

## **Editorial: A certain sensibility for alternatives?**

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If a recent large conference programme is anything to use for analysis, there is apparently much research going on in educational studies around the world qualifying as “alternatively” oriented. But what is the qualification? Without rehearsing usual issues with multiple determinants or applications within the educational mainstream of “alternative education” confusing matters, let’s assume I mean there is *seemingly* much research that aspires to be other, new, alternative, “progressive.” Rather than seemingly underpinned by what we commonly have right now as a hegemonic and “usual” educational approach focusing on assessment, measurement, discipline, attainment, learning, this research uses liberally the word “democracy” for instance. Does it thereby fall into a category of the “alternative” and “progressive”?

The point I wish to highlight with this editorial is that education research and publishing attached to the words “democratic,” “autonomous,” “free,” “different,” “alternative,” “progressive,” “child-centered,” “person-centered,” or whatever aspires to indicate an *other* way, is not necessarily other. It might say it is. It might (increasingly) fashion itself within and around those kind of words. But let’s bring in the bullshit detectors (with thanks to Postman et al for the spirit with which we are empowered to do this) to understand better the inherent rationale informing use of alternatively oriented labels.

I know there is issue with the idea of labels: “Progressive education is not indeed a term susceptible of exact delimitation. Hopes of ... definition have been adamantly dashed by one of the knowledgeable experts in this field, Lawrence A. Cremin: ‘none exists,’ he tells us, ‘and none ever will.’” (Röhrs & Lenhart, 1995, p.11). A recent book by John Howlett on the history of progressive education in the UK and Europe also suggests labels mislead (2013). But I wonder if there is something deeper than words, which makes the alternative in education truly other.

Increasingly I wonder if it is possible for work that is truly other to find an easy place in the current mainstream of educational journal publishing where much of this “alternative” work appears. There, rules apply to these papers which broadly also apply without change to work fulfilling “gold” standardised criteria of excellence. Whilst it is wrong to generalise I expect that getting into a high profile

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“4\*” journal requires comprises through peer review. I have heard many tales of this occurring. Would complying with the epistemology and ontology inherent in four-star decision making constitute a sad dilution for those with difference to offer via their research work?

At *Other Education* we are publishing this kind of work—work suited to such journals and which might have chosen to rest there instead and by virtue of its quality could have done so I believe. But perhaps not, sometimes: on account of these authors’s commitment (and I get authors telling me they are committed to the ethos of *Other Education* over and above publication elsewhere) to being deeply different; not superficially so.

What happens here, with this journal, is that the route to publication is co-constructed with a value for difference. Our authors come to us because they value this and shockingly perhaps, they cannot find it in another place. Our review process for the papers with sufficient importance to gain publication is increasingly about *iterative* feedback so that work which strikes out for difference can be brought to an audience of critical fellows *on its own terms*, yet definitely taking into account the importance and value of peer review. We offer a sensibility for this; a wish to avoid losing the *other* when academic expectations are involved. I hope *Other Education* can serve to make publishing alternatively easier.

We are lucky to have a strong, committed and intelligently sensitive community who believe in this kind of approach involved in this journal. Yet is this lucky? Is a sensibility for the paradoxes which lie within the life of the educational alternative—in all its theories and practices—the gift of everyone? Perhaps it is currently a minority sensibility? A language too obscure? I have long thought it was felt and spoken by a very few. In recent times this has been shaken as a view. I’d say the population is large but the sensibility and its “language” has been previously suppressed. Brutally suppressed? But not anymore. Whilst it is not possible to conjecture why exactly the pressures to silence it are seemingly lifting, we can notice widely that the wellspring of its expression bubbles up. I hope all this emerging work using alternative or progressive (etc) phrasing in conference programmes is then, honestly, about what is complex and difficult, democratic and free. Will that be enough to make it alternatively inclined? Is that its qualification? Thankfully alternative education isn’t obsessed with qualifications but there may be a certain required and inspired sensibility...

References

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