



Imagination and Inquiry: Creative Approaches to Encouraging Literacy Development

—Karen Magro

Morris, Karin. *The Posthuman Child: Educational Transformation through Philosophy with Picturebooks*. Routledge, 2016. 277 pp. \$53.95 pb. ISBN 9781138858435.

A central aim in Karin Morris's *The Posthuman Child: Educational Transformation through Philosophy with Picturebooks* is to "disrupt dualistic metaphors that shape ageist pedagogical practices and curricula" (7). Too often, the voices of children are left behind, and they are not valued as individuals whose perspectives can help solve problems. Children are "rich, resilient, and resourceful" (36) from Morris's point of view, and education should provide a safe space where children can heal, imagine, and create (83). While the often dense references to poststructuralist philosophies may be unfamiliar to some readers, Morris's book offers many practical pedagogical insights that will resonate with educators from a range of backgrounds.

The Posthuman Child is divided into two parts. The first part explores conceptions of post-humanist philosophies, diffractive methodology, the aims of

education, and binary conceptions of children that limit and potentially harm children and their ability to be active agents of change whose voices are valued. Morris is critical of educational systems, theories, and pedagogies that "[fail] to do justice to the capabilities of individual children, especially their imaginative meaning-making capabilities when philosophizing" (82). The second part focuses on the application of post-humanist philosophy in the classroom. More specifically, Morris analyzes the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching as a catalyst for creative and reflective thinking (Rinaldi). The Reggio Emilia constructivist education philosophy is learner-centred, highlighting discovery, choice, and exploration. This philosophy conceptualizes the teacher as a guide, facilitator, and co-researcher who encourages emotional and cognitive skill development through self-directed and collaborative learning projects (Rinaldi

43). Murriss believes that children's literature offers one avenue into this approach to teaching, as it has the potential to correct inaccuracies, "portray oppression, speak to 'structural inequality' and 'open up for enquiry justice-based solutions like repair, redistribution or reconciliation'" (243). For example, when used creatively, picture books such as Anthony Browne's *Little Beauty*, Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, and David McKee's *Tusk Tusk* can encourage "inter-active" learning that creatively integrates affective, spiritual, cognitive, psychomotor, and imaginative dimensions.

Murriss's transformative educational perspectives share significant parallels with Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Carl Rogers's *Freedom to Learn*, David Kolb's *Experiential Learning*, Kieran Egan's *An Imaginative Approach to Teaching*, and Marjorie Faulstich Orellana's *Immigrant Children in Transcultural Spaces*. Collectively, these writers advocate for a transformative education system that is rooted in democratic discourse, social justice, inclusion, and an "asset" perspective of human capacity building. An asset perspective of learning and literacy values and validates an individual's existing experiences and literacy practices. Murriss advocates a post-human curriculum rooted in the needs, aspirations, and talents of children, and the transfiguring of traditional power polarity between the teacher and the student to enable more democratic dialogue and collaboration.

Murriss's theoretical approach is interdisciplinary; she integrates ideas from developmental psychology,

critical pedagogies and new literacies, transformative learning theory, Reggio Emilia inspired pedagogies, agential realism, and other dimensions of poststructuralist and post-humanist philosophies. According to Murriss, a post-humanist conception of teaching and learning dismantles dualistic norms that limit, confine, and stereotype children and the potential of children to be "philosophers" who can think reflectively about their world and initiate positive change. Murriss advocates for a "non-hierarchical *monist* philosophy of education that is critical of the *anthropocentric gaze*," which neglects, trivializes, and is dismissive of non-human forces at play (6). Her transformative vision also reflects an existential stance; individuals are viewed in a process of becoming and (e)merging through intra- and inter-personal relationships with others. Murriss emphasizes that post-humanist epistemological changes and shifts in power require an "unlearning" of didactic teaching practices that undermine children's voices and aspirations:

[A] deeper challenge . . . involves preparing teachers for the uncertainty and insecurity involved in planning for lessons that democratically accommodate children's own questions and ideas, and that draw on pedagogies with which they are unfamiliar. This includes a lack of familiarity . . . that does not involve specifying goals and objectives in advance, but enacting a range of flexible, ongoing hypotheses (195)



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Post-humanist philosophical orientations challenge dogma, unequal relationships, and freedom of expression.

