

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Education Without Schools - Discovering Alternatives, Helen E Lees**

**November 2013 Hardback**

**192 pages £56.00**

**ISBN 9781447306412**

**Policy Press, Bristol**

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*There is a debate to be had about the responsibility of our politics and our systems to open themselves educationally to more than just the school (Lees, 2013, p. 133)*

*Education without Schools* provides a great starting point for such a debate. The book makes a compelling argument that our educational horizons and choices are limited by a pervasive narrative which conflates education with schooling—what the author terms “educationism.” Within this dominant discourse, educational difference is narrowed to the institutional variations that distinguish types of school from one another. There is implicit bias against anything that sits outside the mainstream. Alternatives are judged according to mainstream standards or excluded altogether. The parents and children who chose alternative educational activities are subjected to prejudice and hostility.

This important and thought-provoking book makes a sustained case for an alternative to this ‘educationist paradigm’. *Education Without Schools* focuses on one particular alternative to schooling—elective home education and, specifically, autonomous forms of EHE. As a result, the book’s value is twofold. Firstly, it provides an evidence-based discussion of elective home education—a much under-researched topic, especially in the UK. Stories of “genuine discovery” elective home education offer nuanced counterbalance to the oversimplified and negative stories that frequently reach newspaper headlines or inform policy discussion. Secondly, the book challenges an educational paradigm that narrows the confines of “legitimate” discussion about what education entails. It asks the reader to see education as a “multi-modal terrain” and, in doing so, understand that education is both a right to learn as well as a right to unlearn and to be educationally different.

Lees argues that “educationism” is so all-encompassing that, “...many adults in England cannot conceive of education allowed without schooling” (Lees, 2013, p. 19). The central narrative device of the book is ignorance of home education as a real, lived choice. Its focus is

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on the discovery as an “event”—on both societal and individual levels. Empirical evidence illuminates this discovery. Street surveys were initiated with the question, “Did you know that children don’t have to go to school?” Parents who were considering or had chosen to home educate were interviewed to find out about how they had discovered EHE as a possibility. Responses from interviews and the street survey highlight both the profound reach of an “educationist” mindset and the transformation that comes with awareness of other possibilities. Respondents talk eloquently of their liberation and excitement, as well as of the intrepidity that comes with their newly acquired awareness.

The book is at its most convincing when elucidating on the transformatory opportunities uncovered by reclaiming education from schooling. Providing parents with more knowledge about educational possibilities has the potential to fundamentally alter “our politics, our society and our futures” (Lees, 2013, p. 12). Educational choices become “acts of knowledge,” imbuing social actors with democratic rights and responsibilities—essential for a flourishing civic engagement. Through this process, Lees argues, education, “...becomes a way to care for the self, privileging this focus over and above learning for external ends such as test scores, university attendance or career triumph” (Lees, 2013, p. 73). While the book focuses on parents’s choice to home educate, it is clear that the opening of minds to education beyond schooling has far reaching implications—for how the parents in the research perceive and enact their own learning and education, for other non-formal and informal community-based educational activities, for lifelong learning policy and practice...

Lees rightly states that, “There is far too much ignorance about EHE practice for it not to require greater and better information provision and robust frameworks of understanding” (Lees, 2013, p. 151). She makes a persuasive case that the academy focuses almost exclusively on schooling and fails to understand or explore alternatives. The book starts to redress this imbalance. It is extremely well researched, drawing extensively on policy documentation and empirical research. Extracts from Education Select Committee meetings are especially revealing. It is well grounded in key critical literature, including Holt, Foucault, Kuhn, Biesta, Harber, Meighan, Soussa and touching upon crucial conceptualisations like Freire’s “conscientization” and Illich’s “deschooling.”

*Education Without Schools* raises crucial issues and questions and there are times when you want the author to expand further—most notably in three areas. Firstly, the book understandably concentrates on elective home education as an alternative to schooling. It also makes reference to other alternatives to schooling and the reader is left wanting to find out more about these other alternatives. While there is passing reference to Friere and Illich, there is little about (existing or potential) informal and non-formal education—community-based, lifelong, convivial, widespread and voluntary modes of learning. The second relates to social justice and inequality. At various stages in the book, we learn that a have-and-have-nots divide exists in elective home education—both in terms of the perceptions and the realities of educational choices. It would be great to hear more about how elective home education and other alternative educational models might challenge existing inequalities—in ways that formal schooling has failed to for 150 years. The third is on the transformatory potential of technology to offer new modes of education beyond schooling. There are tentative and

speculative ideas presented toward the end of the book, providing tantalising hopes for the reader who is already persuaded.

At times, Lees risks overstating how positive EHE experiences are and how uniformly negative mainstream schooling is. She hints at powerful *othering* processes, that reduce home education to the exotic, spectacular or dangerous, but underplays the impact of these structural and cultural narratives and on the journey of discovery—that families are likely to experience tensions and discomfort, as well as excitement and liberation. Likewise, while we might agree that mainstream schools are too content-heavy, assessment-bound and driven by external ends, there are many learners and teachers within who perceive and act for education as discovery, autonomy and “care for the self.” Many children will experience similar emotional and transformational feelings from school-based discovery learning as those reported in this book.

But this minor point should not take away from the real value of this book. In fact, it provides a powerful counterweight to what Lees sees as a mainstream schooling paradigm. As the world becomes increasingly fast-paced, multiple and complex, surely Lees is correct when she states that, “A sense of education that seems to negate, exclude and ignore alternatives to schooling is unfit for the twenty-first century” (Lees, 2013, p. 156). In telling these stories of discovery, *Education Without Schools* presents a rich and provocative account of what education might be—autonomous, enquiring and humane. Above all, this is a hopeful book and one I would thoroughly recommend to anyone who understands (or could be persuaded to understand) education as, “a plurality of possibilities” (Lees, 2013, p. 13).

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