

Early Years Education and Care in Canada: A Historical and Philosophical Overview – A Review

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Book Review: Early Years Education and Care in Canada : A Historical and Philosophical Overview

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In the current Canadian neoliberal ethos, children are often seen as valuable in as much as they are on their way to becoming something else: cooperative, able-bodied adults who contribute to the economy. For much of the Euro-Western world, political and economic forces have conspired to turn children into not merely investments in the future but the ultimate luxury purchase (Zelizer, 1985). Currid-Hackett (2017) suggests that displays of privilege and social class are frequently no longer manifested through overt gestures like the purchase of yachts, Rolexes, and silver spoons. Rather, inconspicuous displays of wealth appear as “ballet slippers and Yale tuition” (p. 46). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that much of the research on early years comes under the banner of education, long seen as the vehicle that can produce the kinds of “successful” children both parents and society desire. Edited by Susan Jagger, *Early Years Education and Care in Canada: A Historical and Philosophical Overview* (2019) may be seen as a collection of reflections on the meaning and construction of early years studies more generally, making this volume a welcome and much-needed addition to the canon of early years literature. I engage with this book as a graduate student and researcher exploring the narratives of young people across the spectrum of spiritual and religious experiences, although other entry points are certainly possible. From my perspective, Jagger’s volume deftly weaves history, theory, and practice. The book is 303 pages long and divided into 15 chapters. Each chapter opens with guiding questions that would be useful in a college or university classroom, prompting student engagement and class discussion. With its broad range of topics and clear language it is an ideal choice for introductory early childhood courses in which instructors might want to grapple, together with students, with the complex, contradictory, and multidisciplinary threads of rethinking and responding to the context of early childhood studies and education in Canada.

In the opening chapter, Angelina Weenie reflects on her own journey as an Indigenous woman at the forefront of early childhood education. First Nations pedagogy has only recently been acknowledged in the curriculum for early childhood education (ECE) practitioners and there is still much work to be done. Weenie considers how a place can be made for First Nations’ perspectives among the Euro-dominant ECE models. More than simply comparing developmental perspectives, Weenie braids the work of theorists like Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Abraham Maslow with different Indigenous teachings. This chapter is an insightful and personal perspective on decolonizing approaches in Indigenous education, particularly for ECE students who are encountering Indigenous perspectives for the first time.

Patrick J. Lewis's chapter on the spirituality of play challenges the notion of a child's early years being merely the developing grounds for what will become a productive adult. Lewis complicates the idea that play is good or useful insofar as it encourages "healthy" development. In other words, play is understood as serving the development of "higher" functions, like rational thinking. Lewis writes of play for its own sake, contrasting with Piaget, who understood early childhood development as a series of successive and linear accomplishments of which the setting of play for a child is much like a laboratory for a scientist with a research agenda. A child is not wooed into play by a promise of improved fine motor skills, but by the sheer joy and delight inherent in the activity. In my own work on children's spiritual and religious experiences, spirituality is often discussed against the same reductionist rhetoric. Spirituality or religion are presented as "good" in that they might promote positive mental health, give one a sense of connection to culture and identity, and increase pro-social values. The often-overlooked premise that Lewis begins with is that play, like spirituality, exists on its own terms and for its own sake.

Thinking with diffractive analysis, Margaret MacDonald's chapter offers an opportunity to consider the lasting legacy of Émile Rousseau's *Émile* on child rearing and education. MacDonald explores how practitioners can provoke curiosity to think differently about the inherited, established norms of early childhood education. Whether this is in the compartmentalized, individualistic approach that seems unavoidable in the Eurocentric education system, or the mother-blaming in and between "mommy-blogs," Rousseau's ideas permeate not only professional ECE practice but also society's conceptions of childhood and "good" parenting. MacDonald asks the reader not to reject but to recognize this influence and begin to question the taken-for-granted status of much of this legacy. In the context of my own work, this chapter prompted me to consider how I can act creatively when I encounter the long-standing and often unquestioned boundaries that seem implicit in standard ECE practice.

Pivoting off Rousseau, Peter Pericles Trifonas's chapter introduces the lesser-known Jan Amos Komensky, or "Comenius," the Czech philosopher and pedagogue from the early 17th century. Like others of his day, Comenius believed in the reforming power of education. However, he understood that education's purpose is to produce not future workers for an increasingly capitalist society but lifelong learners. Social reform will come about through "transformational learning" (p. 57). The objective is "to transform existing society through creative and active participation in life" (p. 58). This noble (perhaps even Utopian) goal continues to be met with resistance in many modern education systems, including Canadian ones, where education is both overtly and covertly used to replicate and inculcate a society's economic needs and desires. "The child is," Trifonas writes, "in effect, dehumanized and perceived to be a cog in the machine of schooling that spits out finished products that are exactly the same" (p. 57). I see the possibilities of thinking with transformational learning in my own work as I consider children's spiritual and faith development as lifelong pursuits of wonderment without definitive educational ends and aims.