Murris explains that children are marginalized by society in three central ways: “ethically for being wrongfully excluded, epistemically for being wrongfully mistrusted, and ontologically for being wrongfully positioned as a lesser being” (37). She challenges the reader to analyze the way in which labels such as the child as “slow learner” or figures such as the developing child, evil child, innocent child, and fragile child have been used to marginalize children and erode the complexity of their thinking and feeling processes. For this reason Murris is critical of Jean Piaget’s linear stage theory of cognitive development, which posits that as children mature, their thinking processes become qualitatively different (i.e., as children reach 12 and older, concrete thinking processes give way to abstract reasoning). From Murris’s perspective, stage theories like Piaget’s do not take into account “ontoepistemic injustice, structural and systematic discrimination of children, particularly as knowers and creators” (35). Murris nevertheless seems to have misinterpreted the important contributions of Piaget from a constructivist stance. Current theoretical perspectives analyzing the contributions of Piaget emphasize that, like the socio-constructivist Lev Vygotsky, he did advocate the importance of children interacting and exploring their environments. Piaget affirmed the unique ways that children construct, produce, and interpret knowledge (Ormrod et al. 23). From Piaget’s point of view, children are active and motivated learners who seek to construct new knowledge from prior experience. Educational psychologists suggest that Piaget may have *overestimated* the ability of adolescents and adults to develop

“formal operations” and abstract ways of thinking. In contrast, Henry M. Welman et al. note that Piaget *underestimated* the influence of emotions in learning as well as the capacity of very young children to show empathy. Murriss’s socio-cultural perspective suggests a stronger affinity with Vygotsky’s observation that

[e]very function in the child’s cultural development appears twice, on two levels. First, on the social, and later on the psychological level; first, *between* people as an *interpsychological* category, and then inside the child, as an *intrapsychological* category. (43)

From Vygotsky’s perspective, the teacher is a skilled socio-cultural mediator who has the power to influence the direction of a child’s development.

Developing a Transformative Perspective

For Murriss, diffractive methodology is one way to develop a transformative post-human perspective of teaching and learning. She explains that

[diffraction is a term] from physics to describe how water, sound or light waves combine when they overlap In the childhood studies course, each material discursive intra-vention causes ripples or waves, and put together these waves (when meeting) constitute new waves that make marks on

bodyminds (without ever leaving the ‘original’ waves altogether ‘behind’). (39)

New systems of knowledge emerge as “waves” or thinking processes that “ripple” together to solve a problem or create a new way of knowing. Murriss analyzes developmental psychology, educational pedagogies, and various philosophies diffractively, by re-examining perspectives and paradigms through one another. Post-human pedagogical approaches encourage self-expression, reflection, democratic discourse, and experiential learning that can result in perspective-taking and new creative insights into problem solving. Literacy is a “life-widening” process rather than a “life-limiting” one. Storytelling; artistic creations such as collage, sculpture, and painting; creative writing; student-generated discussions; and open-ended questioning form an interest-driven curriculum where students have “choice and voice” (Egan 10). Teachers problematize the meaning of abstract concepts, and in this facilitation process, “children [can] ‘discover within themselves a multitude of beautiful things, which they bring forth’” (Socrates, qtd. in Murriss 184). Murriss’s critique is similar to Freire’s critique of “banking education,” where instead of democratic dialogue, “the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. . . . [T]he scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving,

filing, and storing the deposit” (72). In contrast, a transformative education emerges “through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire 72). Liberatory education, from Freire’s perspective, begins by first reconciling the power imbalance and duality of the “teacher-student contradiction . . . so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (72).

Plato’s Cave and the Learning Labyrinth

Murris provides examples that draw upon her own experience in England and South Africa. She describes her role as a researcher and teacher, working with children who were disenfranchised. Her book includes examples of her own work with children and with student teachers. She also features conversations between teachers and students engaging in “philosophical thinking” using picture books. The “craftsmanship” of teaching involved, notes Murris, “is not that of building scaffolds with predetermined structures: [instead,] the material and the shape are unpredictable, infinite, and relational” (17). At its core, educational transformation is about building positive relationships and valuing the experiences of children. A positive climate conducive to creative and critical thinking can lead to significant personal and social learning and change. Post-human educational orientations emphasize a “transformation of our

relationships with students, with children, and other nonhuman others, including things of the world, a world we ourselves are also part of, our institutions, our society” (Murris 35). Murris notes that the architecture of the school should be designed to celebrate, inspire, and heal.

