

---

## Book Reviews

### **Religious Education and Social and Community Cohesion**

MICHAEL GRIMMITT, 2010

Great Wakering: McCrimmons

336 pages, ISBN 978-0855977108, £17.50

We live in an aggressively secular age. A Christian woman working for British Airways who wears a cross around her neck is asked to remove it for fear of offending other people. A nurse who prays for a patient loses her job. In the introduction to his book, Michael Grimmitt writes that along 'with a tendency for the British press to present religious matters in a critical and often demeaning light ... there can be no doubt that as a result of writing by Dawkins and others the public perception of religion in the UK has undergone a negative change in the present decade'. The decision not to include Religious Education (RE) in the English baccalaureate for schools, introduced last year, sends a signal from the Government about its view regarding the importance of RE as a school subject. It can be no surprise that what is happening in wider society is reflected in the classroom, where RE is often viewed by pupils as an old-fashioned subject which is not relevant in modern society. From *The Simpsons*' Ned Flanders to *Eastenders*' Dorothy Brannning, popular culture depicts the general perception that those who practise their faith are barmy. *The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science* aims to 'advance the public understanding of science and sponsor research into psychological unreason', 'the latter presumably being typified for Dawkins by religious belief and practice' notes Grimmitt. His book invites debate about the role RE has to play in social and community cohesion, but as he makes clear in his Extended End Piece, what happens in schools does not happen in a vacuum. What goes on in the classroom reflects what is going on in wider society. Schooling can make a contribution to the creation of a just and equitable society, but education cannot achieve this in isolation:

any changes in RE which are directed towards the encouragement of social and community cohesion, will, like all educational policies, only succeed when those factors which contribute to inequality, discrimination and alienation in society are ameliorated by enlightened political, social and economic policies which can

actually deliver equal opportunities for all, especially with regard to employment, housing and education, irrespective of ethnicity, religion, class and gender. (p. 262)

This book features excellent, thought-provoking writing by a number of eminent educators. There is an interesting chapter by Abdullah Sahin giving an Islamic educational perspective and another by Clyde Chitty on the role of education and schooling with reference to sexuality and sexual diversity. Norman Richardson writes on RE and community cohesion in Northern Ireland: 'it is not unusual to hear the suggestion that the situation would be considerably improved "if religion was taken completely out of the schools"' (p. 220) but this 'runs the risk of perpetuating avoidance and unawareness' (p. 228). There are chapters giving historical perspectives; on the contribution of local authorities; about the role of Citizenship Education and how closely this should be linked to RE; and about whether public examinations in RE feature community cohesion strongly enough. In short, this book raises numerous questions about what can be achieved by Religious Education, and how this subject should be taught in schools: what should the RE curriculum look like, what pedagogical approach should be adopted?

However, on my first reading of the book during July 2011, I wondered if the challenges and opportunities for fostering community cohesion via the teaching of RE would be much debated by teachers, busy defending their departments against cuts. On 19 July the House of Commons' Education Select Committee published its Fifth Report on the English Baccalaureate. The Report noted that 'a survey of nearly 800 schools, conducted by the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE), recently found that almost one in three secondary schools plans cuts to RE teaching'. The *Times Educational Supplement* reported in February 2011 that the NATRE survey found planned cuts to both short and full-course GCSEs in Religious Education from September 2011. It was reported that 'In some cases schools are reported to be ignoring their statutory duty to offer RE at all' ('RE teaching time slashed in English Bac scramble', *Times Educational Supplement*, 4 February 2011). But by late August, and my second reading of this book, things were looking different. RE, and social and community cohesion, could not have been more relevant.

