

## “Holding Culture in Her Hand:” Immersion and Understanding

Coming upon Devon McKenna’s entry one might ask two questions. First, why send undergraduates, specifically potential early childhood professionals, abroad? Second, why send them to Sweden? To both, the answer drawn from a comprehensive worldwide review of early childhood program provision provides an elegant recognition: “It is said that the merit of any nation may be judged by how it treats its children, particularly the poor and needy. If that adage is true, then Sweden surely sits at an international pinnacle. Nothing honors Sweden more than the way it honors and respects its young” (OECD, 1999). American early educators studying Swedish family policy and early care can learn much about the salience of culture and what it means to honor children and childhood.

A third more relevant question to study abroad emerges, how can a student understand another early childhood culture so that she can better see her own? In early childhood education, culture matters for everything. Theoretically, from a sociocultural perspective we understand that culture happens “between the ears” as well as in the external surroundings (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Cultural meanings and ideologies determine our policies for children and families as well as the way we interpret children’s daily learning behavior. Culture dominates our national discourse regarding best practices for children in early childhood settings (Bredekamp, 1997).

While in Sweden, Devon witnessed concrete manifestations of the Swedish construct of *honor and respect*. She immersed herself in policy, politics and culture and learned about a society that provides generous family leave, so that parents can remain home to care for their infants while receiving a percentage of their salary. She had a lived experience of childcare as the combined responsibility of the government and families, receiving a substantial financial subsidy. She saw a country that embraces a national curriculum with an explicit focus on democracy, citizenship and personhood. Finally, she worked alongside highly educated early childhood teachers in preschool settings where all must attain a college level degree from their national teacher training program.

How did *honor and respect for its young* translate to Devon's practical work in the preschool setting? Here she was able to bear witness to practices that value play, honestly consider the voice of the child, allow children's ideas to lead learning, and incorporate democracy into a national curriculum as a "first step in" to children's learning. Such beliefs and correlating teaching practices were utterly eye opening for Devon, all profound contrasts to her experience with children, teachers and settings for their care back home. She soon became drawn to the Swedish notion of early learning and development and in particular, to a comparative view of assessment practices with the states. Essentially, she posited how do Swedes understand learning in young children? What constitutes Swedish assessment practices?

It was not by chance that the construct of assessment pulled Devon's attention upon leaving the states and planting her feet on to Swedish soil. Assessment stands at the very center of a countrywide heated educational debate (Elkind, 2001; Steinberg, 2002; Strauss, 2003; Whitehurst, 2001) Devon left home well aware of our beleaguered national and international reputation in academic achievement along with an alarming achievement gap between our children of differing socioeconomic status (Elkind, 2001; Raver & Zigler, 2004). Understanding this to be the engine driving recent education policy, Devon had engaged in the intense scrutiny of the product-driven mandate; how do we teach all children to read by the time they reach third grade (Bush, 2003)? With great curiosity, Devon pressed forward with an appeal to her Swedish experience. What values and beliefs frame Swedish educational policy? How are policies then translated to everyday practices when it comes to educating the youngest children? What views of children and childhood do the Swedes embody; and on a more personal level, what views of childhood do I embrace and why?

The culminating event of Devon's policy to practice experience was her final thesis entitled, presented in this volume. This she presented in Swedish fashion to a group of her study abroad peers, mentors, and professors. In this thesis, Devon demonstrates her ability to identify and weave threads of cultural values and beliefs, related national policy mandates, teaching practices, parental expectations, and their implication for children's well being and development. Devon creatively employed a variety of sources to validate her ethnographic study: participation, observation and interviews; early childhood curriculum and assessment documents from both the US and the Swedish perspective; and relevant developmental and educational theory and research. Devon's comparative arguments are particularly relevant to our na-

tional trend of increasing standardization and accountability. Her research makes us aware of the implicit hazards to our youngest children, stating the need for re-examination, both in intent and purpose of our national obsession with learning standards, assessment, and academic outcomes.

From my perspective as an educator, Devon McKenna's undergraduate trajectory exemplifies an innovative and desirable path in higher education. Devon's intentional decision to study abroad in a department-linked program was much like other decisions she made as a Human Development major at Cornell University. Admirably, she selected a variety of opportunities and created a range of roles for herself to deepen her understanding of young children. Her emerging desire to step into the field of young children became apparent early on. Because of her extensive experience with young children and settings for their care, by the second semester of her junior year she had accumulated a wealth of knowledge about contexts for children's development. Given her self-direction and preparedness, her entry into our Swedish Practicum in Childhood, Family and Social Policy in Gothenburg, Sweden was a timely one. Devon had the unique opportunity to "hold culture" in her hand and closely examine what it might mean in terms of her own personal and professional life and in this case, the lives of young children. These experiences within the Swedish social democratic system and collectivist ideology undoubtedly had a most powerful impact on her developing identity as an early childhood professional.

### **J u d i t h   R o s s - B e r n s t e i n**

*Senior Lecturer, Department of Human Development  
Program Coordinator, Swedish Practicum in Childhood, Family and Social Policy  
Cornell University*