

# Dancing princesses

Carlene Cornish reviews the key text behind the *Tutor Voices* initiative

Maire Daley, Kevin Orr and Joel Petrie (eds), *Further Education and the Twelve Dancing Princesses*, London: Institute of Education Press, 2015, £24.99 (ISBN: 978-1-85856-640-5)

This book makes an optimistic and positive contribution to the study of teaching - and of practice more generally - within the neo-liberal, marketised FE system. It uses Ball and Olmedo's Foucauldian analysis (1) to advocate a critical approach to practice, one that can help build the fortitude needed to refuse approaches judged to be mundane, along with conscious efforts on the part of colleagues to gather collectively in staff rooms and union meetings or on social media sites. The introductory chapter outlines the ethos of the book, arguing strongly for a shift from the Cinderella metaphor commonly applied to FE to the alternative narrative of the twelve dancing princesses, which is used to symbolise the collective intention to resist - and find spaces to 'dance' within - the tight political and institutional constraints that dominate the sector.

This metaphor drawn from a fairy tale is intended to stimulate in people working in FE a determination to succeed, instead of passively waiting for someone else to emancipate them. It underpins the book's ethos throughout and is reflected in the chapters, each of which deals with critical moments when, despite the culture of control and surveillance that prevails in institutions, practitioners have engaged in critical education and collective strategies, thereby aiming to open spaces and promote transformative practice. In chapter 3, Rebecca Maxted focuses on critical pedagogy in FE practice, and provides a rich body of data to

demonstrate ways in which practitioners engage in critical education, using deliberate strategies to raise student consciousness and promote social justice. Similarly, in chapter 9 Damien Page uses the image of the soldier in the fairy tale to discuss what happens when line and middle managers move from sharing in the struggles of 'chalk-face workers' to asserting their power when they judge this necessary 'to get the job done'. This chapter highlights the stress on non-senior managers to produce data collection reports that is endemic in a highly pressurised work environment, referencing the notion of 'job-craft' (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) (2) to reflect the dialectical position of such managers when they prioritise aspects of the job they deem to be meaningful and downplay those they consider less so. Here, then, resistance is seen as the scope to create a space within tight work conditions in which work judged to be of higher value can be undertaken, and the chapter is a valuable contribution both to the current academic debate on professionalism and to the conceptualisation of power and resistance.

The majority of the contributors hold senior posts, and thus write from a position of power and influence which allows them to construct their arguments in an assured fashion and thereby stimulate critical thought that can generate transformative practice. Some more than others provide good examples of strategies used by practitioners to offer 'real education' beyond the formal curriculum. For example, in chapter 5 Jane Weatherby and Lou Mycroft engage in a professional dialogue in which they exchange some 'golden nuggets' on critical education that can expand the repertoires both of FE teacher trainees and existing practitioners.

Although the book arguably focuses mainly on traditional settings, the image of dancing princesses aptly illustrates the diverse - indeed heterogeneous - nature of the FE sector, comprising as it does 244 general FE colleges, 94 sixth form colleges, 15 specialist designated institutions, over 1,000 private or charitable training providers, over 200 public bodies such as local authorities offering adult community learning, 38 HE institutions also offering FE courses, 18 National Skills Academies, the training departments of major employers such as Rolls Royce, 14 NHS trusts, and government departments such as the Ministry of Defence, Prison Services and Armed Services (Lingfield Report, October 2012). In some parts of the sector, for example general FE colleges, the Foucauldian call to resist and find spaces to 'dance', may be more realistic than in others. Thus colleagues working in non-traditional settings may feel less free to engage in the strategies proposed.

The book contains several references to 'dancing' as a way of celebrating important moments of victory, as for example in Rob Peutrell's chapter (11) on ESOL. And while the dancing metaphor is used here in a positive way which is intended to inspire optimism, commitment to progress and the establishment of transformative practice, it might also prompt the question: to whose tune is the FE sector dancing? Additionally, in the fairy tale the princesses dance harmoniously in a planned choreographic sequence. This arguably bears little resemblance to the unplanned, pressurised and chaotic FE work environment, with its many unpredictable, insecure and stressful aspects, which most chapters here do in fact reflect alongside the moments they celebrate. Granted that there is a need to progress from the negative Cinderella stereotype, could the dancing metaphor be counter-productive in that it perhaps masks the complex, 'dark' side of FE practice, whereas a more realistic image that captures the hybrid image of both 'realities' might prove beneficial, especially to new trainees and those who are considering a career as practitioners in FE?

Either way, the book is thought-provoking. It provides a rich body of current data, thereby making an important contribution to the disciplined study of FE. It offers a positive message on practice, demonstrating that, by engaging in collective strategies and pro-actively seeking opportunities for critical education, FE teachers can, within tight institutional constraints, nevertheless sometimes deliver critical pedagogy that promotes social justice and begins to establish transformative practice. Teacher trainees, educators, researchers, policy makers and careers guidance advisers would certainly benefit from reading it.

1. Ball, S. and Olmedo, A. (2013) 'Care of the self, resistance and subjectivity under neoliberal governmentality'. *Critical Studies in Education*, 54 (1), 85-96
2. Wrzesniewski, A. and Dutton, J. (2001) 'Crafting a job: revisioning employees as active crafters of their work'. *Academy of Management Review*, 26 (2), 179-201.

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*For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.*

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