Early Childhood Education and Care: An Introduction

Sheila Nutkins, Catriona McDonald and Mary Stephen (2013) London: SAGE
ISBN: 978-1-4462-0711-6 (pp.339, £21.99, pb.)
Reviewed by BRENDA DUNN and JILL SHIMI

As the title suggests, this book introduces the reader to relevant aspects of professional practice within early education and child care. It offers valuable insights into a wide range of early years topics and is targeted at professionals working with children 0 to 8 years. The three authors have considerable collective experience in schools and nurseries in Scotland, England and Sweden. They are teacher educators in higher education, who draw upon current theory and recent research to provide a cohesive and well-structured guide for use in the early years setting. The text promotes knowledge and understanding of education and care for early years specialists, primary teachers and childhood practitioners. It offers a variety of strategies and approaches to enhance professional practice.

The book is divided into four parts. The initial focus is on the crucial aspects of early childhood. This includes child development and learning and the child in the socio-cultural context. The authors provide an international lens for the reader, going on to consider the needs of the developing professional. This book is well written, accessible and engages the reader throughout. There is uniformity across the chapters with integrated learning features. Every part has an overview which presents an introduction. The chapters have boxed summaries, which signpost the reader to the text to follow, highlighting the key ideas from the outset. Case studies are used to encourage the reader to make strong and meaningful links between theory and practice. Personalised reflective activities appear at the end of significant sections. These activities promote critical analysis of current practice, challenging readers to explore their strengths and areas for development, culminating in change. The reader is directed to additional reading and a range of useful websites to deepen their knowledge and understanding of key topics. Suggested reading is current and appropriate. The recommended websites are selected to extend learning and include video clips, which are informative and entertaining, as well as keynote speeches from experts in the field and additional teaching materials. Each chapter has a short and helpful conclusion, summarising the key themes which have emerged.

The book starts by exploring child development and learning in relation to practice and provision. It considers recent research evidence pertaining to cognitive development and language acquisition from conception to three years. The emphasis is on the critical importance of these early stages of life on prospective life experiences. Promoting and facilitating play is deemed central to learning and the authors advocate the inclusion of active learning through play within the primary classroom. They consider learning theories, planning and supporting play and current policy. The concept of risk management is presented as a challenge for the early years professional. Strategies such as the promotion of meaningful outdoor play opportunities are suggested to help "mitigate the negative impact of a risk-averse society" (page 41). The role and purpose of creativity is examined through two approaches: Kodaly and transient art.

The focus changes to investigating outcomes for children in relation to their health and wellbeing in light of societal changes. The changing nature of the family structure is thoroughly considered and emphasis is placed upon working in partnership with parents, families and communities. Reference is made to current legislation and the impact of technology within the home and in educational settings is examined. The reader is encouraged to reflect upon aspects of practice and to contribute to on-going professional dialogue. The authors take a close look at international approaches to early years education and encourage practitioners to examine their practice by making comparisons and adopting

and adapting new methods where appropriate. Readers are encouraged to conceptualise professionalism, to assess their role within the development of inter-professional practice and to view the profession as inherently evidence-based. The importance of research, professional debate and professional autonomy is stressed.

Underpinning this book is the purpose of early education, the role of the practitioner and the nature of the curriculum. It is a valuable learning and reference tool which will appeal to a wide audience who seek insight into early years.

The Transition tightrope: Supporting students in transition to secondary school

Reviewed by LYNNE GRANT

It is well documented that transition issues occur for many children between primary and secondary education. Wilcock explores this area in her lucid narrative, drawing on many real-life examples. The book is written from an insider's perspective; the author - as she explains in the book - is herself a primary school teacher and parent. 'Transition Tightrope' is designed to aid parents to support their children during this phase in their life. Wilcock has based this book on real-life examples, some of which draw upon her own parenting experience as well as her knowledge of transition from a primary educator's viewpoint. The book is written in an easy-to-read, informative manner, to support parents' understandings of the changes that happen at this time and the support that they themselves can provide to their child.

The book comprises twelve different chapters, each looking at issues such as work environment and time management. Within each chapter Wilcock exemplifies her points with 'True Tales'; these are snippets relating to the topic under discussion, including examples from her own children's experiences or from her experiences as a class teacher. These 'True Tales' are designed to provide practical examples and further exemplify the topics being examined.

