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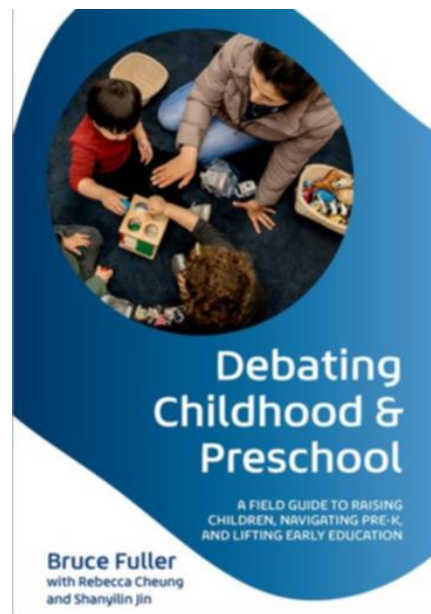
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Bruce Fuller, professor emeritus at the University of California-Berkeley, offers a new book on the terrain of preschool policy in the United States. He frames his book like a field guide to early education, one that “unearths the philosophical roots of contemporary debates, spotlights the proliferating range of players who shape heartfelt ideologies of childhood, and reviews a growing body of evidence that may tweak your own assumptions” (p. vii).

Curiously, a field guide is a portable, illustrated book designed to help its users identify natural objects outdoors, while the subject of Fuller’s discussion is, ultimately, children. However, Fuller argues that such a guide was crucial to write, since the current landscape of preschool is a “wild and wooly mixed market of providers, infused with the ideology of parent choice” (p. 108). His ultimate goal is to contribute to a more knowledgeable and reflective field of well-prepared and informed early childhood educators and policy makers who ask critical, thoughtful questions leading to positive changes for young children’s education and care.

Indeed, the guide centers on helping these stakeholders to better understand the mixed-delivery preschool markets, which are a set of different home-based and center-based locations for early education. Under this parent choice system, access and quality may be unequal, children are often segregated by race and class demographics, and they may experience different levels of quality education and care (Sherfinski, 2013). His idea is that professionals in the field must crystallize their knowledge of the market landscape, form a pluralist understanding of parenting and child development, and know the research on early education



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quality so that they might “engage parents and fellow teachers in this important conversation—clarifying philosophical positions and findings that speak to which setting yields stronger benefits for children and families” (p. xv).

To begin their journey toward understanding, Fuller suggests that readers learn to look at the issues through the “windows” of five main debates that form the basis of the chapters. He assures readers: “I aim to be more Socratic, amplifying essential questions, rather than didactically preaching my own remedies” (p. 7). He includes lively discussion questions at the end of each chapter to support these dialogues. The windows discussed in the book are as follows:

- Chapter 1. How to define childhood? Why do the grown-ups disagree on their aims for shaping and teaching young children?
- Chapter 2. Who sets the moral and developmental goals for raising young children? Why have a variety of political players—beyond parenting gurus, preschool teachers, and scientists—become so influential in the field of early education?
- Chapter 3. Where should young children be raised outside the home? Does a colorful mix of childcare and preschool options best serve children and families?
- Chapter 4. How does the quality of early care and education settings vary? What qualities of caregivers, teachers, and classrooms most potently lift young children?
- Chapter 5. What will it take to boost the preschool’s sustained benefits for children? Will this pint-size institution narrow disparities in children’s early growth across lines of race and social class? (p. 15)

While the first part of Fuller’s book lays out the debates and invites inquiry. As the book unfolds, he reveals his world view:

My own view is that we must ready children for a pluralist, more tolerant society, one that offers a warmer sense of belonging locally, enlivened by cultural competence and the cognitive agility to operate in settings beyond one’s immediate community. Teach locally *and* globally. (p. 237)

Fuller eventually notes that as a society we have moved away from the “once-unifying aim of preschool,” the quest to uplift young children. The Head Start model serving children from low-income families and children of color is an example of a model with this specific aim. Now, he says, competition rules the day as the US looks to corporate and parent-focused solutions to address public concerns:

Equity firms buy fancy preschool networks, aiming to profit from well-off families and their kids. Curriculum firms pitch classroom tools that fail to elevate learning. Labor unions advocate for childcare vouchers, seemingly unconcerned about the quality of settings that taxpayers subsidize. Progressive politicians promise to

narrow gaping disparities in children's early growth, then dodge asking whether rising investments are paying off, not for the adults, but benefiting the kids. (pp. 241-242)

Fuller's treatment is hopeful because he includes insight on how to move towards the pluralistic goals he imagines. He advises that we should discern the relative costs and benefits of policies that reduce stress and upset in families (such as incentivizing informal care providers with vouchers) versus using public funds to support pre-K organizations and recognize how overly complicated systems discourage families from participating. He cites recent studies showing positive effects of preschool on working class children's developmental outcomes in cities like Tulsa and Boston, as well as unfortunate examples in programs like in New York, where segregation and uneven access have not yielded the same effects. He uses these examples to back up his message that having solid, empirically supported aims for a pluralist approach and a plan to achieve them are very much needed right now.

As someone who has documented challenges and affordances of the mixed-delivery universal preschool system in the state of West Virginia during the past 15 years (Sherfinski, 2013, 2017, 2018, 2019; Sherfinski & Ansah, 2025; Sherfinski et al., 2015; Sherfinski & Woodrum, 2026), I believe that Fuller's attention to educating stakeholders about the mixed-delivery preschool system is very much needed in this age of authoritarianism and shifting forms of privatization.

In conclusion, Fuller brings a well-informed, empirically grounded perspective and demands a focus on goal setting and back-mapping guidelines to strengthen early childhood policy and practice. While I think the book may be a challenging read, it has many merits such as adding information about early childhood education and care initiatives in California to a national conversation that has, for a long time, been limited to the southern and eastern U.S. regions. In addition to Fuller's target stakeholders, teacher educators would find this a useful book to supplement their class content and inform their outreach.

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About the Reviewer

Melissa Sherfinski, PhD, University of Wisconsin-Madison, is professor of early childhood and elementary education at West Virginia University. Before joining the faculty of WVU in 2011, she had six years public school experience (K-5) and four years in private preschool or childcare. She is the immediate past-Chair of the American Educational Research Association's Early Education and Child Development Special Interest Group, and the author of *Rooted in Belonging: Critical Place-based Education in Elementary and Early Childhood Pre-service Teacher Education* (2023, Teachers College Press). Her current research is focused on the roles of parents rights initiatives in early education, the impacts of AI programs in Appalachian elementary schools, teachers' views of homeschooling, and understanding systems of universal pre-kindergarten education and childcare in local communities.



About the Author

Bruce Fuller, professor emeritus at the University of California-Berkeley, is a sociologist with special interests in a broad range of subjects in education. His work explores how institutions, large and small, work to lift children and families. A former professor of education and comparative policy at Harvard University, Fuller has worked to improve early education in China, Viet Nam, and southern Africa. His book *Standardized Childhood* examines



the philosophical and political history of the universal preschool movement. Fuller's volume *When Schools Work* details how grassroots activists in Los Angeles have shaken civic politics and advanced policy reforms that lift children and teachers. Fuller's research has appeared in the *Atlantic*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *San Jose Mercury News*, and *Washington Post*.

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