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**Seddon, T. (1994), Context and Beyond: Reframing the Theory and Practice of Education, Falmer, London, 230 pp., \$115.**

Bruce Haynes  
*Edith Cowan University*

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Harris, Kevin (1994), *Teachers : Constructing the Future*, The Falmer Press, London, 150 pp., ISBN 0 7507 0301 6 (Pbk) \$34.95.

Kevin Harris makes a "case for teachers learning, guarding, preserving, fostering and transmitting the most valuable manifestations of human achievement and capability and, at the same time, promoting rational social reconstruction. What I am looking to envisages teachers being deeply involved in decision-making with regard to the content and value of the substantive curriculum they are able to control and transmit, and with regard to forms of social relations and conditions that might well be sought and constructed .... teachers of a certain sort would be well placed to engage in, rather than retreat from, activities directed towards social reconstruction". (pp. 64-5).

Because only teachers "of a certain sort" are justified in intervening in the lives of children at school, teacher education and, in particular, critical theoretical awareness are especially important. The renewed emphasis on teacher education is important at this time because Harris (p.viii) claims "By 1995 they (teachers) are likely to have lost, in a single decade, most of the gains made in the preceding century".

Teacher education could enable teachers "become better placed to be critical and in a sense 'transcend' the dominant forms and substance of consciousness and value-formation". (p.102) Such teachers-as-intellectuals would then be justified in being active participants in schooling so as to "transmit and advance knowledge suitable to, and capable of, empowering people to become critically aware of the world and to function as autonomous citizens within a democratic society". (p.103)

This book is written for teacher education students, practising teachers and teacher educators. It is written from a Marxist perspective including influences of Althusser and Gramsci. Any author who can say of their own earlier work that it is an example of "crude reproduction theory at its worst. But it was not just crude and uncritical: it was also politically naive, and absurdly defeatist". (p.23) is eminently admirable and worth serious consideration.

Given the accessible nature of the writing and the importance of the issues raised I look forward to engaging my pre-service teacher education students in discussion of this book. In so doing I hope to come to grips with and better understand how the distinction between productive and unproductive labour is drawn in chapter 3 and whether it has significance for the students or is limited to shaping Harris' perspective. Likewise it will be instructive to engage the students in discussion of whether there is merit in the claim that "if the social conditions for making free and autonomous choices (and acting as participating citizens in a democratic society) do not exist in practice, then educational policy advocating autonomy, choice and democratic citizenry is likely to be little more than empty idealist rhetoric". (p.51)

As the book contains a useful summary of idealist educational theory (chapter 1) and reactions against it (Chapter 2) and significant chapters of the role of the teacher (Chapters 5-7) together with a 22 page bibliography then it should prove to be a challenging and worthwhile experience for students to come to terms with it.

Bruce Haynes, Edith Cowan University.

Hatton, E. (Editor), (1994), *Understanding Teaching: Curriculum and the Social Context of Schooling*, Sydney, Harcourt Brace, 415 pp.

This book is designed as a text for Australian and New Zealand pre-service teachers and takes the view that teachers are "active agents in curriculum change and development whose work necessarily involves social justice". (p.xvii) The intention is to present material which is intellectually challenging and can be used in pre-service teacher education to introduce students to the social, political and ethical complexity of classroom teaching.

Given a view that teachers and students construct the curriculum through their school work, Grundy, Warhurst, Laird and Maxwell provide chapters on interpreting the curriculum, curriculum contestation, curriculum development and curriculum evaluation. As the view that the work of teachers' construction of the curriculum necessarily involved social justice issues, a number of authors present chapters from a liberal social justice point of view. These chapters consider issues related to social class, gender, sexual orientation, multiculturalism Aboriginal education Maori education rural education and school and community.