Grieving father Tariq Jahan's calls for calm following the murder of his son Haroon dramatically halted the Birmingham riots this summer. 'I'm a Muslim. I believe in divine fate and destiny, and it was his destiny and his fate, and now he's gone.' Rather than resort to fury and retaliation, Mr Jahan rose above the hatred and tension and urged members of the community not to retaliate: 'Blacks, Asians, whites – we all live in the same community', he said. 'Why do we have to kill one another? Why are we doing this? Step forward if you want to lose your sons. Otherwise, calm down and go home – please.' The rioting, burning and looting that had been taking place in English cities stopped. Tariq Jahan's religious response to his son's death brought back a sense of reason and morality to the community: it is interesting to note that

where secular society failed to be brought to order by the Government or police, there was respect for Allah and for God. Reverend Hayley Matthews wrote in *The Guardian* that she was protected by her dog collar as she walked through the streets of Salford during a night of rioting, '[whenever the rioters] came near me, one or other of the brick throwers would halt fire and ensure I was somewhere safe – on occasion even escorting me and physically shielding me from rocks – before giving the OK for more missile throwing' ('The Salford Riots and the Greed of the Disenfranchised', *The Guardian*, 10 August 2011). On the streets there were RE lessons going on: during rioting in Croydon Fr Michael Scanlon was recognised by one of the looters (Fr Michael had done his grandfather's funeral a fortnight earlier). One boy came up to the Catholic Priest and asked, indicating to some looted goods on the pavement, 'Would it be a sin if I took those?' The point is that, as Grimmitt writes, 'the aspiration to combat injustice and inequality and to build a society which offers equal access to all is not inconsistent with the values and teaching of all religions. In broad terms, therefore, secular and religious values should be able to cohere and support each other' (p. 13). Fr Michael answered the boy's moral question, but went further, 'Well, first of all, yes it would be a sin if you did. But also think about this. If you were caught with those things, you would certainly be regarded as having stolen them, and your whole future could be ruined' ('Hope amid the Ashes', *The Tablet*, 20 August 2011).

Michael Grimmitt has skilfully brought together a collection of writing which asks some exciting and challenging questions of RE and those who teach it. He stresses the importance of the need for research into whether the intended outcomes of different pedagogies of RE are realised or not. The events of this summer make the need for such research, and the debate regarding pedagogies in RE, even more pertinent. Grimmitt, and contributors to his book, naturally make reference to 9/11 and the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005. Tariq Jahan's story is different. Not for a long time has religion hit the headlines in a positive way, bringing calm and respect across communities comprising of people from different backgrounds and faiths. As classes returned this September there is much for those with a professional interest in RE to think about and debate. And this book is essential reading for anyone who wishes to engage in that debate.

**Lucy Russell**

Dr Russell is a Visiting Tutor at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and a freelance writer. Her books, *Teaching the Holocaust in School History* and *Dr Dr I Feel Like ... Doing a PhD* are both available from Continuum. *Correspondence:* [drlucyrussell@gmail.com](mailto:drlucyrussell@gmail.com)

**Radical Education and the Common School: a democratic alternative**

MICHAEL FIELDING & PETER MOSS, 2011

London: Routledge

194 pages, £24.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-49829-6

Stepping out hopefully, this book declares it is exploration, argument and pursuit. Hope, though, is a heady brew, to be sipped advisedly:

It is a question of learning hope. Its work does not renounce, it is in love with success rather than failure. Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed ... The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong. It will not tolerate a dog's life ... and it looks in the world itself for what can help the world; this can be found.  
(Bloch, 1959/1995, p. 3)

These are among the opening words of *The Principle of Hope*, the magnum opus of German philosopher and maverick Marxist (for some a revisionist, for others a renegade), Ernst Bloch. Bloch doesn't register in the index to the book under review, and speaks in the body of the text only at third hand, through a quotation from a paper by Ben Anderson. Yet something of that militant optimism in which Bloch sought to engage with 'the huge occurrence of utopia in the world ... [and] bring philosophy to hope' (Bloch, 1959/1995, p. 6) pervades the text. Fielding & Moss offer a vision of public education inspired by what Bloch called *docta spes*: educated hope – hope that has learned from its own thwarting as well as from its evolving realisation in history.

