

Radical education

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What's wrong with schooling? Why have there always been people who want to set up educational initiatives *outside* the system? And why do some educators feel the system needs transforming from within? What, in short, is radical education all about? This question sets out to answer questions such as these and, in particular, explores

- The importance of understanding ideology in education
- The radical critique of mainstream education
- Radical alternatives both outside and within the system

IDEOLOGY AND EDUCATION

The concept of ideology

Sociologists and others use the term ideology to refer to a group philosophy. Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford (1997: 180) write: "Ideology is defined as a broad interlocked set of ideas and beliefs about the world held by a group of people that they demonstrate in both behaviour and conversation to various audiences. These systems of belief are usually seen as 'the way things really are' by the groups holding them, and they become the taken-for-granted way of making sense of the world." The term ideology can be used in many contexts, e.g. political ideologies, economic ideologies, religious ideologies and, of course, educational ideologies.

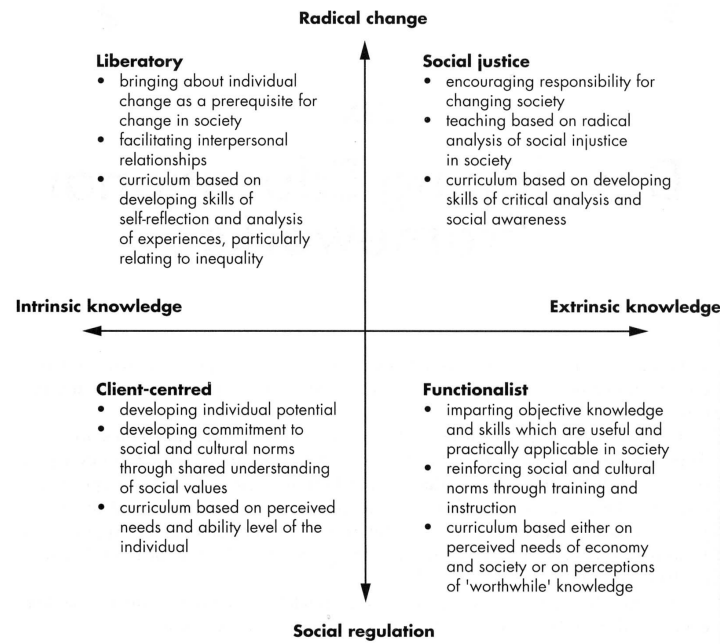
In a situation where one ideology becomes prevalent it is known as the 'dominant ideology'. This happens when a dominant cultural group makes its beliefs seem natural, normal or mainstream, and attempts to marginalise other ideologies. An ideology may become dominant through the use of overt repression (e.g. the army, police or courts) but more often this is done less overtly. Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford (1997: 183) comment: "A softer form of legitimisation is in the use of major institutions, such as education, mass media, religion, law and the economy, to put over a 'consensus', 'common-sense' or 'sensible person's' point of view as against the 'lunatic fringe' view, which turns out to be almost any view inconvenient to the group with the dominant ideology."

The reason why different educational ideologies exist is because educators, philosophers and politicians, hold different beliefs about its purposes and how it should be put into operation. Educators have drawn up various 'maps' of educational ideologies. Askew & Carnell (1998) use a four-fold classification based on a matrix that maps beliefs about knowledge and the role of education in society. Is knowledge extrinsic or intrinsic, i.e. external or internal to the individual? And is the task of education to fit people into existing society or to question the nature of that society? See Figure 1 below.

Dominant ideology

Hegemony refers to the way in which a dominant ideology embraces all aspects of life so that it achieves 'rule by consent.' It refers to a form of ideological control in which dominant

Figure 1 Four educational ideologies



(Askew and Carnell 1998)

beliefs, values, and everyday practices are created and disseminated throughout society via a range of institutions such as schools, family and mass media. Hegemony thus defines the meaning of common sense by making particular ideas seem normal. It is not about indoctrination because it ‘saturates’ society in such a way that it becomes seen as commonsense, i.e. reality itself. Ideology is therefore not something abstract since it powerfully shapes our perceptions of both self and society. Examples of western hegemonic beliefs would be: science as the measure of all things; war as being inevitable; that the individual is more important than group; that gender dictates opportunity; that all children should go to school.