The book is divided into three parts, viz., (1) Teaching, (2) Curriculum, and (3) Social Issues but the division is misleading as the five chapters in Part 1 could have been placed in Parts 2 or 3. To use 'teaching' as the title of Part 1 may give rise to expectations of consideration of the act of teaching but the scope of this book is limited to aspects of the enterprise of teaching and schooling. There is a chapter in which a Rawlsian conception of social justice is outlined and defended as an example of "how theories of justice constitute a justification for educational policy". (p.83) It is somewhat surprising that this account was not balanced by a chapter on the current dominance of economic rationalism and political expediency of administration in educational policy in Australia and New Zealand. With only a brief section in Kennedy's curriculum paper (Reading 12) on economic context, students do not seem to have a basis for reflection on competing theories. Also, without an adequate historical account of the development and function of mass schooling (the historical chapter deals with secondary school curriculum issues). it is hard to see how these chapters will challenge students to be reflective about schooling in Australia and New Zealand. They may well be placed to oppose some of the dominant trends in schools in which they work but without some of the understandings to help make that opposition effective. A modified subtitle might be a better description of the book's content "Curriculum and the social issues of schooling". Because curriculum is central to understanding teaching and the social issues presented in this book are significant to the purpose and conduct of schooling then it may have been better to entitle the book, rather than the conclusion, "Just Teaching".

Within its limitations, this is a most interesting recent text for pre-service teachers in their efforts to develop an understanding of their role as teachers in schools which include social justice as part of their educational policy. The authors are experienced teacher educators in Australia and New Zealand and include some of the leading researchers in their respective fields. The chapters are well written, so that the arguments are accessible to students, with significant references to permit substantiation or development of the points without being intrusive. The inclusion of readings, on the other hand, seems less justified. Most of the readings (or some recent, local equivalent) should be readily accessible in any Australian or New Zealand teacher education library. The increased cost of the book due to the inclusion of the readings may not balance the convenience of having them under one cover.

This book should be seriously considered by all those seeking a text for pre-service teachers who need to develop their understanding of social justice in teaching.

Bruce Haynes  
Edith Cowan University.

Seddon, T. (1994), *Context and Beyond: Reframing the Theory and Practice of Education*, Falmer, London, 230 pp., \$115.

Teacher educators might set this book for their graduate research students to read, as the issues it sets out to tackle are both important and difficult. Seddon identifies an increased use of 'context' in educational research publications, particularly during the 1980's, and "This trend to consider context, its centrality to contemporary educational experience and current educational politics, its significance as a way of seeing the world and its implications for action, provide the broad canvas with which this book grapples". (p-5).

Yet 'context' is a problematic notion. 'Context' "can be used to refer to an external milieu, a matrix of action and a medium of meaning, and these can be both actual and symbolic". (p-56). Seddon seeks to distinguish between positivism (a-contextual) and various forms of understanding which take context seriously - atomistic, interpretive and relational.

"The process of defining a context relative to some other phenomena does more than simply name an empirical referent .... Such contextualization is therefore as discursive practice which defines and signifies what counts as 'real' and 'relevant' and simultaneously marginalizes and dismisses what counts as 'irrelevant' or 'unreal'". (p.8)

Seddon claims to ground her theoretical work in a case study of New South Wales education (by which she seems to mean state schooling) in the 1930's. It is somewhat odd that this case study uses contextual categories, which are taken for granted, when the thesis of this book is that such categories are socially constructed and contested. This thesis also applies to 'education' and 'teaching' and Seddon argues "that in the depths of depression the liberal meritocratic educational formation was reformed as an illiberal meritocracy. As the political and economic crisis began to be resolved from 1932, this reformation showed a retreat from some aspects of illiberality, beginning the consolidation of a qualitatively distinct form of social democratic liberal meritocracy". (p.135).

However, this book "does not detail the actual mediations of the social, institutional and discursive setting in the process of policy formation" (p.136) either in general or at the school level. Thus the claims of effects of the contextual categories on schooling remain largely assertions. While the effects of context on schooling remain the focus of this book it can only make a limited contribution to the avowed purpose of the enterprise.

