



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

Arizona State University

ISSN 1094-5296

May 26, 2010

Heydon, Rachel M. & Iannacci, Luigi (2008). *Early Childhood Curricula and the De-pathologizing of Childhood*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Pp. 203 ISBN 978-1-4426-1026-2

Reviewed by Sylvia McLellan
University of British Columbia

Here at last, is a book with the potential to unify the vastly diverse community of early childhood educators. In *Early Childhood Curricula and the De-pathologizing of Childhood*, Rachel Heydon and Luigi Iannacci write from within a curriculum studies discourse, outside of any particular approach to Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum and pedagogy. In doing so, they have managed to develop a theme that encompasses all approaches. The authors' main point is to bring awareness to and challenge the attitudes and assumptions that underlie the dominant discourse "... that has made pathologizing possible in education." (p. 8). Well, as they go on to argue, not only *possible*, but actually *favoured* for its end result of efficiency and control. They use their own experiences, both as educators and as previously marginalized children themselves, to bring "faces" to a

Citation: McLellan, Sylvia. (2010 May 26) Review of *Early Childhood Curricula and the De-pathologizing of Childhood* by Rachel Heydon and Luigi Iannacci. *Education Review*, 13. Retrieved [Date] from <http://edrev.asu.edu/reviews/rev926.pdf>

difficult topic. Their intent is to problematize the dominant discourse of children as at-risk and in need of fixing (a deficit-based discourse) and to present a vision and a theoretical framework for an alternative, asset-based pedagogical approach. Even though the book is written within a Canadian context and focuses on early years and special education, it has relevance for other human service fields and for policy makers interested in exploring the possibilities of asset-based curriculum development.

In the introduction, the notion of pathologizing is contextualized within curriculum theory. “Pathologizing” is defined as “... the processes by which persons belonging to a particular group are seen by a more powerful group as abnormal.” (p. 3). The authors are explicit about their beliefs and the ideologies underpinning the book: childhood studies, critical theory and post-modernism. They are explicit about the book’s intended audience: “...educators [who are] interested in improving the lives of children through interdisciplinary studies.” (p. 6). The authors expand the notion of who ‘gets’ pathologized, and the processes involved. In this way, they argue one step further than others in the special education field who have noted that “...the ‘normalizing’ aspects of the curriculum [serve to render] disability invisible.” (Erevelles, 2005, p. 435) Heydon and Iannacci would say, not only invisible, which may be seen as passive, but pathologized, which is most certainly, active.

They place the Canadian experience within a global perspective, especially with regards to the high percentage of culturally/linguistically diverse (CLD) populations. The hegemonic discourse of the technical – rational approach to education is, as one might expect, criticized for its emphasis on efficiency and control. The authors present a clear, critical analysis of the current educational system as being focused on a deficit discourse and a bio-medical approach to childhood. They intersperse heavier, theoretical sections with narrative style case studies based on research they completed within the Ontario school system. This perspective leads to a refreshingly original (yet unexpected)

challenge to educators to help children *as individuals* transcend deficit discourses.

The first part of the book (Chapters 2-5) focuses on defining, describing and theorizing the processes and effects of pathologizing. Readers get a glimpse of the complexity of the issue the authors are tackling with the wide range of contexts within these chapters: children living in poverty, approaches to teaching literacy, culturally/linguistically diverse (CLD) populations and special education. Each chapter uses theoretical discussion and narrative case studies to examine how the current dominant pedagogical orientations “[privilege] certain ways of knowing and [marginalize] others” (p. 78).

The second part of the book (Chapters 6-7) takes a more positive angle. In it, Heydon and Iannacci present a vision for the possibilities to be experienced by children when they are exposed to an asset-based curriculum. They call their method *syncretic*, to reflect the “ethical desire to depict smallness and its various relations to largeness....” (p. 14). They accomplish this with qualitative narratives of children and educators, interspersed with interpretations of current sociological trends.

The conclusion brings readers full circle – back to theory and curriculum development. Although not without its difficulties, the book effectively forces educators and educational policy makers to examine our own practice and assumptions.

The Hegemony of the Educational System

Heydon and Iannacci repeatedly question the ubiquitous hegemony of the system. In the words of McCutcheon (1986), they attempt to “... generate action by raising our consciousness about matters to which we were oblivious before our reading.” (p. 20). The “child development theory”, against which the authors rage, is based on liberal humanist assumptions. Readers who are not familiar with these will be hard-pressed to find them explicitly stated within the pages of the book. However, Heydon and

Iannacci make the assumption that readers will recognize the seemingly innocuous assertions that "... all people including the very young are equally positioned." (Rhedding-Jones, 2005, p. 139). They make an ill-defined leap to the understanding that such assumptions, while denying the possible effects of class, money or gender as limiting or constructing possibilities, lead to educators placing the blame for "inadequacy" on individuals, rather than on systems or institutions. In doing so, the authors rely more heavily on examples than on explanation.