One of the central functions of hegemony is to make inequality and hierarchy seem normal and acceptable – that’s just the way things are. In particular hegemony helps perpetuate inequalities of race, class and gender. Quite clearly many people do challenge poverty, racism and sexism, and clearly significant changes have occurred in the twentieth century. However, hegemony easily absorbs reformist tactics and blunts radical struggles for change.

The New Right

From 1945 to the early 70s capitalism experienced the longest period of sustained economic growth in history. During the 60s and 70s, however, the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement and the Watergate political scandal shook US society to its roots. For many it felt as if the nature of society was being threatened. This led to the rise of the New Right which aimed to achieve a new consensus. The New Right in the USA and the UK wanted to abandon the welfare state, return to ‘traditional’ morality, and oppose critical social movements. In particular they saw education as a tool for achieving this (see chapter *).

What Apple (2001) calls a 'new hegemonic alliance' emerged combining the interests of four major groups: a) dominant political/economic elites intent on 'modernising' the economy; b) largely white working/middle class groups concerned with security, family and traditional values; c) economic and cultural conservatives who want a return to 'high standards', discipline and social competition; d) part of the new middle class whose professional advancement depends on greater accountability and efficiency. In education over the last twenty-five years this has meant a) attacks on the autonomy of professional educators; b) tighter accountability and control of education; c) increased marketisation and privatisation. In the UK, amongst other things, this has led to a national system of standards, testing and curricula.

Radical ideology

The term 'radical' has a variety of meanings, e.g. fundamental (a radical error); far reaching (radical change); a person holding radical views (a radical); a fundamental principle (getting to the roots of). Traditionally radicalism has been associated with the political left as this has been the main oppositional movement during the twentieth century challenging the conservative /liberal *status quo*. Button (1995) points out that in the popular mind radicalism is often identified with extremism but this is not the meaning given to it here.

A radical ideology thus attempts to go to the root of things, to question the fundamental premises of dominant beliefs. Radical ideology comes into existence when a group begins to challenge the status quo in society, e.g. in relation to politics, economics, religion, race, gender, education. A radical ideology is defined by what it is *against* as well as what it stands *for*. Radicals are driven by their vision of what a better society could look like and the need to act in order to bring this about. They oppose injustice and inequality and abuse of power and privilege. They challenge all forms of disempowerment (lack of control over one's life chances) and seek to promote empowerment (being fully responsible for one's life chances). Adherents to the dominant ideology will always see radicalism as dangerous but over a period of time radical ideas and demands often become incorporated into the dominant ideology, e.g. the abolition of slavery, the establishment of votes for women.

In the nineteenth century radicals fought for the abolition of slavery and for better working conditions. Socialism and anarchism were the two radical ideologies challenging conservative and liberal ideas. Socialism emerged in the nineteenth century as a challenge to the liberal stress on individualism and the growth of capitalism. Anarchism, or libertarianism, emerged in the eighteenth century and in the popular mind is often equated with disorder and chaos. This is because anarchists reject the need for external authority including that of government. Some of their key beliefs are: i) authority is generally used to take away people's freedom; ii) iii) a belief in the potential goodness of human nature; iv) a stress on individual freedom, equality, co-operation and solidarity; v) that the organisation of society should work from the bottom up rather than top down. During the twentieth century most radical groups drew on socialist or anarchist ideas and practice in their activism: the suffragettes; colonial struggles for liberation; social movements such as civil rights, CND, anti-Vietnam war, feminism, environment, gay rights.

What is it about education that has attracted radicals in the twentieth century? To answer this question we need to know something about the rise of state schooling in the nineteenth century, i.e. education as part of the dominant ideology. In the UK this occurred during a period of major capitalist industrialisation, urbanisation and social class formation. Radicals

argue that the development of compulsory state schooling was essentially coercive in that it was the way in which the growing middle class sought to control the rapidly expanding urban workforce. Their purpose was essentially to train citizens and workers for life in the modern industrial state.

