

## Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

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### **Early Years Education and Care in Canada – A Historical and Philosophical Overview**

By Susan Jagger (Ed.)

Canadian Scholars' Press, 2019, 303 pages

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#### **Reviewed by**

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Education for and with young children is an ever-evolving field. Historically based pedagogy and practices occupy both a contested and, at times, complementary space with current understandings of children and childhood, the design of curriculum and teaching practices, the role of developmentally appropriate practices, and inclusionary measures that are beyond tokenistic. Some tenets that current readers may perceive as *modern* have their roots in past philosophical work. For example, in chapter 4, Peter Trifonas explores the contributions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Comenius who heralded children's right to education, a concept, Trifonas notes, that is more recently found in the 1989 United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Many of the concerns in early years education also have historical roots. In chapter 9, "Children *in* society: Thinking sociologically about children and childhood in a Canadian context," Noah Kenneally reminds us of the effects of history on the social context. Past sociological conception of children limited the agency of children, depicting them as being socialized by adults but not being capable of being socializing agents. The recent growth of sociology of childhood places greater agency on children's ability to affect each other and adults. In the preface titled "Drawing Together Common Threads in the History and Philosophy of the Early Years," editor Susan Jagger remarks that this compilation emerged due to her interactions with students in her course, History and Philosophy of Early Childhood

Education, who found the idea of the course daunting and assumed that a historical and philosophical overview would have “nothing to do with the present” (p. ix). This collection demonstrates otherwise.

The contributing authors are Canadian scholars who have brought a uniquely Canadian perspective to longstanding questions in early childhood education. The book consists of 15 chapters, each beginning with two to three guiding questions that help to provide a roadmap for the discussion to follow. Helpful learning tools such as tables summarizing key concepts and comparing different theories aid in guiding readers to grasp the complex landscape of early years education. Like a jigsaw puzzle, the chapters fit well with each other, creating continuing dialogue on topics through a multitude of perspectives.

Several chapters discuss key educational theorists including Dewey, Rousseau, and Comenius and the impact of their contributions to early years education. In chapter 6, Jagger draws upon Dewey’s experiential learning theory to explore “the place of experience in early education and the educational places of experience” (p. xi). In chapter 3, Margaret MacDonald focuses on Rousseau’s *Emile* and discourses on mothering in isolation as a “method of successful child rearing,” and notes that such practices reduce “family and community ties” (p. 42-43). Other chapters discuss inclusionary practices that include the need for indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing that have been obscured in the past in the settler-colonial nation of Canada. For example, in chapter 1, “Awasisiwiwin: Early Childhood Education and Indigenous Ways of Knowing, Angelina Weenie powerfully argues for holistic education, showing that for many of the Western perspectives and theories such as Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development, Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model and Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development that have dominated the conversation in early years education, corresponding indigenous concepts and ideas including Medicine Wheel, Circle of Courage, and Circle of Life teachings have existed for centuries but have not been taught in mainstream curriculum. Continuing the conversation, Jessica Ball reports on the community initiatives and programs that support Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care (IELCC) such as the federally funded program *Aboriginal Head Start*. Yet, Ball highlights limited funding, a fragmented service system, inadequate program facilities, and training gaps as obstacles to achieving equitable quality programs for Indigenous children in Canada. The dialogue on indigenous knowledge inclusion is continued by other authors including Enid Elliot who details, in chapter 14, the practices in an outdoors kindergarten, a “nature kindergarten” which al-

lows children to come into contact with the same and changing landscape, learn from and about salamanders, logs, ants, and even dead animals. The children were embedded in a community of local traditional knowledges, learning with First Nations Elders in a forest that was the gathering place of many Coast Salish First Nations.

The notion of play is woven through multiple chapters. In chapter 2, Patrick Lewis theorizes play beyond its developmental function – “play contributes to development and development can be seen in play” which has remained the main discourse in “Euro-Western thought” (p. 13). Play is also explored in chapter 15 by Laura Teichert who, in discussing children’s use of digital technology, notes that “play based theories of early learning dominate curricula in Canada” (p. 277). Lewis challenges the main discourse of play by affirming the spirituality of play and that “we play at our existence and our becoming human” (p. 24). In chapter 10, continuing the thread on development based learning versus alternative ways of thinking, Rachel Berman and Zuhra Abawi inform readers on the Reconceptualist Approach to early years education including a critique of developmentally appropriate practice, the benefits of applying critical race theory, post-colonial theory, and multi-species ethnography among others to advocate for “an interdisciplinary and critical idea of childhood that problematizes the ideal childhood” (p. 183). Chapter 7 by Kristy Timmons provides a needed background on the debates on developmentally appropriate practice and concludes with “suggestions for continual refinement in understanding evidence-based, developmentally “aligned” practices in the early years” (p. 115). In chapter 5, Lovisa Fung also draws on ways that holistic education has defined Montessori and Waldorf programs and reflects on the characteristics of the holistic teacher. In chapter 12, Kathryn Underwood spins the thread further by choosing the framework of social justice and equity to challenge mainstream understandings of disability.

The strength of the book is indebted to the way it provides a comprehensive view of key issues in Early Childhood Education, putting into conversation conflicting as well as complementary theories. The authors present their discussion in a simple and engaging style that enlivens complex topics. Given the vast depth of the field, a weakness may be that some topics were not given enough space aside from a broad look such as the issues concerning immigrant and refugee children. In approximately 300 pages, *Early Years Education and Care in Canada – A Historical and Philosophical Overview* accomplishes a much-needed task, providing an overview of a vast field for future educators and emerg-

ing scholars in varied fields including education theory and policy; educational leadership; childhood studies; teacher education; curriculum studies.

The book may be of most value to emerging scholars such as upper level undergraduates and graduate students who are beginning their foray into the complex debates and manifestations of contested issues in early education. Given the wide span of historical and philosophical concerns and their resulting complexity in early years education, emerging scholars may need supplemental guides to the theories presented in some of the chapters.

In conclusion, *Early Years Education and Care in Canada –A Historical and Philosophical Overview* is an apt collection of views to help us understand how we have arrived and “where we might go” in early years education (p. ix).