(While accessible to the typical reader, the case studies themselves are far beyond the reading level of the average immigrant...) The preceding parenthesis serves to highlight the kind of assumptions that underlie pathologizing people and illustrates the approach that Heydon and Iannacci articulate. Their assertion is that, as aware educators, we need to notice and problematize phrases like "typical reader" and "average immigrant". Because most of us do not think we do – pathologize children, that is.

I experienced two different moments of disequilibrium while reading – one in response to examples of the prevailing practice of labeling silent CLD children as 'selective mute' (pp. 59-62) and the other while reading an alternative, culturally sensitive interpretation to a child's 'social dependency' (p. 140). The authors anticipate this, including a reference to Patton's (1998) metaphor of 'looking behind the curtain' (from Frank L. Baum's *Wizard of Oz* story) as an attempt to understand and become aware of hegemonic forces within our own practice as educators. They give a clear, authoritative statement about the power of hegemony: "There are moments in the book when teacher readers might recognize their acts and feel disheartened. Yet ... we do not blame individual teachers for the processes of pathologizing, but recognize that all educators, as citizens of the minority world, are implicated in a web of deficit-driven discourses and curricula that pathologize children and can rob people of their sense of agency; being blinded by dominant ways of doing and being is what makes hegemony *hegemony*." (p. 161).

Two Authors

It is possible that the lack of clarity noted in the previous section derives from the issue of having two authors. Each chapter identifies the author who penned it (the introduction, conclusion and one chapter are jointly written). Heydon and Iannacci express an awareness of this potential difficulty and say "... we would like the moments of transition in the book to be read not as failures of the text, but rather as reminders that texts are never innocent: They are always created by embodied authors who have their own desires and agendas and who are rooted in particular times and places." (p.17). It is an effective tactic to forestall what may have been perceived as a fault. It also resonates with the tone of the rest of the book.

Portions or versions of four chapters have been published elsewhere (noted in the beginning). This creates some disconnect within the book, but also some advantage. There is a clear effort to logically structure the disparate chapters, with plenty of macro-organizing statements regarding what is coming up next for example. Unfortunately, this sometimes leads to the parroting of whole paragraphs (compare p. 139 with p. 167). There are only so many different ways you can write about "what you've already written". By way of advantage, the authors take the opportunity to respond to a criticism of one of the previously published chapters (pp. 160-161) with sensitive and thoughtful remarks.

Strength in the Voicing

The strength of the book is in its authorial voice. Each of the authors is at the beginning of what appears to be an effective professional career and each of them brings a different, yet intensely personal perspective to the topic of pathologizing children in education. Rachel Heydon (PhD 2002, University of Toronto) is a special educator who is especially concerned with ethical praxis. "This praxis recognizes that young children in need, such as Craig [from a previous case study], demand action and a thoughtful appraisal of that action..." (p. 90). It emerges from a commitment to "do no harm" to others. She presents several emotional narratives concerning children the system has

deemed “unfixable”, recognizing that stock pedagogical approaches will not even come close to addressing the complexities involved. Luigi Iannacci (PhD 2005, University of Western Ontario) finds a focus in CLD students and the practices of literacy instruction. His perceptive writing style gives voice to these often ‘invisible’ students. “[Classroom practices] ensured that their ways of knowing or coming to know were undervalued and epistemologically irrelevant in altering the curricular space. As a result, who they were, what they knew, and how they understood the world remained untapped and inconsequential resources for shaping the literacy curriculum they encountered.” (pp. 78-79). He takes a critical multicultural perspective and notes the irony that education is typically seen as the solution to addressing inequity. Together, the authors present a poignant rendering of the effects of pathologizing as experienced by the children themselves. This sets the book apart from any others written on the topic.

The authors present themselves as having been pathologized in earlier life experiences, lending authenticity to their passion. Heydon comes from a self-identified “low SES” background and Iannacci from a self-identified “CLD” background (p. 16). They claim an interest in critical pedagogy based on these earlier experiences. A natural attraction for emancipation has led them to focus on personal transformation. This in turn develops the capacity to dwell on the beauty and potential of childhood. This is exactly what they claim is missing from any deficit-driven educational system.