Some of the chapters are quite brief, such as *Parents with style - which style suits you?* This discusses briefly the various types of parenting style and asks parents to identify their own style of parenting. The chapter on *Girls and Boys - vive la difference!* tends to over-generalise; not all boys are competitive risk-takers, just in the same manner that not all girls are verbal and anxious. However, Wilcock does acknowledge that these are 'sweeping terms' and provides 'True Tales' to further exemplify the points made.

Overall, although this book may be helpful as an aid for parents and carers to help them support their children through the transition from primary to secondary education, it has limitations as an academic text.

Reinventing the Curriculum: New Trends in Curriculum Policy and Practice.

Mark Priestley and Gert Biesta (Eds.) (2013) London: Bloomsbury.
ISBN 978-1-441-13764-7 (pp. 237, £75, hb.)
Reviewed by DAVID LEAT

The editors have faced a significant challenge in producing a book centred on an ESRC research project located in a small country and yet making the book sufficiently attractive to an international readership.   Put another way, what does Scotland's experience of *Curriculum for Excellence* have to say about curriculum processes in the rest of the world? It says much for the quality of the book that they have, in large measure, succeeded.
One of the key messages of the book is the importance of coherence between what Basil Bernstein would have called message systems - curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Where they are not aligned there are tensions that play out in the lives of school leaders, teachers and ultimately students. In the case of Scotland, whilst *Curriculum for Excellence* has expected and encouraged schools to take up the mantle of curriculum development, there has remained an assessment regime which constrains teacher agency. This is captured by a vivid quote from a secondary principal teacher who reflects: '*We have professional autonomy, we can be creative and innovative in the best sense of all these words, and then you are still going to be measured in a quite narrow way. I find it quite paradoxical.'* The explanation for the contradiction lies substantially in the stranglehold of neo-liberal market ideology which places such a premium on simple outcomes measures exacted through standardised tests. At the global scale this policy is encapsulated in the PISA (Programme of International Student Assessments) and its owner, the OECD, comes in for some criticism in the book on account of its large impact on policy and practice, despite being unelected and unaccountable.

The book has two main sections. After a very helpful introductory chapter by the editors the next six chapters focus on Scotland by way of two general chapters (The Origins of Curriculum for Excellence and Capacities and Curriculum) and then four chapters, each analysing one of the four capacities that form the spine of Curriculum for Excellence.   Of these next four chapters, putting the spotlight on the Successful Learner, Confident Individuals, Responsible Citizens and Effective Contributors, three are written by authors who have been steeped in the Scottish context over the last 10 years and know its intricacies. The result is that one gets a nuanced analysis of the origins of the particular capacity concept and its evolution within Scottish policy. These chapters will be of particular interest to Scottish readership but they also manage to marshal sufficient general relevance for an international readership.   The exception is the chapter by Ecclestone, who rehearses some arguments that she has made elsewhere, critiquing the concept of confident Individuals. This chapter is less securely located in Scottish policy evolution and, although there is logic to the argument, the chapter feels unbalanced and somewhat out of place as the author relies somewhat on 'straw men' and anecdotal evidence.

The remaining chapters broaden the scope of the book. Sinnema and Aitken provide a pivotal chapter on *Emerging International Trends in Curriculum*, as this allows the Scottish experience to be compared with other Anglophone countries. Another important chapter, by Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, provides detail of the *Teacher Agency and Curriculum Change* project which underpins the book, and shows through case study how local, or ecological conditions within a school can strongly affect the capacity of teachers to be creative and fulfil the role that Curriculum for Excellence desires. Agency is an important concept currently in educational research and there are important theoretical and practical accounts of its significance. The penultimate chapter by Lingard and McGregor, although a little repetitive, provides an account of recent educational history in Queensland and the fate of the New Basics curriculum, which became a victim of the lack of investment in change and the politically-driven federal commitment to high-stakes assessment.

This is an important book. It should be read by teachers everywhere, but particularly in Scotland and the rest of the UK. They deserve to understand the nature and causes of the impasse they find themselves in, as at one and the same time they have to meet externally-imposed targets and are either expected or elect to be creative. It is fair to say that the book is stronger on policy (curriculum as written) than practice (curriculum as taught and experienced) but teachers are still learning how to resolve the contradictions and find compromises.

