

BOOK REVIEWS

J. Krishnamurti and Educational Practice: Social and Moral Vision for Inclusive Education

Meenakshi Thapan (Ed.)

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Krishnamurti was a radical teacher who spent his life giving talks around the world about the problems that beset humanity, and the transformation that is required to resolve our social problems. His argument is that no external factor can help us undertake this change; it has to be an inner “revolution.” It is only when we look into ourselves, face ourselves as we really are, that we can hope to change the world. (Thapan, 2018, p. 6)

Thapan opens this collection of essays with a well constructed self-authored chapter, laying out both the context and structure of the book. This opening chapter lays a solid foundation for the reader by offering an overview of the concepts and topics covered by the various chapter authors; however, it should not be seen as a simple description of the chapters. It is true that Thapan includes chapter descriptions within her own chapter, but she does so within the development of a carefully constructed scaffolding of interrelated arguments and themes.

From the beginning, Thapan demonstrates a comfortable familiarity with Krishnamurti and his work through the ease in which she summarises deep philosophical and experiential concepts. She describes how appropriate Krishnamurti’s message is in our current global context in which “humans can no longer be passive observers in a deeply divided and self-destructive world” (Thapan, 2018, p. 3). She proposes that agency in such a world cannot remain personal, and is instead about connecting to others in the public space. This concept of agency is about engaging with possibilities, with perceptions, and with the world. Thapan continues:

Krishnamurti posits that such engagement does not take place in an aspired for space but in the present, in the hurly-burly of the here and now. It is in the everyday that Krishnamurti seeks out change, beginning with the individual and her world, both personal and social. This premise foregrounds his emphasis on educational practice as the medium through which social change is possible. At the same time, education is not an objective instrument but a deeply nuanced method for the transformation of consciousness and social change. (Thapan, 2018, pp. 3-4)

After briefly establishing the social and educational contexts of the book, Thapan introduces Krishnamurti, his life, works, and philosophy, as well as the schools and projects that have been developed in the light of his teachings. She then moves on to develop the six core concepts, or arguments, that run throughout the book. She names these as: Education and Society; the Sacred and the Universal; Agency, Values and an Ethical Life; the Transformative Value of Education; Caring about Emotions; and Addressing Diversity through Multigrade-Multilevel Education. These six core arguments weave throughout the book, providing foundational threads for the other twelve chapters to engage with.

To round off the chapter, Thapan offers further discussion centred on Krishnamurti's approach, and gives consideration to the students that have come through the schools that have been shaped by his indications. It is clear that some previous students are known to the schools even today, but Thapan asks questions of all past students, wondering where they are now, asking how they are situated as moral beings. By doing so, Thapan brings us back to the question of agency she began her chapter with, and asks what educational outcomes truly are: What is right education? Right conduct? Moral imagination? What does it take to be a citizen in this "troubled and fragile world?" These considerations lead the reader into the rest of the book.

Brief Overview of Chapters

The book is divided into three sections: "Social, Ecological and Moral Insights into Educational Practice"; "Learner-Centred Pedagogy in Practice"; and "Diversity and Inclusive Education: The Multigrade-Multilevel Programme (MGML)" (please see the complete list of chapter titles and authors at the end of this article). These headings describe the common themes addressed in the chapters contained within them, while the six core concepts described above refer to arguments that appear throughout the book.

The first section begins with Thapan's introductory chapter, and includes four further chapters offering philosophical explorations and practical applications of education and curriculum related to Krishnamurti's work. The section offers conversations on transformation and guarding against creating structures that enforce conformity, bridging the gap between the spiritual and the practical, and considerations of how to keep educational concepts fluid and dynamic.

The second section includes three chapters that look at specific pedagogical considerations in selected schools. Specifically, the first looks at teacher-student relationships

at Rishi Valley School, the second offers an analysis of the ways in which education can take place without the operation of fear as a factor, and the third looks at the tensions between inclusion, diversity, and assimilation, and the ways to address this.

