

THE WAY OF MINDFUL EDUCATION: CULTIVATING WELL-BEING IN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Rechtschaffen, D. (2014), W.W. Norton and Company: New York and London.
ISBN: 978-0-393-70895-0 (pp. 224, £ 15.99, pb)

Reviewed by GRAEME NIXON

Mindfulness is everywhere. From the front cover of Time magazine, to boardrooms, parliamentary sub-committees, health services, locker rooms and schools, mindfulness has arrived. This book should therefore be welcome to a growing number of school educators who are curious about mindfulness and its applications within their secondary or primary school classrooms. Rechtschaffen, a therapist and founder of the US-based Mindful Education Institute, argues that mindfulness is a tool that can cultivate awareness; control impulsivity; enhance regulation and social awareness, and develop emotional intelligence, both in pupils and in their teachers.

Rechtschaffen argues that children at the present time live in a state of “continuous partial attention” and that they, living in an over stimulating, increasingly mechanised world, have become ‘dysregulated’. This is a state of continuing stimulation, stress and inattention. For Rechtschaffen, our children have become the canaries in the coal mine; harbingers of the toxicity of developed society. Mindfulness is therefore a means by which young people and their teachers can regain the present, and develop qualities that enhance their attention, self-awareness, presence and communication. His aims in the book are to provide an overview of the mindfulness education movement; guidance about how to develop mindfulness and be maximally present with ourselves and others; ideas about how to create a mindful classroom, and provide detailed curricular guidance and lesson plans for the introduction of mindfulness in schools for a range of ages and stages.

There is a lot to commend Rechtschaffen’s book, particularly the lesson ideas and outlines of possible differentiation for pupils. For the teacher (or parent) who is new to mindfulness I would recommend Rechtschaffen’s book. It provides orientation for those new to mindfulness with young people, including an acknowledgement of some of the barriers to the introduction of mindfulness practices. The necessity of teachers grounding this in their own deepening practice is also a repeated and important theme. Mindfulness can be no ‘off the shelf’ thinking skills strategy. Another strength is the fact that Rechtschaffen’s book surfaces the need for compassion (heartfeltness) more than other books in the mindfulness canon to date. Further, Rechtschaffen’s view that while mindfulness is ubiquitous to religious traditions, it is not particular to them, is a skilful way of

navigating the secular-religious binary that prevents certain people from accessing the subject.

However, there are times when the discerning reader is left asking for more research and substance. For example, the idea of 'dysregulation' needs more robust explanation and scholarly references. At times claims could be a little more circumspect. For example, at one point it is claimed that childhood impulsivity and criminality are linked with no reference to research that establishes this. Though Rechtschaffen does acknowledge certain issues and sensitivities in introducing mindfulness there could be more discussion around areas of consent, confidentiality and optimal group size. Other issues such as typological mistakes; a lack of clear structure, and sweeping, unreferenced attributions to certain figures (such as Freud), also undermine the overall prospectus.

At one point Rechtschaffen claims that when you practice mindfulness "pretty soon your whole world is shining" (p68). This reviewer would prefer a more careful consideration of the evidence. Overall, a good primer for mindfulness and its introduction into schools, but one that should lead teachers and adults working with children to deeper and more careful study of the field.

RESEARCH METHODS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: AN INTRODUCTORY GUIDE

Penny Mukherji and Deborah Albon
London: Sage Publications 2015 (2nd Edition)
ISBN: 9781446273692 (pp. 344 , £ 24.99, pb)

Reviewed by: SUSAN HENDERSON, JOYCE LESLIE and KHADIJA MOHAMMED

This book enables early years practitioners at all stages of their career to identify key strategies for undertaking purposive research beyond the 'ivory towers' of the institution, in the more familiar domain of their own early years settings. In so doing, the authors contribute to raising the status of the profession by encouraging practitioners to become accountable to research and show how what they often already know intuitively – in terms of the importance of child-led practice, inter professional dialogue – can be applied in the name of good, ethical research practice.

The foreword provides an overview of the purpose of the book and outlines the strengths of this new edition. Thereafter the book is set out in four parts with a synopsis at the beginning of each part. Each chapter includes clear objectives, reflections and references to further reading. Indeed, we note a fine example of 'practice what you preach' whereby the authors advocate the use of web-based research and so, in this new edition, they provide a companion website to the book. This includes an interactive glossary, quizzes, podcasts, free journal articles and activities, all of which can be used effectively in workshops. As the second edition

of a well established text, it remains an essential read for anyone engaged in the field of early childhood education.

This updated edition also includes international research from a wide range of countries and this was welcomed by our team. It not only helped us to address aspects of the 'internationalisation' agenda that most Higher Education Institutes are currently promoting but also encouraged our students to develop their knowledge and skills in relation to early childhood research globally.

