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The posthuman child – educational transformation through philosophy with picture books

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BOOK REVIEW

The posthuman child – educational transformation through philosophy with picture books, by Karin Murriss, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, 282 pp., £29.99 (hardback), ISBN 9781138858442, £20.99 (e-book)

The exploration of the chance remark – ‘Laika is a slow thinker’ (1) – between two teachers concerning a pupil some years previous – sets in train an earnest and ethical commitment by Murriss. She exposes and challenges ontoepistemic injustices (see 130–148 especially) and expounds the recognition of children as agentic, in order to ‘transform’ education.

What makes this book so poignant and urgent is its deep concern with theoretical–practice-rich pedagogies which emerge alongside an ongoing attention to the everyday ‘doing’ of knowledge construction. Murriss’s concern with justice and to ‘being with’ others, whether as children or adults, in expansive spaces of attentive listening that can fascinate, provoke and challenge without threatening, extends to the way in which she commits to the reader of this book. She speaks generously from a space of humble authority in a multiplicity of subjective guises at one and the same time, whether as practitioner, academic, mother, teacher, learner or earth dweller. This is powerful, for its effect is to take the reader by the hand, in considerate collegiality, and to invite her to walk alongside Murriss through the intricate and fascinating maze of posthuman possibilities for re-imagining a pedagogic terrain of philosophical de-colonised education. This requires positioning posthuman enquiry as principally concerned with ‘how things work’ rather than merely what language ‘means’ (224) where binaries such as those between the human and non-human, and adult and child are constantly interrogated, challenged and disrupted to focus on differences produced in material discursive relationships. It especially requires the addressing of what Murriss has termed ‘hermeneutical injustice’ (see 225) in which the everyday living worlds of children do not get lost. This means committing to a philosophy of de-colonisation that is concerned with representing ways in which children make sense of their own experiences themselves, and not just through the medium of language.

Murriss builds on years of research and practice in this book, informed by her doctoral research, her wealth of knowledge of literacy practices and philosophy for/with children, her subsequent research, her Higher Education programme and course leadership, her practice in schools and educational settings, and her ongoing and constant dialogue with others similarly placed. Although not claiming a position of superior ‘knowing’, Murriss is unequivocal in her assertion of the transformative power, and affordances offered, by the posthuman in the space of early childhood education in particular. She regards childhood education and the figuration of the child, thus imagined within, as having been saturated by the developmental, the psychological, the social, and the discursive of humanist theorisations. She does not dismiss these: indeed, her attention to ‘diffractive methodology’ (see 14–18 particularly where she draws comprehensively upon work of theorists such as Barad, Taguchi, Deleuze and Guattari, Jackson and Mazzei) requires her to *think with* prior theoretical resources in order to prise these apart in different directions, to move beyond binary oppositions that humanist theorisations must always presume. Such binaries Murriss regards as limiting and reductive and ‘fixing’ of young children, especially, in ways that deny them the justice that should be accorded to them as ‘knowers’ in their own right.

Murris is concerned about humanist modalities that identify children in ways that, at best limit them, and at worst, discriminate against them, such that they can only ever be seen through an adultist lens, even at the same time that attention might be drawn to other vectors of difference such as class, race and gender. This lens positions children as universalised and essentialised: as fragile, innocent, always requiring of protection, and in constant need of being 'filled-up' with adult ways of knowing such that they may become – at some undefined point in the future – more fully realised as human. Murris regards this positioning of children as demeaning and unethical. Instead, she invites us to embrace the possibilities of more ethical, intra-relational ways of being together with children. In so doing she asks us to be attentive to new ways of learning from one another, suspending moralising judgements, instead embracing material, discursive, human and non-human possibilities of posthuman ways of theorising–practising together. This requires a 'hold' on the humanist ways of defining – in advance – what it is that can be known from any given educational situation, opening up, instead, the possibilities of the surprising, the imaginative, the creative and even the disturbing and controversial. For Murris, an ontoepistemic commitment of posthumanism demands a re-imagining of 'child' as rich, resourceful and resilient such that the 'Hundred Languages' (commensurate with Reggio-inspired Early Years educational practices) can be enabled to flourish (see 168, 177 for example).

One of the great strengths of the book is the way in which the chapters are set out. Each begins by explaining the key ideas that are to be explored, and carefully summarises overarching themes, connecting them with other concepts, abstractions and practices that feature elsewhere in the book. The net effect of this approach is that there is a re-citational quality to the accumulative knowledge generation within the book, making it secure and comforting to digest. In this way, Murris respectfully acknowledges that she is positing 'difficult' ideas that may be unfamiliar to many readers working within predominantly normalised Early Years educational, humanist discourses. The first few chapters of the book are committed to proposing ethical ontoepistemological ways of challenging humanist metaphysics, such that the child is not positioned as 'lesser being' and discriminated against as a consequence of the presumed ignorance of her biological age. This demands that adult educationalists fore-go a 'listening as usual' to children (an idea Murris borrows from the work of Davies 2014) and embrace, rather, a listening out for the 'effects of difference' (see 144). In Chapters 4 and 5, Murris posits a re-configured posthuman child within education as rich, resourceful and resilient by virtue of her intra-relational and material and discursive actions with 'pedagogies as living organisms' (see 15). For the posthuman child, communication extends far beyond mere 'reading and writing' to include a repertoire of arts-based practices, physical movements, the use of digital tools and resources that can generate collective forms of knowledge production that exceed an adult/child binary. Chapters 6 and 7 explore posthuman learning possibilities as democratic, 'rhizomatic' and 'entangled' acknowledging an agency of matter for teaching and learning. Chapters 8–10 gradually introduce the possibilities of posthuman philosophy of picture books with children to build community and address discriminatory practices. Murris espouses practices that enable an active engagement with 'messy', contradictory matters that spring from the child and that may require some 'unlearning' from teachers themselves in order to become more childlike and open to the power and possibilities of imagination, creativity as well as humanist rationality.

This passionately philosophical early childhood education book is well supported with beautiful documentation of the work of students, illustrations from picture books, diagrams, photographs and drawings that add to the sense-making of the text. Practical 'examples' and narratives are also highlighted in boxed and emboldened text to further illuminate and illustrate the central arguments. I know that for me, as a course leader of postgraduate Early Years educators within a UK university, this book has become my own helpmate and provocation,

emboldening and exciting me with the endless possibilities for ongoing, ethical transformatory ways of generating knowledge with and about young children in the doing of their intraconnected, everyday worlds.

Reference

Davies, B. 2014. *Listening To Children, Being and Becoming*. London: Routledge.

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