

At the Center of All Possibilities: Transforming Education for Our Children's Future. Doug Selwyn (Ed.). Peter Lang, 2022, 202 pages, ISBN 1433194651

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# Critical Education

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## Book Review

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*At the Center of All Possibilities: Transforming Education for Our Children's Future.* Doug Selwyn (Ed.). Peter Lang, 2022, 202 pp., ISBN 1433194651.

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The optimism of the title *At the Center of All Possibilities: Transforming Education for Our Children's Future* immediately drew me in. Struck against the current rhetoric and omnipresent realities of existential threat, terms like *possibility*, *transformation* and even *future*, once emblematic of public education's problematic promise of progress in the United States, seem even more hopelessly romantic than they ever did. But I am a romantic, albeit a somewhat cynical and certainly critical one. Doug Selwyn's edited book in Peter Lang's *Counterpoints: Studies in Criticality* series is a pedagogical powerhouse of writings, reflections, conversations and testimonies that dips and swings among humanist, progressive and pragmatic criticalities with cautious optimism, thoughtful critique and the romance of praxis.

Driven by the overarching question, what might it mean to "educate our young people so that they know what they need to know and learn what they need to learn so that they are able to live healthy and sustainable lives, and to pass on a healthy and thriving society (and planet) to their children and grandchildren," Selwyn's constellation of authors collectively explore schooling, teaching, learning and student activism (p. 2). The book is divided into eight compact sections with brief but useful introductions by Selwyn. The first section, "Schooling within a larger social context" contextualizes the project of transforming schools for the well-being of children within larger societal structures of inequality in this country. The two chapters in this section critically explore the impact these structures, more particularly meritocracy and public health, have on the lives of children and youth, families and communities. Section 2, "The Purpose of Education and the Roles that Schools Play," continues the first section's focus on the "inextricability of school and society" (Mathison & Ross, p. 38). However, the second section's chapters focus on distinctions between the purposes of schooling and the aims of education and how these contrasting and often conflating notions have played out historically and contemporarily in schools and societies, but most important, in the lives and learning of children and youth. Section 3, "Learning from Teaching During Covid," offers two reflective narratives from Seattle teachers

thinking through pandemic pedagogy and the lived curriculum of Covid-19. Section 2 discusses the necessity of educational and societal critique. Chapters in Section 3 illustrate critical reflection in action. Collectively, these three sections lend social, historical, theoretical and practical insight into questions regarding how to “reconsider, to reorganize our educational system so that it truly serves all of the students with the goal of helping them to become healthy, confident, and able to act on their own behalf and on behalf of their communities and the planet” (p. 35).

Section 4, “What Our Children Need to Learn,” seems to serve as the book’s central core. It features the most chapters (six), which travel diverse curricular ground: preschool in Uzbekistan, ethnic studies, GED curriculum, Native peoples’ representation across the curriculum, Black Lives Matter and the curriculum of history, and higher education. Similarly, the forms the chapters take are diverse. For example, Chapter 10 is structured as an open letter from former education professors to educators highlighting the significance of the sovereignty of Native peoples, and how they might begin to adapt their lesson plans about Native peoples to take it into more substantive account. Chapter 11 is a conversation between Selwyn and teacher, author, editor and activist Jesse Hagopian about the Black Lives Matters movement and what it might teach us about restructuring curriculum that is “focused on liberation, that’s focused on solving problems” and will “engage our students in a way that they are and also help us achieve a better society” (p. 106). While the chapters in this section are diverse in curricular emphasis and form, they are unified in their efforts to “inspire readers to reconsider what is most essential about our work as educators, what it is that will best serve our learners, and how we can transform our classrooms so that we are placing the most time and attention on what matters most, and what holds meaning for our young people” (p. 64).

