial. Building on Chapter 2, Kummen suggests that developmentalism in particular has shaped a narrow, universalizing, and specifically Western definition of normal which "privileges one way of understanding childhood over another" (p. 205). To illustrate, Kummen focuses in on three micropractices that act as "regimes of truth" in British Columbia in relation to the Early Development Instrument (EDI) used by kindergarten teachers to assess readiness. Kummen illustrates how children, parents, and even entire communities are monitored, classified hierarchically, and face possible intervention based on their conformity to developmental standards. While Kummen argues that school readiness as an idea is not inherently bad, she challenges its singular story as there is a diversity of learning pathways to a range of possible futures.

Overall, the chapters in this volume tackle diverse and crucial questions regarding child and youth care. Each individual chapter ambitiously covers a lot of ground: Most review modernist practices, refer to postfoundational theories, link to personal or research experiences, and offer compelling, though sometimes underdeveloped, alternatives. While it is difficult to review current practice, evaluate that practice, and offer alternatives in short chapters, I would have loved to learn more, for example, from Little on participatory action research methodologies, from Kelly on the idea of a third space or middle ground in outreach to street youth, and from Kummen on what it means to consider a teacher a co-learner. Similarly, the compelling ideas of some chapters would have benefited from more concrete examples. I would like to have heard more specifically from Alsbury about how professionalization undermines the relevant expertise of people in the North. Similarly, concrete examples of father involvement initiatives would have bolstered Hodgins' contribution, while de Finney et al.'s Chapter 5 on the

minoritization of girls could have helpfully referenced current, innovative programs that support girls in challenging inequalities.

Pence and White have tried to balance between a minimalist editorial role which allows contributors to speak directly to the reader and a more intensive one that provides an organizational metanarrative. While they balance between these approaches nicely in their introduction, a more detailed explanation of critical postfoundational perspectives would have been a logical and welcome addition, particularly as the collection covers such diverse, but occasionally uneven, theoretical ground. Also, while the book's theoretical stance importantly resists concrete definitions, a more detailed introduction to the profession of child and youth care would help less familiar readers to enter into this engagement.

The collection would have benefited from a heavier editorial hand in general. There is quite a bit of repetition between chapters, for example, and the sectional organization of the articles was not always clear or well explained. Certain chapters that would have fit very well together, for example, were far apart in the text. Notably, White's Chapter 3 on ethics could have been paired with Alsbury's Chapter 7 on professionalization, and Pacini's-Ketchabaw's Chapter 2 on developmentalism linked with Kummen's Chapter 11 on school readiness.

Such minor concerns aside, *Child and Youth Care: Critical Perspectives on Pedagogy, Practice, and Policy* presents a number of valuable contributions that together offer readers a strong, theoretically grounded collection that thoughtfully engages with, and importantly troubles, key components of child and youth care. This collection challenges child and youth care practitioners to reflect on their practices, and raises vital questions for students to consider as they enter the field. Many chapters in this volume are also relevant well beyond child and youth care; the questions they raise inform developmental psychology, the sociology of childhood and youth, and child and youth studies more broadly.