

BOOK REVIEWS

The Palgrave International Handbook of Alternative Education

Helen E. Lees and Nel Noddings, (Eds.)

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An “International Handbook of Alternative Education” is indeed timely, given the intensifying critiques of global education systems, some of which surface in this book. However one will have to look elsewhere for more trenchant and penetrating dissections of the ills of the education-industrial complex which is so intertwined with neo-liberal project (see for example Meyer & Benavot, 2013, Au & Ferrare, 2015). It should be noted that this is a big book with over 520 pages including the preface pages. The title signals three characteristics: international, handbook and alternative education and these deserve some attention.

The label “international” is broadly justified. Although the 29 chapters are predominantly recruited from the UK and to a lesser extent the US, there are chapters from Israel, Iran, Turkey, Germany, India, South Africa, Japan, Sweden and China. In addition some of the UK authors are reporting on non-UK contexts. Thus, although the dominant market will be in the UK and US there is certainly enough in the book with global relevance to appeal to an international market. In addition the book deals predominantly with issues on a conceptual level, which allows them to be considered in multiple country and cultural contexts which aids their universality. In considering “alternative education” the book also succeeds on the grounds of breadth, for although Alternative Education is an elusive term, varying interpretations are given an airing, not least in Helen Lees’ chapter on “Educational Mutuality.” “Handbook” is perhaps the most questionable term of the three, as handbooks are commonly understood to be reference works, sometimes small, for practical or in depth queries on a specialist subject. It implies instruction and advice about how to accomplish something. Although there is much stimulus and coverage the book does not aim to provide practical guidance.

There are different models of edited books which include a “tight” model at one extreme in which there is a coherent message and chapters inter-relate strongly, to a “loose” model in which contributors are recruited around a topic and the editors build a structure and narrative which hold the book together. If this is regarded as a spectrum then this book is towards the latter end—but this should not be seen as a criticism or disadvantage, as both models have their benefits and costs. So each chapter is a self-contained entity and, depending on interest and need, can be read in isolation.

The book launches with a joint chapter from the editors Helen Lees and Nel Noddings, but unusually their contributions are separate and identified as such. Noddings, whose work on “care” and caring in education will be known to many, begins the chapter with reference to Ivan Illich’s work on de-schooling society. She emphasizes the theme of developing care and trust by reference to several chapters in the book, and she contrasts this theme with the mania for objective-led teaching, and further she champions the importance of choice, arguing through reference to John Dewey and Lee Cronbach that there is no one pedagogical method that serves all learning purposes. Finally she recommends collegiality, experimentation and inter-disciplinarity. While Nel Noddings hints at alternative education taking place within the school system, Helen Lees’ introduction is more by way of an outline of the handbook chapters and she admits that the book is not a “how to do” enterprise but still a guide in the sense of showing, discussing, considering and understanding. She emphasizes the principles of autonomy and agency and depicts the chapters as “intelligent invitations” to alternative education.

The main structuring device is the subdivision into a “Thinking Differently” section with 10 chapters, a “Doing Differently” section with 9 chapters and finally an “Acting Differently” section which hosts a further 10 chapters. This is a simple subdivision and is not entirely successful, as it is difficult to sustain the difference between “Acting” and “Doing.” The “Doing” chapters are characterized as “walking the talk” while in the “Acting” section “there is a sense in which attitude matters for alternative ‘right’ action: thinking and doing involved in the acting in relation to others that is not just a variety of what we have and reject from mainstream but an actual alternative of substance, with form, with results, with consequences.”

Thinking Differently is largely composed of conceptual overviews. These include Peter Gray’s focus on “Mother Nature’s Pedagogy: How Children Educate Themselves” which reminds the reader very strongly that children have an inbuilt self-organising impulse to pursue learning through intrinsic motivation, often in mixed age groups. Other chapters include the “Promise and Peril of Neuroscience” (Clarence Joldersma), “Women’s Traditional Interests” (Nel Noddings) and a slightly impenetrable chapter on “impotentiality” (Nick Peim). The major exception to the conceptual style is the experiential account of “An Ordinary Day” at

Summerhill School by Philipp Klaus, which successfully brings personal tensions to the surface for consideration.

Doing Differently is the section which attends most to place-based case studies, taking in holistic education in Brazil (Helena Singer), “Children’s Dream Park” in Japan (Yoshiyuki Nagata) and school ethics with student teachers in South Africa (Karen Murriss). It also includes very welcome overview chapters on identifiable alternative education “practices” on Philosophy with Children (Joanna Haynes), Forest Schools (Sara Knight) and Self Organised Learning Environments or SOLEs (Sugata Mitra and colleagues). These are practices that one can find integrated into mainstream schools. Robert Kunzman provides an excellent, well balanced chapter on Home Education which one might see an iconic form of alternative education. There is an overview chapter on teacher education (Ian Menter), which sits a little uncomfortably in this section as it is an intriguing historical account of teacher education in the UK and its growing entanglement with government policy and accountability pressures. The chapter on “Creating Spaces for Autonomy” in Denmark (Max Hope and Catherine Montgomery) was particularly engaging because of its dual focus on imaginative physical learning spaces and the metaphorical significance of space for thinking differently.

Acting Differently is the hardest section to characterize. There are some chapters which might equally have been located in Doing Differently, such as the account of Humanist Schools in Israel (Nimrod Alloni) and radical, counter-culture pre-school Kinderlaeden in Germany (Robert Hamm). There are insightful chapters too on “Alternatives to School Sex Education” (Michael Reiss), “Geographies of Trust” and “Attachment Aware Schools” (Richard Parker & colleagues) and an unexpected chapter on “Critical Animal Pedagogies” (Karin Gunnarson Dinker & Helena Pedersen).

The book is very wide ranging, dominated by chapters which are conceptual overviews, some of which are laced with exemplification. This is perhaps not a book for teachers who are looking for practical advice to dilute the dominant objective led pedagogy in schools. It is more for a broader range of professionals and adults concerned with the mental, physical, moral and spiritual welfare of young people. It provides both stimulation and deep provocation regarding alternatives to mainstream education, as well as being a substantial reference to the wide array of alternatives.

References

- Meyer, H-D. & Benavot, A. (2013). *PISA, power, and policy: The emergence of global educational governance*. Didcot, Oxford: Symposium Books.
- Au, W. & Ferrare, J. (2015). *Mapping corporate education reform: Power and policy networks in the neoliberal state*. New York: Routledge.

Reviewer details

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