The English school that Murris describes in her book includes alternative spaces where children can create, read, reflect, and imagine:

The modern school’s layout on a slope was unusual. It was an “open school” with many spaces for teaching, but few walls and doors to separate them. Another challenge to staff were the school’s many outside doors, as well as odd corners where children could hide, hindering adequate supervision (*surveillance* of children’s movements and actions). (7)

Rigid borders between the school and “out-of-school” places are broken and alternative or liminal spaces provide opportunities to experiment with different ways of learning. This approach to architecture privileges after-school programs and informal learning endeavours. Murris conceptualizes the learning context as more of a philosophical oasis, design studio, and artistic atelier.

The space nicknamed “Plato’s Cave” provides another example of innovative architecture in the context of teaching and learning in Murris’s school. A special circular room reserved for reading and books, this space

is a sanctuary for children to feel a sense of freedom and safety. Although Murriss's approach to children's literature, and especially picture books, is not reliant on this space, Plato's Cave provides an ideal venue for her pedagogy. Murriss used picture books to encourage the students to actively engage in philosophical thinking. She emphasizes that as artistic forms, "picturebooks are rich with abstract concepts that defy particular geographical or historical locations. Their characters also mediate between binaries, so they engage and open up a space *full* of suspense, surprise, mystery, ambiguity, and complexity" (230). She elaborates that "[p]hilosophy with picturebooks makes it possible to open up magical spaces that provoke children to use their imagination, to think out loud, to suggest ideas . . . playfully with others" (241). Cognitive, linguistic, and social development are integrated as students experiment with print, art, drama, puppetry, and writing projects that emerge. From this transformative perspective, learning is linked to discovery, adventure, and a sense of wonder. Multiple ways of knowing are encouraged, and rather than being a classroom manager and content expert, or an agent of socialization, the teacher is more of a co-inquirer, researcher, a collaborator, an advocate, a challenger, and a facilitator who draws out the talent and skill of the student (Murriss presents the image of the teacher as a "pregnant stingray" who "stuns" with new ideas [184]).

Learning is multi-layered and richly textured when open-ended questions are asked, and students have opportunities to express their ideas in multimodal ways

that include sculptures, collages, and poems. Murriss presents the process of learning through the image of a labyrinth that "mak[es] room for the open-ended ambiguous and divergent nature of philosophical enquiry" (34). A labyrinth represents "one path, which goes forwards and 'backwards': the past cannot be left behind; it will always remain part of the present" (34). As students and teachers embark on journeys through their labyrinth, new insights and systems of knowledge emerge that cannot be reproduced (35). As a result, the curriculum and the specific teaching and learning approaches applied will be unique, with "infinite variations" of lessons possible (35). Murriss further asserts that:

In communities of philosophical enquiry, children create an emergent curriculum rather than a curriculum that is 'done to' them, with all the profoundly problematic ethical and political dimensions that entails. (13-14)

The democratic vision of the classroom as an atelier and investigative workshop where ideas can flourish can enhance a child's motivation to learn in new ways.

Yet one might ask how realistic this is. While Murriss's ideas share many similarities with Egan's "multiple intelligence" approach to fostering creative and inclusive classrooms (25), Murriss tends to minimize the complex dynamics of teaching today. New immigrants, for example, "join an already complex cultural/linguistic/

racial-ethnic landscape, which results in complex negotiations around language, culture, and identity” (Orellana 4-5). The teacher is often trying to balance structure and creativity in helping newcomers regain a sense of trust and self-efficacy. Newcomer and refugee children and their families may also be more transient, less organized, and more socially stratified (Orellana 5; Magro, “Connections” 211). Murriss’s work would have a greater international appeal had she delved more deeply into the impact that “super diversity” (Orellana 4) has in terms of meeting the needs and challenges of learners coming from different countries of origin.

