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Author

Laberge, Yves

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**Review: Thinking Critically About Environments for Young Children:
Bridging Theory and Practice**
Edited by Lisa P. Kuh

Reviewed by Yves Laberge
Quebec, Canada

Kuh, Lisa P. (Ed.) *Thinking Critically About Environments for Young Children: Bridging Theory and Practice*. New York City: Teachers College Press, 2014, vi+207 pp. ISBN: 0807755451, paperback. US\$ 49.95. (Early Childhood Education Series)

Centred on the classroom and clearly rooted into Environmental Education in a broad sense, these nine essays by noted scholars and practitioners are based on a simple principle “that children will learn from the spaces in which they spend time (for better or for worse)” (p. 2). Its critical approach is really what makes this book unique and important because very few books “ask educators to respond critically to the messages sent to children as a result of the choices adults make in establishing learning environments” (Kuh, p. 2). This is not a “How To” book; rather, it is a collection of innovative teaching experiences retold by various researchers, mostly from the United States.

Right from the start, Lisa P. Kuh and Melissa Rivard take from Dewey, Montessori (the “prepared environment”), and Reggio Emilia to introduce salient concepts, dimensions and ideas such as aesthetics and design in the classroom, insisting on the importance of enabling students to “appreciate and produce beauty” (p. 11). This awareness related to beauty can help future adults to appreciate and care for the environment right from their childhood (p. 27). The second chapter proposes an unusual comparison: the same teacher describes her classrooms over four decades: from 1971, 1973, in the mid-1980s, and in 2005. Finally, Patricia Tarr reminds us that children are very sensitive to their immediate environment, i.e., their classroom, and how it is organised, painted, and furnished; she concludes that in some ways, the “environment is the third teacher” (p. 45). In Chapter 3, some international comparisons are made, for example with preschools in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (p. 60). While the first texts concentrated on the indoor, subsequent chapters propose a rethinking of outdoor play in traditional playgrounds but also in new landscaping and even in “healthy risk-taking” situations (p. 83).

In most chapters, the pedagogical dimensions are very strong and always centred on teaching strategies, especially in the sixth chapter, giving much useful advice to teachers who want to maximise the learning experience (for example in the school garden), being aware of obstacles and barriers (“competing demands”; “not having enough time”) (p. 102). Concentrating on the school garden (“Fertile ground for learning”), Chapter 5 begins with an interesting remark: “Going green has become a mainstream term referencing everything

from housing to politics” (Chapter 5, p. 89). In a welcome reflective effort, some thoughts about what pupils think about these activities and more importantly, why students think their teachers bring them to the school garden? (p. 102).

One note should be made about the “critical” dimension appearing in the title: these contributions are in no way equivalent to what some people coin as “radical” or “subversive”; I would rather use the term “analytical” to describe the critical perspective adopted here. For example, in a rich presentation of the possibilities in a museum visit (before/during/after the experience), Angela Eckhoff refers to museum spaces in positive words, as “provocation for learning” (Chapter 8, p. 145). The final chapter offers a basic framework and elements for guidance dedicated to teachers who wish to deal with virtual environments in a world where digital games are everywhere and too often useless. In my view, this ninth chapter could have been much more critical, especially regarding online marketing targeting children and teenagers using virtual worlds, even though the author admits there are numerous possibilities but also “many new risks” related to virtual worlds (Chapter 9, p. 178).

Not easy to find in bookstores outside the U.S., *Thinking Critically About Environments for Young Children: Bridging Theory and Practice* will be of interest for teachers in primary levels interested in research and for scholars in Environmental Education.

Yves Laberge, Ph.D., < ylaberge@uottawa.ca >, Centre de recherche en éducation et formation relatives à l’environnement et à l’écocitoyenneté – Centr’ERE, Québec, Canada

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