

**Special Issue Guest Editorial:
Literary Visions—Exploring Education Through the Lens of
Literature**

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This special interest issue of *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives* emerged from a desire to explore the ways in which literature can provide alternative ways of imaging and practising education.

From dystopias to utopias, literature can provide insights into the past, present and future of education. The aim of the special issue is to engage with wider questions around the purpose of education, the ways in which education is imagined, and the potential of literature to reshape educational thinking. We take as our starting point the notion that literary representations of schools and education and the use of literature in education operate as important creative and imaginative spaces. Literature can provide a critical distance and space to ‘speak the unspeakable’ or to act as sites of dialogue to foreground tensions and offer challenges to existing practices.

Broadly, research on literature and education falls into three categories. First, studies of literature which explore the work of individual authors in relation to education, considering what their work reveals about educational ideas. Notable examples include Philip Collins’ (1963) *Dickens and Education*, D.D. Devlin’s (1975) *Jane Austen and Education* and Marianne Thormählen’s (2010) *The Brontës and Education*. Second, there is a robust body of work exploring constructions of childhood in children’s literature, for example Lurie (1998) and Rudd (2013). Alison Lurie’s book considers the potentially subversive power of literature, exploring how many of the popular children’s books challenge rather than maintain adult values and the status quo. Third, there is a body of work which explores representations of teachers in education considering the practical value they offer in relation to teacher roles, exploring the meanings schools have for children, teachers and the wider community (e.g., Fisher et al, 2008; Hanratty, 2018; Dickinson, 2004). Many of these studies focus on cinematic representations (e.g., Ellsmore, 2005; Resnick, 2018). Adopting a broad focus, Paul Nixon’s (2008) collection of edited essays considers a wide range of examples drawn from different cultural contexts, including examples from post-colonial and western settings. Nixon points to the way in which education functions as ‘a tool of assimilation or cultural

colonisation' (p.18). However, Nixon also concludes that amongst these diverse representations of education drawn across different cultures there is also much in common, and that they potentially offer new ways of understanding education. Other studies such as recent work by Sophie Ward (2016) offers a complex and nuanced explorations of political and educational issues. Specifically, Ward considers how Shakespeare's plays can offer an alternative approach to the neoliberal values that have pervaded current education policy in both the UK and North America. In this tradition, this special issue aims then to contribute to this field, considering the value of literature in offering alternative perspectives on current educational policy and practice.

The articles here draw on a diverse range of theoretical frameworks to structure and inform their analysis of the significance of literary representations of education. Although not explicitly referenced, underpinning this approach is Giroux's idea of "public pedagogy" and the idea that literary representations of education both reflect and shape attitudes to education (Giroux, 2008). Giroux explores the ways cultural representations shape habits of thinking, allowing individuals to explore their own identities and mediate between the public and the private sphere. Importantly, Giroux acknowledges the ways popular cultural representations can reinforce dominant ideologies as well as provide more subversive spaces offering potential "sites of resistance" to challenge orthodoxies. With the work presented here we are concerned with how these creative and critical spaces are opened up and the ways in which literary representations can provide a framework for thinking differently about educating.

Throughout, a key theme that emerges is the importance of dialogue in education. As Buber notes, what is important in dialogue is what takes place in the "sphere of the 'between'" (Friedman, in Buber, 2002, p. xiv), and it is potentially in this space that transformative education can occur. Some of the articles draw also on Bakhtin's work (1981) on dialogism and heteroglossia—how layering voices creates an internal dialogue around education. The articles are varied and wide-ranging, exploring education in school and university settings as well as more oblique representations. The educational dialogues in this issue consider the ways in which representations can help us to reflect and challenge and the fundamental values and "knowingness" that are often unquestioned in current educational policies and practices.

The first article by Anne Pirrie explores the subversive power of literature, challenging the established and often unquestioned notions of reflective practice and student satisfaction. She uses the work of Edmond Jabès (1912-1991) and Hannah Arendt to explore how literature offers a deeper, broader understanding of and challenge to these concepts. Her reading is concerned with the silences, the gnomic utterances or perhaps put more broadly the "sphere of the between." The article provides a theoretical framework for the issue as a whole, foregrounding

broader questions about knowledge, the nature of criticality in education and ways in which practice and policy are reconciled on an individual level. The second article by myself and Julian Stern considers the potential of metaphors of schooling in literature and explores the ways in which these representations can be read alongside educational models of learning including dyadic modes of learning and more cyclical modes such as the apprenticeship model of Lave and Wenger. This approach suggests alternative ways of viewing education.

The third article by Julian Stern and Gill Simpson considers the educational use of Holocaust novels in higher education. The article engages with broader questions around the aesthetic and moral value of literature drawing on Buber's "imagining the real" and Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia. The article considers the ways representations provide a voice for the unspeakable and the tensions between sympathy and empathy as well as potential dangers in false redemption.

The fourth article investigates the progress of female academics in higher education using Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre* and Marianne Thormählen's ground-breaking book, *The Brontës and Education* published ten years ago. It provides a framework for discussions with ten female academics working in four UK universities. Thormählen's book explores representations of fictional teachers and schools in relation to the wider nineteenth century debates around the purpose and practice of education. This approach is adopted in the article to explore contemporary education debates. The article uses extracts from *Jane Eyre* read alongside recent media stories about gender and education to frame wider discussion around the identity and career progression of female academics. It explores the ways in which literature can both reveal and, perhaps, potentially lead to challenges and rejection of culturally imposed limitations.

Similarly, Matthew Clarke's article uses the work of Robert Musil (1995 [1940]) *The Man without Qualities* to provide a framework to challenge contemporary education's focus on standardised assessment and evidence-based practice. As an essay engaging in dialogue with the essayism of Robert Musil, the article adopts an exploratory approach challenging some of the fundamental assumptions around curriculum, pedagogy and assessment imagining an alternative "nonmodern" version of education.

The final article by Ansgar Allen provides a creative reimagining of the purpose of education and the role of the educator through creative dialogue with Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot*. It engages with the "plight of the educator," offering a personal and collective insight into the ways in which the educator is both complicit in and an agent of their situation. It explores the seductive nature but ultimately unrealisable and unfulfilling notion of redemptive hope, even as, by its own existence, the article reveals that all hope is not lost. The contributors to this volume also acted as peer-reviewers internally to the special issue with open understandings that this was occurring. This method acted to thus promote positive

and generative collegiate dialogue, providing multiple non-blinded peer reviewed considerations on the issues raised. All the articles, both in form and content, invite the reader to think differently about education.

In the light of often increasingly technical rationalist approaches to education, these pieces of scholarship provide important critical frameworks, reinvigorating imaginative spaces for educational thinking. They do not offer easy answers, but argue in the gaps, “the sphere of the between,” for the value of uncertainty and the possibility of the unknown. As Anne Pirrie says in her article, we need “to learn to value questions more than answers.”

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