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Penn, Helen. (2011) *Quality in Early Childhood Services: An International Perspective*. New York: McGraw Hill.

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Grouping infants together—like bats in a communal nursery—for a certain number of hours every day under the supervision of paid alloparents (substitute parents) who are not kin, but who are expected to act as if they are, is an evolutionary novelty, completely experimental.
(Hrdy, 1999)

Helen Penn's comprehensive and insightful new book, exploring the idea of quality in early childhood settings across the globe, begins with the above quotation by socio-biologist Sarah Hrdy. Following Hrdy's belief that the phenomenon of early childhood care is an unnatural and evolutionarily recent occurrence, Penn, a professor of Early Childhood at the Cass School of Education, University of East London, discusses the historical and socio-political drivers that have informed the upsurge of nursery education in various contexts throughout the

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world, shaped by both the physical and conceptual nature of nursery education in these very different contexts as well as interpreted what quality means and how it should be measured.

Penn contends that among the many reasons why childcare and education services are provided to the youngest members of society, the unadulterated desire to care for and educate young children is most often not at the top of the list. She argues that the existence of early childhood care and education (ECCE) policy and how it is implemented and assessed cannot be divorced from the macro-level historical and political nature of the context. Providing examples of ECCE services in several countries where she has lived and worked, both in the global North and the global South, Penn effectively illustrates that radically different environments lead to radically different rationales for and practices (such as curriculum and training) within ECCE services as well as radically different notions of quality, any standardized assessment of which would inevitably lead to distorted assumptions of impact.

In the first three chapters of the book, after providing a short overview, Penn explores the various rationales for early education interventions postulated by policy makers as well as proponents of early education, the majority of which surround two main ideas: that early education is important in that it allows mothers to participate in the workforce and that early education is beneficial in order to provide a strong base for future schooling of the child. She argues that while most early education policy is in response to present needs, it inadvertently draws on the past, bringing along presumably outdated ideas of quality or what is “best” for children. Citing examples when early education policy was developed rather inadvertently, Penn urges the reader to take a broad view of history, to acknowledge the true historic origin of governmental policy in order to move towards an improvement of practice rather than heading up “blind alleys.” (p. 29)

In the next three chapters, Penn looks at the ways in which quality is defined and systematized in various contexts. Citing indicators of quality developed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), United Nations Children’s Education Fund (Unicef),

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) and the European Union (EU), all of which have taken an international overview of quality in ECCE services, Penn illustrates that while some basic consensus regarding what constitutes high quality services (including governmental responsibility to promote ECCE policy, prioritization of the most vulnerable children at every level, having a view on curriculum and pedagogy, having strong information and data collection systems, having adequate and efficient funding, having and adequately trained and rewarded workforce) does exist, there is organizational variation regarding extensions beyond these basic requirements. She also explores how the rise of private for-profit child care and education services has led to particular problems of quality and in some cases transformed the concept of ECCE into a business, placing accumulation of income over the well-being of the child or her parent. Citing examples from various countries, Penn goes on to discuss wide ranging contextual differences in ECCE curriculum as well as the training of teachers and care takers of the child.

Taking a closer look at practice in ECCE services, Penn devotes the next section of the book to aspects of quality that deal with working space, management and leadership and relationships between practitioners and children. She seems disappointed that very few educational institutions set up space in a manner that is indicative of the value of the physical development of the young child. She cites examples from various contexts as best practice that successfully use space, even very little space, to support and enhance young children's physical development. She provides examples of nurseries in Europe that have successfully utilized "cooperative management" strategies rather than a traditional hierarchical leadership model towards a more positive environment for parents, practitioners and children. She discusses the complex nature of the relationship between a child and her caregiver and the challenges faced by practitioners who attempt to replicate this interaction in the institutional setting of a nursery.

In the final section of the book, Penn shifts the conversation to a discussion of early childcare in poor countries, highlighting both the intense need and immense challenges of the provision of services in such contexts.

While she is cognizant of the limitations to returns on early childcare that are brought on by the inequality and injustice in which young children in poor contexts live, she asserts that such services can serve as a source of social protection for the most vulnerable. She provides examples of Cuba and Mongolia as two countries near the bottom of the United Nations Development Index with literacy rates above 98 percent. In discussing the exporting of quality, she encourages a respect for cultural differences in the definition of childhood and expectations of the child as she cautions against blindly applying models of successful early childhood services in the global North to countries in the global South.

Finally, Penn looks at the means of measuring quality in ECCE services. She briefly describes different instruments used to assess quality in various contexts. While she acknowledges the need for accountability she reminds the reader that “accountability flows from more general questions about rationales and goals” (p. 205) and that while any universal definition of quality is impossible, “doing without a notion of quality is equally problematic” (p. 188).

The book provides a comprehensive account of early childhood services across a variety of contexts. Although admittedly not offering any explanations for what constitutes quality, Penn explores various interpretations of quality in early care and educational services provided the world over. The author leaves the reader with an appreciation for the complex nature of quality as well as the importance of context in determining what quality is with respect to early childhood services and how it should be measured. But perhaps most importantly, Helen Penn challenges the reader to adopt a macro lens: to take a step back and observe the value of early childhood services in his or her own context and question the historical and political motivations behind pervasive definitions of quality within local educational settings. Her own passion regarding the importance of understanding and caring for the youngest members of society is obvious throughout the book. She both implicitly and explicitly urges the reader to “see them for what they are—robust, competent and active people who have a stake in society, just as it has a stake in them” (p. 212)

Reference

Hrdy, S.B. (1999) *Mother Nature: Maternal Instincts and How They Shape the Human Species*. New York: Ballantine.

About the Reviewer

Saima Sohail Malik is a doctoral student in the Developmental and Psychological Sciences program at Stanford University School of Education. She is interested in exploring the design and implementation of education services for young children living in post-crisis contexts throughout the world.

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