Section 5, “Who Shall Teach,” shifts the emphasis from curriculum to focus on cultivating and sustaining the “teachers we need” (p. 118). These three chapters all address the critical role teachers play in social justice work and teaching as a political act. Chapter 15, a conversation between Selwyn and Wayne Au, explores both the challenges and possibilities of teaching as a political act in which teachers, particularly teachers of color, are precariously situated both within and against systems of white supremacy and settler colonialism. Section 6, “Thinking about Freedom Schools,” consists of Selwyn’s introduction and a single chapter looking at the freedom schools as historic and contemporary alternatives to the conundrum the Au chapter highlights. This is a moving chapter in which author Caroline Whitcomb connects the liberatory aims of 1964 freedom schools with the current work of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center, a freedom school in Oakland, California. In some ways, this chapter is representative of the critical moves of the book as a whole, which offers an “honest and clear-eyed” view of how schools and society are (dis)functioning for young people, proposes change, and then offers tangible examples of transformative educational practice that is not confined to schools (p. 27). Section 7, “But What About Assessment?” also includes an introduction by Selwyn and a sole chapter (17) presenting a conversation between Selwyn and Jack Schneider, the leader of the Beyond Test Scores Project, about measuring what matters. Again, the book’s formula is at work: thoughtful critique, proposed changes and practical examples of transformation in action. In regard to the latter, the conversation in Chapter 17 highlights the work of the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment and their School Quality Framework featuring teacher-created, classroom-embedded and teacher-scored performance assessments. Assessment as described here is approached as a cornerstone of practical transformation undertaken through joint action.

While the discussion of curriculum in Section 4 is arguably the center of this book, I think Section 8, “Learning through Activism,” is its heart. In this last section we get to hear from “youth activists who are taking action on behalf of themselves, their communities, and the planet” (p. 177). This section includes the transcript from acclaimed climate activist Greta Thunberg’s TED talk titled *Save the World by Changing the Rules*, and a conversation between environmental activist Aji Piper, one of the youth plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the federal government alleging violation of the “youngest generation’s constitutional rights to life, liberty and property” (p. 179). Section 8 also includes excerpts from Piper’s congressional committee testimony regarding the impact of climate change. This section reiterates a guiding question borrowed from Thunberg, which Selwyn adapts in the book’s introduction and evokes in the introduction to Section 8: “What use is an education if that education does little to address the world’s crisis and what good is learning ‘facts’ if those facts lead nowhere? What is the lesson for the rest of us?” (p. 179). Spoken in the voices of youth activists, the urgency for change that runs across chapters is amplified in its final section and the stakes seem even higher. In contrast, the book ends with a warmer, less fiery conclusion in which Selwyn reassures, “We are in this together and are wiser and more powerful when we join together” (p. 202). Selwyn then sends us off with the wise words of Myles Horton, proposing love as the heart of a “good radical education” (Bell, Gavents & Peters, 1990, p. 177 as cited in Selwyn, 2022, p. 202).

The chapters in this book collectively build on a tradition of criticality that suggests a good education is necessarily a radical education undertaken through joint action—communities, schools and families working alongside each other to transform. Even though these very same critical traditions demonstrate the ways in which systems of power and privilege thwart these efforts, Selwyn’s book makes such an education seem a little more possible and transformation almost practical, and powerfully demonstrates social justice as embodied by teachers and youth through action rather than an ongoing lesson perpetually out of reach. And after the existential shakedown of the last three years, the romance of praxis might be the most radical thing of all.

However, radical resistance can also wedge itself into pedagogical utility. And this is perhaps where I find this book most powerful. I have already used it as an anchor text in a doctoral curriculum course and assigned chapters from it for a doctoral course in social foundations. In the economy of competing demands, students often make unfortunate choices when it comes to reading, or rather, not-reading. In his published dialogs with Paulo Freire, even afore mentioned liberatory educator Myles Horton laments that he can’t get his students to read enough. The book is in no way an easy read. But Selwyn’s use of multiple narrative formats and short chapters help encourage busy students to actually read it. Moreover, Selwyn’s book seems to hit a sweet spot between using critical theory to expose the challenges of this educational moment, positing opportunities for transformational change, and providing substantive inspiration through examples, sometimes radical examples, of joint educational action aimed at moving us closer to “an equitable, just, sustainable society” (p. 3). Make no mistake, the inspiration offered in *At the Center of All Possibilities: Transforming Education for Our Children’s Future* is not the toxically positive pablum of the post-pandemic stridence for superficial notions of empathy, or the sometimes too-easy empowerment talk of liberalism’s enduring promises. The inspiration in Selwyn’s book is measured and hard-won, forged in the critical durability of embodied examples of joint action toward a world we want to live in—worlds we want our children and their children and so on to inhabit.



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