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Book Review: The Importance of Being Little: What Young Children Really Need from Grownups

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***The Importance of Being Little: What Young Children Really Need from Grownups*, by Erika Christakis. New York, NY: Penguin, 2016. 376 pp., \$15.59 (hardcover).**

This book by Erika Christakis offers discussions based upon the author's viewpoint and experiences about various issues affecting the education of young children in public, private, home, and natural environment settings. Christakis sifts through myths, facts, conventional wisdom, and research while using her own experiences as a teacher, a mother, and a researcher to bring discussions forward about the pitfalls and successes of early childhood programs and education. While the reader may not agree with some of her conclusions and ideas, the arguments she weighs are at the forefront of current issues facing early childhood education. Throughout the book, Christakis gives multiple examples of debunked myths within the text including: The myth that children are blank slates to whom information must be imparted via direct instruction from the teacher. "...we find a traditionalist mind-set presuming the young child contributes relatively little to her own intellectual development." (8); The myth that children can construct their own knowledge independently without teacher intervention. "...we often find permissive adults harboring naïve ideas about what young children can accomplish on their own, absent careful teacher preparation and guidance." (10); The myth that a child centered curriculum means that children have complete authority and control in the classroom. "A high quality, meaning-based curriculum reflects a well-organized and intentional learning environment; it is nothing close to a free-for-all, and the teacher is squarely in charge..." (74); The myth that more or better materials improve the classroom learning experiences for children. "One of the least attractive aspects of our early learning habitat is a multiplying material culture that treats kids like rapacious consumers..." (171); The myth that children's emotions are frivolous and need to be properly controlled. "We often assume that preschooler's emotions are less powerful or less valid than our own grownup ones." (198); The myth that preschool is always exponentially beneficial to children. The quality of the preschool matters. "...it is taboo to discuss unsettling questions about teachers' competence or the possibility that early education and child care might have been forced into a marriage of convenience." (269-270). While these myths were addressed in the book, Christakis really does not give a clear answer to many of the questions she poses in her discussion, rather she creates somewhat of a dialogue with the reader using research and her own experiences as talking points.

In the first chapter, Christakis lays the foundation for the book by outlining “the preschool paradox, the puzzling misalignment between...children’s inborn ability to learn in virtually any setting and...the inadequate early learning environments and suboptimal learning we so often find.” (6) She describes the idea that many tout the importance of early education and even implement programs supported by well-researched and recognized sources, but the actual experience of the children in those programs does not match the expected outcomes because of multiple intervening factors including inadequate teaching pedagogy, teacher preparation, teacher training, and other environmental factors. She continues in subsequent chapters explaining the issues affecting early childhood education by reviewing and weighing relevant research and then parsing the conflicts and details associated with specific studies. One of the studies mentioned multiple times through the book is the Perry Preschool/High Scope program, which is a landmark, longitudinal study in the field that continues to track the progress of children who received a preschool education in the 1960s. The study showed that those who received the education had many positive outcomes including higher salaries, better employment, and higher education levels achieved. The author points out that the world has changed since the 1960s and children are exposed to far more educational resources than they previously were which has thus lessened the impact of any run of the mill preschool program. The author then rightfully posits that the quality of the preschool program impacts the effectiveness of the schooling the children receive. The author also spends time discussing individual elements of programs that may or may not have an effective impact in the classroom for various reasons. Her stories illustrate teachers’ and programs’ good intentions, but highlights missed opportunities for learning often because of pre-scripted curriculum that separates cognitive or social benchmarks into parts instead of combining ideas in a whole experience. Another recurring theme among the chapters is the need for listening to children, giving children time to play, and giving children the opportunity to be creative. Her focus on children may be described as child-centered; however, the author rightfully rebuffs this singular characterization as it conjures ideas of children running amok without teacher guidance. She shies away from labeling or prescribing her own pedagogical or curricular approach, but she does artfully weave the idea that children are stronger than they are given credit for, more capable than most suspect, and more curious than teachers may allow time for in the classroom.

