

Book review

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Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, Sylvia Kind and Laurie L.M. Kocher, *Encounters with Materials in Early Childhood Education*, New York: Routledge, 2017; 92 pp. ISBN 9781138821460

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Materials are often valued for what can be done with/to them. In early childhood classrooms, educators and children are accustomed to working with materials in ways that foreclose experimentation; what a material can do and what can be done with it are already presumed beforehand. Paper is drawn or painted on. Blocks are used for building and so on. In their book *Encounters with Materials in Early Childhood Education* (2017), Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, Sylvia Kind and Laurie L.M. Kocher work against such static conceptualizations of materials. As they write in the opening pages of their book, they treat materials ‘as active and participatory’ (p. 2), and in turn, they are interested in exploring the encounters that certain materials make possible in the context of an early childhood daycare centre. Informed by the pedagogical thinking of Reggio Emilia, artists and scholars such as Lenz Taguchi (2010) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987), this book asks what thinking *with* materials might produce (p. 5). In this way, their book resists interpretive logic and instead, moves towards *experimentation*. As they write, experimentation ‘reveals what human and nonhuman bodies can do and produce when they encounter each other’ (p. 5). Their focus on creative experimentation is a refreshing and much needed move away from the current neoliberal model of education wherein the standardization of curriculum and pedagogy dictate classroom practices.

The book is organized into six main chapters: the introductory chapter that contextualizes the study and five chapters that each focuses on a particular material. These include paper, charcoal, paint, clay and blocks. Each material is explored in relation to several concepts which emerged out of the children’s and educators’ encounters with them. Paper, for example, is thought about in relation to *movement*, charcoal – *encounter*, paint – *assemblage*, clay – *ecologies* and blocks in relation to *time*. Their discussion of blocks was especially intriguing because it posed to be the most challenging material to experiment with. As the authors explain, this is because ‘blocks have always been heavy with expectation’ (p. 71), and this limited the ways in which children and the educators were able to encounter them. Their deliberate (and experimental) approaches to subvert the historically prescribed way of encountering blocks reveals the deeply embedded practices in relation to certain materials and how these can stifle creativity in the early childhood education context. Their difficulty with blocks was an important reminder that experimentation with materials takes effort and a strong desire to explore uncharted territories. Moreover, their approaches signal an ethical orientation to materials, one in which materials are taken seriously, rather than as simply ‘things’ that are used by humans.

The book does not privilege children’s encounters with materials over the educators’. In fact, it is often difficult to distinguish how the children encountered the materials differently from the educators. While the authors position the educators as ‘experience producers’ (p. 32), it becomes

quite evident from the short vignettes in the book that the children, the materials and the educators were all active participants in curating particular experiences and encounters. What is significant is that these experiences and encounters were never about coming to 'know' or understand something better. As the authors write,

[m]ost of what we experienced together with the children exceeded our capacity to know, but knowing was never our aim. We were less concerned with understanding what was going on than we were with paying close attention to the fluxes, movements, and rhythms of the materials ... (p. 82)

In this sense, readers seeking lesson plan ideas or solutions to working with materials in the classroom may be disappointed.

The invitation to be open to encounters with materials is no small task however, as *children*, rather than materials, are most often at the centre of pedagogy in both early childhood education and primary school. Educators' own pedagogical goals (their own and those dictated by the curriculum) may also hinder the kind of openness and creative experimentation that is explored in this book. While the authors do bring up some of the challenges they faced in encountering materials (chapter 6), these may appear insignificant in comparison with issues related to resources allocation, funding and location of particular daycare centres. The kinds of encounters with materials that the children and educators were able to have were particular to the unique geographical location of the daycare centre. As the authors detail, many of their encounters took place in forests, near rivers and were also carefully crafted by committed educators in the various spaces of the daycare such as the art studio. A discussion of the unique and (one can assume) privileged location of the daycare was not elucidated in this book, but is one that readers would appreciate.

Encounters with Materials in Early Childhood Education comes with a companion website (encounterswithmaterials.com) which serves as an engaging extension to the book. Of particular interest is the 'exhibit' link, which allows readers to gain a closer look into how this study unfolded over its 3-year duration. Showcasing beautiful photographs of the children encountering materials in various spaces and places, this forum also expands on some of the concepts that were introduced in the book including movement, time and noticing. While written in the context of early childhood education in Canada, primary school educators and artists outside of North America will find that this tiny book has much to offer. While not prescriptive in any way, this book will surely cultivate in the reader an openness to attend to materials differently. As the authors write in the concluding section of their book, 'We are convinced that something is always produced in these acts of attentiveness' (p. 81). As many readers of this book will agree, becoming more attuned to materials' own agency and the various ways in which children and materials respond to one another highlight that materials often have their own way of responding to human intention, and that taking time to be with and observe materials is an ethical, and potentially, radical act.

References

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- Lenz Taguchi H (2010) *Going Beyond the Theory/Practice Divide in Early Childhood Education: Introducing an Intra-Active Pedagogy*. London and New York: Routledge.