Education, Democracy and Development. Does education contribute to democratisation in developing countries?

Clive Harber and Vusi Mncube (2012) Oxford: Symposium
ISBN 978-1-873927-71-7) pp.190, US$48.00, pb.)
Reviewed by HELEN LEES

This book is shocking. It hits hard because it highlights with scholarly, rigorous force how needful democracy in education is and *particularly* in developing countries. It is a tragic book because it shows clearly the need for widespread and thorough-going democracy in schools with one hand, whilst at the same time highlighting how absent and how slow the concept is to catch on in schools and for schooling. Perhaps nowhere else is the need for a better concept of the democratic required in the developing world than in the continent of Africa and post-apartheid South Africa, which this book focuses on with in-depth analysis and clarity. The book offers a disturbing consensus about the various failures of the democratic in this continent. Why democracy in school systems there is especially needed is discussed in the light of NGO and government reports and university research, which all point towards key sites for development of solutions to violence, power-hugging, corruption, unprofessionalism and lack of adequate educational infrastructures; concomitantly acknowledging enduring lip service to democratic practice without the necessary boldness of fundamental supporting changes. Officials, governors, head teachers, individual teachers, parents and especially teacher education programmes are all implicated in a story of a failure to sufficiently move into democratic leanings for health and well-being.

Thankfully the difficult picture of a concept in its infancy in this region of the world is variously interspersed with signs of hope for improved democratic practices, pedagogic interest and emphasis, in the form of isolated but successful schools and national attempts (for instance South Africa's policy suggestions) to go against ingrained assumptions for school-based operations of authority, hierarchy and lack of voice. Examples are given where democratic theory and pedagogic attitudes are recognised as aiding in and achieving outcomes of peace, inter-cultural tolerance and understanding, mitigation of bullying and violence, improved gender relations and even improved examination results. But such stories are always tempered by very difficult contexts for thorough-going flourishing of the democratic through schools as institutions. The book therefore offers a wake-up call for further and prolonged research into active, participatory learning, development of school meetings and forums for discussion, widening of opportunities for voice, deeper integration of *Ubuntu* (human kindness, dignity and respect) into the school lives of children and also their parents, such that they can support and protect their children better in dangerous school settings through democratic means. The political and social struggle for the values and benefits that democratic practices can bring is never in this book underestimated. Indeed, the relentless factual recourse to research showing how profound the obstacles are causes the reader to work somewhat drudgingly through the ideas presented, as though on a required vocational pilgrimage to educational hell; all the while wishing that the picture were not so complex and seemingly intractable whilst so needful of change.

Alas, this book also shows that what happens in Africa is shockingly not so far from the lamentable failures of robust democratic education in developed/ing countries such as the UK. As Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence has shown, amongst other initiatives such as the English Curriculum for Citizenship, understanding and knowing what active, agentic integration of various stake-holder voices in schools can actually look like, and function as, is a troubling proposition (Preistley, Robinson, & Biesta, 2012). Schools are not democratically inclined. Expecting deep democracy in schools to inform curriculum initiatives – or vice-versa - is currently unrealistic (Harber, 2009), anywhere perhaps except specialist settings such as Summerhill School (Stronach & Piper, 2008). In a sense, Harber and MnCube are providing here yet one more stake in the heart of the idea that schools as they currently are hegemonically organised can ever hope to achieve a proper contribution to just and active citizens of democratic *poleis*.

In the face of a harsh wind, Harber and MnCube successfully develop in this book an argument for greater emphasis and attention to democracy in some of the most troubled regions of the world - where violence, injustice and authoritarianisms have long held sway. They do so by weaving their own research outcomes and collected knowledge with cogent argumentation, supported by rigorous and systematic recourse to relevant other voices. It all points in one direction: democracy is needed for schools to function effectively as educative institutions and in line with human rights agendas. Just for the extensive bibliography of research on democratic education research and initiatives in Africa and beyond, this book would be worth consulting. But it is also *much* more valuable than this. The import of the presentation stands to be considered worthy of becoming a classic of educational literature. Harber's 2004 book, *Schooling as Violence*, is also such a book. That Clive Harber of the University of Birmingham, this time partnering with Vusi MnCube of the University of South Africa, is able to pull off these blockbusters of the terrible deficiencies and harms that schools do because of their omissions and their laziness to change, is testament to the desperate needs of the children in the schools we study; they are being hurt and there is a solution. Democratic practices work. Research of this kind therefore matters a *great* deal.

