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Publisher: Routledge

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Journal of Education for Teaching: International research and pedagogy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjet20>

Rethinking secondary education: a human-centred approach

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Published online: 09 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: Tanya Ovenden-Hope (2013) Rethinking secondary education: a human-centred approach, *Journal of Education for Teaching: International research and pedagogy*, 39:3, 348-350

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2013.796734>

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implied by its grounding in research, its adventurous pedagogy and its insightful appreciation of how policy might be – within a different time, place or culture.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2013.790190>

Rethinking secondary education: a human-centred approach, by Scherto Gill and Garrett Thomson, Cambridge, Pearson, 2012, 312 pp., £24.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781408284780

Secondary education in England, we are informed, needs ‘rethinking’ and a new approach taken to pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and school culture based on a ‘human-centred approach’. Gill and Thomson offer an approach to ‘bridge the gap’ between the knowledge-led, outcomes-based mainstream approach and ‘alternative’ (student-centred/led) education. Weelahan (2010) has suggested that this type of ‘solution’ for education is nothing new, but is instead part of an established process in which neo-liberal discourses utilise progressive narrative while sustaining technical-instrumental outcomes for learners. This said, Gill and Thomson present an engaging and stimulating debate based on robust theoretical examination and empirical research, providing an interesting read for even the most sceptical critic of a ‘third way’ for mainstream secondary education in England.

‘Rethinking Education: A Human-Centred Approach’ originated from work for the Guerrand–Hermès Foundation for Peace, the ethos of which shines through in this book. A.S. Neill, the founder of Summerhill School in 1921, the first alternative free school in England, is referenced as the inspiration behind the intellectual theme of the book. However, Neill’s (1992) concept that education should ‘fit the child’ is also grounded in Gill and Thomson’s concrete affirmation that ‘learning from books’ is not education. This tension between the authors’ desire to locate their philosophy of an alternative human-centred education within mainstream education therefore

offers an interesting and complex conundrum for practice, the answer for which is offered through the rejection of instrumental rationality (Beck and Earl 2003) and to instead 'humanise' (or de-instrumentalise) education. Gill and Thomson do not advocate the abandoning of goals to meet this aim, but to 'reconceptualise their significance' (p. 20) in improving the person's life (their life being the only thing that has intrinsic value). This mild objectivist view is accepted by the authors, framing their approach in the position that within specific contexts 'claims that affirm that one state of affairs is better than another can be true or false' (p. ix).

There is acknowledgement from the authors that 'parents want the best education for their children; the public is worried that education standards are falling' (p. 2), but that these desires and concerns are based on value judgments that require clarification. The philosophising of educational 'ends' for the 'third way' postulated within the book is analytical, recognising that 'teachers have certain purposes in mind for their students, and ... Government has a programme of outcomes established by law' (p. 2), which presents a challenge to current educational theory that the authors suggest should incorporate consideration of 'human flourishing'.

Gill and Thomson's conviction is that educational standards should be human-centred. Human-centred education is defined as education that treats all those involved as equal in human terms, that is they are perceived as autonomous individuals with a capacity for inquiry and sensitivity and respected as such. It is stated that only through this acknowledgement of the learner as 'human' that they can fully develop. It is from this basis that Gill and Thomson's new concept of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (in that order) is formed. What makes this book special, however, is that the new offer for how learners can learn and how institutions can facilitate this is framed through the current experiences of young people in secondary school. The student voice offers a powerful critique of mainstream practice and adds depth to authors' argument that 'society needs to move further away from knowledge-based schooling that is exam-driven towards the full education of a human being' (p. 3).

The tension in this book is caused by the attempt to balance keeping what are judged to be the 'good' parts of mainstream secondary education with more progressive or alternative education. Gill and Thomson make every effort to understand educational standards, but through a discourse of what educational standards they consider a society should have. There is a clear priority given to 'the personal' (located in person rather than worker or citizen) as a goal of education, devaluing and de-prioritising social and academic aims as a consequence. Learning is therefore presented as a means for individual development in and of itself, but recognised that learning can still be instrumental, but through the control of the person. While some readers may not agree with the order of priorities given to the aims of education, the approach taken does offer fuel for thought on how secondary education can 're-balance' the person against their future role in society and the perceived need for academic outcomes.

Gill and Thomson's book is divided into two distinct sections; towards human-centred education and rethinking secondary education. This separation facilitates an exploration of a philosophy of education grounded in theory, comparing and contrasting both traditional and alternative approaches to education and of an empirical, research-based practical application of the authors' ideas to secondary education in mainstream practice. At the heart of their work is an alternative educational philosophy that transcends a dichotomy of reason versus emotion and presents standards and practice that attempts to 'combine the best of both worlds in a new vision' (p. 148). This is courageous given the current political climate in England on education policy

and the focus on performance and grades. Their book is clearly written and examines some essential questions about secondary education, which makes it accessible and worthwhile reading to both students and scholars of education.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2013.796734>