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Book review

Book review: *Slow knowledge and the unhurried child: Time for slow pedagogies in early childhood education*, by Alison Clark

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Peer review

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Abingdon: Routledge, 2023, 172 pp.; ISBNs: 978-0367-50881-4 (pbk); 978-0367-50880-7 (hbk); 978-1003-05162-6 (ebk)

There was a certain serendipity in my being asked to review this book; I had no foresight of just how loudly this would speak to my own values concerning education. I ordered an inspection copy, which (as is sadly the case these days) came as an electronic version, but as soon as I started reading, and all my most revered educational theorists began to appear – Biesta, Malaguzzi, Ball, Foucault – I decided that I needed to own a paper copy. It was money well spent. I love this book. It should be noted at the outset that both time and values are tricky, ethereal concepts. Clark's discussions concerning our hurried teaching environment and the pressures of performativity are enthralling, but her attempts to translate these into more concrete actions are somewhat less convincing. These are big ideas, big issues and big truths, so to then align them with something as physical as pedagogical documentation is a challenge that verges on the impossible. These latter sections are a little weaker, but in no way detract from the overall value of this book.

In her opening sections, Clark adeptly explores the problems that are inherent in our current educational system. Ever-moving targets, a constant pressure to produce better results, in less time and with fewer resources. An environment where there is a glaring disconnect between the quality pedagogical theories on which much of our teaching has been established and the expectations of our institutions and of governing policy. And of course, time is established as the focus, taking time, managing time. At a conference more than 10 years ago, I heard Barbara Czarniawska (2013) speak about how, when we are walking, we slow down to remember and speed up to forget. She discussed how in today's high-speed lifestyle, knowledge is attained rapidly and lost just as quickly. Speed comes before thought and ideas are blurted out and remain shallow. Her ideas stayed with me (clearly) and this is the first text I have come across that thoroughly explores these concepts. From the first chapter of this book, I was captivated.

Clark refers to many concepts that chime with me as a social pedagogue, one being the concept of flow. She discusses the elasticity of time and how for each of us our experience of time is personal. She cites Rovelli (2018) who describes how 'hours fly by like minutes and minutes are oppressively slow, as if they were centuries' (p. 52), dependent on how connected we are with our activity, with the caveat that such absorption in tasks is not possible within our clock-driven classrooms. Clark opines that the opportunity to wallow in the present moment, to dedicate all our senses to topics that have captured our imagination, cannot exist in an education system obsessed with 'what looms ahead' (p. 21). Education is about making optimum use of every minute to pack in knowledge in preparation for the tests that lie ahead. Clark discusses how the ability to work 'harder, faster and better' (Ball, 2010, p. 125) has now become our measure of worth.

Clark also examines how the 'heart' has been squeezed out of education, as its purpose has transmogrified into delivering 'the knowledge and skills that business needs' (p. 8). This is described as 'shallowness' or 'depthlessness'. She frequently refers to Stephen Ball (I'm a huge fan, so this works for me) and his belief that 'the neo-liberal subject is malleable rather than committed, flexible rather than principled' (p. 5). The social pedagogical concept of 'head, heart and hands' is not only referred to directly, but also indirectly when citing the work of Aoki (1983) who describes the learning relationship between pedagogue and subject as 'a holistic activity of the total person – head, heart and lifestyle, all as one' (p. 116).

The final synergy between Clark's work and social pedagogy is found in recognising the importance of really listening to others and finding connection. And this, Clark argues, requires us to slow down; to 'be with'. One of her research participants refers to cultivating – cultivating culture, space, being together and, as Clark points out, cultivation takes time. She refers to Senge et al.'s (2005) idea of 'deep listening', of being open beyond one's preconceptions which resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) question of 'What more is there to see?' This is about finding the time to listen more fully and to discover full potential.

As mentioned previously, in the middle sections of the book, where Clark attempts to make concepts more concrete through topics such as pedagogical documentation and storying, the argument becomes a little weaker and the connections with time are a little more tenuous. After all, the reality is that teaching is time-bound, there are only so many hours in the day (and frequently so many children), we cannot create more time, but this does not lessen the central messages of this book.

The final sections of the book are, admirably, a call to arms to challenge the impatience of our clock-driven schools and to reassess the purpose of our education systems. It calls for resistance to what Deleuze and Guattari (2004) refer to as 'sameness' and a willingness, and encourages us to accept 'doubt and uncertainty', 'difference and disagreement' (p. 128) as a facet of listening pedagogy. There are echoes here of Reggio Emilia's concept of teacher as a fellow researcher with the child, alongside rather than ahead of them (Rinaldi, 2001). Clark's final argument is that 'avoiding short termism and standing up for the longer view is a priority of education at this moment in history and for our planet' (p.131), but she acknowledges the difficulty in communicating this to families embroiled in market-driven approaches to education. Hopefully, this book has gone some way to communicating an alternative view to a wider audience.

I am delighted that this book has won accolades (it won *Nursery World's* Professional Book of the Year in 2023). The recognition of this book's worth is not only well deserved, but brings hope that Clark is not just speaking into an empty void. Now we just need everyone to read it, because, as Fisher (2020) reminds us, reassessing what is gauged as educational 'success ... is a collective and collaborative endeavour'(n.p.).

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