I took a long time to read this well written and intelligently structured book - much longer than usual - because it made my heart regularly weep that educational policy and even educational studies just don't get it: our *first* policy and practice priority should be the democratic. Everything else can follow from this. Harber and Mncube have created a reason with this new publication to never believe in anything other than the need for increased democracy in education as the pedagogue's core vocation. For students, academics, policy makers, NGO's, parents, students in schools, teachers and head teachers, this book is highly recommended and ought, furthermore, to appear on the shelves of any university where teacher education occurs. Let the debate begin afresh, informed by the undeniable message Harber and Mncube communicate through lessons from Africa.

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School-based research. A guide for education students

Elaine Wilson (Ed.) (2013) London: SAGE
ISBN: 978-1-4462-4749-5 (pp. 357, £20.99, pb.)
Reviewed by ANNE PIRRIE

This edited volume of contributions from members of the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge is intended for Masters students and practising teachers, but contains material that will be of interest to primary and secondary PGCE students. The book is dedicated to the memory of Jean Rudduck and Donald Macintyre, both of whom were professors of education at Cambridge. They shared a conviction that teachers have a crucial role to play in research. The starting point is the definition of research provided by Lawrence Stenhouse, who is widely regarded as the pioneer of teacher research. Stenhouse defined research as 'systematic and sustained enquiry, planned and self-critical, which is subject to public criticism and to empirical tests where these are appropriate.' The purpose of this book is to equip teachers with 'basic tools', 'key ideas, key concepts and key methods' in order that they may 'engage with their own futures in a planned and coherent way' and bridge the gap between tacit and explicit knowledge.

The book is clearly structured and presented. Section 1 clarifies the purpose and direction of school-based research. Section 2 is devoted to carrying out and reporting on classroom-based research; and Section 3 is entitled Methodologies. Chapter 1 (Becoming a reflexive teacher) begins with a salutary reminder that 'becoming a teacher involves more than just being "told what to do", developing skills or mimicking other teachers.' Chapter 2 provides practical advice on refining the focus for research and formulating a research question. There are examples of teachers' classroom-based research that make explicit the aim of the research, the stimulus (in terms of developing new awareness or addressing dissatisfaction with current practice) and the topic area. Chapter 3 gives a clear account of the purposes of reviewing literature in a format that is readily accessible to novice researchers working in a school context. There is also a helpful section on setting search parameters.

New to this edition is a section on conducting research with early years and primary age children, drawing upon empirical work conducted by Cambridge University Primary PGCE students. Thorough consideration is given to ethics and consensual participation in the research process, first in relation to working with younger children, and then more generally (Chapter 6). In Chapter 4 in addition to the standard treatment of interviews and questionnaires as means of gathering data, consideration is also given to the use of visual stimuli (photographs, objects or video) as a stimulus for discussion. As data collection is the explicit focus of Chapter 7, there is a degree of repetition, as was the case with the treatment of research ethics. One wonders whether the issues that arise in working with younger children might have been 'mainstreamed' in later chapters. However, this is a minor quibble, and it is probably inevitable, given that this is a collection of essays rather than a monograph. Chapter 8 gives very thorough treatment to the issue of handling data; and Chapter 9 addresses reliability and validity in qualitative research by teacher researchers. Chapters 11 and 12 are devoted to quantitative approaches and to the analysis of quantitative data respectively. For this reader at least, it is slightly puzzling that consideration of action research (Chapters 14 and 15); the case study (Chapter 16); and grounded theory (Chapter 17) is reserved for Section 3 (Methodologies), all of which logically precede 'writing about your research' (Chapter 13).

The chapter overviews are particularly useful features of the book, as are the brief sections entitled 'Key ideas' and 'Reflective questions', with which each chapter concludes. All in all, this a thoroughly researched and helpful contribution to the burgeoning literature on research methods, with the added advantage of being aimed specifically at teachers who have an interest in reflecting on classroom interactions, interrogating their own practice and the behaviour and performance of their students.