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Children's Interests, Inquiries and Identities: Curriculum, Pedagogy, Learning and Outcomes in the Early Years

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BOOK REVIEW

Children's Interests, Inquiries and Identities: Curriculum, Pedagogy, Learning and Outcomes in the Early Years, by Helen Hedges, London, Routledge, 2022, 206 pp., £32.39 (Ebook), ISBN: 9781003139881

The inquisitiveness of children about their life and the world serves as a powerful motivation to cultivate their interests. Regrettably, adults often maintain fixed perspectives on what children's interests should be, which has been criticised for underestimating the potential of children's interests. This book presents a critically and comprehensively oriented approach to research on children's interests, urging us to transcend shallow understandings.

The book 'Children's Interests, Inquiries and Identities: Curriculum, Pedagogy, Learning and Outcomes in the Early Years' challenges the prevailing notion that the connection between children's interests and informal learning is often disregarded and underestimated. It presents a fresh perspective on comprehending children's learning by emphasising the need to go beyond superficially examining the activities or topics chosen by children. The book puts forward novel principles to better understand children's learning and offers compelling evidence that delving deeper into their interests is essential to comprehend their true selves and what motivates them. Additionally, it explores ways to analyse and interpret children's interests in a more profound and analytical manner, as well as how to genuinely engage with and respond to their interests. Helen Hedges utilises game-based activities as a starting point to explain and illustrate various approaches to interpreting and understanding children's interests. The book explores the core of what is truly important to children. The examples in this book are based on research conducted with children under the age of 5, as well as young adults aged 18–25.

Chapter 1 begins with a project involving children's interests, in which Jack, along with his teachers Theresia and Rachael, experiences a significant moment in their preschool class when they discover Jack's interest in boats. This serves as the starting point for Jack's journey in developing his interest. The chapter also delves into the importance of interests and understanding children's interests, and how they are connected to children's education. Additionally, an overview of the overall content of the book is provided in this chapter. Chapter 2 discusses and summarises the influence of developmental psychology and education on understanding children's interests, as well as the traditional methods employed in early childhood educational environments that are shaped by these theories. While many psychological studies utilise observations of play activities as a means to assess children's interests, at times, these methods tend to be circular and self-serving, merely reinforcing and supporting existing assumptions. This understanding has long been employed and skilfully implemented in early childhood educational practices, namely by providing various types of play activities. This chapter proposes responsive ideas to delve deeper into these concepts, their influences, and the significance of interests in human life.

Chapter 3 explores into the tensions and dilemmas that arise in the policies and practices of early childhood education. This chapter examines the lasting impact of child developmental theories and the usage of binary terms like 'child-centered' and 'teacher-centered.' It also explores the contributions of sociology and childhood studies in offering deeper understandings of children's abilities and influencing modern depictions of children, as evident in curriculum documents such as Te Whāriki. This highlights the significant investment in early childhood education and the creation of curriculum documents. In Chapter 4, a comprehensive examination is conducted on qualitative methodology and its various techniques utilised in researching children, with the objective of

delving into their lives, experiences, and interests. This methodology encompasses the underlying beliefs, assumptions, concepts, and theories that guide the design of the research and must align with the underlying theories that inform the overall study, emphasising the importance of a socio-cultural approach that highlights participation and engagement with children as the focal point of the adopted approach.

Chapter 5 provides an in-depth exploration of children's interests, focusing on developing a comprehensive understanding. The chapter investigates the concept of 'funds of knowledge' as a theoretical framework for interpreting and engaging with children's interests. 'Funds of knowledge' refers to a metaphorical perspective that acknowledges the inherent strengths and valuable knowledge embedded in the daily lives, families, and cultures of individuals. This framework recognises that learning is intricately intertwined with these contexts (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005). However, while funds of knowledge can serve as a foundation for a deeper understanding of children's interests, its implementation in curriculum and pedagogy also requires critical reflection. Chapter 6 focuses on research aimed at gaining a deeper and more sustained understanding of children's interests. In this chapter, the focus is on exploring the possibilities presented by children's 'authentic questions' (Wells 1999) as a foundation for interpretation. The chapter delves into the potential and significance of these genuine inquiries raised by children, highlighting the meaningful questions and serious efforts made by children in developing positive identities and making positive contributions to their identities as learners and citizens.

Chapter 7 examines the practical application of theory-of-mind concepts to facilitate comprehensive and dynamic outcomes that are attuned to children's interests and inquiries. The cultivation of learning dispositions such as curiosity, concentration, persistence, contribution, and communication is emphasised as crucial for fostering the development of interests. The chapter outlines successful theoretical outcomes that encompass children's active engagement in participation, learning, critical thinking, and the evolution of more profound and interconnected ideas over time. A specific focus on the theory of work illustrates how children's ideas and understandings evolve in relation to their individual interests and inquiries, which can often follow non-linear pathways and be intertwined with the development of learning dispositions. Chapter 8 elucidates that while children remain the central focus in curriculum planning, teachers can serve as catalysts, inspirers, responders, and connectors of children's interests by utilising their own interests and knowledge. This chapter provides examples of various interests held by teachers and ways to integrate them into curricular experiences. This enhances the depth, richness, and conceptual understanding within pedagogical interactions.

Chapter 9 discusses the challenges of examining whether a focus on interests remains relevant, valuable, and significant into adulthood. This chapter expounds on the inseparable relationship between intelligence and influence, as posited by Vygotsky, as part of the 'fullness of life.' It paves the way for new approaches in studying human experiences, thoughts, and activities, which are illustrated through studies utilising narrative methodologies. This chapter also reveals how childhood interests ultimately shape higher education and career decisions in early adulthood.

Chapter 10 summarises the main arguments and related evidence presented in this book. The importance of children's interests in their lives as a source of inspiration and motivation for participation, learning, and contributions within family, community, and culture is emphasised. This section reviews the challenging components Bereiter posits for adults to appreciate and not underestimate children's interests, as outlined since the early chapters. Additionally, this chapter offers responses based on the evidence presented throughout the book. The book emphasises the importance of adults treating children's interests with genuine attention and carefully analysing them to fully harness their potential in human life and the process of learning.

This book introduces innovative and unique models for curriculum, pedagogy, and sociocultural approaches that are centred around interests. These models offer promising avenues for future exploration in both research and practical application. By departing from old practices that influence our understanding of curriculum, pedagogy, learning, and outcomes, the book opens


up possibilities for gaining new perspectives on children's interests. This book holds significant value for researchers, graduate students, practitioners involved in early childhood education, parents, and professionals engaged in working with children.

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