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by Michael Fielding and Peter Moss

Reviewed by Kim Atkinson



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Author's Bio

Kim Atkinson is an early childhood educator and a pedagogical facilitator with the University of Victoria's Unit for Early Childhood Research and Development. She also co-coordinates, with Danielle Davis, the Images of Learning Project—an exhibit, blog, and series of presentations that highlights the work of ECEs and the competencies of children (www.imagesoflearningproject.com).

Over the many years I worked with families, I regularly heard stories about experiences with public school, and while the individual stories were all different, they shared a common thread: a deep sense of dissatisfaction. If I were to distill the dissatisfaction down to a single complaint, it would be this: a loss of identity or individuality within a system that narrowed who and what a child and a family could be and do. Standards, labels, routines, and prescriptive curriculum defined the school experience, requiring children and families to fit within their confines. From the 5-year-old who told me that “at school we have to do a lot of super sitting” to the 10-year-old that I invited back to attend preschool so he could regain some sense of himself, to the 16-year-old who simply stopped going to school because he was utterly bored, the grievances were wide ranging and ever present.

To all of these families I would like to have recommended *Radical Education and the Common School: A Democratic Alternative* by Michael Fielding and Peter Moss, a book that offers new possibilities for education and hope for what might be. The authors “set out what [they] hope is a real utopia, a fundamentally redesigned but pragmatically possible alternative for education and schooling” (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 2). Drawing on the work of two social

thinkers, Erik Olin Wright and Alberto Mangabeira, Fielding and Moss present a theory for the transformation of education.

Chapter 1 begins by describing two examples that illustrate radical education. The first project described is the schools of Reggio Emilia in Italy. The authors then discuss St. George-in-the-East, a secondary school in London which ran from 1945–1955. Both schools were built on a pedagogy of democracy and relationships, and both welcomed plurality and experimentation. The authors offer these examples as hopeful prospects before plunging the reader into a critique of current education, where schools have become a business “whose ‘mission’ is to use teacher-technicians to apply prescribed ‘human technologies’ to achieve predefined outcomes” (p. 17). The authors contend that public discourse about knowledge, values, ethics, the image of the child, and the image of the educator has been forgotten in the pursuit of market-driven economic values and goals. Democratic deliberation about the meaning and purpose of schools and education has been replaced by reductionist technical issues of defining outcomes and universal objective assessments for achieving predetermined ends. In the words of the authors, “the political and ethical have been drained out of public discourse” (p. 21) on education, thus our society has lost sight of education as both a public responsibility and a site for dialogue and democracy. The authors argue that schools, and thus learning, should open spaces for complexity, for new interpretations and connections, and allow for the emergence of independent thinking. The failure to invite plurality and engage with complexity ignores the global state in which we are confronted by environmental and economic crisis. Our current educational systems “seem stuck in a time warp . . . displaying an unwillingness or inability to engage with either new thinking or the state we are in—and worse, the state we are heading towards” (p. 33).

Chapter 2 sets out Fielding and Moss’s “overtly utopian” (p. 39) approach to radical education, an approach wherein democracy is the heart. The authors argue for a definition of democracy that moves past the formal sphere of the public institution of government, instead inviting a multidimensional concept of a relational ethic of everyday being and thinking. Democracy in this sense is a way of life, a cultural climate of social relationships that allow for “human flourishing and the conditions under which it can be best fostered” (p. 41). Radical education, then, sees schools as sites of democratic fellowship where individuals come together in a person-centred learning community. Values integral to radical education include social and political justice, solidarity in a common effort, shared purpose, plurality and multiplicity of values, and experimentation to invite thinking beyond the known. The image of the child and the image of the teacher in this context are of individuals who are rich co-constructors of knowledge, in relationship with each other and the local community. Schools are places of connection between citizens, forums for encounters “which [are] capable of many collective purposes and projects of common interest and benefit” (p. 53).

The authors stress that these schools cannot remain isolated or exclusive. Rather, they require expansive reciprocity with both the local and global communities to make learning processes visible and open to dialogue. They encourage not only shared responsibility by community stakeholders, but full engagement in problematizing boundaries and contesting dominant discourses.

Critical to pedagogical practice in radical education is reenvisioning relationships between adults and children within an ethic of care and adopting a dialogic approach of genuine openness and reciprocity. Ongoing, attentive dialogue between adults and children of all ages opens up understandings and opportunities for making meaning together that “nudge us away from the individualistic preoccupation of personalization and high-performance schooling towards a person-centered approach . . . not as an instrumental lubricant for a smoother running organization” (p. 80).

