

Postformal Education: A Philosophy for Complex Futures

Gidley, J. (2017). *Postformal education: A philosophy for complex futures*. Berlin: Springer.

Reviewed by Matthew Rich-Tolsma¹

Reviewing Prof. Jennifer Gidley's new book – one which is in many ways a crowning achievement of her oeuvre to date, and has taken her many years (more than a decade beginning with her doctoral work) to complete – has not been an easy task. It is clear, even from a cursory skim of its contents page that *Postformal Education* is a profoundly complex (although not unproblematic) scholarly achievement. However, I would contend that it is as a personal manifesto and a strident and courageous call to educational change that this book deserves to be widely read. The landscape of educational theory is – for the most part – an arid one. Much like the institutions of schooling which it underpins, it is often largely irrelevant to the practice and lived experience of both teachers and learners. In this arid spiritual and intellectual landscape, Gidley's latest volume may just be both the pregnant cloud on the horizon and the first cool drafts of a wind of change.

The book is the third volume of Springer's series on *Critical Studies of Education*, which is edited by leading critical pedagogy scholars Shirley Steinberg and Kenneth Tobin. The volume is dedicated to the memory of the late critical scholar Joe Kincheloe (who was married to Shirley Steinberg), and the personal influence of Kincheloe on Gidley is recurring theme throughout the book.

Gidley offers a penetrating and catholic analysis of the emerging edge of the field with characteristic humility and thoughtfulness. She also offers some very practical expressions around what making this change looks like, particularly in part three of the book, in which she offers an exposition of her evolving post formal educational philosophy. This integrative philosophy – drawing on many of the the strands that have inspired Gidely across her career including anthroposophy, integral theory, and critical pedagogy – is built upon four core pedagogies: pedagogical love (as an evolutionary force); pedagogical life (as a sustaining force); pedagogical wisdom (as a creative force); and pedagogical voice (as an empowering force).

This is offered against the backdrop of a penetrating problematisation of the contemporary educational context (she clearly outlines four challenges: global; epistemological; global youth; and educational problematiques). This is all clearly drawn from a diverse wealth of personal and professional experience. The glimpses that Gidley provides into how her philosophy was formed

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through snippets of personal narrative, serves to inspire the reader to continue to evolve their practice, while effectively imbuing her words with a sense of living authority.

Gidley's stated purpose in writing this book is not to tinker with what she considers to be an obsolete educational system but rather "co-evolving a radically new education that is complexly human and simply divine" (p.271). For her this involves the creation of educational settings that support the evolution of consciousness. This utopian ideal seems quite inspiring, but I would contend that this is also what makes Gidley's approach at times quite problematic. I find the sections in Gidley's book where she is drawing attention to practice most engaging, where she is taking up the complex face-to-face acts of relating that human beings participate in with each other and making sense of them. I would suggest that what she is drawing attention to here is a sort of logic of practice that Aristotle called *phronesis*, a sort of critical-reflexive exercise of practical judgement. This is based on her vast experience and what is clearly a profound capability to reflect on her practice. I enjoyed this aspect of the book because it seemed particularly useful to me as it applied to my experience of what education is: a myriad of relation and interactions consciously aimed at supporting learning. Education is not a system. This is a particularly *disembedded* (to borrow a term from the organisational theorist Barbara Townley) way of thinking about education, that attempts to divorce it from embodied human experience through a reliance on bureaucratic, technocratic, and economic rationalities (see Townley, 2013). I also enjoyed reading critical reflections that engaged practice, as these seem more pragmatic, it draws attention to the messiness of what is rather than proposing an idealised hypothetical.

The trouble with attempting to engage with education as a system is that Gidley's work is at times not only idealistic but ideological. It proposes a better future based on a set of idealised values (these values – love, freedom, wisdom, care – are in and of themselves not particularly original, but then again what is). This is a good example of what the American pragmatist George Herbert Mead (1923) spoke of as cult values. Mead posited that cult values result from the generalised presentation of a hopelessly idealised future, divorced from the practical obstacles to its particularisation. The cult behaviour that results from this idealisation can result in horrendous violence; yet Mead argued that cult values are also a cherished part of human heritage. The reality is that cult values can only find meaningful expression through their functionalisation in context. By this I mean that the general ideal of love, is only meaningful through particular expression of love in relationship which is diverse and bound to be less than ideal, thereby revealing the paradox of the general and the particular.

The irony is that attempting to overhaul the educational system based on noble ideals is not a new idea. Many of the systems that Gidley is quick to criticise began in this way, and invariably descended into familiar tyranny and disfunction because the particularisation of cult values is bound to be unpredictable. The idea that futures – however noble – can be designed and controlled in a predictable way doesn't appear to correspond to the evidence of human experience, and yet these attempts to create utopian visions (based on an apocalyptic interpretation of the failed utopia which preceded them) seems a persistent pattern (the English intellectual John Gary wrote a fascinating and controversial book, *Black Mass* (2007), in which he argues that this is an expression of *chiliasm* or *millenarianism* as an attempt to cope with the eschatological disappointment of Jesus Christ not establishing a new world order).

In short, I think that this is a good book. I think that you should buy it. I think it offers valuable wisdom and critique of educational theory and practice, and some well thought out and researched new ideas. I also think that our hope and ardour should be balanced by honesty and rigour, and her ideas should be read with a critical mind. We should not allow the grandiose scope of her vision, or the sometimes mystical turn of her phrasing to intimidate us or dampen our desire for clarity. From what I know of Prof. Gidley, she would expect no less of her readers.