Fielding & Moss begin by roundly rejecting the equivalent in education of a dog's life: 'the dictatorship of no alternatives ... the clarion call of neoliberals and market fundamentalists ... the current dominant but failed and dysfunctional discourse' (pp. 1, 2). In its place they offer a synthesis of ideas, possibilities, examples, arguments and counterblasts. Their text is threaded with 'tales of hope' (p. 3), some contemporary, some from the past, in keeping with Bloch's belief that the thinking of the past is not yet finished: its utopian surplus is still live, awaiting social conditions wherein it can ripen again and be realised. Chief among the many tales Fielding & Moss present are those told through the life-work of the book's dedicatees, Alex Bloom and Loris Malaguzzi. Alex Bloom envisaged, and for a decade from 1945 until his death, led, the extraordinary venture in democratic education which was the English state secondary school, St George-in-the-East. His Majesty's Inspectorate reported on the school in 1948, and wrote of its 'pioneering and missionary work ... always

in a spirit of confident adventure ... which has given a vision of what the new form of secondary school can be' (quoted in Fielding, 2009). Loris Malaguzzi played a crucial part in sustaining the early years' educational project begun at the close of World War II by members of the Union of Italian Women in the region of Emilia Romagna. Steadfast in their desire for a future better than the fascist past, and an education which would free their children from 'an age-old subjection by official schools which ... sooner or later expelled the students of humble origin' (Barazzoni, 2000, p. 18), these women worked to fund, establish and maintain first a nursery school, and eventually a regional system of early years' education, now known worldwide as the Reggio Emilia approach.

St George's, and Reggio, 'cases in viability' (p. 3) work in Fielding & Moss's book in part as inspiration, in part as touchstones. The authors frequently return to these examples, realised alternatives to the state of educational affairs in England now. They also gesture towards others, such as the international Schools-Within-Schools movement, the work of 'free-time pedagogues' in Sweden, and the Sheffield Children's Centre. These are case studies of more properly democratic and dialogic approaches to education. They challenge our current dispensation, in which:

[e]ducation and the school have become a machine for ever more effective governing – of children, of teachers and of parents – in the interests of producing a flexible self-managing workforce for an increasingly competitive and increasingly consuming global economy ... Our contention is that the political and ethical have been drained out of public discourse on education and schools: the discourse is reduced to discussion of the best technical solutions for achieving predetermined and self-evident ends, at the expense of debate about critical questions, purposes, values, understandings or concepts. (pp. 17-18, p. 21)

As a result, education has become 'the dismal subject': stifling, enclosed, instrumental, dehumanising. It is the reverse of what it should be; the shadow of itself. Today's schools, the authors argue, make little or no space for caring about people as intrinsically valuable, for plural and diversified thinking, or for considering questions urgently posed by capitalism's unsustainability and by other threats to the future of our species.

So Fielding & Moss throw back the shutters, let in some light. They talk about 'real utopias', achievable transformations of the educational state we're in. They ask what is to count as knowledge and as learning, and who is to decide? How are people to be seen, known and treated in school? What will shape the right and good relationships within school, and between the school and the communities it serves? In place of neoliberal capitalism's 'impoverished techno-managerial public discourse' (p. 28) Fielding & Moss offer: 'radical education, the common school and the equal society ... a democratic political and ethical project of participation and creativity' (pp. 36, 38). Schools for human flourishing.

To flesh out their understanding of what constitutes 'radical education' Fielding & Moss foreground thorough-going collaborative and democratic principles and practices, replace 'personalisation' with an ethic of care and 'personalism' (drawn partly from the work of John Macmurray), promote the importance of a willingness to experiment, reject conformity in favour of 'plurality and the unexpected' (p. 15), and elaborate 'a pedagogy of relationships and listening' (p. 15). They discuss the roles students and teachers can take up within the new-made space, the nature of its organisation, and the importance of its human scale. They point to what they perceive as more 'successful societies, like the Nordic countries, without ... chronic levels of dysfunctionality' (p. 37) to buttress their belief that radical education and a common school can play a part in bringing such societies about. They acknowledge the chequered history of 'progressive' education, and do not shirk neoliberal, socialist and feminist criticisms of it. The general stance the authors take is resolutely radical rather than revolutionary.

