

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

**Les Etablissements scolaires et la recherche en education:  
problèmes méthodologiques et épistémologiques  
by Marie-Anne Hugon and Marie-Laure Viaud (Eds.)**

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Marie-Anne Hugon and Marie-Laure Viaud's *Les Etablissements scolaires et la recherche en éducation, problèmes méthodologiques et épistémologiques* is a welcome addition to the epistemological and methodological discussion on alternative pedagogies in France. The approach is both theoretical and more pragmatic with a first part hinging on broader epistemological and methodological issues while the second part is dedicated to the specifics of evaluation. It gives interesting insights into the difficulty of studying French alternative schools that tend to shy away from researchers for many reasons: the first one being that these schools have usually been created and led by teachers who are not academics (although the credentials gap between teachers and researchers has now considerably narrowed down) and oftentimes resent what can be conceived as an elitist approach of researchers who may or may not compromise the fragile status of their sometimes fledgling institutions (Chapter: Peyronie). The French context is hardly conducive to any form of alternative schooling (Bongrand, 2016) and although some of these schools have been around for quite some time (École Decroly since 1945, École de la Neuville since 1973, Lycée autogéré de Paris since the 1980s, Lycée Pilote Innovant International de Poitiers since 1983, Microlycée Sénart since 2000), their future is still all but certain.

One of the questions at stake here is thus to negotiate the position of researchers who are not necessarily external to the schools studied. Concrete, common-sense strategies are presented for external researchers who seek to be allowed to study these alternative schools while the difficulty faced by researchers who also teach there are also tackled; the main recommendation being for an increased dialogue between full-time educators and full-time researchers or

researchers who are also educators themselves (Chapters: Robbes and Peyronie; Epstein and Bernier).

The epistemological questions raised by an object that is steeped in interpersonal relationships naturally bring to the fore the thorny question of the validity of qualitative research. Quite a few authors here highlight the importance of life stories, oral histories and ethnographic approaches in general (Chapters: Pawlowsky and Bergeron; Leroux and Leyle), while others insist that quantitative evaluation is not to be shunned altogether even for alternative schools, as attendance, attrition and graduation rates appear to offer fruitful insights into the schools studied. But while it might seem that they sometimes give a little easily into the idea that absence of easily quantifiable data immediately undermines the scientificity of the analysis (see, pp. 14, 38, 170), Hugon and Viaud brilliantly summarize the stakes in insisting on the need for an “emancipating form of evaluation” (p. 182), an expression borrowed from Baron and Monnier (2003). Nevertheless conversely the dangers of an all quantitative analysis, underlined for instance by Abelhauser et al in 2001, could have been given more attention.

A few chapters stand out, particularly that of Sébastien Pesce who uses American philosopher C. S. Peirce’s work on semiotics and makes a strong argument to explain why alternative schools’ models are so hard to replicate:

what makes alternative schools different is that they open spaces for musement<sup>1</sup>, they enable the complex game of inferences, make up time for subjects to “think,” interpret, and play with meaning, to produce significations. If one seeks to transfer the findings of these alternative schools to other institutions, the tools should not be displaced: one needs to create anew the cognitive (interpretative) processes that helped subjects to transform themselves, even if that sometimes means creating brand new tools (p.106, my translation).

Pesce makes inroads into new possible methodologies to evaluate schools, making it hard to understand why his contribution was not included in the second part of the book dedicated to evaluation. Especially since it echoes another fascinating contribution by Jean-François Nordmann, which demonstrates how important it is to

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<sup>1</sup> The word has been coined by Peirce. It is a form of creative musing. See <http://www.commens.org/dictionary/term/musement>

gauge schools' ability to elicit musing, straying and an intellectual process of trials and errors.

Many strands of alternative schooling are discussed here (L'École Nouvelle Française, le Groupe Français d'Éducation Nouvelle, la Pédagogie Institutionnelle Freinet), but unfortunately, historical context is seldom provided for these sometimes overlapping but always complex philosophies. As a result this eclectic book seems to be more adapted to researchers who are already well acquainted with this particular context. Moreover, in spite of the very helpful introductions and conclusions by Hugon and Viaud, this book suffers from the usual shortcomings of all conference proceedings: it remains a patchwork of perspectives that are hard to make sense of for non-specialist readers. A few *Studies in English* on happiness at school are mentioned in the introduction (Cox and Rowlands 2000; Ogletree 1991) and John Dewey is briefly discussed by Céline Leroux and David Leyle (p. 150) but that's about the amount of attention foreign influences get. Maria Montessori is referred to in passing while Paulo Freire does not even get a single reference.

Hugon and Viaud can hardly be blamed for this myopic attitude to the possibility of a circulation of "alternative" ideas since it is a generalized flaw in French social studies, but unfortunately this ethnocentric approach while it fails to enrich French perspectives from other points of views also makes it harder for non specialists to understand the stakes here. Researchers who have not been previously acquainted with the main French-speaking theorists in alternative education: Célestin Freinet (1896-1966), Jean Piaget (1896-1980), Ferdinand Oury (1920-1997), will find this book a difficult read, as nothing is done to ease the reader into the particularities of the French context, but others can most certainly find much food for thought in this very enriching presentation of the latest epistemological and methodological debates among French specialists of alternative schooling.

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