"Our practice in education, in research, teaching, policy and practical politics, is then a contemporary participation in processes of social change. It becomes a part of and contribution to wider social questions about what constitutes a good life and how that end might be pursued". (p.197)

The important parts of this book are difficult to read as specific arguments for the theoretical claims are not presented in the case study. Some of the discussion in Chapter 9 "Between

"Corporatism and the New Right: The Contemporary Politics of Australian Education" provides a basis which may help students to come to grips with the theoretical position Seddon is attempting to develop.

Bruce Haynes, Edith Cowan University

Biggs, F. & Potter, G.K. (1995), (2nd Edition). *Teaching children in the first three years of school*. Melbourne Australia: Longman.

The main aim of this book is to help student teachers develop appropriate skills for teaching 5-8 year olds, particularly during teaching practice. The book is written for the Australian, New Zealand and English markets, which has influenced its scope and content. No doubt this is a good move for the publishers but it does make parts of the book less useful for some students, because certain information may not align with a specific context. For example, the age for beginning school varies in different states in Australia. Five year olds may attend a full-day preschool program on the primary school site, and so will not experience the "dramatic changes" discussed in chapter 2. Thus, some information will have little specific relevance for some students, although a great deal can be generalised.

As a reader for student teachers, the book fulfils its role well. The second edition is written clearly, is comprehensive, and easy to read. As a student text it should be easy to follow, but unfortunately the 2nd edition does not have an updated index, and the numbers in the index do not align with page numbers. In addition, there are a few errors in the in-text and end-text references. These types of publishing errors are likely to cause a great deal of annoyance to busy students, and will reduce the usefulness of the text.

The book is broad in scope, with a variety of chapters that address a wide range of topics including some aspects of child development, classroom organisation, children with special needs, curriculum planning and classroom management. The breadth of material means that some weighty matters receive brief attention. The authors note that the book serves as an introduction to topics, and they provide lists of readings throughout the text. However, at times, the authors refer readers to some dated literature (for example, Clarke, 1956), and on occasions the absence of relevant up-to-date Australasian or North American literature is puzzling. It is surprising that the authors do not mention "Developmentally Appropriate Practice", or the current debate on issues surrounding these principles. Similarly, in the discussion of ethics, the authors do not discuss the Australian Early Childhood Association's code of ethics. In the section on teacher evaluation, there is no reference to the substantial literature on "teacher as reflective practitioner". Possibly this decision reflects the fact that more than half of the sixteen books listed in the self-evaluation section are over ten years old, and none published in the 90s.

The chapter on children with special needs contains some excellent material, but at times current information is not included. The authors note that teachers may positively influence children's self-esteem by using specifically designed curricula, and the list of publications includes books from the 70s and 80s. However, recent research evidence shows that the type of "self-esteem programs" recommended by the authors are ineffectual (Hattie, 1992). Notwithstanding these comments, the book contains a rich variety of materials and information that make a valuable starting point for student teachers.

A particular strength of this book is its clarity of style and content, which make it a very suitable student text. There is a wealth of information contained in the book, and it provides the stimulus for many discussions of issues central to the education of young children. It is a valuable addition to early childhood student teachers' reading lists.

Loraine Corrie  
Edith Cowan University

Peterson, L. (1995). *Stop and think learning: A teacher's guide for motivating children to learn: including those with special needs*. Camberwell, Victoria: The Australian Council for Educational Research.

This is designed to be a practical book for classroom teachers who want to help children to improve in problem areas. The title "Stop and think learning" sums up the simple approach outlined in the book. It consists of a student, in collaboration with a teacher, identifying the student's areas of strength and weakness, nominating those areas that the student is willing to improve, and proposing ways to improve them. Five examples of students and teachers using this approach are briefly described.