It is also vital to consider the connection children are making between their “formal” educational experiences and the learning experiences in their communities. Murriss does not elaborate on this vital connection. Perhaps in follow-up research, she could involve the parents more and observe the ways in which the students apply, create, and practise their own literacies in their homes/communities. Drawing upon African and Indigenous ways of knowing, African-Canadian educational theorist George Sefa Dei is critical of educational institutions that segment “educational practices” from local, community, and familial sites of learning:

Creating relevant knowledge [in education] begins by identifying, generating, and articulating a pedagogic theory and practice that uses lived and

actual experiences of local peoples as a starting basis of knowledge generation” (Dei, “Spiritual” 129).

Based on extensive research experience, Dei posits that many Africans from poor rural communities have been excluded from opportunities for formal learning when their family cannot pay for tuition and accommodations. Those given opportunities for formal education are often “uprooted” from their family and cultural traditions. Dei explains that formal education can leave individuals alienated and disconnected from their land and community. A transformative education would enable students to reclaim community and tradition:

It is important for teaching to ground the learner in a sense of place, history, culture, and identity. Identification with the social and natural environments in which teaching and learning occur must be seen as key to spiritual and emotional self-development. . . . [T]ransformative teaching must examine how notions of self, personhood, place, history, culture, and belongingness to community are manifested in specific cultural contexts/values. . . . For many learners, knowledge of history, place, and culture helps to cultivate a sense of purpose and meaning in life. (Dei, “Spiritual” 127-28)

Both African and Indigenous ways of knowing value cultural customs and philosophical ideals of community,

social responsibility, reciprocity, sharing, connectedness, relationality, and the appreciation of local languages (Dei, *Reframing*). Learning and literacy development must be connected to the development of life skills and emotional intelligence skills such as self-awareness, empathy, resilience, and transcultural competencies. Parents and community elders should also be a part of a “community” school, notes Dei (“Spiritual” 129). Without these connections, too many students lose interest in education; they become disengaged and alienated. A critical look at innovative education programs that seek to bridge “home and school” learning is therefore vital.

Texts to Engage and Inspire

Murriss could have strengthened her book by including recently published children’s picture books that reflect current social and environmental issues and culturally diverse themes. Her dense theoretical analysis of poststructuralist philosophies overshadows and obscures the practical examples she provides of teachers creatively using picture books as a catalyst to encourage creative thinking among young children. For example, the exquisite prints from *Counting Lions: Portraits from the Wild* by Katie Cotton and Stephen Walton can encourage children to reflect more deeply about species extinction and protection. Another example, the poetic book *Imagine a Place* (Thomson and Gonsalves), could be a springboard for creative thinking. For older children, award-winning books such as *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness and *Fatty Legs: A True Story* by Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton can encourage the development of emotional intelligence skills such as empathy, courage, and resilience amid adversity and trauma. Texts that reflect diverse narratives and highlight hopes, dreams,



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and challenges of artists who have experienced discrimination and marginalization, combined with a balance of self-directed and collaborative projects, can contribute to an interest-driven curriculum grounded in the aspirations of children.

Murris challenges teachers to address the question: how might our world be improved if we supported and encouraged childrens' visions and aspirations? She presents specific examples of Reggio Emilia-inspired lessons for picture books in part two. Empathetically listening to children and gaining an insight into their thought processes are vital. Learners' prior knowledge and experience can be used to inform interpretations of texts, and they can generate open-ended questions and investigations with teachers. Murris writes that "[n]ew conceptual knowledge is created in *ateliers* (classrooms)—metaphorical places where brains, hands, sensibilities, rationalities, emotion and imagination all work together" (161). Both self-directed and collaborative learning projects encourage students to develop artistic, dramatic, musical, linguistic, and emotional literacies. Teachers can highlight concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract thought, and active experimentation (Kolb). Dance, music, play, and art are particularly powerful forms that can enhance a learner's motivation and curiosity. To take one example, Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* could be a text where students explore themes such as greed, compassion, generosity, and empathy. Murris provides excerpts from conversations enjoyed by children exploring these themes. The students then had opportunities to construct an artistic collage or sculpture that expressed their understanding of the story. Such approaches embody "diffractive" ways of looking at literacy that enable children to create. Murris writes that