The main radical critique of education is that it inevitably reproduces the social, political and economic norms of the dominant ideology. In the west this is capitalist, technocratic, individualistic, materialist and patriarchal. Education is therefore not neutral. This is why one of the key questions is: Whose knowledge is of most worth? Since radicals are suspicious of state education many radical initiatives have taken place outside the mainstream system. Schools and education, the argument runs, can never be neutral. Apple (1993: 3) writes: "Education is both a 'cause' and an 'effect'...The school is not a passive mirror, but an active force, one that also serves to give legitimacy to economic and social forms and ideologies so intimately connected with it." All education is a political act in that it gives strong messages about the distribution of power and resources in society. Schools offer a particular selection from the sum total of knowledge, e.g. it is 'obvious' that science, maths, English, ICT are the most important subjects; that European history is more important than Asian; that boys are better at many things than girls.

RADICAL IDEAS (OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM)

One of the debates at the heart of radicalism is whether it is individuals that need to change first or society. Clearly the answer is 'both'. However, social activists look first at the individual, concerned at how socialisation under dominant ideology restricts a person's sense of self. They are concerned with the freedom of the individual. Political activists argue that if the unjust structures of society can be changed then people's life opportunities will be radically improved. They are concerned with changing society first. These two different emphases are sometimes known as the libertarian tradition and the social justice tradition. They form the top two quadrants in Figure 1.

The libertarian tradition

This tradition raises questions about the nature of freedom. Political freedom means little, it is argued, if the individual's actions are limited by some internalised authority. Godwin, in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1796), made one of the first attacks on the concept of the state. He argued that the state has no right to tell people what to do and was thus very suspicious of the development of a national system of education, feeling that government would only use such education for its own purposes: "It is not true that youth ought to be instructed to venerate the constitution, however excellent; they should be led to venerate truth; and the constitution only as far as it corresponds with their uninfluenced deductions of truth."

Anarchists (or libertarians) are concerned with the way in which external authority, in all its forms, is used to oppress the individual. Libertarian educators wish to be free from the influence of the state and teachers. What children learn in school, they argue, is primarily to obey, to believe and to think in ways imposed by others. Libertarians thus oppose all forms of coercion believing true learning can only occur as part of a spontaneous process arising within the individual when they are free to explore their deepest needs. Libertarians believe children should be given the same respect as adults and that they should not be looked down on or treated as inferior. Libertarians believe in the essential goodness of human nature. A.S.Neill was one educator who put these principles into practice.

A.S. Neill and Summerhill

Neill began teaching in the early 1900s at a time when education was based on strict discipline, rote learning and frequent punishment. He was not impressed by what he experienced and later became interested in experiments in progressive education. In 1927 he set up his own school called Summerhill at Leiston in Suffolk.

Pupils were sent to Summerhill because they were problem children or because parents disliked the ethos of mainstream education. Neill believed children sitting at desks studying useless subjects resulted in docile, uncreative children and citizens. Instead of making the child fit school he believed school should fit the child. He had a deep belief in the child and in order to allow children to fully be themselves he renounced discipline, direction and moral training. A timetable was posted but attendance at lessons was voluntary. Neill believed that learning should come after play and that children would come to learning when they were ready to. At first most children chose not to go to lessons. Their recovery was in proportion to how bad their experience had been at school.

The school was run through the General School Meeting where all rules were voted on by the entire school. Both children and staff had a single vote on any issue. This was true equality and democracy in action. Such meetings decided on rules about safety and social behaviour; often there was no punishment for stealing, but reparation had to be made by the offender. Pupils were very loyal to their own democracy because they were being given real freedom. There was little fear or resentment because they were learning that self-government can actually work. Neill's principles (1966: xii) have been summarised as: i) the inherent goodness of the child; ii) the aim of education is to work joyfully and find happiness; iii) education must be intellectual *and* emotional; iv) education must be geared to children's needs; v) dogmatic discipline creates fear and hostility; vi) freedom does not mean licence; vii) need for true sincerity from the teacher; viii) security comes from true independence; ix) guilt feelings create fear and bind child to authority.

What are the outcomes of attending such a school? Past pupils and employers have reported a greater self-confidence, greater maturity, greater self-reliance and tolerance. Some pupils have reported feeling older than their contemporaries. After Neill died in 1973 the school was run by his wife and now by his daughter Zoe. This model of libertarian education has long had an international reputation and two-thirds of the pupils now come from overseas. It was recently in the news because of a damning report by OFSTED inspectors, but dominant ideology is never likely to be sympathetic towards radical principles and practice.

