

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

### **Socially Just, Radical Alternatives for Education and Youth Work Practice: Re-imagining Ways of Working with Young People Charlie Cooper, Sinead Gormally & Gill Hughes (Eds)**

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Review by Michael Gilsonan, Newman University, Birmingham, UK

In setting the context for this book Cooper, Gormally and Hughes offer the well-evidenced proposition that policy and discourse about young people perpetuates a deficit model of youth. Citing various reports that talk about the youth “crisis” and describing young people who engaged in the recent England riots as lacking in character, resilience and employability skills, they draw our attention to the view that according to the Riots, Communities and Victims Panel report (2012) these are problems that need to be addressed by schools. Even when discussing issues of disengagement from education they assert that “... the lens remains one of blame” (p. 2). So, in a context of such negative discourse, the scope of the book, as they say, is to draw on a range of pedagogical and critical theories in order to “offer a reframing of how we think about working with young people” (p. 2).

Exploring contexts such as Alternative Provision Free Schools, higher education institutions, youth and community programmes and engaging throughout with critical approaches such as social pedagogy, critical youth and community work and critical pedagogy, the book successfully takes the reader on a tour through some excellent examples of practice that challenge perceptions about education and offer inspirational ways to continually seek social justice in one’s work with young people.

For those practitioners working with young people on the margins of the education system or within youth and community work contexts, there will be familiar scenarios as well as ones that will stretch our imagination. What comes across very clearly throughout the book (and particularly in chapter two) is that for those of us who are continuously seeking to assert and reassert the value of learning outside of state sanctioned educational establishments there is a rich heritage and wide range of practice experience from which to draw.

Highlighting a diverse range of case studies the book contributes to the notion that education is not simply a product of schooling but a process that can be engaged in based on mutual respect, consideration and commitment. Education (pedagogy) can be the means by which we come to understand the continual need for ensuring social justice. The book is particularly pertinent at this point in English history because of current proposals to broaden

the scope of Ofsted registration and inspection to include supplementary and informal education contexts operating for more than six hours per week. Similarly, the practice of critical and social pedagogy brings forth challenges to government initiatives such as the Prevent Strategy.

After detailing standpoints of practice and discussing their underpinning theory, each chapter concludes with a section on re-imagining ways of working. These are then brought together in the final chapter written by the editors. In stating what should be the case now, Cooper, Gormally and Hughes identify that there is "... a need to generate more robust methodologies for imagining alternative and more humane societies" (p. 251). They proceed to highlight incidents of both pragmatic and radical ways in which the cases cited present work within and against the state for a just humane society whilst focusing clearly on the needs and wishes of the young people they are working with. Finally, in "What could be in the future?," Cooper, Gormally and Hughes inspire us to recognise that in engaging in the quest for social justice through a range of social, political and educational interventions we are part of a long history of utopian thinkers grounded in reality but not constrained by the acceptance of things as they are.

The book has been called "easy to read" (back cover) and indeed it is if one is conversant with academic texts. It will prove, I think, a very useful book for students studying at undergraduate level on programmes such as Youth and Community Work, Social Work or Education Studies and an essential text for those studying youth work programmes at post-graduate level. However, the cover price limits its accessibility. Unless a cheaper paperback is published (the e-book is £51.99) it will, most likely, find its dwelling place in the libraries of academics and higher education institutions leaving the knowledge contained in its pages reliant on a "trickle down" epistemology—perhaps the irony of the book.

## References

Riots, Communities and Victims Panel. (2012). *After the riot: The final report of the Riots, Communities and Victims Panel*. London: RCVF.

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Michael Gilson is a part time senior lecturer in Youth and Community Work at Newman University and studying for an EdD at Liverpool Hope University. He has a long history of youth and community work practice dating back to the late 1980s and has worked in a range of settings, including detached and centre based urban, suburban and rural youth work.



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