

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

### **Thinking in Education Research: Applying Philosophy and Theory**

**by Nick Peim**

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Reviewed by Paul A. Moran

University of Chester, UK

“Why not?” I was prompted to ask myself, as I began to read Nick Peim’s book, *Thinking in Education Research: Applying Philosophy and Theory*. As I progressed further into his text, the Peim-effect took hold. More questions began to propose themselves. “Why doesn’t educational research methodology, on the whole, concern itself with questions about the purported nature of the very objects of its study?,” “What is it that educational research believes that it is studying?,” “How is it that a silent, assumed, numbing fog of consensus appears to have settled over what education is, what its purposes are for, what its effects must be, and how its values should be assessed and determined?” By the time I had finished reading his book, the Peim-effect had had its epistemological way with me, and the following was much clearer: *Thinking in Education Research: Applying Philosophy and Theory* is both a critique of what have become standard methodological approaches to doing educational research, as well as a provocative indication of what educational research could be.

The critique rests upon the text’s demonstration that standardised educational methodological approaches are not simply reiterations of well-worn techniques for data gathering and forms of analyses. They are, much more significantly, parts of the broader mechanisms of education; mechanisms which reproduce their same ideological object of study, namely, education, as if it were a metaphysical verity, rather than a politically constructed process of subjugation. The methodological approach that Nick Peim’s book adopts in order to ask these questions, has, of course, to be a methodological approach that does not simply reproduce the same field of investigation, the same field of endeavour, the same way of thinking and being, within which these very questions are never considered; because, quite

simply, they do not exist. This is the very point of thinking in education, of applying philosophy and theory to this otherwise anti-intellectual domain of practice. These are very significant, if also, in another sense, rather abstract claims; and so I began to think about Nick Peim's critique in more concrete terms. I was thereby drawn back to a report published in 2017 by the Social Mobility Commission. *Time For Change: An Assessment of Government Policies on Social Mobility 1997-2017* (HMG). It is a detailed, weighty, quantitatively data driven analysis of the impact of successive UK government policies over the past twenty years, policies that have been designed to have a fundamental impact on social mobility. The cornerstone of these policies during this period has been in the area of state education. There are some choice moments, including:

The attainment gap between poorer children and their wealthier counterparts at 16 is as large as it was twenty years ago.... Schools are not yet the engines of social mobility they should be. ...There is currently no prospect of the gap between poor and wealthier children being eliminated at GCSE level or at A level. (p.3)

And so I was driven to understand by the Peim-effect of the book under review here not that the alarming conclusion the Social Mobility Commission comes to is in some way a shameful result of UK education policy and practice over the last twenty years. I did not feel that education policy and practice during this period, characterized by being an ever increasingly pressured regime of target setting, data driven and punitively managed, had failed, and would continue to fail, especially in terms of achieving the results of its own goals—no, none of that. Instead, on the contrary, I understood, due to Peim's perspective and its effect on my own thinking that this is precisely what education is; these consequences being, actually, the affirmation of its very project.

Moreover, these are consequences which, and here is the beauty of the Peim-effect, education is theoretically, that is to say, most thoroughly, unable to recognise. Thus, as the book points out, education, constituted in this un-thinking form, is forever doomed to repeat its supposed "failures," in classically Nietzschean terms (Nietzsche, 2005). Hence the sentence from the report, quoted above: "Schools are not yet they engines of social mobility they should be." Should be? As we focus on the should be, *Thinking in Education Research* asks us to reflect on and understand why education requires that we dismiss the impact of what education actually is; that education is the confirmation of social division; that education is the creation of pedagogies and that, like Trump's wall, they are part of a rhetoric, a distraction, which addresses a non-existent problem. For Trump's wall this involves a whipping up of xenophobia related to drugs and illegal migrants and a corruption of national identity; whereas for education the "should be" is about the problem of

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learning, which, if it could only be resolved, would result in the realisation of social equality and the democracy of social cohesion. This, in the face of the impact of twenty years of policy analysis showing precisely the reverse. Education, as the Peim-effect eloquently demonstrates, is profoundly uneducable; indeed, education's identity is based upon this profoundly anti-intellectual undertaking.

All of which, of course, provides a kind of guarantee, sadly, that this book will be thoroughly ignored by the field into which it has been so thoughtfully inserted. I therefore doubt, for this very same reason, that this book will ever be critiqued, understood, or used, even misguidedly, by the audience towards which it is fatally aimed. In this sense, it is a kind of suicide note, attesting to the stubborn ignorance of this most ignorant of subjects. Very rarely do I wish, with as much conviction, to be wrong.

### References

- Social Mobility Commission, (2017). *Time for change: An assessment of government policies on social mobility, 1997-2017*. London: HMG.
- Nietzsche, F. (2005). *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. G. Parks (Trans.). Oxford: Oxford World's Classics.

### Reviewer details

Paul Moran is Senior Lecturer in Education and Children's Services, University of Chester, UK. His recent book co-authored with Frances Atherton, *The Philosophy of Homelessness: Barely Being* is published by Routledge and is the result of a five year ethnographic study of homeless people in Chester. Contact Email: p.moran@chester.ac.uk



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