Louisa Fung further considers the fragmentation and dualism that dominates current Euro-Western models of education and offers the philosophy of holistic education as an alternative. Holistic education is used as an umbrella term to unite the movements that react against these long-held assumptions. The central tenets that link holistic educators are spirituality, seeing each child as having a unique and important contribution, educating toward and through connection, and upholding the goodness inherent in humanity. Education for the whole, integrated child acts as a deliberate critique of what is perceived as the mainstream education agenda, which sets the intellectual development of the child above all other priorities. In my work, Fung's chapter calls me to consider children's experiences through the multivalent lens of faith, interweaving rather than segregating the domains of child development.

Susan Jagger's chapter introduces John Dewey, the late-19th-century American education reformer. She thinks, like Dewey, that we should resist the notion that children hold *potential* value that can be realized in a future economic

capacity if only the child is educated to certain set standards. Instead, Jagger argues, children must be taught with and in the “ever-changing and dynamic present” (p. 88). School, then, should be a transformative community that works in harmony to reflect the values of with a child’s social and home life. Whereas much mainstream education places the child in opposition to the curriculum, Dewey saw curriculum as fluid, able to change with the growing child. Jagger’s chapter focused my attention on my practices as an instructor of future child and youth care practitioners, and I wonder how I am encouraging these new practitioners to engage in the “dynamic present” of their work while also moving toward a more just and hopeful future.

In chapter seven, Kristy Timmons reviews developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) as outlined in the National Association for the Education of Young People, an American nonprofit association for early childhood educators. Timmons understands DAP as continually situated in the materiality of children’s worlds. This can mean that determining what DAP is and how to implement it is not a clear-cut task. Timmons moves the reader from the “what” of DAP to the “why,” looking for diverse ways to think of early years practice as collaboratively aligned with evidence-based, developmentally appropriate practices. Reading this, I am again thinking of student practitioners encountering the ideas of DAP for the first time. How might we present DAP with an edge toward critique, even deconstruction, while at the same time acknowledging its value and usefulness?

Aurelia Di Santo and Bethany Robichaud ask why more Canadians are not familiar with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the implication this has for early years education and care. They suggest that both educators and students lack understanding, and even knowledge, of children’s rights, a topic that is not a regular part of the curriculum in Canadian schools. It is no wonder that Canada continues to underperform in comparison to other countries that have also ratified and implemented the UNCRC. The authors call on practitioners to think of themselves as “duty bearers” charged with increasing awareness of children’s rights. I wonder how we can inspire new practitioners to see themselves as duty bearers, charged with the task of not only knowing the “what” of children’s rights, but also sensitively and wisely acting out the “why” behind them.

Noah Kenneally’s chapter takes a sociological approach to children’s experiences in Canada and considers how this way of thinking might challenge and broaden conceptions of early childhood. He suggests that the sociological tools of social context, social action, and social construction can be useful tools to help practitioners understand and situate children’s experiences within their macro- and chronosystem. Children are social actors on the stage of social context engaged in relationally constructing meaning. Kenneally weaves together a social history of Canada and suggests that by seeing children in their cultural, historical, and social context, ECE practitioners can be better informed, more curious advocates and activists. Kenneally offers that “early childhood professionals capable of historicizing childhood are better equipped to support children in the present” (p. 162). One particular focus of my research is on the experiences of children raised in religions perceived as new, alternative, and even controversial. How might I better situate the individual stories of these children and their faiths within a broader sociological context so as to bring greater understanding and depth to these narratives? How can a more robust understanding of society, culture, and history inform my work with young children?

Rachel Berman and Zuhra Abawi give an account of reconceptualist contributions to the early years. Against this backdrop they describe critical race theory, feminist theory, poststructuralism, queer theory, postcolonial theory, posthumanism, multi-species ethnography, and new materialism. The reconceptualist movement is diverse, but its many incarnations are united by their call for early years practitioners to think in a multidisciplinary way that challenges mainstream frameworks and assumptions. The many theories of practice described in this chapter offer invitations to imagine how we might shift our practice away from inherited, hegemonic assumptions. Thinking with reconceptualist perspectives reminds me to be always situating children in the materiality of their experiences

as embodied humans. I think that this chapter will be particularly useful for instructors who are looking for a concise and accessible way to introduce these concepts to students with no previous experience of them.

In chapter 11, Veronia Pacini-Ketchabaw, Randa Khattar, and Meagan Montpetit continue the conversation on thinking otherwise about early childhood education and care by introducing common world pedagogies. Euro-Western conceptions of children and childhoods have long held up white, heterosexual, male children and their development as the default norm against which all other children and childhoods are compared. Common world pedagogies seek to destabilize and disrupt these assumptions. “Common worlds are the actual, messy, unequal and imperfect worlds real children inherit and co-inhabit along with other human and non-human beings and entities” (p. 194). The authors show the value of common world pedagogies in practice by relating three stories. These stories describe the qualities of renaissance—slowing down and becoming reacquainted with what we believe we already know; experimentation—creating caring spaces and times to dwell with materials and ideas; and the more-than-human—“acknowledging the complex, dynamic relations that unfold in human/more-than-human assemblages” (p. 202). Common world pedagogies view curiosity as a component in caring and propose that being uncomfortable is not always something children need to be protected from. Always situated in the particulars of experiences, common world pedagogies do more than refresh stale narratives; they support practitioners in co-creating new ones. I believe that to work wisely with children, I must co-create worlds with them by curiously engaging with the promises, hopes, and even the apprehensions they experience.