Many of the readers of this book will be approaching research for the first time, yet are undertaking a lead practitioner qualification such as the BA Childhood Practice. They may have already undertaken a degree of research and/or interrogated methodologies for other purposes, such as ways of effectively supporting children's learning. In a future edition, Mukherji and Albon might therefore provide space to acknowledge the diverse backgrounds of readers accessing this book, and in so doing, challenge – as well as reassure – more experienced practitioners about their understandings of the differences and similarities between practitioner (action-based) research and reflective practice. In addition, an exploration of the challenges commonly encountered or perceived by practitioners as they develop new professional identities as practitioner-researchers would also be welcomed by the reviewers.

Indeed emphasising trust does not preclude professional and ethical responsibility, which we are pleased to see has been extensively revised in this second edition. Yet the difficulty that many institutions now face is ensuring that this trust is reflected in the decision-making processes of University Ethics Committees, which in our own experience can be subject to logistical constraints. In particular, whilst many practitioners would readily advocate participant-centred approaches to their practice, students may not have the opportunity to hone their *research* skills in this area due to the (justifiable) need for university ethics committees extensively to deliberate over proposed research on vulnerable groups. To this end, the reviewers would welcome a more extensive discussion around the wide ranging ethical dilemmas which may arise in practitioner research, supporting readers to recognise and reflect upon situations which cause conflict across the researcher and practitioner roles within practitioner research. The researcher's position of power over participants is acknowledged by the authors, but given the diverse communities of practice in which practitioner research may be undertaken, a wider discussion of ethical aspects such as autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice would be beneficial.

Hence whilst Mukherji and Albon's book is applauded by the reviewers – supporting the many diverse routes for undertaking research with children and other practitioners – its utility may become more apparent post-university study, where our own students are able to undertake child-centered research under the guidance from their local authority or private employer. And to that end, we would also welcome greater emphasis on the mechanisms, ethical processes, and practicalities of 'sharing' research amongst others -including participants, other practitioners, the local community, academia – particularly given the many avenues of dissemination 'open' to practitioners via social media, the internet and beyond. An example is the SSSC 'Workforce Solutions' website whereby graduates were encouraged to upload their dissertations for public dissemination

– more opportunities like these are advocated by the reviewers (<http://workforcesolutions.sssc.uk.com/new/chp.html>)

The status of the profession might be raised through informing others about the quality of our research practice and inviting dialogue – and scrutiny - from our peers, our colleagues, our stakeholders and the media. We are left with a real sense of hope about the role of early years practitioners engaging in research confidently and with enthusiasm. This second edition will be of value to researchers, early years practitioners and postgraduates with an interest in this area.

BENIGN VIOLENCE: EDUCATION IN AND BEYOND THE AGE OF REASON.

Ansgar Allen (2014) Palgrave Macmillan
ISBN 9781137272850. (pp. 312, hardback £65).

Reviewed by DENISE MIFSUD

I was prompted to read and review this book by my mounting love affair with Michel Foucault, the title of this volume, and of course, the author himself (strictly in this *order of things*). The photo of Ansgar Allen posted on his university profile page (a photo of his reflection in the mirror, rather than his actual image) is indicative of an originality in thinking, a trait which is definitely mirrored in the rather unconventional style of the book. The title itself is arresting, not only the choice of words, but its presentation on the book cover – ‘Benign Violence’ splashed out diagonally in capital letters across the cover seems to be screaming out loud for the reader to open the book. ‘Benign Violence’ – Allen must be applauded on his perfect selection of adjective – various other synonyms could have replaced it: beneficent, benevolent, congenial ... ‘Benign’ is associated with cancer, immediately bringing to the fore its antonym ‘malignant’ ... with education as an evil, destructive tumour consuming our students’ minds ... and *bodies* ... in an albeit-insidious manner. The ‘Age of Reason’: the promotion of reason, rationality and enlightenment (*supposedly*). Has education moved *beyond* the Age of Reason? Does it promote the *free* exploration of ideas?

‘Education is a violent act, yet this violence is concealed by its good intent. Education presents itself as a distinctly improving, enabling practice ... In challenging all that is well-intentioned in education, this book reveals how our educational commitments are always underwritten by violence’.