A Reggio-inspired philosophy with children emphasises oral language and iterative intra-actions with the material/discursive body, the material environment (e.g., sitting in a circle), texts, emotions, questions, ideas, each other, the teacher, and even silences. (160)

Exploring the importance of “literate families and communities” that value literacy in multi-faceted ways could, however, further enrich Murriss’s discussion. A more comprehensive analysis of the psychological, situational, and institutional barriers that prevent students (and teachers) from achieving their goals and potentials would further inform her work. Despite the investment in education since apartheid ended, “many children in independent and government schools are still failing to achieve basic literacy and numeracy skills in the foundation phase” (Murriss 175). Murriss comments on the significant barriers in South Africa that alienate many children and deny them basic opportunities:

[U]nder- or unqualified teachers, a majority of people living in poverty, the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS on households and schools, huge language barriers for learners and teachers, lack of resources in schools, little parental involvement, limited literacy practices in many African home and community settings . . . , and insufficient attention paid to literacy instruction at the institutions that prepare teachers. (175)

The barriers Murriss identifies cannot be underestimated. Teaching and learning do not occur in isolation, and powerful socio-cultural and political factors shape the educational enterprise. Educators have their work cut out for them and need vital resources and training to be motivated and effective in diverse classrooms today. Additional research examples would be helpful to educators, particularly research that examines teachers’ personal philosophies and the way these translate into curriculum design, learning strategies, and holistic assessment practices. Moreover, one could ask to what extent the expressed mission statements of educational institutions influence teachers’ own ideals, beliefs, and values. More research that addresses these questions would deepen Murriss’s discussion. Perhaps Murriss could write a practical handbook that isolates the strategies and core concepts building on a Reggio Emilia-inspired approach to teaching. The readiness of the learner to engage in philosophical thinking is also important to recognize. Children have complex personality features and learning styles, and this must be factored into the teaching and learning dynamic. Moreover, not all teachers believe that their work is to critically challenge or help broaden students’ personal, social, and global perspectives (Magro, “Teaching” 131). Are opportunities for teachers to be actively involved in transformative educational change encouraged? Are courses, workshops, and practica available for teachers who wish to learn more about transformative

and post-human teaching and learning processes? How does assessment protocol shape teaching and learning strategies? Too often, teachers are expected to be passive bystanders swept away by passing fads and changes when in reality they can also be active agents in creating a positive learning climate (Magro, “Teaching” 130).

Concluding Comments

Aristotle once said that “educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all” (Shields 87). This theme emerges as Murriss advocates for an educational system that is appreciative of the intricate emotional lives of children. Educational systems at all levels can make a greater effort to recognize the importance of learning within a context of social justice and planetary sustainability. A shift in thinking about “relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race, and gender . . . and our visions of alternative approaches to living” is vital (O’Sullivan 11; Morrell and O’Connor xvii). The agency of children should also not be idealized. For example, children do not choose or decide (in most circumstances) to be involved in armed conflict as child soldiers. Prostitution, the exploitation of children as child labourers, ongoing exposure to war and conflict, slavery, and other forms of violence continue to erode the fundamental human rights of children (Kristof

and WuDunn 29). Children with specialized needs (psychological, cognitive, and physical) need resources, effective educational programming, and enlightened help and compassion from adults. The experiences of marginalized children could provide more insight into the help and resources these children and their families need. Murriss could further explain the connections between post-human transformative visions of learning and literacy, and more didactic pedagogical approaches. A strength in Murriss’s work is her eloquent critique of reductive societal and global systems that marginalize vulnerable children. She offers specific pedagogical strategies and new orientations to curriculum design that can help teachers. Karin Murriss reinforces Freire’s idea that education is never neutral; it can be a force of oppression or liberation. *The Posthuman Child* makes an important and timely contribution to the ongoing discussion of an educational vision rooted in life-centred values. In addition, the detailed illustrations and excerpts from students’ conversations make Murriss’s scholarly book valuable. Her message is hopeful and inspirational in providing new directions for teaching and learning that affirm the lived experiences of children. This is a valuable text for educators, counsellors, education program planners, and researchers interested in working with early years and elementary school children.

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