If radical education is the theory, the common school is the form it shall in practice find. Questions to do with who goes to the common school and at what age, how they are to be taught, and why their school, although comprehensive, is not called a comprehensive school, are explored. The way the common school responds to diversity and otherness is considered in some depth, and makes use of the refreshing Italian idea of '*confronto* – seeking people out because we want their point of view or to look at something we are or do in the light of another way of being or doing' (p. 172). The relationship between the common school, its community and the state is also raised. 'All citizens ... have an interest in and responsibility for the education of children. It is a public responsibility involving the national political community – the nation state – and the local political community – or local authority' (p. 122). Such words resonate more than ever at a time when school-aged children arrested during the August riots are demonised in the media that they may be the more harshly processed by the legal system. Fielding & Moss abstain, though, from considering what the class nature of the capitalist nation-state means for the durability of sometime-countenanced reforms. I will return to this issue, which seems to me bound up with aspects of their final chapter, 'Transforming Education'. In this the authors revisit some central ideas, explore the Gramscian notion of 'prefigurative practice' (p. 148) or being the change you want to see in the world, and put their faith in the transformational power of 'radical incrementalism' (p. 161).

This book is a sustained, thought-out and sometimes passionate analysis of what is rotten in the English education-state, and a worked-through signposting towards a better way. It restores to us examples, perspectives and traditions of thinking which the dominant orthodoxy has attempted to wall off. It does so in part by deploying the alternatives made possible in St-George-in-the-East, in Reggio Emilia and elsewhere, and in part by quilting into the text quotations (and therefore ideas and new points of departure) from a wide range of educational, social, ethical and political thinkers. Among these are Bloom and

Malaguzzi, of course, but also John Dewey, John Macmurray, Carla Rinaldi, Vea Vecchi, and (most importantly in terms of ideas for social transformation) Roberto Unger and Erik Olin Wright. This inclusive and synthesising approach reminds that the dominant discourse is always multiply-contested. Alternatives abound. It can, however, make for disjointed reading, as if the thread of the authors' particular argument kept fraying rather than resolving. At times too the writing style, for stretches characterised by a certain sameness of tone and rhythm, and tending to favour long multiclausal sentences replete with abstractions, wearied this reader. The authors speak of borrowing language from other social thinkers; would they had trusted more to their own!

But, it might be retorted, the arguments here are necessarily complex and nuanced, tricky to articulate and properly demanding of the patient reader. A careful case is being gathered, established, argued and pursued in a policy climate unremittingly hostile to what is being said. Easy enough to sing: 'be reasonable: demand the impossible now!' But thoroughly to work 'the tension between dreams and practice' (p. 2), to discover the usable utopian surplus in the 'dismal subject', and extensively to explore and at times trail blaze for the establishment of an alternative realisable vision may justly entail some knotted prose. The authors acknowledge they write for an international audience (p. 167); perhaps they have in mind a readership more university- than school-based.

There will be those in school or university whose hard heads dismiss this book as soon as it speaks the word 'utopia', which it does within the first ten lines of chapter one. Moreover, and perhaps more scandalously, it goes on yoking 'utopia' with the word 'real'. Such readers, or non-readers, will point out that Italy's experience of fascism and resistance, and the history of public education in that country, have no parallels here. They will remind that England's post-war secondary modern schools such as St-George-in-the-East were prevented from offering exam courses, and consequently freed from those constraints that accompany the getting of grades. Alex Bloom's students might well dance through the lunch hour or spend all day at the local swimming bath untroubled by the need to secure their target levels. Society was different then.

Well, yes and no. Alex Bloom, albeit in the language of his time, writes in familiar-enough terms about many of the children at his school:

The number of broken homes, of homes that are unhappy or where moral values are lacking is sadly large. So many of our children are 'lonely and bothered' that the school environment is – save for some of the clubs – the only place wherein they can feel wanted and secure. The school roll, moreover, comprises an unusual medley of tongues and race and colour. (Bloom, 1948, p. 120)

The argument that things are different now so the 'tales of hope' have no purchase is really an attempt to justify an anti-utopian stance. Against this, anti-anti-utopians, Bloch-heads if you like, will recall:

