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Book Review: On Being Child Centered

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Book Review

Murphy, L. (2020). *On Being Child Centered*. Redleaf Press.

Reviewer

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While Murphy describes this book as a “two-hundred-page (give or take) conversation” (p. 2), I would describe this book as a ‘two-hundred-page rallying cry’. A rallying cry that encourages early education practitioners to develop and implement a child centered pedagogy that best suits their setting. Murphy’s passion for work with young children and her years of experience in the field is the overarching theme that runs through the entirety of this book. Against the backdrop of this, Murphy walks the reader through her “nine attributes of a child-centered environment” (p. 23) and “the Seven Things” (p. 151), explains what these would look like in reality, and encourages practitioners to reflect on their own practice.

In Part 1, Murphy introduces herself and her style of writing; a style that could be considered a world away from the established conventions of educational writing. This does not compromise the value of her writing, but instead, makes it refreshing. She clearly relays the realities of working with young children in a relatable, approachable and non-threatening manner. One comment in particular stands out in this book’s opening section; that many early education practitioners find themselves “feeling pressure (whether actual or perceived) to begin building the house before the foundation” (p. 2). In this statement, Murphy astutely summaries a preoccupation that myself and my colleagues have been discussing for over a decade. Rushing children through their early education and not affording an appropriate amount of value to this time in their lives risks doing young children a disservice, not just in the USA (from where Murphy writes), but internationally. This quote underpins this book, and the remainder of Murphy’s writing acts as a justification to ensure that such foundations (read; early social and educational experiences) are afforded the time, space and thoughtful consideration to enable the subsequent houses (read; children who are ready to learn, are emotionally adept, and are conscious citizens) to be built. Murphy concludes this chapter by discussing Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and Gray’s Five Characteristics of Play and explains how these have contributed to the current discourses associated with early education.

Parts 2 and 3 are introductions to Murphy’s “Nine Philosophical Attributes (p. 11) and what it means to be “child centered” (p. 15) respectively. In these chapters, Murphy explains how her years of working with young children, and then running workshops, has led her to writing this book. She also introduces the idea of “taking ten days to intentionally reflect” (p. 20) on what you read. This theme of ensuring that you take from this book only what is relevant, doable and appropriate to your practice and context is consistent throughout. Part 3 is concluded and the main body of the book (Part 4) introduced with Murphy stating that she “might not have all the

answers, [but that she does] have a plan. A nine-point philosophical plan that will guide us as we frame the foundation that supports the house of higher learning” (p. 21). Part 4 of this book opens with a list of Murphy’s “Nine Attributes” (p. 23) which are then each explored in a standalone chapter.

When discussing attribute #1, Murphy outlines the importance of children having enough time to go through cognitive processes that are related to their play and activity choices and how this relates to their mastering of “executive function (EF) skills and self-regulation skills” (p. 25-6). Murphy explains that time is often considered an anathema in early education settings. She offers an example of a daily timetable that would enable practitioners to ‘tick the necessary boxes’, but also remove the need to organise the day into time chunks that limit children’s autonomy. She goes on to explain that most practitioners do not timetable their days with the intention of depriving children of time, but rather, do it to appease decision-makers. In her cheerleader-esque style, Murphy offers a justification of a more open timetable and offers support and advice to practitioners on how to implement and legitimise this. Reading this chapter in early 2023 makes this work all the more relevant in the context of the recently published Clark (2022) ‘Slow knowledge and the unhurried child: time for slow pedagogies in early childhood education’, which further explores the importance of time, and its appropriate use, within early education settings.

Attribute #2 focuses on the outdoor environment and time spent there. Murphy opens this chapter by illustrating the divisive nature that the outdoors can have among practitioners and providers, with some visualising it as the archetypical context for childhood and others lamenting the risks, limitations, and paraphernalia that goes hand-in-hand with outdoor play. The noteworthy quote in this chapter; “Children are washable, and so are their clothes” (p. 59), acts as a reality-check, of sorts, that encourages practitioners to embrace the outdoors, rather than to shy away from it. Murphy further writes about the importance of outdoor play in terms of children’s cognitive development, the link between outdoor play and physical development, and how being outdoors can often afford practitioners the space and time to observe the children, learn more about them, and know what role the children need the adults to play.

Attribute #3 could arguably be the most challenging of chapters to read, especially for established practitioners. Reading this chapter asks you to ‘take a look in a mirror’ and ask yourself probing, and perhaps uncomfortable, questions. Despite this, the reader will feel that Murphy is going through this process with them as she reassures us that self-reflection is important and enjoyable. Practitioners are mainly encouraged to re-evaluate their rules and ask why they are there in the first place. This leads into the next chapter and Attribute #4 of “controlling the environment instead of the children” (p. 87). This comment stood out and is a comment that I consider to have the potential to widely impact early education. Murphy explains that the key to this is to manage your setting with “organisation and consistency” (p. 95) so that the rest can take care of itself. Murphy offers practical examples of how to achieve this and also how to “reframe and redirect” (p. 93) any so-called ‘inappropriate’ behaviour without relying on outdated disciplinary practices. These examples continue into the following chapter, in which Attribute #5, the idea of the adult being a “facilitator” (p. 106), is examined. Murphy defines a “facilitator” (p. 106) as someone who is “ready and willing to assist when called upon” (p. 106).

The suggestions for adults working with young children continue in to Chapters 6 and 7, with a discussion of the importance of knowing, and being able to convey, a rationale behind your decision making (Attribute #6) and being familiar with the work of influential early childhood theorists (Attribute #7) respectively. Chapter 8, which explores Attribute #8, continues the adult-focus and calls upon practitioners to make considered choices when making themed, pedagogical and planning-based choices. Murphy implores practitioners to make choices that are relevant to their children and their context, and to ensure the availability of real, first-hand experiences. This is particularly relevant to England's early education practice (from where I write) as this is referenced in the associated guidance (Development Matters (DfE, 2021) / Birth to Five Matters (2021)). In the final chapter of the Attributes, Attribute #9 is discussed. In this chapter Murphy outlines her "seven things" (p. 151), which all have their roots in play, gives practical examples of how to implement these, invites us to test our knowledge and encourages us to take a deeper look at play by exploring Bob Hughes' (2002) Play Types.

In the conclusion, Murphy tells us that her;

"intention this time around was to identify nine philosophical attributes of being child centered and to reinforce that this philosophical orientation must also be grounded in developmentally appropriate practice, strong relationships, and an understanding of the role of play-ful learning" (p. 187)

Without a doubt, this intention has been realised. Murphy is the cheerleader that many early education practitioners will have always wanted; the mentor that we wished we had had early on in our careers, and the voice that tells us that it is never too late to learn and improve. In this book, Murphy is speaking to you; you the playwork practitioner, you the childminder, you the early education teacher, in an understanding and supportive tone. It is evident that Murphy understands and believes that in order to provide best-practice for young children, it is essential to support, encourage, and motivate adults to provide it; a task that she achieves with great success. While there is a wide range of available literature calling for the implementation of a child centered pedagogy, few can claim to be as forthcoming with practical applications as Murphy. This charmingly honest, compassionate and playfully written book is an absolute must for beginners and experienced practitioners alike.

References

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