

***The Early Advantage: Early Childhood Systems That Lead by Example.* By Sharon Lynn Kagan (Ed.). New York: Teacher's College Press, 2018. 252 pp.**

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems throughout the world are unnecessarily complex. Deeply rooted in historical narratives and events, approaches to ECEC implementation are multi-faceted and fragmented. Delivery systems in many nations have arisen from reactionary policies that follow a “circuitous, unintentional path, implementing one solution after another to problems caused by previous solutions to previous problems” (Stevens, 2015, p. 1). The current volume posits that existing ECEC historical and ideological narratives are outdated and must be reexamined. This is no easy undertaking, as ECEC is challenging on many levels: ideologically, structurally, fiscally, and temporally. Likewise, there is no single solution to implementing high quality ECEC because each approach must be tailored to the context in which it is to be delivered.

The Early Advantage: Early Childhood Systems That Lead by Example, by Sharon Lynn Kagan (Ed.), is a detailed account of the results of a comparative international research project, commissioned by the National Center on Education and the Economy, designed to analyze successful early childhood systems. With the goal of learning from them, a cross-section of regions with varied infrastructures, ideological underpinnings, and fiscal approaches were strategically chosen for examination. Two parameters guided selection of participating countries: (a) performance rankings in mathematics via Performance for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012); and (b) performance rankings for ECEC system quality (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012). Countries were divided into nine cells, based on high, medium, or low performance in each of the two parameters. Five jurisdictions that were “high-performing, either on the PISA or the Economist ECEC rankings, but not necessarily both, were selected: The Republic of Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Finland, and the U.K.” (p. 12). A sixth country, Australia, was chosen because it demonstrated unparalleled quality work while its differentiated approaches and market conditions closely resembled those of the United States.

As a leading scholar in the ECEC field worldwide, Kagan was invited by the National Center on Education and the Economy to assemble a global team of professional scholars to complete this study. Scholars from each of the six selected countries drew on substantial experience to compile and interpret the data from their region. One chapter is devoted to each region and includes a rich description of that jurisdiction's ECEC-related history and values, range of services, and systemic and structural components. Each chapter concludes with an analysis of challenges and successes, and implications for moving forward. The text is dense and packed with statistics. Reading it takes time and concentration, and it is worth the effort. The reader comes away with an in-depth understanding of each system and the lessons it has to offer leaders who are involved in ECEC restructuring efforts across the globe.

As a scholar practitioner, and a speech-language pathologist who has spent many years in inclusive early childhood classrooms in the United States, the specific examples of successful policies and contextual adaptations in each region helped me to place the broader theories and statistical analyses in the context of everyday practice. For example, I was enchanted by Hong Kong's response to improving services to young children through parent training. Given that

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many young children in Chinese society are cared for by grandparents in the home, Hong Kong created a two-year pilot program to deliver child-care courses to grandparents. The Grandparent Scheme creatively addressed the need for high-quality, cost-effective childcare while honoring the cultural importance of family.

Likewise, I was encouraged by Finland's societal commitment to the development and well-being of *all* children, and the professionalism of its ECEC workforce. Its policies reflect extraordinary dedication to investing in human capital through heavily funded public programs to promote health, welfare, and education, including early childhood education. High quality services are promoted and maintained with a national play-based, child-centered curriculum that allows programs the latitude to implement context-specific adaptations. However, the growing global climate of standardization and accountability are in direct contradiction to Finland's ECEC ideals and the tension between the two ideologies may test their system going forward.

England is another country that faces challenges in the future. Since the 1990s, English ECEC policy has demonstrated a strong commitment to providing an equitable chance for all children through the integration of education and care services. In 2017, increasing economic uncertainty prompted the government to shift its primary ECEC policy goal away from child development and toward the provision of affordable childcare – an example of the global tension between *education* and *care* that is ubiquitous in ECEC. The policy shift may be an effort to ensure availability of employees to fill open positions left by exiting Europeans following the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union. Finland and England are just two examples of the significant challenges faced by national ECEC systems as they grapple with the juxtaposition of increasing globalization and worldwide far-right political trends (Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017).