Kathryn Underwood, in Chapter 12, argues that the polarized conversation about how disabled children are included (or not) in early childhood care and education can hinder the practice and application of social justice. Underwood describes social justice as a continuum that moves from developmental theories to poststructural and critical theories. The desire to identify and “correct” children who breach the perceived bounds of normalcy is still a foundational component of developmental theories and strongly informs how early years practitioners theorize inclusion. Underwood suggests that a more radical understanding of inclusion means that educators consider not just what and where a child learns, but also what learning actually means. This necessitates contextualizing the image of the child to include the social realities that create and delimit possibilities. Underwood’s chapter challenges me to consider how conversations of normalcy are framed in early childhood care. Much of my own work involves the stories of those whose religious experiences are other than normal. Rather than asking how we can bring those who embrace alternative religions into the perceived realm of “legitimate religion,” I consider how we might expand our understandings of faith and spirituality to make room for those on the outside.

In Chapter 13, Jessica Ball challenges tokenistic attempts at reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples in Canada. The chapter provides a concise and pointed summary of the health inequities experienced by many Indigenous Peoples and suggests that Indigenous early learning and childcare (IELCC) can serve as a focal point and catalyst for broader systemic and community-level changes. Yet, despite a wealth of evidence demonstrating the promising and positive outcomes of IELCC, many of these programs remain underfunded and slowed by competing bureaucratic interests and lack of training (especially culturally grounded training) for practitioners. Ball argues that until all Indigenous children and their families have access to universal, high-quality early years resources that are grounded in self-determination and cultural knowledges, any attempts at truth and reconciliation are moot. For me, this chapter marks a call for child and youth care practitioners to engage with policy in new ways, championing the needs not only of individual children but of whole communities. In a field that prides itself (rightly) on the lived, everyday experience of children, we must not forget that we are called to challenge the larger structures in which these children live and move.

Enid Elliot, in Chapter 14, writes about nature kindergartens, using the case example of the Sooke School District’s

Nature Kindergarten, which began in 2012. The model for the program was drawn from the traditional Scandinavian forest schools while also being informed by local Indigenous knowledges. Elliot reports that the outdoor milieu informed a different kind of pedagogy, providing space for the children to engage in diverse learning that would not be possible in a classroom. The children learned new ways of feeling capable and competent. The class formed a community not only among themselves, but also with the more-than-human world they now had access to. This chapter reminds me that material settings and more-than-human relationships are foundational to early childhood experiences, and not “extra” to everyday education but pivotal to it.

In Chapter 15, Laura Teichert considers the role of digital technology in the early years. The chapter presents a case study of four-year-old “Belle” and her use of digital technologies in the home. Teichert found that these technologies influenced Belle’s non-digital activities. Characters and stories encountered in games and videos show up in other spheres of her everyday life. These technologies are a part of most Canadian children’s everyday environments, an integral part of their social realities. Techno-literacy can be seen as coming alongside and working with, rather than replacing, other forms of literacy. Teichert’s research demonstrates that very young children transcend their portrayal as passive consumers of digital technology and suggests how early years practitioners might collaborate with these diverse mediums and create spaces of critical engagement, rather than viewing them only as forces that need to be controlled or managed in children’s lives. In reading this chapter I am reminded of the need to challenge narratives that portray children as helpless and to foreground the ways in which children often defy narrow interpretations of their meaning making. This often requires that I set aside my own assumptions and approach engagement with fresh curiosity.

There is a tension that runs through Jagger’s volume that resonates not only with my own work about the religion and spirituality of childhood but also with my experience in early years practice more broadly. As both a researcher and practitioner in the field, I feel myself living in the “now and the not yet.” How do we provide education and care for very young children that reinforces our hopes for justice, peace, and love, while at the same time preparing these children to live and move in the world as it is now? In many ways, this is a spiritual question. We operate in a fallen system while longing for a redeemed future. Much is written, including in this book, about the need for educators who are able to bring a joyful, whole-hearted, relational approach to their work (Cassidy, King, Wang, Lower, & Kinter-Duffy, 2017; Government of British Columbia, 2019; Government of Ontario, 2014; Lamouchi & Brathwaite, 2019). This ideal bumps up against the boundaries set by low wages, poor benefits, and the chronic over-work experienced by so many ECE practitioners. The kind of “heart homework” that Waldorf-based education recommends with yoga, meditation, and quiet sitting is likely a fantasy for many ECE practitioners, who hold second jobs to make ends meet, try to engage in professional development, and care for their own families. I think something happens when we come up against these boundaries. It may be in this grey area of “now and not yet” that we need to settle our practice. Noticing, wrestling with, and wondering about these tensions may not result in the kinds of bullet-point answers that fit tidily into policy frameworks, but are, I believe, the calling for today’s practitioners in early years education and care. Jagger’s work is a compilation of these kinds of noticings, wrestlings, and wonderings and provides a refreshing and accessible introduction that has value beyond early childhood education alone.

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