Ethical Praxis

Their treatment of “social class” in the book is a welcome addition to a field that is notorious for pretending that social class is no longer an issue in North America (Wright, 2000). Having several of the so-called “risk factors” myself (low SES, father unemployed, mother hospitalized) I found my own experiences resonating uncomfortably with those in the book. For example, Heydon describes an experience she had as a student teacher, witnessing the humiliation of a child who was blamed by adults in authority over her for her own

victimization. “For God’s sake, C.[child’s name], why do you let them do that? Uh? I want an answer. Why do you let people push you around like that?” (p. 157). How many of us, as experienced educators, recognize the cold, bare legs and favoured “white plastic cowboy boots” of a bullied child? The authors intersperse these emotional narratives with appeals to readers: “Teachers are not without power to make positive changes in children’s lives.” (p. 162) This reminds me of my son’s grade two year – Mrs. H. and *the only year I* (as a single mother of a son – two more significant “risk factors”) *was never called into the school to deal with my son’s acting out behaviour*. What kind of different lens did that teacher view my child with? Heydon and Iannacci would argue: an asset driven lens, a curriculum of at-possibility, instead of at-risk. As a case in point, that son is now an adult, with a wife and family that he loves and supports well. He has no fond memories of his school days. Heydon and Iannacci view the writing of the book as an act of “...bearing responsibility not *for* but *to* the other. Our teaching, research and personal lives have become joined in the response to the ‘face’ of the suffering other. [this book] is one attempt to unsew our lips and say “No” to Mr. X [the adult speaker in the previous narrative].” (p. 158).

Theoretical Difficulties

The book reads like good medicine – effective, but at times, hard to swallow. For example, there is an overzealous (I argue) connection between developmental discourses and “...the proliferation of deficit-driven assessment and evaluation practices...” (p. 70). MacDonald (2007) presents an alternative view of developmental discourses. “...developmental theory and the DAP [developmentally appropriate practice] guidelines can be viewed as tools and instruments used selectively by teachers and not dogmatically viewed as all or nothing thinking.” (p.9). She concludes that children may be better served if curriculum developers included developmental theory but viewed it interactively, as part of a larger pool of available resources. This is not to say that others have not also made the same (strong) connection. In particular, feminist writers such as Jeannette Rhedding-Jones (2005) decry the “... positivist

hard science” of developmental discourses. (p. 134). She notes that, in this framework, adults take “... the role of the expert, with children and their abilities objectified and categorized.” (p. 134). This clearly supports the argument of *Early Childhood Curricula*. However, even Rhedding-Jones (2005) acknowledges the existence of ECE contexts where psychology-based and sociology-based discourses may be regarded as complementary and mutually reconstructive. Heydon and Iannacci never acknowledge this position or even the possibility of its existence.

A similar omission becomes apparent in the conclusion, when framing their position around Schwab’s (1971) “Arts of eclectic”. The authors note Schwab’s three approaches to solving practical problems with theory: match prescribed theories to problems, adapt theories to fit a situation or invent new solutions. They then connect them to “prescriptive”, “adaptable” and “emergent” curricula. They effectively place all three along a continuum of efficiency and ethics. Then they describe in great detail the first and last and completely ignore “adaptable”, even though it seems to hold the most promise for educators trying to work *within the system*.

This is the gist of the criticism of their work mentioned previously. A writer identified herself as a “working teacher” and harshly criticized their insistence on deconstructing approaches to literacy (p. 160). While the authors acknowledge the messiness of the practitioner/academic divide, they insist that their identities are strongly linked with being practitioners. Even so, they note “... we know that we are no longer teachers in the sense that classroom teachers would recognize.” (p. 161). They had an opportunity to constructively address this criticism here, but I believe they missed it. The book’s argument in general would be more convincing if the authors attended to these kinds of details.

Disconnect with the Conclusion

In many ways, the conclusion to the book presents the greatest difficulty. In attempting to present an alternative to

the dominant discourse in education, the authors use two examples which are well-known within the preschool field of ECE: Reggio Emilia and Te Whariki. This comes as a surprise, given that the narratives in the book are virtually *all* from school – age settings (notwithstanding the title of the book, which did claim to be “Early Childhood” based).

There is a claim within ECE that we attempt to include the experiences of all children from birth to age eight. This could explain the author’s own understanding, except that it comes from the developmental discourses (Bredekamp, 1996) which are so criticized in their argument. However, the logistics of the educational and training systems typically preclude any substantial crossover of curricula or theory. A supporter might argue that accepting the broader definition of early childhood while rejecting the developmental basis on which it was originally made is acceptable insofar as there is nothing in the new “sociology of childhood” to preclude such a definition (Rhedding-Jones, 2005). I would respond by stating that even a reader who supports the books’ basic position may have problems with some of the prescriptive suggestions in Chapter 7. The idea that teachers might respond to “the need for a [phonics] skill [emerging] from the context of the classroom...” (p. 143) is a misapplication of preschool theory to school-aged formal settings. When applying this to a class of 24 diverse students, the question becomes: *Whose* need for skill drives the curriculum? I argue that no matter which individual child is identified, the effect for most children in the class will be exactly the same as if it *were* the program which drove the curriculum.