[e]xpectation, hope, intention towards possibility that has still not become: this is not only a basic feature of human consciousness, but, concretely corrected and grasped, a basic determination within objective reality as a whole. (Bloch, 1959/1995, p. 7)

For me, the main problem isn't with that utopian naming and thinking which drives this book, but with the enigma of agency. Who's to do what is to be done? Bloch's faith rested in the organised agency of the class capitalism itself produces to be its gravedigger. Fielding & Moss leave the question more open, albeit hopefully. They look to the plethora of alternative democratic experiments and projects, brought into being by disparate individuals and groups, to 'proliferate, develop and survive' (p. 168) at local and if possible national level, and hence to contribute to the required thoroughgoing social transformation. This is in keeping with the authors' radical rather than revolutionary perspective. Raymond Williams, tracing the development of the word 'radical', notes that by the mid twentieth century it 'seemed to offer a way of avoiding dogmatic and factional associations while reasserting the need for vigorous and fundamental change' (Williams, 1976, p. 252). Fielding & Moss are disinclined to be dogmatic and factional, and say as much (p. 135). Yet they load the dice:

[T]ransformation is not a matter of waiting for sudden revolutionary rupture, which many see as never likely to happen ... Rather transformation is a complex and gradual process of steps taken. (p. 149)

This is far too sketchy. They are not revolutionaries who are content only to wait rather than to labour long and hard in preparation for the moments of potential rupture the contradictory dynamic of capitalism itself provides.

Against what they see as the unlikely happenstance of revolutionary rupture, the authors argue for 'radical incrementalism', reforms that hold out 'the possibility of a deep break with the hegemonic dominance of capitalism' (p. 161). They claim such reforms (and associated practices which pre-figure aspects of the educational dispensation they wish to bring about) can enact 'fundamentally different ways of being in the world' (p. 161). They suggest 'radical incrementalism' differs from compliant or co-optable gradualism through its 'cumulative and transgressive persistence' (p. 161). Yet this appears belied by some of their own evidence, such as the innovative early childhood education project in New Zealand promoted by one government and terminated by the next (p. 146, n. 8). It seems to me their approach avoids reckoning with the nation-state as a structure of class-power, capable not only of retracting small or piecemeal concessions to reform but of fundamentally redirecting the development of policy (and strengthening the means of its enforcement) in the service of 'the hegemonic dominance of capitalism' or perceived ruling-class interest. The authors go no further than to note the 'striking ... continuity of policy' (p. 169) across the last three decades despite changes of government.



'Radical incrementalism' may well be transgressive; but can it be either persistent enough or cumulative enough to reach the point of the 'deep break'? (And what would such a moment be if not a revolutionary rupture?)

Many will hope it can. Should it prove otherwise, indefatigable hope will learn the lesson. For education as a policy-term and in common parlance remains to be reclaimed 'as a democratic project and a community responsibility' (p. 171), while 'the school as a public space of encounter for all citizens' (p. 171) has yet to be built. This book, timely and provocative, rallies and resources people in that great work, and helps advance it.

**Patrick Yarker**

### *References*

- Barazzoni, R. (2000) Brick by Brick: the history of the 'XXV' Aprile People's Nursery School of Villa Cella. Reggio Emilia: Reggio Children; cited in Hall, K., Horgan, M., Ridgway, A., Murphy, R., Cunneen, M. & Cunningham, D. (2010) *Loris Malaguzzi and the Reggio Emilia Experience*, p. 19. London: Continuum.
- Bloch, E. (1959/1995) *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice & Paul Knight. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bloom, A. (1948) Notes on a School Community, *New Era*, 29(6), 120-121 (see also <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/cei>). Quoted in M. Fielding (2005) Alex Bloom, Pioneer of Radical State Education, *FORUM*, 47(2), 133, n. 8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2005.47.2.1>
- Fielding, M. (2009) Student Voice, Democracy, and the Necessity of Radical Education. Presentation at University of East London. <http://escalate.ac.uk/downloads/7978.ppt>
- Williams, R. (1976) *Keywords*. London: Fontana Press.

