

‘THE HOLY GRAIL,’ TRYING TO DEFINE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: A BOOK REVIEWÉ OF THE PALGRAVE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOK OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

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Abstract

The Palgrave International Handbook of Education is an accessible text allowing the reader to discover for themselves their own definition of alternative education. The three key sections; Thinking differently, doing differently and acting differently allow the reader to find the chapters that refer directly to their situation and culture. I highly recommend the handbook to those interested in alternative education as it fills a much needed hole of cutting edge research into educational alternatives.

Keywords: alternative education, educating differently, democratic

Focus

The Palgrave International Handbook of Alternative Education is a much friendlier and accessible text than its grand name and hardback cover suggest. Its focus may appeal to readers of JUAL as it does not try to pigeon-hole alternative education into one box and has many chapters that focus on democratic and learner-centred education and posits itself as giving other stories away from the limitations of the mainstream educational system but also some interpretations of what has been defined as ‘alternative education.’ For example, Nel Noddings in the introduction explains that

Unfortunately, much of what is pressed on us today as alternative practice (perhaps especially in the US) is in direct opposition to what was recommended by Illich, Dewey, and Cronbach. Greater and greater emphasis is on standardisation of content, “best

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practices,” “scaling up” and standardised testing. Even charter schools, meant to provide a positive alternative to regular public schools, often fall back on authoritarian methods and strict regimentation designed to provide higher test scores. These schools are rarely forms of what we call here “alternative education.”

Nel Noddings, 2016: 2.

The book has 30 chapters with research from over 12 countries arranged into three parts; Thinking Differently, Doing Differently and Acting Differently. Work is covered from neuroscientists, psychology, educationalists, geographers and teachers in a wide range of methods - mostly qualitative but also quantitative and post-qualitative.

Thinking Differently

I recommend the engaging Autoethnographic chapter on life as a adult-teacher-boarding-staff-surrogate-parent at Summerhill Democratic school in Suffolk UK to be of interest to JUAL readers as the use of poetry, narrative and theory give accessible depth into the complexity of allowing young people to grow up autonomously. The Chapter by the well-respected Peter Gray adds gravitas to the historic successes of unschooling children from the hunter-gathers period.

The submissions from Nick Peim and Helen E. Lees, as they really spell out the hidden not-spoken-about truths of violence in schooling, will be supporting arguments for moving away from institutional learning.

Violent practices endemic to schools: bullying,... strict management of time and conduct, the arbitrary exertion of authority and age stratification. There are powerful forms of symbolic violence that operate through all educational institutions: the determination of

knowledge, the imposition of identities, the insistent promotion of the educational world picture, a rabid normatively and the everyday machinery of social reproduction.”

Peim, 2016: 147.

Possibly the most uncomfortable part for some will come from Lees (Ch 11) where she takes a radical but, I feel, not too progressive leap to scold education on its lack of consensual approach to children in not only their learning but their day to day lives in school. Explaining that education can learn from people involved in kink, fetish and BDSM lifestyles in how fundamental consent is into any interaction between human beings and by adopting consent into schooling then the UN human rights of the child could be met is explored.

Doing Differently

This section is helpful in giving vision for the possibility of educating differently around the world. It includes a detailed explanation of Forest Schools, a reflective piece on home education, and others on approaches in Brazil, Japan, Denmark. I found the historical overview of education, including progressive approaches and influential thinkers in Menter's Chapter, helpful in understanding the current situation of mainstream education in the UK. However, it was from Sugata *et al's* chapter that I was able to gain some hope that changes could be made that would be accessible to all children, not only those from privileged backgrounds. His work in India between 1999 - 2005, leaving internet-accessible computers in rural areas for children to discover and learn from has influenced his thinking for the future and the development of Self Organised Learning Environments (SOLEs) in the UK which

“Question the fundamentals of traditional education: a system that has its origins in the colonial and industrial ages and whose purpose, by and large, is to produce similar people.

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That purpose itself is now obsolete and so, perhaps, is the system. SOLEs are a first faltering step towards preparing our children for a future we can barely imagine.”

Sugata et al, 2016: 238.

Acting Differently

Acting Differently is a less cohesive section but it had a difficult role to achieve by showing many different visions towards the future. This section moves across many countries (including China, Israel, India, Ecuador and the UK) and explores wide ranging topics such as sex education, alternatives to using behaviourism in mainstream schools as well as spirituality and religion in education. It asks challenging questions of alternative education such as Smyth's quandary (Ch 25) of what can be altered if due to Neoliberal educational policies schools are unable to produce any meaningful change in schools? Deeper still and possibly of interested to unschooling readers of JUAL was the highlighting by Stern (Ch28) of the “false necessity of schooling”. However, possibly one of the more controversial chapters is Gunnarsson Dinker and Pedersen (Ch27), as they explore an idea of a pedagogy of unthinking the human, by unpicking speciesism (a presumption of human superiority) and giving suggestions for a vegan education.

Conclusions

I think the real strength of this book is its diversity of research, writing styles and countries covered and I think there are several chapters that will really pique the curiosity of interest for all people interested in alternative learning. However, I would have liked to have seen more examples and critiques of established alternative pedagogies such as Steiner Waldorf and Reggio Emilia, which I was waiting to come across after there were many mentions of Democratic education.

Initially, I was a little frustrated that the editorial did not have a clear definition of alternatives. With hindsight though, I agree with the volume that by allowing the reader to make up their own mind but also see the complexity and variety of interpretations that maybe allows a stepping away from there being a set definition of alternative, re-establishing a binary to 'mainstream or traditional' education and by following the ever changing, personal interpretation of alternative, new and less fixed understandings of education are possible.

I think this book fills a much needed gap in the market of diverse and rigorous academic and practitioner research into alternative education and I would recommend it to students, academics and parents interested in learning more about educating differently.

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