

BOOK REVIEW

Wealth, values, culture & education: Reviving the essentials for equality and sustainability by J. E. Torabian (2022). Switzerland: Springer Nature Publications.

Reviewed by Bryan Cunningham*

This new book is an important addition to Springer's *Diversity and Inclusion Research* series. As Professor Robert Cowen observes in his foreword, it is not a book that is susceptible to easy categorisation on the basis of any one academic discipline or specialist focus: "its cultural and historical range is extraordinary". It is also one that I can readily attest "will invite thought, dispute and disagreement".

The author herself captures the essence and scope of her book by invoking such of its aspirations as "work[ing] for the betterment of the world". She also writes that its aim "is to provoke reflections – but not to propose definite responses". In these regards, and by its overarching concern to evidence the enduring inequalities and illusions of late capitalism, her work is extremely successful.

Comprehensively referenced, structurally *Wealth, Values, Culture and Education* is divided into five major sections, each with arresting titles such as 'The Capitalist Trojan Horse and its Tenets' and 'A Retour to Essentials: Reconstructing Wealth and Values'. As an educationalist, the chapter on 'Education and Culture' held special interest for me.

A number of key questions, and of apparently contradictory perspectives, are being addressed in this chapter. Is the present function of education fundamentally about producing "human outputs" with relevant, employment-ready skills? Is there scope for education to encompass an emancipatory dimension, "equip[ping] learners with philosophies of being and doing"? Ranging across incredibly diverse geographical, political and cultural contexts (this range in fact being a feature of each of the book's chapters) the author reviews a selection of theoretical and philosophical constructs that may serve to aid our understanding of *how* and *why* immense differences in educational principles and practices exist across the globe. Prevailing inequalities and authoritarianism loom large in Torabian's analysis.

I was caused to ponder, not for the first time, how, in highly developed countries such as the UK and France, one particularly striking phenomenon is the very large proportion of successive school leaver cohorts progressing to higher level study (despite what many would acknowledge to be the significant opportunity costs of doing so). While much space could be devoted to an interrogation of this trend, there are two drivers that

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almost certainly ought to be cited. One is qualifications inflation (or “credentialism”), whereby employers require in applicants an ever more impressive batch of certificates for any given occupational role. The other appears to derive from changing social norms – “going to uni” simply having become what so many of your friends are planning on. Universities themselves have also played a part in so dramatically raising participation levels; given that their funding base improves with every increase in student numbers, the pronounced monetisation of the higher education sector, with its growing numbers of marketing staff, is hardly surprising.

While the above – now long established – trend might be celebrated as an unalloyed good, there are however certain emergent negatives. For example, individual students seeking the so-called ‘graduate premium’ (higher predicted lifetime earnings for degree holders than for those who lack one) could well be disappointed: it is observable that not all degrees are held in particularly high esteem by employers, and that over and above this reality they will often tend to prefer those from more prestigious universities. The impact of this, both practically and emotionally may be felt in particular by individuals who have left university not having found their time there either life enhancing or horizon broadening – or simply much fun. The outcome such graduates may well come to experience could be a case of the “*20 years of schoolin’ and they put you on the day shift*” that Bob Dylan sang of back in 1965.

Witnessing first-hand the kind of realities I am briefly alluding to here certainly underlines the imperative for those of us in education to purposefully engage with Torabian’s “Essentials for Equality and Sustainability”. In saying so, I am in an important sense really only echoing some of the sentiments expressed in the sixth, and much shorter, section of her work. Titled ‘The Road (not) Taken’ this comprises what we can perhaps encounter as her *cri de coeur*. She acknowledges that moving away from our present materialistic, instrumentalist, preoccupations and practices may entail what she terms “baby steps” on the road to “*otherwise thinking*”. In conceiving of a “revitalised role of education and culture”, her highly ambitious, never less than deeply reflective, narrative offers the reader an astonishingly timely and stimulating basis for both individual and collective action.

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