This is a very apt description of the book presented on the back cover itself. Allen provides a genealogy of the examination, critiquing it by ‘adopt[ing] an historical line of enquiry’ (p. xv), tracing its development and widespread nature, its role in society and the resounding effects on the present. For, ‘despite the profound contingency of examination, despite its distributed nature, examination has come to feel universal, inescapable. It has come to resemble a monolith’ (p.xv) – a rather apposite choice of metaphor for the examination – a massive geological

feature on our educational landscape. Despite Allen's claim of refusing to present his argument in the preface, due to it being a presumably premature act, he contradicts himself by giving an overview of the book on the same page: 'Broadly conceived, examination forms the subject matter of this book, for which I offer a critique. This is a critique of examination, I might add' (p. xiv). But I must assure you that it is much more than that. Allen is being too humble here – he touches on a plethora of other issues relevant to schooling and education at large – among which are the birth of modern schooling, the modern examination, meritocracy ... situated within their contingent political context while demonstrating their migration from school to other social institutions. But Allen is also equally concerned with how the past resonates on the present: 'This book is the product of my desire for a different relation to the present' (p. xiv). I must say that the importance of the present over the past becomes a quasi-obsession for Allen, an issue he desperately attempts to drive home to the reader by various references to this matter throughout the book. A typical example would be, 'It goes without saying that today our concerns are more immediate' (p. 1) [with reference to the purpose of radio telescopes]. There are also reminders of his use of genealogy: 'Histories are rhetorical deployments ... Indeed, my juxtapositions are designed to create a disturbance in the present' (p. 14). Another distinguishing feature of this book is that it is steeped in Foucauldian theory: power, discipline, biopower, subjectification and governmentality – besides making detailed references to the works of other scholars for his interpretations.

So far, I have attempted to outline my main interest in Allen's book (a conscious effort on my part to have a *subtle* influence on potential readers of this review, and subsequently the book), together with the main essence of his work. But that is just to get you started. I will now move to my main concern: the presentation of the main text and my not-so-absent-presence as an objective reviewer who embraces a subjective stance and openly and unashamedly admits it. The book is divided into three sections – *Bodies*, *Populations* and *Meritocracies* (titles with a Foucauldian undertone) which are subsequently broken down into chapters bearing titles with an ironic tinge. I outline the main issues presented in each section, in order to introduce the potential reader to the book.

The *Preface*, which serves as an appetizer, or an eye-opener, rather, of what is to follow, deserves a treatise on its own: 'Seeking to unsettle a settled conscience, this book is designed to disturb the reader' (book cover). And indeed, Allen unmistakably manages to do this from the very beginning of the book (at least that is the effect it had on my subjective self) – by setting out the contemporary academic context and showing the contradictions within academia: 'This book is not designed for academic consumption ... For that audience alone it must remain an *indigestible meal*' (p. x, original emphasis). In a very sarcastic manner, Allen utilizes a rather caustic and sardonic tone to critique academia as a 'cloistered' and 'subjective' discourse on various grounds: accountability, its forces of inclusion and exclusion, collaborative research, the 'academic species' (p. xi), the Research Excellence Framework (REF), neoliberalism and marketization, the function of a 'good research project' (p. xiii) ... The transgression of Allen's writing style comes out through various devices: the use of punctuation which is arresting and aids convey the message, the apt use of

metaphors, the use of modals to promote uncertainty, the use of italics ... 'This text is an exercise in rumination' (p. xvii) – Allen invites us to reflect on the myriad ways in which education constitutes us as subjects in order to rebel against our educational present ... This is what I suggest you engage in as you read the ensuing presentation of the three sections of Allen's volume.

I. BODIES

On Progress describes the inception of the Department of Education (that now employs Allen), with a focus on the origins of and rationale behind scientific measurement to produce a 'chatter of statistical work' (p. 2) and 'alternatives' to scientific measurement with an emphasis on focusing on the 'relative' self. Meritocracy is introduced as a 'myth' (p. 7), with the examination being utilized as a mask for democracy. *Modern Examination* deals with the establishment of medieval universities, the phases in an undergraduate's career, and the introduction of the modern examination, with its rationale set within contemporary mid-nineteenth century England. *Educated Bodies* starts off with a 'false critique' of the modern examination which only serves as a pretence – 'We believe ourselves crushed, our life force running away through the drainage channels that examination has had the foresight to construct' (p. 21). The functions of the modern examination as a 'meticulous divider' (p. 22) are outlined, where the first direct reference to Foucault's theories is made – with the school utilizing disciplinary techniques for the formation of 'docile bodies' and 'souls'. Allen then focuses on the development of two particular schools in England, describing his genealogist methodology, whilst comparing schools and prisons, calling upon Jeremy Bentham's panopticon in the process, with an emphasis on practices of exclusion. *A Child's Interior* introduces 'moral training' through Foucault's concept of pastoral power, moving on to give a broadened definition of 'examination' while debating the impossibility of living an '*unexamined* life' (p. 51, original emphasis). This chapter wraps up BODIES on a rather disturbing note, typical of Allen's style throughout the book: 'A radical critique of examination must, by definition, unsettle the soul'. This is understood as the main thread running through the text, however, Allen offers an escape route to the faint-hearted: 'if you wish to remain secure from introspection and doubt, you must cultivate your attachment to historical constants ... With the facts pushed into view, you, yourself, can retreat from view because "the facts speak for themselves"' (p. 52).

