

BOOK REVIEW:

Local literacies in early childhood: Inequalities in place, policy and pedagogy

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BOOK REVIEW: Smith, Helen Victoria. (2021). *Local Literacies in Early Childhood: Inequalities in place, policy, and pedagogy*. Taylor and Francis Group. ISBN 1-00-303205-2. 174 pages

Have you heard of the ancient Chinese story of Mencius¹' mother moving three times to show the importance of the right environment for a child's upbringing? When he was three, his father died. His mother raised him. Mencius was smart and good at imitation when he was a child. *Biographies of Exemplary Women*² recorded that Mencius' childhood home was near a cemetery, where he found delight in mimicking the gravediggers at play, leaping and frolicking amidst tombstones. Mencius' wise mother considered it harmful to her son, so she decided to relocate their home to another place near a crowded marketplace. But another thing happened. Mencius enthusiastically behaved as a salesman to sell items. Then Mencius' mother saw that it wasn't a good way for his son's growth. Finally, they moved their house beside the school, where Mencius used his imagination to play out the rituals and etiquette of the academic world. His mother gushed, 'This is where my son should live'. From then on, they lived there. Mencius' abilities blossomed in this supportive setting. He became a renowned Confucian scholar and a shining example of discipline as he matured, mastering the six classical arts: rites, music, archery, riding, writing and arithmetic.

This is a widely known story in East Asia. Moving forward, it symbolised the profound influence of the environment and maternal guidance, a tribute to the power of a mother's nurturing hand in shaping a remarkable destiny. Parental beliefs have a significant impact on the development of children's literacy abilities; hence, shaping the extent of parental engagement in fostering their children's literacy development is important (Minna et al., 2022).

Local literacies in early childhood: Inequalities in place, policy, and pedagogy highlight the importance of empowering parents, particularly mothers and local resources, to assist parents in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings for the literacy development of children. The book comprises nine chapters. The introductory chapter

¹ He was a Chinese Confucian philosopher belonging to the fourth generation of scholars of Confucius. During the Warring States period, he was a great thinker and educator in history.

² It is a literary work meticulously assembled by the renowned Han dynasty scholar Liu Xiang around the year 18 BCE. This compendium comprises a total of 125 biographical narratives, showcasing exceptional women from ancient China.

provides contextual background to the research discussed in the book. The next two chapters analyse British ECEC policies. The following four empirical chapters examine four community resources to encourage literacy among children in Britain using findings from the authors' research: (1) a town library (Chapter 4), (2) privately run parent and child early education classes (Chapter 5), (3) Sure Start children's centres (Chapter 6), (4) independently run community preschools (Chapter 7). Finally, Chapter 8 synthesises the findings from the case studies and Chapter 9 draws conclusions.

The purpose of the book is to examine how literacy was introduced to young children and their parents through a particular educational resource. Having interviewed 13 mothers and 9 preschool teachers, taken photographs, made field notes and collected relevant documents, the author conducted an ethnographic study to examine each of the literacy resources she discusses in Chapters 3 to 6. The study took place in Embervale, a small town in the East Midlands, UK. Her research questions were: How was a potent combination of pedagogy and location utilised to implement local policy? How did the preschool professionals' implementation of government policy result in inequality? How can resources, parents and professionals be repositioned?

The author writes, 'Place shapes, and is shaped by, inequalities' (p. 142). She notes that the socioeconomic status of households serves as a fundamental catalyst for discrepancies in access to resources and opportunities, thereby perpetuating inequities. The author found, as also highlighted by Christensen et al. (2014) that the early development of children is significantly influenced by the socioeconomic status of their families, which is intimately tied to the broader social and economic inequalities that shape the regions in which they live. In general, children hailing from socioeconomically disadvantaged households received fewer resources in comparison with their counterparts from more privileged family and community settings. Smith found that literacy resources were distributed unequally in Emvervale. By utilising the social space framework, this book delivers an in-depth investigation and assessment of the individuals and locations associated with the provision of four community resources: (1) Sure Start children's centres, (2) preschools, (3) a public library, and (4) privately operated parent and child early education classes. The book presents a comprehensive narrative and analysis of these entities.

Unexpectedly, by examining the trajectory of UK government policy from 1997 to the present, the author revealed that the government's strategy and policy restricted children's literacy learning and hindered their literacy practices at home and in school, especially for those from working-class families. As a result, an academic disparity emerged between children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those who are more affluent. The author notes that the accessibility of literacy resources is crucial, as parents with lower socioeconomic status may be unable to procure such materials due to financial constraints. Therefore, it is essential to consider the diverse literacy learning practices and experiences that are available within ECEC settings.

The book also describes how parents, especially mothers, from low-income backgrounds are frequently portrayed as inferior to policymakers and professionals. Professionals exert disempowering influence over mothers by assuming their lack of knowledge through the dissemination of standardised programs and underestimating their learning capacity. Mothers are encouraged to foster their children's development better by enrolling them in preschool. However, such a separation from their children renders them devoid of the agency to assertively request the required support they need. The status disparity between

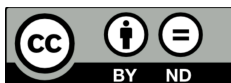
parents and professionals challenges the establishment of collaborative relationships that would facilitate the educational progress and literacy growth of children, exacerbating the lack of empowerment of mothers.

The book explores the process of repositioning parents, professionals and resources by acknowledging the significant role of parental empowerment. The author notes that to facilitate the successful promotion of literacy among parents and children, it is necessary for professionals to actively engage in partnerships with parents. This partnership should involve providing materials tailored to meet the specific needs and preferences of parents and offering inclusive resources that facilitate the joint engagement of parents and children in literacy activities. This approach acknowledges and values the knowledge, skills and literacy practices of parents and children, which can reduce educational disparities and ensure all children have a positive start to schooling.

The book successfully explores how local resources play a pivotal role in assisting parents, especially mothers, in children's literacy development in ECEC settings. Literacy development is a fundamental component of government policy aimed at ensuring children's readiness for school and future accomplishments. The book makes a valuable contribution by shedding light on critical areas, such as early intervention, parental engagement, early childhood development and school readiness. It further presents fresh and insightful case studies that delve into family and community literacies. One of the book's primary objectives is to guide policymakers and early childhood professionals on how to tackle educational disparities head-on. By leveraging the insights and strategies outlined in this book, these stakeholders can maximise learning opportunities for children and their parents. In a world where educational equity is paramount, this book serves as an invaluable resource for driving positive change and fostering a brighter future for all.

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