

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

### **Postformal Education: A Philosophy for Complex Futures by**

**Jennifer M. Gidley**

**2016 (hardcover)**

**291 pages £72.00 (hardcover) £31.99 (softcover) £24.99 (eBook)**

**ISBN hardcover 978-3-319-29068-3**

**ISBN softcover 978-3-319-62814-1**

**ISBN eBook 978-3-319-290069-0**

**Published by Springer, Switzerland**

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This book intrigued me from the start. The title did not relay to me immediately the subject matter—the futures of education; the ways in which education can see itself for now, and especially the future, though a lens of new consciousness, understood as non-linear and non binary. Holistic visions, if you like. So in postformal education as phrase we have a rather new domain for the everyday educationist: one replete with views, perspectives, ideas that are not every-day because our current everyday functions with “hyperrationality,” whilst this book says this era of human existence is at an end. Also, of course it is not every-day because the book focused on the day to come rather than the day we have. I had to work hard to get my head into the idea that education can speak like this: using Jean Gebser, Edgar Morin, Ron Miller (and so many other men- where are the women I ask? They form a mere 17% of citations). Education is a conservative domain with little imagination for alternative visions and so of course any alternative educationist will find in this volume rich resources with which to think anew.

I also had to work hard to appreciate the format this book takes. To explain with a perfect example: in three pages (pp. 58-63) there are 17 new subheadings. It TOTALLY did my head in. I felt *tortured* by breaks in the narrative. And its “sectionality.” My response may be time bound and personal and not for another reader to consider as their experience were they to pick up this book. Given I began my engagement with this volume as extremely interested, this was doubly frustrating because the way the book is written completely frustrated my interest. Whilst, as mentioned – and I want to stress this to be fair to the author - this reaction may of course be mine alone, I nevertheless with hyper-rationality challenge anyone to not get somewhat frustrated with the format of so many sections and each

beginning with a very “statistical” numbering of (over the three example pages cited) “3.5.1, 3.5.1.1, 3.5.1.2, 3.5.1.3, 3.5.1.4, 3.5.1.5, 3.5.2, 3.5.2.1, 3.5.2.2, 3.5.2.3, 3.5.3, 3.5.3.1, 3.5.3.2, 3.5.4, 3.6, 3.6.1, 3.6.2,

Lost in destructive subheadings (numbers and then worded subheadings) is how I would sum up a possible reader’s experience of this book. I have not even begun to mention the upset caused by all the tables and charts. Why are these subheadings there with such astonishing frequency? Why are those charts so chart-like? It is not clear why and it is not clear that it is necessary. Most people make do with paragraphs. These days... I thank them for it.

It would have been better for the author to have paid closer attention to the impact of this kind of breakages on the reader’s (in)ability thereby to concentrate on some complex, demanding frames of understanding.

So if this review is not “à point” – that is the reason. My mind rebelled from reading this book. It went on super-strike. As a result this review is about one year late and still not as “engaged” with the book on its own merits as I would have liked. I thought about giving the book back but frankly, it’s too interesting a topic to not attempt meditative states of mind in order to do it proper justice.

This is a real shame as situation. I would have given anything to have got into this subject matter with more gusto. It is a vitally important topic and certainly the 58 pages I read closely, word for word, section after section, before I lost the will to live are well written (section chunking aside), well researched, scholarly, interesting and stimulating. All in all the irony of “...there are three discourses that attempt to meta-cohere these new ways of thinking and new knowledge patterns....My philosophical interest in this book is the *think these threads together* as facets of the one emerging consciousness movement.” (p. 62, emphasis in the original) is mindblowing. I suspect the suspect numbering strategy is an attempt to get to “higher stages of reasoning” in line with *Gidley’s* mention of Einstein as a higher level thinker (p. 62). Whatever the case it is, to my mind, an abject failure as an attempt to go higher to simply chunk thought into higher and higher numbered sections.

It is worth saying some more—and in more detail—about the content, intent and value of this book. On page 106 we find *Gidley* stating that “the term *postformal* is the most widely used psychological term to denote higher developmental stages beyond Piaget’s *formal operations*” (emphasis in the original). Thus we can see then the scope, magnificence and import of this book’s intent. It is tremendously exciting to connect with education in this “zone” and indeed moments of deep fascination and stimulating speculations have accompanied my reading of this book. One example is the photographs included in chapter four of ancient artefacts which suggest to the reader, along with the text, the often silenced idea that in the far, far past children were learning and being educated in ways we can imagine but rarely do unless prompted to ditch the silences in our

minds about these children, and take up ideas about education beyond a curtailed imagination of schools of the last two centuries or so. This is an imaginary but nevertheless partially knowable world spoken of also by Peter Gray in his interesting chapter “Mother nature’s pedagogy: How children educate themselves” (2016).

Altogether the ambition of this volume is enormous. I do not think it is a book to read from first to last. My attempt was frustrating as mentioned. I consider the author of this volume has not written a book which can be read as other books can. It is as though the scope and ambition of the volume has broken the ability for the book to read normally as a kind of narrative or argument and instead this piece of extensively detailed scholarship—which one could argue is far too laden and complex for a “good read”—would be better consulted on a basis of pieces or chapters.

Which brings me really both to the considerable offer of this book as well as the biggest (even bigger than the section chunking) problem with it: the way the book *functions for the reader* stops a thesis emerging. The offer is to allow education to dwell in great ideas that bring inroads to new approaches, alternative visions. By virtue of whatever argument one can find, there is work here which can support these alternative notions beyond just hippie love and peace ideals. There is meat here of an intellectual kind on which to chew. Whilst I am deeply uncertain about the inclusion of some of the names of educationists and other theorists presented almost alongside Foucault, Derrida, Morin, Deleuze and Guattari, Steiner and others in importance (and lament greatly the profound sense in which history has through this author’s choices seemingly only ever offered up male thinkers of note for the project to hand), the book serves as a collection of writers to whom one may turn for a certain kind of thought. This is valuable.

In 8.6.1 (p. 199) I did not appreciate the list of “practical ways” to love children. I will leave this example as metonymic of my distaste for the approach to love used. It is hard to not preach in the area of postformal, love-inducing and love-making (non sexual) education that this book excites. It is hard to have a coherent argument that compels one to believe that love is the future such as this book attempts. I was not convinced that love is the future, although it surely is. I commend this book to you to argue with and to respond to by wanting more of the same, but differently. It is an important book for the rarity of its subject matter and ought to be paid attention.

## References

Gray, P. (2016). Mother nature’s pedagogy: How children educate themselves. In H. E. Lees & Nel Noddings, (Eds.), *The Palgrave international handbook of alternative education*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

## BOOK REVIEW *Gidley: Postformal Education*

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