The third and final section contains five chapters focusing on the development of the Multigrade-Multilevel (MGML) approach, that is, the practice of teaching children of different ages and varying abilities in a single classroom space. These chapters cover the initial development of the MGML methodology as pioneered by Gordon F. Pearce and David Horsburgh, as well as their further development. They include investigations into the use of MGML in satellite schools in varying contexts, the creation of the “school-in-a-box” tool that has been used in varying contexts, and teacher attitudes and training.

Discussion

I found this collection of essays to be not only enjoyable and informative, but interesting on many levels, starting with the shape of the book itself. As can be seen by the section and chapter headings (see below), the book follows an inward/outward breathing process that reflects the movement of Krishnamurti’s message of reflection and action, looking within the self to see the world more clearly and finding the connection to others. Thapan has arranged the chapters to begin with philosophical considerations, then moving into an exploration of direct observations and individual experiences at particular schools, and ending by delving into the core principles and practices that connect to teachers and schools around the world. This iterative, breathing relationship can be seen on different levels throughout the book, as will be seen below.

As Thapan outlined in her introductory chapter, there are some themes that weave through the book, rising up in one chapter and reappearing in another. The fact that they are shared through varying perspectives results in a growing feeling of familiarity and deepening understanding.

The chapter overview, above, offers a limited summary of the book. Even in such a brief overview, however, it can be seen that the topics the authors have chosen vary widely. The authors are all addressing the common themes of Krishnamurti and educational practice, but do so through their own unique perspective. This results in a collage of ideas and observations that includes variations in subject of focus, and also in styles of writing. The style of writing in the chapters ranges from the poetic to the academic, from the practical to the philosophical. Personally, this aspect of collected essays and stories on a shared theme has always appealed to me, as I enjoy the resulting variation in texture and it helps me grasp the shared theme more deeply. As I read this particular book however, it occurred to me that this structure is ideal as it can be seen as an illustration of Krishnamurti’s message in action. That is, each author offers insight into their own individual understanding of Krishnamurti’s comments, and shares observations relating to their own experiences of the “hurly burly of now,” regardless of whether they take a more philosophical or more practical approach.

There is no system or script to any of Krishnamurti’s indications. As Hertzberger mentions in Chapter 3, “Krishnamurti’s vision of education is pluralistic; no one school is a

model for another” (Thapan, 2018, p. 69). In fact, he was against systems in general, whether for the individual or for an entity such as a school, as many of these authors have pointed out. For this reason, the development of the schools described in this book and approaches they have taken cannot be quickly and neatly summarised—especially in a review of this length. This concept of not using a script or shared system reflects back to Krishnamurti’s ideas regarding how to change the world by starting with self, and how this inner process reveals a connection to all things, highlighting social and environmental responsibility.

The education that is being described here is a reflection of that same concept in two ways: it describes what education looks like when the goal is to create individuals capable of grasping that inward and outward connection, and it illustrates the idea that the schools themselves need to follow this same process, i.e., look inward at themselves to fully grasp their connections to their immediate social and environmental locale and the wider world. In this way it can be seen that there can be no prescription for an individual school in the same way that there is no prescription for an individual human.

Even the schools that share the Multigrade-Multilevel approach explored here in the third section are each unique to the environment they have been developed in. The development of the village schools in Rishi Valley followed a process of looking inward to understand the problem and find the connection/solution to it. This MGML approach became a model that could be shared with other villages around the world, and in very different cultural, social, political, and environmental settings. The model does not result in a standardised school, however, but in a school uniquely suited to its own context. This is a further enactment of the idea that by looking into the self, one realises a connection/empathy/understanding of others, the environment, and the wider world.

The practical school-based stories that appear throughout the book also emphasise the message of the value of the individual and “the hurly burly of the here and now” by sharing anecdotes relating to the actions, struggles and successes of individuals. There are no definitive declarations of absolute success, these are descriptions of processes, including critical explorations of individual struggles that are taking place on personal, collegial, and system-wide levels.

Another appealing aspect of the book for me is the fact that, as within Krishnamurti schools themselves, no one is trying to “sell” his ideas here. While some of the authors do summarise aspects of Krishnamurti’s life and works or share stories of their interactions, none of the authors are proselytizing; in fact, some chapters make only brief references to him. It is perhaps because of this that one can glean a deeper understanding of Krishnamurti’s intent through this book—i.e., there is no one right “way”; there is no one system or set of rules or guidelines that can tell you how to act or think. These varying perspectives collectively offer the reader a deepened understanding of how it is that looking inward can connect you more deeply to those around you.