The Reggio approach to preschool education has been adapted for school age applications (Wien, 2008). Wien (2008) notes an important distinction between intellectual and academic skills as essential to using Reggio with older children. The most well-known example of an adaptation in Canada is the Bishop Strachan school for girls in Toronto (“Reggio”, 2008). However, Heydon and Iannacci never present the possibility of adapting the curriculum or philosophy of Reggio Emilia for schools. They never mention Bishop Strachan school. Furthermore, there are no references in the bibliography to the usual Reggio curricular

theorists or writers. All the information gleaned seems to have come from two secondary sources, one well-known, one obscure.

The second case they present as an alternative approach to curriculum is Te Whariki. It is also intended for preschool settings (New Zealand, n.d.). The national curriculum in New Zealand (for five year olds and up) contains the typical learning outcomes and a current review of standards, to be implemented beginning in 2011. While the New Zealand school curriculum seems somewhat less prescribed than North American versions, the philosophy outlined in the book is clearly described as it is intended for preschool education in New Zealand.

In connection with this, the authors expound the virtues of the Learning Stories method of assessment developed by Margaret Carr (2001). This is well-deserved praise, as the method is based on an asset-based discourse. However, Heydon and Iannacci seem unaware that Learning Stories have actually been used in order to bridge the gap between the preschool play-based approach and a mandated reporting regime for preschool education following the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability Framework in 2001 (Perry et al., 2007). Once again, there is a dearth of references, as the only mention of Carr in the bibliography comes from two speeches she made in 2003 and 2004.

These facts do not necessarily weaken the argument put forward by Heydon and Innacci, but they will be known by some readers (especially in the international community which the authors seem to be targeting). The omission brings to the forefront the necessity to treat the philosophies of Reggio Emilia and Te Whariki as being adapted when applied to formal school settings, which the authors do not. Without that treatment, the argument becomes confusing.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the difficulties mentioned above, Heydon and Inannacci bring the book to a brilliant finale (in the conclusion to the conclusion. Pp. 172-174). They effectively

tie together the emotions, the children's narratives, their own lived experiences and curriculum theory. Overall, the authors have sensitively presented the perspectives of several stakeholders and have used many real cases to paint a picture for the reader. Because of its thought-provoking nature, this book will be of great interest to both educators and policy makers.

References

- Bredenkamp, S. (1996). Early childhood education. In J. Sikula (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teacher education: A project of the association of teacher educators* (2nd ed.) (pp. 323-347). New York: Macmillan Library Reference USA.
- Carr, M. (2001). *Assessment in early childhood settings: Learning stories*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Erevelles, N. (2005). Understanding curriculum as normalizing text: Disability studies meet curriculum theory. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37(4), 421-439.
- McCutcheon, G. (1986). What in the world is curriculum theory? *Theory into Practice*, 2(1), 18-22.
- MacDonald, M. (2007). Developmental theory and post-modern thinking in early childhood education. *Canadian Children*, 32(2), 7-10.
- New Zealand, (n.d.) The New Zealand curriculum and the standards review – how they fit together. Retrieved December 9, 2009 from <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/Schools/CurriculumAndNCEA/Factsheets.aspx>
- Patton, J.R. (1998). The disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education: Looking behind the curtain for understanding and solutions. *Journal of Special Education*, 32(1), 25-35.
- Perry, B., Dockett, S. & Harley, E. (2007). Learning stories and children's powerful mathematics. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 9(2). Retrieved March 1, 2009 from <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v9n2/perry.html>
- Reggio Emilia approach in schools takes children seriously. (September 11, 2008). *Y File*, Toronto: York University. Retrieved December 8, 2009 from

- <http://www.yorku.ca/yfile/archive/index.asp?Article=1111>
- Rhedding-Jones, J. (2005). Decentering Anglo-American curricular power in early childhood education: Learning, culture and “child development” in higher education coursework. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 21(3), 133-155.
- Schwab, J. (1971). The practical: Arts of eclectic. *School Review*, 79, 493-542
- Wein, C.A. (2008). *Emergent curriculum in the primary classroom: Interpreting the Reggio Emilia approach in schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Wright, H.K. (2000). Nailing jell-o to the wall: Pinpointing aspects of state-of-the-art curriculum theorizing. *Educational Researcher*, 29(5), 4-13.

About the Reviewer

Before beginning her studies in the PhD program at the University of British Columbia, Sylvia McLellan taught for 25 years within the early childhood system. She also taught Early Childhood teachers for ten years and brings this wealth of knowledge and experience to her current studies in Curriculum and Pedagogy. The focus of her research is early numeracy and the role and function of disposition in the development of math competence.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author,
who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.
<http://edrev.asu.edu>

Editors
Gene V Glass
Gustavo Fischman
Melissa Cast-Brede