Chapter 3 outlines what a school for radical education might look like, how it might be structured, organized, and staffed to become a place of ethical and political practice. Short vignettes describe models of schools that are small in scale, age integrated, and staffed with multidisciplinary teams of teachers, pedagogues, and atelieristas. The pedagogue is described as attending to the whole child, his/her mind, body, creativity, and history, recognizing the interconnectedness of relationships and social context to learning. The atelierista is described as an educator with an arts background who brings aesthetic sensibilities and ways of seeing to offer broader perspectives to the processes of thinking and learning. Interdisciplinary teaching teams are integral to the common school to invite multiple approaches and connections. The authors also argue for schools as public spaces where all members of the community come together to “produce ideas, images, knowledge, communication, cooperation, and affective relations” (p. 111). Common schools are for and of the community, offering resources, advocacy, and services particular to the area and members it serves.

The final chapter addresses the obvious questions: How can such a school, such a radical common education, come to be a reality? How can this “overtly utopian” approach be put into practice? The authors are clear that they will not offer an authoritative set of how-to guidelines because the notion of centralized diktat is contrary to the values and philosophy they purport. Instead they offer “modest possibilities . . . in which each step brings new learning and worthwhile change” (p. 135). The arguments and reasoning brought forward embrace utopian thinking as a means of envisioning possibilities and potentials and as a valuable process of contesting the dominant education discourse. In further exploring possibilities of conceptualizing the transformation of education, the authors call for local governments to nurture small local organizations and projects that endeavour to think differently and transform education, but they stress the importance of national governments recognizing that democratic education is needed to bring about a more sustainable and flourishing society. They end with an impassioned plea, a warning that we are facing a global crisis where maintaining the status quo of constant growth,

hyper consumerism, high inequality, environmental damage, and weakening of social responsibility is not sustainable. The very future of humankind, the authors contend, depends on renewed democratic practices to collaboratively respond to the challenges before us. The transformation of education must be seen as an active partner in the larger process of transforming society.

This is a book I want to hand out to colleagues, students, and parents. In fact, I want to hand it out to everyone I know, and to a lot of folks I don't know. As an early childhood educator who has been thinking and working toward transforming practice in my field, I found this book to be powerful in its impassioned argument for the need for change.

In a field whose workers are chronically underpaid and undervalued and that typically has little or no paid time for professional development or team meetings, opportunities for critical reflection and transforming practice are limited. Compounding this limitation is the fact that we are often so immersed in the daily activities and challenges of our roles, the tensions inherent in relationships with colleagues, families, and children, underfunding, staff turnover, and dealing with regulatory bodies, that important issues of the meaning and values of education and school are put aside. In my experience, conversations around transforming practice sometimes get caught up with change in the minutiae of the daily practicalities: Should we use clay instead of play dough? Should we remove plastic toys? But to what end? The more important questions are often neglected: What is the meaning of school? What is education for? What values do we hold about education? Who is responsible for education? Whose voices are heard and whose voices are silenced? *Radical Education and the Common School* makes it abundantly clear that we ignore these questions at great risk to our collective future.

Dialogue must begin among early years professionals, instructors, students, parents, administrators, and regulating bodies. This book is just the thing needed to spark it. As much as it is alarming, even depressing, to read the authors' critique of the current state of education, schooling, and the global crisis, their critique is convincing, and it makes the above-mentioned limitations seem like insufficient excuses for inaction.

The book offers many reasons to be hopeful and many examples of ways to move forward. While Fielding and Moss call for systemic change in education policy, they are clear that creating small, independent projects that embrace democratic fellowship and ethical practice equates to steps to wider change. They argue that we cannot wait "for a sudden revolutionary rupture" (p. 149) to call us to transform education, but that transitional practices must be initiated, bringing with them hope, ideas, and new learning and releasing "the imagination of what could be" (p. 148). In other words, it is incumbent on all of us in the early childhood field to envision a new way of doing early learning and care, to think differently, to start from where we are to transform our practice.

Reference

Fielding, M., & Moss, P. (2011). *Radical education and the common school: A democratic alternative*. London, UK: Routledge.



In this issue:

From the Editor's Desk

Special Issue: Neoliberalism

Guest Editor Dr. Luigi Iannacci, PhD, Trent University,
Peterborough, Ontario

I've got my EYE on you:

Schooled Readiness, Standardized Testing, and Developmental
Surveillance

by Emily Ashton

Bear-Child Stories in Late Liberal Colonialist Spaces of Childhood
by Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, Lara di Tomasso, Fikile Nxumalo

Producing Neoliberal Parenting Subjectivities:

ANT-Inspired Readings from an Informal Early Learning Program
by Rosamund Stooke

Neoliberal Fun and Happiness in Early Childhood Education
by Cristina D. Vintimilla

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A Democratic Alternative

by Michael Fielding and Peter Moss

Reviewed by Kim Atkinson

Call for Contributions:

'The Visual Arts in Early Childhood Education'

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