

## Book review, forthcoming 2012. Journal of Beliefs and Values

**Exploring well-being in schools: a guide to making children's lives more fulfilling** by John White, 2011, viii + 151 pp., Abingdon and New York: Routledge £21.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-415-60348-5, £75.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-415-60347-8:

John White asks the important question, What is education for? He notes that the traditional *academic* design came out of a different 'horse-drawn' age (p.144) arguing that reviewing and changing direction is so difficult that inertia results. He recognises that critics might label his views as utopian, but seeks through this book to highlight how 'well-being' might be a helpful curriculum purpose. "Equipping everyone with the wherewithal for a flourishing personal and civic life will become their [schools'] clear, unclouded purpose" (p.144). This is the fulfilment of the subtitle. He even hopes for the end of the examination system (p.106). Being a philosopher, he is concerned to define his terms, and in particular the term 'well-being'. He declares a debt to the writings of Joseph Raz on well-being. This dominates Part One, at the end of which, being a secular humanist, he deals with 'Depth Without Spirituality?' and 'The Meaning of Life', in both of which he emphasises the need for children to be presented with a broader view of meaningfulness than religious concepts.

Part Two focuses on 'education for well-being'. "A flourishing life is one filled with successful and whole-hearted engagement in worthwhile activities and relationships" (p.113). Well-being involves worthwhile work as well as leisure and is relative to the individual's interests. A chapter on 'a more equal society' not only emphasises well-being as being achievable across the ability and vocational range (his example was of road-menders) and points to a major decrease in working hours (he mentions 15 hours per week) both to spread work across the whole population and allow time for broader fulfilling activities. Schools without examinations can encourage interest, curiosity and excitement in ways not possible in the current unfulfilling system of keeping 'noses to the grindstone' (p.120). He attacks the hegemony of the subject curriculum as a defence of what schools have always done, seeing no philosophical justification of this particular model of knowledge. He works towards an aims-based curriculum which is personally fulfilling and builds a foundation for long-term well-being. Schools will of course still teach subject knowledge but in more relevant and more integrated ways. In the task of developing well-being/fulfilment *for all*, equipping everyone "to lead a full, rich life" (p.129), the traditional curriculum is an obstacle; but since it has served the privileged well, there will be powerful resistance to change. The list of aims is not radical: the curriculum (at home and school) should be engaging, whole-hearted, enjoyable, worthwhile, and should develop the imagination, and enable success rather than failure. The definition of 'worthwhile' is drawn broadly and is not an elite category chosen by the powerful. The arts are especially valued as a route to deep reflection in "an age when religious notions of fulfilment carry less weight" (p.131). Dispositions (personal qualities) includes social and moral understanding. What the resulting school curriculum would look like is not spelled out in detail – schools need to be free to make their own choices within the overall agreed aims. This was of course the situation before the 1988 National Curriculum.

This is not an academic heavily referenced work but a straightforward popular and colloquial attempt to express concerns about current education, and to suggest that there may be a better way. How education might need to be organised for 2030 or 2050, when information is instantly accessible through miniaturised machines, is something we need to address globally. Helping children develop curiosity and engagement is something which current educational arrangements are not good at. The need to discipline large classes is not conducive to helping pupils feeling good about themselves, and the teaching-tips industry is dominated by behaviourism (rewards and especially punishments) applied in ways which are insulting to the pupils (called 'buggers' in one highly commercial series) and an obstacle to the development of positive relationships between child and adult. One aspect of the book that needs development is that of criticality: pupils need to question and challenge all the assumptions and information they encounter. They are, and will increasingly be, living in an information swamp. It is hard for them to discriminate between important and trivial, correct and incorrect, biased or objective, bigoted or balanced. This needs to be built into learning from the earliest stages, and pervade the entire curriculum over time. This applies to what they read, on paper or screen, and what they see in the media. In an exploitative world, they need to be wise to attempts to exploit them, and develop skills and strategies to protect themselves. This not only applies to child protection issues and internet safety, but also to advertisements and other attempts to persuade. Dictatorial schools (that is, schools which dictate in authoritarian ways how to think) are exploiters and not partners in protection. This book about radical educational strategies, is in the tradition of John Dewey, John Holt, Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire. They complained about massive sums of public money funding a service at best ineffective, and at worst damaging to children. In today's information explosion, the question of how education needs to evolve over the next decades ought to be treated with great urgency.

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