

Key Issues in Early Years Education: A Reader

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Smidt, Sandra (ed.), 2nd edn. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010, 192 pp., ISBN 9780415465267, £75 (hbk); ISBN 9780415465250, £18.99 (pbk)

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This second edition of the popular text *The Early Years: A Reader*, originally published in 1998, is long overdue. The first edition will be familiar to students of Early Years and professionals alike. This second edition continues to explore a range of ‘Key Issues in Early Years Education’ retaining the feel of the original text. It is pleasing to see Sandra Smidt again edit a text that continues to provide opportunity for current practitioners, together with students of Early Years, to be heard and valued alongside renowned authors. The inclusion of case studies and reflections by practitioners and students should inspire all those at the front line of Early Years practice not only to feel valued, but to believe that publication is not just for the select few.

Clear from the outset is the principle of placing the child at the centre of Early Years practice. In the preface Smidt states that this book will not feature references to ‘standards, levels or targets’ (p. xii). This comes as a refreshing approach and bucks the trend of so many recently published Early Years texts. It is divided into seven sections each with a similar structure whereby key chapters are then followed by cases studies exploring the main themes in context. This structure means that readers can select and choose a key theme to explore in isolation, or can immerse themselves in the book and read as a whole. The result of which means this text will be particularly useful to students who will undoubtedly be able to return to it again and again.

The opening chapter by Lilian Katz, which also appeared in the first edition, starts the discussion by challenging the reader to consider what matters most in effective early education and care. It restates the commonly held values and principles of Early Years practice. It is on the premise that our youngest children need, and deserve to be safe, develop high self-esteem, be interested and motivated, be supported in making sense of the world, be with authoritative adults and have good role models, that the rest of this book is built, (pp. 5–7). It is fair to say that in the current climate of accountability, outcomes and standards we all need this gentle but timely reminder.

Smidt retains a second chapter by Katz which explores what and when children should learn. However, Katz’s position is developed further in Part I: ‘How Young Children Learn’, with the inclusion of an insightful chapter by Helen Penn, who challenges the reader to reconsider the dominant Western perspective of childhood by exploring family structure, development of language, independence and play in both the Northern and Southern hemispheres. This is a welcome discussion and the inclusion of an international perspective adds a dimension to the book that will promote

professional dialogue and undoubtedly ignite a debate on personally held views of childhood and parenting. The final chapter in this section, contributed by Janet Moyles, 'Play – The Powerful Means of Learning in Early Years', has been updated and continues to emphasize the value of play, whilst challenging the outcome based nature of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfES, 2007a). A review of up-to-date research reasserts the need to place play, and children's exploration of their world, at the heart of effective Early Years practice, whilst acknowledging that there is still so much to be understood about what children learn through play.

The second part of the book, 'Understanding Children', has as its central theme the purpose, benefits, and practical aspects of observation. It draws on a number of case studies to illustrate this. As with previous sections there is a sense of familiarity and reaffirmation of effective Early Years practice. Whilst the arguments offered are not innovative as such, it is the case studies and readability of the chapters that are the strengths here. Part III – 'All Our Children', is justified by a commitment to inclusion driven by UK policy such as *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004) and *Excellence and Enjoyment: A Strategy for Primary schools* (DfES, 2003), both of which have been published since the first edition. The chapters and case studies, reflect on the challenges, practicalities and need to overcome barriers to promote effective teaching and learning of our bilingual children. A celebration of the linguistic competency of the youngest bilingual learners offers a perspective which, whilst not new, is more than worthy of note; likewise Chapter 13, which outlines an Action Research project. For those Early Years students and practitioners new to research, this chapter will undoubtedly be of significant interest. It gives a clear, although brief, outline of a research strategy and will certainly support students who are taking their first steps into the realms of research.

With so much of this book familiar, it is encouraging to read Part IV: 'Children as Thinkers and Problem Solvers'. This section explores and celebrates babies and young children as creative, critical thinkers. It clearly draws together the underlying themes of the book and makes reflective connections between early mathematical development, play and 'tuning into babies and young children' (p. 91). As with previous sections, the detailed case studies illustrate successfully key points made in the preceding chapter.

Part V: 'Understanding the Written Word', is an addition to the book. The chapter by Henrietta Dombey presents a well argued and unbiased appraisal of Synthetic Phonics, recognizing the benefits while acknowledging the limitations. Solutions to the problematic issue of reliance on packaged schemes such as *Letters and Sounds* (DfES, 2007b) are offered by emphasizing the need to promote a language enriched environment to enable our young readers and writers to develop a relationship with writing. Critically this thought provoking chapter could empower Early Years practitioners to challenge the overuse of such packaged schemes.

Part VI: 'Representing Thought and Feelings', a new section to this edition, focuses on the use of visual arts to record ideas and emotions. Whilst the chapter by Rosemary Nalden is remarkable one wonders if this in itself is out of place. It is questionable whether the inclusion of a review of such an innovative project with older children in Soweto can be justifiably placed in this Early Years text. These doubts, however, diminish having read the final section, Part VII: 'Learning: A Second Chance', which challenges the reader to consider the similarities between adult learners and Early Years learners. In essence, it offers the reader a chance, through well constructed case studies, to enhance their understanding of pedagogy through a discussion of 'andragogy'. In doing so myself I arrived at a place whereby I understood the rationale for including the chapter by Rosemary Nalden, and warmly welcome it to this edition.

Indeed the concept of a *second chance* to learn may well be the lasting benefit of this text; a second chance to rethink, reconsider and relearn familiar perspectives of effective Early Years

practice and in doing so move to a deeper understanding of those perspectives. In summary this is a well presented text which will support students and practitioners of Early Years, and refresh and rekindle those of us who think we have heard it all before, but actually still have so much to learn.

References

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