Although the general idea of helping children problem-solve is appealing, the approach in its present form, as described in this book, has two related drawbacks. One is that very little research is cited, with the result that it is unclear how effective the advice in the book is likely to be when applied in the classroom. Secondly, if the book is to be of practical use to teachers, considerably more detail needs to be given. For example, although follow-up is recommended, monitoring of the action plan is not discussed. Very few practical examples of the use of the approach are given, and those that are given are brief. It would also be helpful if the book indicated which children would be likely to benefit from this approach.

A. M. Blackmore

Potential and opportunity: Critical issues for Australian Catholic education into the 21st Century edited by Helen Raduntz, Auslib Press, Blackwood South Australia. 1995 xxix + 264 pages. (\$29)

Two options face Catholic education in fulfilling the responsibility of educating appropriately for today the 20% of Australian children who attend Catholic schools. One is to educate young people 'for transformative action' by developing their critical consciousness; the other is to continue educating them in the current norms. The first is seen as being done in the name of social justice, the second is seen as the continuation of an initiation into an unjust society. Such is the position of editor Helen Raduntz, who has gathered together a collection of sixteen papers attractively presented, entitled *Potential and Opportunity: Critical issues for Australian Catholic education*, designed to facilitate by their critique, example and discussion possibilities for the first option.

The book's stated aim is to challenge Catholic education to engage in facilitating change toward a socially just world through promoting critical dialogue with its outcome of transformative action. Religious education is nominated as the catalyst through which such dialogue and change can be effected, the means by which major issues can be addressed. The

key role of religious education is demonstrated in the contributors, all of whom are experienced religious educators from across Australia, from both Catholic and non Catholic contexts. All but three have been involved in the Religion Studies Department at the University of South Australia.

While both title and preface are remarkably coy about the key role religious education will be given in such a task, ten of the sixteen chapter headings include the words 'religious education'. The chapters are divided into five sections under the topics of 1) *policy*, 2) *curriculum*, 3) *social justice and religious education*, 4) *gender and religious education*, and 5) *critical teaching and religious education*. While the main theme would appear to be that religious education can be the catalyst from a social justice perspective to promote critical thinking and change, a subtheme emerges, which is, in fact, a critique of religious education as it stands. The exploration of critical issues via the tool of religious education is intersected with religious education itself becoming a critical issue. This leads to some confusion in that the friend becomes the enemy without warning in the text. What begins as an exploration of critical issues in *Catholic* education becomes imperceptibly a critique of religious education. In other words the promotional leaflet could have emphasised that the crucial role seen for religious education in the change process towards social justice includes a questioning of **its** current practice.

Graham Rossiter's introduction seeks to deal with this tension by pursuing a chronological line, first setting the context of Catholic education and its responsibilities, clarifying the concepts of 'critical' studies and religious education. In the second part he reflects on the study of religion in Catholic schools. None better equipped, with an integral involvement in religious education from his Australia-wide pioneering work in the early eighties to the present day, Rossiter believes that Catholic education guidelines and programs are attempting the impossible task of seeking to satisfy two opposing needs at the same time. These are the theological needs of the clergy and the spiritual needs of youth. While the answer may lie in having two concurrent forms of syllabus, each framed according to specific needs, Rossiter concludes with a plea for an issues-based curriculum rather than one consisting of descriptive content as the most suitable for engaging young people.

Had the *arrangement* of the papers continued on this tack, that is a grouping of the papers demonstrating 1) the general issues of catholic education, 2) the positive and creative ways religious education has attempted to address these issues, and 3) areas where religious education itself needs to achieve further transformation, the chapters would have fallen more readily into an integrated pattern. The reader would not then have constantly to adjust to identify the writer's stance. The review will adopt this frame work.