Challenging schooling

Various writers in the 70s (e.g. Postman and Wiengartner 1971) looked at formal education and found it seriously wanting. In particular schools were seen as places which existed to reproduce the dominant ideology and which ignored the real needs of young people. Much of the critique hinges around the commonly accepted notion that learning can only really happen in school. Thus the equation that schools = education = learning. Radical educators make a crucial distinction between what goes on in schools and education. This is the vital difference between 'schooling' and 'education'.

John Holt is famous for several books including *The Underachieving School* (1969). Having worked in schools himself he decided in the end that they were bad places for children.

Almost every child, on the first day he sets foot in a school building, is smarter, more curious, less afraid of what he doesn't know, better at finding and figuring things out, more confident, resourceful, persistent and independent, than he will ever again be in his schooling or, unless he is unusually lucky, for the rest of his life. (Holt 1969: 5)

Holt gives as an example the small child's ability to learn language and to keep on trying it out until he is able to communicate effectively with others. What then happens when he arrives at school?

In he comes, this curious, patient, determined, energetic, skilful learner. We sit him down at a desk, and what do we teach him? ... First, that learning is separate from living. 'You come to school to learn', we say, as if the child hadn't been learning before, as if living were out there and learning were in here and there was no connection between the two. Secondly, that he cannot be trusted to learn and is no good at it ... He comes to feel that learning is a passive process, something that someone else does to you, instead of something you do for yourself (Holt 1969: 23).

Johnathan Kozol, like Apple, taught black American children in inner city schools. As a result of his experiences and the ways in which he saw schools perpetuating rather than challenging inequality he wrote this of education.

There is no such thing as a 'neutral skill', nor is there a 'neutral education'. Children can learn to read and write in order to understand instructions, dictates and commands. Or else they can read in order to grasp the subtle devices of their own manipulation - the methods and means by which a people may be subjugated and controlled. Oppenheimer, working on the final stages of development of the atom bomb, and his co-worker Fermi (said) that they were 'without special competence on the moral question ... It is this, not basic skills but basic competence for basic ethical enquiry and indignation, that is most dangerously absent in our schools and society today (Kozol 1980: 89).

What *is* education worth if it does not include discussion of moral and ethical dilemmas as one of its central concerns? A rich variety of alternative approaches to education emerged again in the 1990s. Interesting case studies can be found in Hern's *Deschooling Our Lives* (1996), Gribble's *Real Education: Varieties of Freedom* (1998) and more recently Carnie's *Alternative Approaches to Education* (2003). See also Education Otherwise the home-based education movement (www.education-otherwise.org/)

The social justice tradition

Looking at the state of society other radicals were primarily struck by the huge injustices and inequalities that they saw. Dominant ideology explains these as inevitable, but radical educators do not accept this premise. Issues of inequality are thus seen as a proper focus for education. Similarly issues of injustice, i.e. prejudice, discrimination, abuse of human rights are not ones that education should turn its back on. One of the leading figures in this tradition is Paulo Freire.

Paulo Freire

Freire was born and worked in north-east Brazil, one of poorest regions in the world. In the early 1960s, when his work became internationally known, 75% of people in this region were illiterate, with a life expectancy of thirty. Half of the land was owned by 3% of the population. Freire worked as a teacher in the slums and became interested in adult literacy. Since only literate people had the right to vote literacy was the key to social reform. In 1963 Freire's literacy programme was extended to the whole country. However opposition to his literacy methods grew amongst the political right who accused him of spreading subversive ideas. In 1964 a military coup overthrew the government and Freire went into exile rather than facing the risk of imprisonment. He was not allowed to return home to Brazil until 1980. His book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) is a classic of revolutionary education.

So what did Freire *do* that made him appear such an enemy to the political right? Firstly he was appalled by the degree of poverty and injustice that he saw at first hand. People who lack the ability to read, he realised, lack the basic tool for understanding life in modern society for they can't understand any form of written communication. In elections people were expected to vote as their land-owning bosses told them to. Learning to read was thus a first step in understanding more about their own social and political situation.

Freire and his team began by talking to people in the area where they were working. What were the words and expressions people used most, and the problems people faced in their everyday lives? They then chose a basic list of words that had the most meaning in those people's lives. They also chose words that would help people to understand the social, cultural and political reality that they faced every day, e.g. slum, plot of land, work, salary, government, swamp, wealth. Because Freire wanted to avoid traditional notions of schooling and imposed authority, the facilitator was known as a 'coordinator' and dialogue replaced old-fashioned rote learning. This process was known as conscientisation or 'consciousness raising'. Freire believed that people cannot be truly human until they have real freedom in society. This process enabled people to become subjects rather than objects in their own lives.