One of the last chapters is possibly the most poignant in that it discusses the magnitude of the impact of relationships with children on their learning. I really wish the author had begun her book with this idea, as it seems to tie all of the ideas and issues together under one central focus. Christakis writes, “But most parents of preschoolers really aren’t so interested in the newest curriculum model purchased that year; they want a straightforward answer to the fundamental question lurking behind even the most trivial exchanges between these wary allies: *Do you actually like my kid?* (Embedded in that question, of course, are more urgent questions: *Is my child normal? Is my child going to be a success?*)” (261) These excellent questions stab a knife through the very heart of a child’s education. It is my personal belief and experience that parents are the ultimate power holders (whether they realize it or not) in children’s education. The underlying assumption in Christakis’ questions of behalf of parents is that parents place great importance on the relationship between their child and his or her teacher and everything that may flow from that relationship. Parents, in essence, ask questions that directly impact their children, and those questions cannot be measured by conventional or standard testing measures. Parents’ focus on their individual child overlaps squarely with one of the cornerstones of developmentally appropriate practice, the leading guiding principles of best practice in early childhood education, and the idea that a child is a unique person who constructs his or her knowledge based upon his or her personal experiences. Not only do the questions the author posed matter to parents, but those questions are also integrally linked to a child’s education. A teacher who develops a good relationship with a child has a window into what motivates a child’s learning, what motivates her behavior, and what environmental factors may influence those motivations. Alternatively, the lack of a strong relationship, or a negative relationship between teacher and student may also impact the educational experience of a child.

Something that troubled me about this book was the chapter devoted to play. The author does flesh out many points related to play. She laments the compartmentalization of a young child’s education and the lack of emphasis placed on giving children time to play, develop, and grow according to each child’s individual needs. She points to the standards-based curriculum models that government, school districts, and preschools impose on children that often lack the consideration and high regard for natural development and play-based learning that research supports as best practice. She also repeatedly advocates for play: more time for play, more observation during play, and more learning

opportunities that present themselves through and during play; however, the chapter lacked descriptions of basic terms and philosophies related to play, how play is integrated into the curriculum, and most importantly, how integral play is to children's development. Christakis almost seemed to avoid placing too much emphasis on play as it may seem too cliché. The problem is that play IS children's work, and without well-planned play opportunities, no preschool curriculum is complete. There should have been a discussion about the intrinsic motivation that leads to play and the guiding hand that observant teachers may offer to boost the play experience and subsequent learning. Those ideas, however cliché, remain terribly important and central to a child's early education.

I also note the absence of a complete chapter devoted to parents and family and their impact on children's learning. I was surprised that the people who have the most impact on children's early learning were not included except for references in some chapters.

One additional criticism I had of the book is its format. I found it confusing. Though the author attempts to illustrate points and relate to readers with personal anecdotes, her attempts sometimes muddled her message. As she weighed competing views and ideas, she meandered through the chapters, and I, as the reader, was unsure of what her objective was within many of the chapters.

Even with the confusing format and the absence of some important ideas and topics, the author does use an impressive array of well-known and well-regarded research as her basis for many important discussions. She also uses her own experiences as a mother and a teacher to illustrate some of the successes and failures of pedagogy, curriculum, and environmental factors that contribute to children's learning. Some of the central themes stretch beyond the initial simple myth busting and really present the reader with critical problems facing the early childhood classroom including: "the preschool paradox, the puzzling misalignment between...children's inborn ability to learn in virtually any setting and...the inadequate early learning environments and suboptimal learning we so often find." (6); the importance of a rich curriculum and a teacher who takes the time to observe children, who allows children time to have experiences, and who guides children with probing questions contributes to a better educational experience; the idea that children are capable of metacognition and the process of creating art encourages metacognition and can enhance a child's learning experience; a discussion of the importance of standards and objectives with the recognition that many of the standards-based preschools may not support what those who write the standards purport and may not encourage good pedagogy and effective

learning; the idea that children are stronger than we give them credit for nowadays (especially with focus on fragments of a child's behavior and learning capabilities), and that we need to remember to balance the small parts and whole parts of a child and her experiences; the fact that play is an integral part of children's learning, but not enough time is given for natural play; the point that teachers should limit and be discriminate with use of materials and technology; the idea that children's emotional development impacts their learning at all times and cannot be relegated to a separate curriculum; the notion that even with the importance placed on a reading and a print-rich environment, that the environment may still not adequately encompass all the needed attributes of a "language-rich environment". (255); the fact that the relationship between a student and a teacher is integrally related to a child's educational experience. "...where preschoolers are concerned, education and schooling are two different and not necessarily overlapping phenomena." (287).

These diverse, but related themes cover a great deal of ground within the early childhood subject area, and given the breadth and depth of the discussion points mentioned above, the audience Christakis seeks may be a very specific group. It is my impression that the chapters are so dense with information specific to the field of early childhood education and rely so heavily on knowledge related to that field, that the book would be a wonderful addition to a graduate school class that focuses on trends and issues in the early childhood classroom. There are multiple talking points and opportunities for debate and research related to her choice of topics. Her topics are relevant and are worthy of multi-layered analysis and discussions as the pedagogical and curricular aspects of early childhood continue to change with demographic shifts, needs associated with those demographic shifts, and research related to best practice in the field. I would also recommend the book to administrators, policy makers, and leaders in public and private schools as well as daycare centers.

Carolyn Wade