### **Issues in Catholic education**

A unifying theme of the book is that, in theory, the Catholic church, and therefore Catholic schools, espouse the concept of social justice. This is characterised by an expressed concern for the oppressed, a 'preferential option for the poor', and their empowerment. A major issue then explored is the discrepancy that arises between theory and practice, between ideals and reality, between market viability and support of the 'oppressed.' An evaluation of the Sydney archdiocesan's 1988 Vision Statement (Rose-Marie Hoekstra), and three interpretations of the concept 'preferential option of the poor' (Leonie Green) demonstrate the inherent struggle of this dichotomy.

### **Possibilities through religious education**

Included in a rich array of possible ways forward through religious education, many with examples of programs attempted, are papers on the framework of liberation theology (Anne Harris), teaching theology (Nigel Mitchell), social justice through teaching for resistance (Basil Moore), religious education for the environment (Simon Cobiac), sexism (Margaret O'Toole), the 'feminine' in language in the portrayal of a Catholic saint (Edna MacDonald), views on racism from Aboriginal educators (Margaret Cresp), and strategies for students with other than English language background (Susan Ward).

### **Critique of religious education**

While acknowledging that Thomas Groome has revolutionised the cause of religious education in Catholic schools with his shared praxis model, both Terence Lovat and Helen Raduntz take issue with the model's claim to be 'critical'. Raduntz devotes her chapter to arguing that Groome's shared praxis model, grounded neither in critical pedagogy or in liberation theology, lacks the credentials to be a 'radical religious education pedagogy'. Lovat challenges Groome's acceptance of the authority of the Christian story, a credibility, he argues which should itself be part of the critique in an educational setting. even if not in a faith community.

Action for change where the religious education policy itself was the justice issue, is described by Helen O'Brian, where through parent involvement, a school seeks to address a policy which discriminated against non-Catholic children. Perhaps the severest criticism of religious education comes in the curriculum section in Maryka Spurling-Jane's evaluation of the implementation of the Melbourne guidelines in South Australian Catholic schools, and in Deborah Magden's study of classroom approaches to the study of the Bible. The unsubstantiated generalisations in this last paper sit at odds with the social justice theme of the book. An analysis of six curricula, including those designed for other than Catholic contexts, denounces their mainly life experience-based approach as reflecting the authors' theology and denying the insights of contemporary biblical scholarship. A plea for more opportunity to interact with the Biblical text is made yet the one curriculum (non Catholic) based on biblical units is dismissed as evangelical and fundamentalist. Whose theology now? In contrast Mitchell's paper on theological method and DeBrenni's on how educators might approach the catechetical text of the Catholic church offer the educator more informatively argued options on dealing with religious texts.

Sixteen authors ensures that sixteen different emphases and interpretations of religious education and social justice are given voice. Freedom and autonomy to make meaning, untrammelled by any claims of authority, is the educational stance. Christianity came to birth in a violent age, and has always been characterised both by struggle, and by the need for renewal and transformation in the face of becoming institutionalised and conforming to the dominant powers in society. This group of religious educators, challenging and provocative, will most certainly move readers out of their comfort zone to consider some of the major issues facing educators today, whether through religious education or other disciplines. They have made a valiant effort to hone up the critical tool of religious education and demonstrate the possibilities. A word of caution, that in their zeal, the passion characteristic of liberators, that they too will need to be open to critique. In their critique of authority, an authoritarian note and sweeping generalisations are a temptation, such as in 'offering young people a religion of authority or exclusiveness as a counter to the anxiety and insecurity generated by today's social upheavals *can only* degenerate into an intolerant and isolationist fundamentalism that negates mutuality in *all* human relationships and communal living' (my italics).



In the last twenty years the face of religious education has changed dramatically, as educators drew on contemporary educational theory, developmental psychology, and theology. Hovering over the scene was the pervasive question of faith education, its role, parameters, credibility and relation to religious education. Now with evaluation, experience and social change further transformation is in train, claiming religious education has a far more powerful role to play than has as yet been envisaged? Read the book, engage in the dialogue and be prepared to change and act!

Cynthia Dixon  
Edith Cowan University