His approach to adult literacy was revolutionary, it gave the oppressed the tools of their own liberation. It was a threat to oppressors (the landlords and those in power) because it unmasked the tools of oppression, the ways in which powerful groups kept others in subjugation. The aim was not to attack the oppressors but to expose the social and political structures which perpetuated inequality and injustice. Freire's approach to learning - participatory, non-hierarchical, drawing on the learner's experience, empowering, exposing of injustice, aiming at social and political transformation - became internationally known in the 70-80s.

RADICAL IDEAS (INSIDE THE SYSTEM)

Is it possible for radical ideas to work within mainstream education? Are there spaces within the dominant educational ideology where its practices can be challenged? Both libertarian and social justice traditions *do* have proponents within mainstream education. If schools are a major site of cultural reproduction, it is argued, then they need to be subverted from within as well as outside the system.

Libertarian ideas

In Askew and Carnell's typology (Figure 1) you will recall that one quadrant dealt with the client-centred model of education, also known as person-centred or child-centred education. UK primary schools were world famous for their child-centred approach to education in the 60s and 70s and this is still evident in early years teaching today. The key principles of early years teaching are seen as "the holistic nature of children's learning and development ... the importance of developing autonomy, intrinsic motivation and self-discipline through the encouragement of child-initiated, self-directed activity, the value of first-hand experiences and the crucial role in children's development of other children and adults" (Whitebread 1996). Some of these principles clearly resonate with elements of the libertarian tradition. The main difference is that they are implemented *within* the formal structure of schooling (see chapter *).

One of leading figures in the field of person-centred learning is Carl Rogers best known in education through his classic work *Freedom to Learn* (1994: 121). In this he sets out the three key teacher qualities that facilitate true learning.

Realness in the facilitator ~ the teacher needs to show her/himself as a real person, open to and sharing their own feelings with the group; students meet the person not just the role.

Prizing, acceptance, trust ~ this means prizing the learner, prizing her feelings, her opinions, her person; it is a basic belief that this other person is fundamentally trustworthy.

Empathetic understanding ~ this means the ability to understand the student's reactions from the inside; it relates to the appreciation of being understood rather than evaluated or judged.

It is difficult to hold these three attitudes unless, like Rogers, Neill and others, one has a deep trust in human nature and its potential. This is based on a belief in the basic human tendency towards fulfilment, growth and self-actualisation. Such beliefs are the foundation upon which the school of humanistic psychology was developed in the 60s and 70s by psychotherapists such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. They also underpin important forms of counselling and therapy today.

Social justice ideas

Robin Richardson

Someone who has played a major role amongst radical educators in UK is Robin Richardson, who was influenced by both Freire and Rogers. In the 70s he was concerned that the curriculum seldom helped pupils learn about current global issues and he played a major part in placing this on the mainstream agenda (Hicks 2003). From the 80s onwards he was very influential in the fields of multicultural and anti-racist education (Richardson and Miles 2003). Here he describes how he drew in his work on two long traditions within education, the first focusing on the 'person' and the second focusing on the 'political'.

Both traditions are concerned with wholeness and holistic thinking, but neither, arguably, is complete without the other. There cannot be wholeness in individuals independently of strenuous attempts to heal rifts and contradictions in wider society and in the education system. Conversely, political struggle to create wholeness in

society - that is, equality and justice in dealings and relationships between social classes, between countries, between ethnic groups, between women and men - is doomed to no more than partial success and hollow victories, at best, if it is not accompanied by, and if it does not in its turn strengthen and sustain, the search for wholeness and integration in individuals (Richardson 1990: 7).

His influence amongst UK educators with a radical bent has been considerable, particularly in the fields of anti-racist education and global education. Both Carl Rogers (internationally) and Robin Richardson (in the UK) have shown how radical principles can be implemented within mainstream education in order to creatively change self, education and society.

Issue-based educations

During the 70-80s radical educators began to question whether mainstream education was really helping pupils make sense of the world. The UK curriculum was largely focused on the dominant culture in a national and European context. As a result a series of issue-focused educations emerged all seeking, with some effect, to radicalise mainstream education. These include development education, global education, environmental education, anti-racist education, peace education, anti-sexist education, human rights education and futures education. In the 90s these were joined by citizenship education and education for sustainable development.

