



Book Review

Young Children Playing: Relational approaches to emotional learning in early childhood settings by S.J. Alcock

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This is an exceptional book that takes a unique perspective on children's play and connectedness with each other and the early childhood settings in which they are situated. Serving as a context for the study, Alcock explores the emotional interactions that occur during play events for children from infants through to the young child. This is a well-researched book with a detailed explanation of the methodology and a concisely worded theoretical framework, which are employed to study children's emotionally relational ways of playing and communicating in four early childhood centres located in Wellington and Auckland.

There are four sections to the book, the first provides a succinct introduction and then a more detailed section to account for the methodology. The second and third sections look specifically first at young children and infants and toddlers respectively. The book ends with a section that examines implications for teaching practice. Alcock's major findings are written up in the chapters taking on thematic headings such as 'the intersubjective in-between-ness in young children's playfulness', 'imagining while playing', and 'words connecting children playfully together'. Within these chapters, individual play episodes are recounted and analysed with reference to the theoretical framework. This provides the book with a clear and discernible structure, and allows the reader to follow the writer's progression from observation, analysis, claim and relevant literature – an excellent model for a novice researcher.

This book makes a number of contributions to the early childhood education sector, particularly the theoretical framework which provides a reconceptualised understanding of the significance of children's emotions and connectedness to the play arena. Informed by a mixture of activity theory, relational psychology and play theories, Alcock examines the children's use of mediating artefacts in their play events. These artefacts are considered in terms of primary, secondary, and tertiary use, with the tertiary usage indicative of the children's creative imagination through the integration of resources completely in to their play experiences.

This area of children's play is complex, and the way in which Alcock shows how they imaginatively transform their reality into a playful imagined world captures that sense of spontaneity and joy promoting emotions of belonging and togetherness. One such example is given in the opening chapter which describes a group of children playing with a blue tarpaulin used for covering an outdoors climbing frame on a wet, windy, Wellington day. As the children play with the tarpaulin, it is sent flying into the air by the gusts of wind. In response the children redirect their play, so that the blue tarpaulin becomes transformed into a blue slide, and then as it changes shape again, one child determines the blue tarpaulin is now a 'dry water spout'. Through the contagion of emotion and language, this



same theme is then taken up by another child and controlling this 'dry water spout' becomes, for the moment, the object of the activity.

In Alcock's recount of the 'activity', focus is on the children's emotions, thoughts and feelings and how these are affected by the material activities in which they are engaged. Through the lens of activity theory, we understand that the objective of the group is the exploration of the tarpaulin and rainwater, and through the lens of relational psychology we understand the children as being connected to what is going on around them and with others, and how this affects their thoughts about themselves. One of the professed aims of the book is to heighten the reader's awareness of the children's intra-inter-connectedness, and through the use of the conceptual framework, the often traditional dichotomy of what is internal and external to the child collapses.

The sector is well over-due for a book of this type. The focus of play and children's subjectivity and inter-subjectivity is a complex area that is open to a diverse range of interpretations. However, the description of the play events throughout the book, captures not just the kind of emotional abandon and absolute joy seen in children's spontaneous play, but also presents an alluring account of how emotionally the children connect to one another. Moreover, the section on the implications for teachers and teaching practices, make this book a very welcome addition to ongoing discussions about the current direction of early childhood education.

Reference

Alcock, S. J. (2016). *Young Children Playing: Relational approaches to emotional learning in early childhood settings* (Vol. 12). New York, NY: Springer.