

Book review

Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood

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Helen Penn, *'Be realistic, demand the impossible': A memoir of work in childcare and education*, Routledge: London, 2018; 207 pp.: ISBN 9781138064911, £34.99 (pbk)

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Choosing this arresting slogan from the Paris student movement of 1968 as a book title fits perfectly, both to the author of this work memoir and to the professional-political task at hand. Working in the field of early childhood education and care with a system-changing vision for nearly five decades, during what has been arguably one of the most challenging periods in the history of the sector (not least in the UK), demands a determined, engaged and combative approach – one full of hope.

These combined attributes are ever present in this fascinating account by Helen Penn of her working life, not only across time and in different geopolitical milieus, but also in a remarkably diverse range of professional roles. She describes in sharp-eyed detail, and often in a superbly witty and tongue-in-cheek way, life as a young teacher, as a campaigner for nursery education, as head of a male-dominated policy administration department, as a latecomer academic and cross-national policy researcher, and as a reflective writer.

Few of us can look back on such a rich personal-professional history in the field. Always committed to a socially contextualised view of early childhood education and care at the interface of theory, policy and provision, Helen Penn now provides us with a historically contextualised long view, a comprehensive narrative of one committed and energetic woman's engagement with the field – nationally in the UK and internationally – since the late 1960s.

The 11 chapters are in the main structured chronologically and relate to various working posts, activities and assignments: teaching in a newly established London comprehensive school; joining an under-fives team in a 'Red Republic' London social services department; setting up a national childcare campaign in the context of feminist activism and next to no publicly funded early childhood education and care services; being appointed as a senior policy adviser, manager and decision-maker in a Scottish local authority; and becoming a researcher and subsequently a professor at a London university. These distinctive steps in Helen's professional biography, although not specifically planned as such (she sees her career trajectory more as 'a tripping over of a series of potholes' (192)), are interspersed with a chapter (6) describing her first-time visit to Africa, to Tanzania. This experience proved to be a transformative benchmark: 'My experiences of deep inequality were kick-started in Tanzania, and they have been a mirror for me ever since' (104).

Subsequent work assignments in southern African countries (South Africa, Namibia, Tanzania, Swaziland and Zimbabwe) and Central Asia (China, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) follow. These projects in mostly low-income countries were conducted on behalf of various international non-governmental organisations. Seeing how these organisations sometimes worked at the local community level led to a critical appraisal of their strategies, wondering, for example, whether philanthropic capital may compromise their independence, leading them 'to

advocate “technocratic” solutions, which emphasize their international expertise, but also at the cost of local responses and innovation’ (151).

Despite the author’s insistence that this is a work memoir, a recollection of a working life, readers will find many glimpses of the writer as a person, of likes and dislikes, of pleasure-giving activities beyond reading and writing, such as gardening, watching and listening to birds, and playing in a recorder consort with other amateur musicians – but also of moments of despair and feelings of retreat instead of progression. The first chapter is unreservedly frank about the possible pitfalls of ‘memoir as method’, of the challenge to maintain a balance between the personal act of writing, of consciously selecting what is portrayed and narrated, and the need ‘to minimize the indulgences’ (4) in terms of self-revelation, to avoid dwelling on emotions or intimate disclosures.

The final chapter, ‘The noise of time’, is reflective. It returns to the dilemmas of writing a memoir; it rails against the injustices experienced by 365 million children across the world living in dire poverty; it identifies the growth of inequality, both within and across countries, and the destruction of the natural environment as the two most dramatic and threatening changes to have taken place during the author’s lifetime. On another level, it reflects on shifts that have taken place in the system of early childhood education and care in the UK, the most worrying being the move to a marketised system of early childhood education and care. Confronted with rising demands for provision, it is not the traditional nursery schools, built to high specifications, state-funded, staffed by highly qualified teachers and offering stimulating learning environments, that have been expanded; instead, there has been a surge in privatised provision and a concomitant drop in standards. ‘Nowadays a third of private nurseries in London have no outside space at all. Over 1,000 private nurseries front onto main roads where pollution levels are unacceptable’ (197). It is difficult to ignore a niggling loss of hope in the face of such uncaring market- and profit-dominated forces.

This book is a treasure for all those interested in tracing historical, sociopolitical and international strands of early childhood education and care as a multifaceted work context through the personal lens of a committed and engaged voice in policy discourses over time.

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