This feature of varying perspectives means that the book will appeal to an equally wide array of readers. People with an interest in philosophical and spiritual matters will find it as intriguing as those with a more practical interest in education, such as teachers, educators,

parents, students and other stakeholders involved in the development of education around the world. In the same way, the book will appeal both to those already familiar with Krishnamurti and those who are curious about learning more about him and his work.

In my own case, I am currently beginning a research project for my doctoral thesis on education. I have a deep interest in experiential education, which is based in action, and a particular interest in John Dewey (an American philosopher and educationalist). Reading these stories embedded with reflection and action, seated very much in the real world rather than in theory, helped me understand some fundamental truths regarding my own research. Although I was already familiar with Krishnamurti before I read this book, and understood that there were parallels that exist between Krishnamurti and Dewey's indications on education, I did not approach this book with my research in mind. However, the fact that the chapters are centred around reflection and action and include aspects of honest critique, made them very human and relatable for me and resonated with underlying elements of my research. They brought to mind some shared spiritual and educational elements between Krishnamurti and Dewey's approaches, such as the recognition of connection between the self and others, the essential nature of the cycle of reflection and action, and the continuum of past and present seated in the now. These reflections, in turn, lead to a different level of understanding on my part. I offer these personal insights not to convince the reader that they should find these same points of value, but to illustrate the idea that the book may be equally helpful to people with a wide range of interests, and in more ways than may be expected.

There is a kind of shared understanding made accessible through the variety of perspectives throughout the book, that explains how these chapters describing education in India can relate to a thesis on education in Canada. The detail of the chapters may be made up of individual perspectives of a specific place and time, but the core and underlying message remains outside of these specifics. One problem with the bureaucracy of mainstream education is it seeks standardisation. This inevitably leads to education becoming stuck in time and place; it can't be flexible to local need or changing times. The schools and people described in this book have addressed their struggles in extremely divergent scenarios by focusing on and utilising Krishnamurti's core values of the individual seated in the now to address the problems that they come upon. One can see this as an underlying thread throughout the stories, but that common thread is also a celebration of the uniqueness of each scenario. In the same way, the diverse perspectives and experiences included in these essays help to illustrate the manner in which the reader can do this in their own lives, i.e., start with the self, here and now.

To conclude, I found this book appealing and enjoyable on a personal level, enlightening on a spiritual level, and informative on a practical and educational level. It includes a rich variety of individual perspectives based in reflection, observation, and action, and was arranged and edited in a meaningful and accessible way. I highly recommend reading this book.

Full list of chapter titles and authors:

Section 1: Social, Ecological and Moral Insights into Educational Practice

Chapter 1. Krishnamurti, Values, and Education; Meenakshi Thapan

Chapter 2. Insight through Awareness; Hillary Rodrigues

Chapter 3. Values and the Culture of Schools; Radhika Herzberger

Chapter 4. Curricular Concerns and Practices in a Krishnamurti School; Abismrita Chakravarty

Chapter 5. Krishnamurti's Dialogue as Being Open to the 'Other'; Vikas Baniwal

Section 2: Learner-Centred Pedagogy in Practice

Chapter 6. 'Right Relationship' between Teachers and Students; Madhulika Sonkar

Chapter 7. A Space Sans Fear; Priyanuj Choudhury

Chapter 8. Celebrating Diversities; Disha Pandey

Section 3: Diversity and Inclusive Education: The Multigrade-Multilevel Programme

Chapter 9. Multigrade Instruction at Rishi Valley and Neel Bagh; Radhika Herzberger

Chapter 10. Philosophy of Jiddu Krishnamurti in the Educational Practice of the Multigrade-Multilevel Methodology; Thomas Müller

Chapter 11. Child-Centred Learning in Praxis; Rohini Ram Mohan

Chapter 12. Contextual Challenges for Primary Education; Hitesh Kukreja

Chapter 13. Going beyond the Self; Bharat Suri

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