Development education had its roots in the early 70s when NGOs concerned with global inequality realised education had an important role to play in helping reduce public ignorance. Educators thus had to move deeper into the debate about causes of underdevelopment. As far as the UK public was concerned this was due to backwardness and low levels of economic development. However NGO fieldworkers heard a different story – that European imperialism and colonialism had caused underdevelopment, continuing in the present through unfair trade and aid. Underdevelopment was thus seen as an on-going process rather than a state or condition - a counter hegemonic perspective. Development education was very influenced by Freire's work. There are major Development Education Centres (DECs) in places such as Birmingham, Manchester, London, Leeds with significant educational programmes.

Whilst development education has as its main focus issues of inequality and injustice, global education focuses in particular on the notion of interdependence. Global education has traditionally been based in institutions of higher education. Richardson ran the influential World Studies Project in the 70s which was succeeded in the 80s by the World Studies 8-13 project. Such projects worked with a large number of LEAs and were internationally important because of their focus on global issues and person-centred learning. Also influential in the 90s was the International Institute for Global Education (Pike and Selby 1999, 2000). More recently the Department for International Development has made funding available in the UK to help promote a global dimension in the curriculum.

Shared features

Lister (1987: 54) referred to these initiatives as 'new movements' in education acting as a vanguard, leading social and political education into new territory and new styles of teaching. "The twin stresses on human-centred education and global perspectives constitute a radical shift away from the dominant tradition of schooling (which is knowledge-centred and

ethnocentric). Thus the vanguard educators seek to give education a new process and a new perspective on the world" (Lister 1987: 54-56). He identified a series of common features shared by these new movements:

1. Knowledge should have a social purpose aimed at improving the human condition; it should involve both understanding and action for change.
2. The curriculum should deal with major issues, e.g. war and peace, poverty and development, human rights, multicultural society, interdependent world.
3. Learning is about developing skills, not just about content.
4. In order to develop skills learning needs an active dimension, e.g. games and role-play.
5. Education must be affective as well as cognitive; attitudes and values are as important as knowledge and facts.
6. Recognition of pluralism and diversity in own society and globally.
7. The curriculum should have an international and global perspective.
8. Education should also have a futures perspective.

Much of this has become accepted pedagogy today. Such 'vanguard educators', Lister noted, shared a common interest in an issue-perspective (content) and active learning (process) – two hall-marks of the radical tradition in education.

The advent of the Conservative government's national curriculum in the late 80s had major impact on these new movements and education generally. The right-wing emphasis on traditional subjects and the importance of English, Maths and Science, meant that cross-curricular concerns all but disappeared for a number of years. From 1997, under New Labour, the climate has changed somewhat. There is recognition again of the importance of issues such as race, environment and citizenship. But the dominant ideology in education is still one of teachers as technicians in a market-led economy with SATs and league tables used to measure performance of pupils, teachers and schools, the very antithesis of radical ideas. Currently global citizenship and education for sustainable development provide an important springboard for radical educators in terms of content and pedagogy. It is also possible to find radical educators working within most subject areas of the curriculum.

We need radical educators working within mainstream education because:

Education in modern world was designed to further the conquest of nature and the industrialisation of the planet. This tended to produce unbalanced, underdimensioned people tailored to fit the modern economy. Postmodern education must have a different agenda, one designed to heal, connect, liberate, empower, create and celebrate (Orr 1992: x).

SUPPORT

In this chapter I have set out: i) the importance of understanding the role of ideology in education; ii) the radical critique of mainstream education; iii) examples of radical alternatives found both outside and within the system. This final section of the chapter includes further suggestions for reading.

Questions to consider

1. In what ways has your outlook on life and education been shaped by dominant ideology?
2. Which aspects of the radical critique attract your attention and why?
3. In what ways can you see radical perspectives influencing your main subject and education more generally?

Suggested reading

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Useful organisations

Educational Heretics Press ~ www.gn.apc.org/edheretics/

Education Otherwise ~ www.education-otherwise.org/

Human Scale Education ~ www.hse.org.uk

Libertarian Education ~ www.spinninglobe.net/libedessay.html

Summerhill School ~ www.s-hill.demon.co.uk

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