

# Rethinking the Hard Path of Education as We Emerge from Covid-19: A Turn Away from the Summit

Victoria Jamieson\*

Nan Shepherd, best known for her novel *The Living Mountain*, was a Scottish novelist and poet who wrote about her personal experience of walking in the Cairngorms in Scotland. Shepherd captured the intimacy between knowledge and experience, reminding the reader that not all knowledge can be measured or quantified: 'I know [the mountain's] depth, though not in feet' (2011: 12). In Shepherd's writing about the mountain's plateau, I find a suggestive image for thinking through some of the problems with the English education system's outcome-oriented model of schooling.

Imagine the plateau of a mountain. A relatively flat, vast area, with steep drops running off. For walkers, there is value in reaching a mountain's plateau. It offers an opportunity to stop, to take in the views, to rest – and perhaps if walking with a group, it allows time for others to catch up. However, the *plateau* of schooling is quite different. It is a busy place, and there is no time to stop, for one to catch one's breath, or find one's own pace. Everyone is expected to *walk* the same path. For some, journeying this vast area may be relatively straight forward. Others may need some careful guidance to make it across, as without such, the steep drops present a grave risk and danger. Children and young people find themselves in the

same race, where they are 'pitted' against their peers and measured by their ability to perform on tests to reach the peak of schooling. I turn to Shepherd to consider what such an approach means for the experience of walking the mountains:

To pit oneself against the mountain is necessary for every climber: to pit oneself merely against other players, and to make a race of it, is to reduce to the level of a game what is essentially an experience (2011: 4).

The pressure and demands placed on children and young people leave little space for them to pay attention to those around them. They are pushed along the 'hard path,' towards key assessments. Nan Shepherd turned her attention away from the mountain's summit. She reflected on how she egocentrically approached the mountain; how she was driven by the mountain's effect on her – the sensuous gratification, and a lust for the 'tang of height' (1). I see parallels with Martin Buber's distinction between the object relation (the I-It) and a mutuality in relation, where the Other is recognised as a subject (the I-thou). In such a turn away, Shepherd's relation with the mountain alters:

Yet often the mountain gives itself most completely when I have no destination, when I reach nowhere in particular, but have gone out merely to be with the mountain as one visits a friend with no intention but to be with him (Shepherd 2011: 15)

Education's emergence from the Covid-19 disruption could be an opportunity to think more about what the experience of schooling has become. The current discourse around ['lost learning'](#) poses the danger that education further reduces opportunities for children and young people to be thoughtful about matters of concern for their futures. There is a growing demand for a system of education which resists an obsession with league tables and outcomes, one which gives teachers the space to find the delicate balance between individual children and the curriculum (Biesta: 2016). For too long, we have 'prune[d] away just those parts of educational endeavour that are crucial to preserving a healthy society' (Nussbaum 2010: 142). Those parts of education which cannot be measured are pushed aside in favour of predictability and global competition.

Education needs to be open to what might be needed in order to break through all learning, if it is to keep children and young people 'open' towards the world (Biesta 2016). The disruptions of the recent Covid-19 crisis will have profound social and economic effects, and so education needs to allow the space for individuals to be more contemplative about ethical relations, respect for difference, and understanding of others. Perhaps if we can make the space for children to slow down and allow for imaginations to go in new directions – for thinking to find new and unexpected paths – we can begin to foster radically different values and ways of being to respond responsibly to a world full of ecological, sociological, and political crises. Maybe then a new kind of world may appear:

This changing of the focus in the eye, moving the eye itself when looking at things that do not move, deepens one's sense of outer reality. Then static things may be caught in the very act of becoming. By so simple a matter, too, as altering the position of one's head, a different kind of world may be made to appear. (Shepherd 2011: 10)

\***Victoria Jamieson** is a PhD researcher and Graduate Teaching Assistant at Edge Hill University. Her profile can be found [here](#). She is also co-founder of the [Philosophy of Education Reading Network](#).

## References

Biesta, G. (2016) *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future*. Routledge: New York.

Buber, M. (1972) *I and Thou*. Trans. W. Kauffman. Charles Scribner's Sons: New York.

Nussbaum, M. C. (2010) Not for profit: *Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Shepherd, N., (2011) *The Living Mountain*. Edinburgh: Canongate.