Following the chapters devoted to individual regions, Kagan ties it all together by revealing three emerging narratives for ECEC. She identifies new understandings and actions that might emerge from the roles of (a) contexts, (b) infrastructures, and (c) desired outputs. Historically, the impact of context has been so central to the implementation of ECEC that services have been provided episodically, thus failing to create sustainable policies and foundational infrastructures. The new narrative recognizes that successful delivery systems must be tailored to the context of the country or region in which it is to be implemented. Indeed, three successful operational contexts emerged from the research: (a) Nordic Contexts; (b) Asian Contexts; and (c) Anglo Contexts.

Nordic contexts, represented by Finland in this volume, are characterized by substantial public funding for ECEC services, undergirded by robust social contracts focused on citizen well-being. Pedagogy, while guided by national frameworks, allows educators significant freedom in implementation decisions. Contrary to the other two contexts, there is very little attention paid to program monitoring in Nordic countries. Child agency is paramount, regardless of age. Trust is a guiding principle in this context – of programs, of educators, and of the children themselves.

Asian contexts, represented by Hong Kong, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore in this volume, rely heavily on market-based strategies (both practically and philosophically). ECEC services are provided in both the public and private sectors, with for-profit and nonprofit programs co-existing in the private sector. Most regions have well-defined national ECEC

frameworks, and moderate levels of program monitoring. Pedagogy tends to be more structured than in Nordic and Anglo contexts.

Anglo contexts, represented by Australia and England in this volume, have more variable sources of public funding, ranging from limited to very heavy. Like the Asian contexts, ECEC service provision in the Anglo contexts are provided in both the public and private sectors. National frameworks guide pedagogy, with both Australia and England having notable success in unifying service efforts in ECEC as they coordinated to create these frameworks. Finally, Anglo contexts put heavy emphasis on program monitoring, such as the mandated assessment and ratings process that is embedded within Australia's National Quality Framework (NQF).

The second new narrative emerging from the study addresses the importance of infrastructure. It recognizes that “in order to be maximally effective, investments in elements of infrastructure that support the programs – finance, pedagogical quality, transitions, workforce development, data use, and engagement and support strategies – are necessary” (p. 188). This narrative espouses a solid commitment to young children as central to ECEC service provision. Rather than allowing ECEC services to be assembled responsively, in reaction to external societal needs, leaders must position commitment to young children at the fulcrum, while considering ECEC through a systems lens to create infrastructures that support this commitment.

The third new narrative is perhaps the most foundational in that it examines the understandings and actions related to the desired outcomes of ECEC systems. Because this narrative addresses the *goals* of the system, it may offer greater leverage for widespread and substantial change (Meadows, 1999). The recent “explosion of research in neurobiological, behavioral, and social sciences has led to major advances in understanding the conditions that influence whether children get off to a promising or worrisome start in life” (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000, p. 1). Kagan posits that this new research, in concert with globalization, has led to a new view of ECEC as playing an essential role in social and economic advancement. As such, it recognizes that child outcomes are dependent on four related systemic goals: quality, equity and equality, efficiency, and sustainability. Each of the six regions addressed these goals within the context of its ECEC delivery system.

The Early Advantage: Early Childhood Systems That Lead by Example is a thorough and well-written resource for early childhood education leaders, researchers, and practitioners who wish to obtain in-depth knowledge of the challenges and strategies necessary for delivering high-quality ECEC services in a variety of contexts. It provides detailed information about ECEC systems in six countries, with handy fact sheets provided for quick reference. Besides learning about differences between region-specific systems, readers will appreciate the underlying historical narratives that shaped these systems. Furthermore, readers will arrive at an understanding of new narratives that are being formed, and the potential for those narratives to mold the ECEC systems of the future.

In the final chapter, Kagan highlights the role of exemplary leaders in emerging ECEC narratives. She points out that the leaders of these systems dared to contemplate new and innovative solutions, and then act on them. What's more, each did so by connecting infrastructure to context. While no two are the same, each of the six systems makes great strides

toward creating more cohesive and equitable ECEC systems. The new narratives represented by their actions are ushering in a new era in ECEC. Kagan concludes with a call to action, imploring leaders to “capitalize on early childhood’s contemporary political momentum and the new sciences informing it” (p. 7) by grounding ECEC systems improvements in solid commitments to young children.

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