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The Palgrave International Handbook of Alternative Education. Edited by Helen E. Lees and Nel Noddings. Macmillan Publishers Ltd: London 2016

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Review by Dr Nicola Kemp

This substantial 'Handbook' of alternative education brings together a collection of theoretical perspectives and practices from a wide range of different educational contexts. The book can be considered less a handbook in the conventional sense and more a showcase of the treasures editors Helen Lees and Nel Noddings have collected "in our search for promising alternative forms of education" (p.2). Given the diverse nature of the focus (alternative education) and the geographical extent of its reach (international), it is important for the reader to understand what the editors were looking for in their search and where they looked. In terms of the 'where', Noddings's and Lees recognise that "The alternatives we seek may be found both outside and inside the places officially designated as schools" (pp. 1-2). This is important and differentiates the book from other recent publications such as Kraftl's (2015) *Geographies of Alternative Education* which focuses on alternatives outside the mainstream. However, Lees & Noddings are also wary of "much of what is pressed on us today as alternative practice" (p.2) such as charter or free schools, arguing they may be masquerading as alternatives whilst drawing upon conventional educational practices. Equally, they acknowledge the need for criticality when designating something as educational, arguing that much of what happens in schools "may not qualify as education at all" (p.2). It is clear from this brief discussion that both 'alternative' and 'education' are positioned by the editors as contested concepts and the intention is that the reader engages with them critically. It follows, then, that examples of alternative education may be found in unexpected places and that not everything which presents itself as such may qualify on closer inspection. In terms of the 'what' alternative education is, the editors avoid providing a definition but instead, celebrate the freedom "that we do not know 'exactly' what an educational alternative is or can be" (p.3). The editors, individually and then collectively, identify some principles to guide the reader. The principles of autonomy and self/social empowerment as expressed in the relationships between teacher and student and the ability of either party to make educational choices are particularly emphasised.

The handbook contains 30 contributions organised in three discrete sections: Thinking Differently, Doing Differently and Acting Differently; a classification which broadly reflects Stephen Kemmis's (2009) conceptualisation of praxis – thinking, doing, relating. Collectively it covers all ages from early years through to higher education and life-long learning and a range of different educational concerns. Readers may be drawn to particular authors or themes and each chapter can be read independently. However, there is also much to be gained by reading the whole collection because it allows connections to be made and reveals unexpected 'treasures.' The book has been developed as "a collection of voices" (p.3) and, like the spoken voice, the many written voices differ in tone, style and impact. There are familiar voices which are comforting and affirming but there are also unfamiliar voices which challenge and unsettle,

lingering in the mind well after the reading is completed. There are voices which are easy to understand, and those which require us to grapple and struggle. The editors challenge the reader to “dare to think on your own” and this is exactly what the book does.

The first section ‘Thinking Differently’ draws particularly upon the theoretical foundations of educational alternatives. The ordering and content of the section is well-justified by the authors in the introduction and this is vital context for the exploration of individual chapters. When reading such a substantial book, it is interesting to reflect on the voices that linger and to consider why. For me, the window Phillip Klaus provided into a day at Summerhill School was one such chapter. His auto-ethnographic portrait challenged both in form and content being a poetic interpretation and “filled with details of bodies, spaces and movement” (Klauss, 2016, p.33). It is a chapter about boundaries – social, physical and cultural – and the way in which these boundaries are constantly (re)negotiated within this educational context. It brought to mind Massey’s (2005) seminal text *For Space* and the relevance of her reconceptualization of space to educational thinking. Similarly provocative, although for different reasons, was Chapter 7 by Nel Noddings entitled ‘What Might Have Been: Women’s Traditional Interests.’ Here, she argues, that “educating for better home life might contribute not only to a reduction in poverty but also to the greater effectiveness of schools in teaching the standard curriculum” (p.97). She identifies three components of what this curriculum might encompass including housekeeping, peace and religion. A thought-provoking read, the chapter raises the question about the extent to which these elements could be considered ‘women’s traditional interests’ and also about the positioning of men and boys within contemporary contexts.

Part two, ‘Doing Differently’, provides nine examples of alternative practices from different international contexts including Japan, Brazil, Denmark, South Africa, USA and the UK. These provide fascinating insights into different educational cultures and demonstrate possibilities in practice. Here the emphasis is generally on description and detail rather than critical analysis. This is exemplified by Knight’s account of forest school in the UK (chapter 19) in which she presents the Forest School Association (FSA) model and documents its use in practice. Conceptual questions about the purpose and place of forest school in different educational contexts are not addressed with the focus instead on practical detail. Chapter 15 by Mitra, Kulkarni & Stanfield offers perhaps the most radical example of doing it differently in their exploration of Self-Organising Learning Environments (SOLEs). SOLEs harness the power of computer technology and the internet to provide opportunities for children to connect, communicate and collaborate. Big Questions such as ‘what causes global warming and how can it be prevented?’ drive sessions and virtual support is provided by ‘Granny’ e-mediators who offer a friendly adult presence. These ‘Schools in the Cloud’ could be considered as an extreme version of learner autonomy and self/social empowerment. In this scenario there is no human teacher; the more knowledgeable other is the non-human technology. As the authors recognise, this is an educational future “we can barely imagine” (p.238).

The final section ‘Acting Differently’ is defined by the editors as including “actual alternatives of substance, with form, with results, with consequences” (p.6). The boundaries between the sections on ‘doing’ and ‘acting’ at times feel rather blurred. However, this section contains some of the most inspiring and challenging material in the book. Aloni’s exploration of humanist education in Israel in Chapter 24 provides a compelling justification for educational

alternatives drawing on three inspirational case study schools. Equally, Noaparast's 'alternative' understanding of Islamic education in Chapter 22 provides a timely reminder of the need to challenge educational stereotypes and dominant narratives. The final chapter by Parker, Rose & Gilbert seeks to provide an alternative to behaviourism in schools through the development of attachment-based strategies. The question they seek to address, 'what happens when it [behaviourism] doesn't work?' is one which would seem to be of relevance to every teacher and educator.

There are no concluding remarks or attempts to draw connections between the different contributions at the end of the book which would have been helpful having covered such a diverse and complex territory. In spite of this, the Handbook convinces that the value of alternative education lies not just in the benefits it may provide to particular groups of learners who are engaging with it at any point in time. Rather, its ultimate value is in the challenge it can provide; to disrupt existing ways of thinking, doing and acting. For this reason it is an essential read for all educators.

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