II. POPULATIONS

On Forgetting starts off with Allen's (very personal) ironic critique of the academic world by extolling forgetfulness in the academic as a simultaneous privilege and 'brutal imposition' (p. 53): 'Forgetfulness should not be confused with laziness ... [it is] a marker of one's intellectual refinement' (p. 53). Allen then moves on to disciplinary arrangements, to ranking more precisely, the 'statistical judiciary of our modern era' (p. 53) which is a 'nineteenth-century bequeathment' (p. 54), associating it with biopower which is then contrasted with disciplinary power, reminding us of eugenics in the meantime, outlining its role as he weaves the past yarn with that of the present: '[they] provide us with a set of clues for unravelling later twentieth-century developments that extend, indeed, to the educational

present' (p. 57). *The Violence of Power* draws on Foucault's 'analytics of power' and genealogy, interspersed with fleeting references to Nietzsche. Allen gives an excellent presentation of Foucault's 'corpus' (p. 58), locating the outstanding French philosopher in his historical context, while pointing out difficulties and advising that 'all usages of Foucault must remain partial: those who adopt Foucault can only deform him' (p. 59). Allen thus touches on power, freedom, resistance, government, critique, genealogy and counter-historical discourse in order to draw out the architecture of violence. *Make Live and Let Die* is located entirely within the political realm with its focus on militancy, the sovereign, political right, and biopower as a disciplinary technique amid populations. Once more, we can observe Allen's play on the past and present: 'biopower was not good or bad, but it *is* dangerous' (p. 96, original emphasis). *Improving the Breed* (a rather sarcastic way of referring to the human race, in my opinion) deals purely with eugenics and how various attempts have been made throughout the ages to ameliorate the human race through the survival of the fittest, by weeding out those who were below average, who did not possess superior intellectual powers. At the end, Allen gives a rationale for the genealogy of this chapter: 'it is to demonstrate how a disposition of power persists through the shifting configurations it is able to adopt' (p. 131). [Is it perhaps to try to justify his mention of the Nazis in his attempt to subvert education?]

III. MERITOCRACIES

Our Eugenic Religion starts off from the present, from this 'climate of lamentations' in order to justify the need for the past, for historical discourse: 'We require a genealogy of its prior construction' (p. 132). Allen presents the 'apparent' dissolution of meritocracy, stating the purpose of this final section at the very beginning: 'This last collection of aphorisms explores how, with eugenic assistance, meritocracy developed as an insidious form of social regulation' (p. 132). Allen problematizes Foucault's genealogy, showing the affinity between histories of meritocracy and eugenics, summarizing the latter in a single sentence: 'The basic eugenic preoccupation was to segregate the subnormal' (p. 135). A very detailed critique of eugenics follows. *The Occasional Hero* deals with the apparent fluidity of meritocracy, with Allen sardonically deconstructing meritocracy in the present: 'we must insist that a fluid meritocracy remains highly organized and highly regulating. It is a system of government that uses liberal left sentiment as a cloak ... Its ancillary function is to conceal widening inequalities' (p. 146). Allen focuses on the distribution of workers according to rank and the scholarships allocated to students. In *Lives Redistributed*, Allen traces the movement of students across various schooling levels, making several links between the past and the present. *After Fairness*, the final chapter of this volume, deals with the role of the learning environment and its influence on the education of the child – our total subjectification to it: 'Through the educational mask, and with a fixed but empty grin, we see how the child is placed within a likely future, a future that is the product of statistical manipulation and population norms' (p. 228). Allen concludes his book, reminding us of its purpose: 'To rebel against our educational present we must explore its perversions, its cynicisms. We should disabuse ourselves of

our well-meaning but shallow commitments. To resist, we must become uncomfortable' (p. 250).

Dear reader, I hope that I have managed to transmit a certain degree of unease, of discomfort, through my review. Allen does manage to do so, not only through the text he presents, but moreover so, through the structural and rhetorical devices he uses. Throughout the text, he inserts short paragraphs in order to shock us back to the present (p. 37, final paragraph). His end sentences are at times very cutting and right on the spot/mark (p. 91, first paragraph). Pieces of reflection containing a series of rhetorical questions and addressing the reader directly are very effective (p. 47, third paragraph; p. 152, final paragraph). Allen's power of description just leaves us readers in awe – descriptions complimented by original photos that are very effective. This volume's readability and accessibility are further enhanced by the very detailed End Notes and Index.

This book *should* be read by educational practitioners and scholars alike – it dismantles the notion of a free, equal, meritocratic education system for all into one built on inequality, mistrust and 'benign violence' ...