

Digital Dialogue no. 3: Progressive education and school experiments in the late 20th century.

Organisers and project participants: Professor Ning de Coninck-Smith, Associate professor Lisa Rosén Rasmussen, PhD student Kamilla Ane Petersen & Post.Doc. Pernille Svare Nygaard – Danish School of Education (DPU), Aarhus University

Lead: Professor Julie McLeod, Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne

Speaker: Associate Professor Frances Kelly. School of Education and Social Practice, in the Faculty of Arts and Education at Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland, in Aotearoa New Zealand

Date: 23rd of April 2026

Time: 9 am – 11.30 am (CET/CEST)

Zoom-link:

<https://aarhusuniversity.zoom.us/j/61176771851?pwd=9u9ijagewt9M2NtMiGIb3GTBnxLChm.1>

In this dialogue, we take up the notion of progressive education as an empirical and analytical concept to discuss not only what it implies, but also how it may take on different meanings across time and space. By focusing on specific experiments at the everyday level within school and teacher education, we explore the micro-level of progressive education and examine how understandings of teaching, teachers, and students evolve through these experiments. In doing so, we wish to discuss how these developments add meaning to the very notion of progressive education. We also consider the ways in which new ideas and practices travel beyond the experiments themselves and ask how this movement unfolds – perhaps differently - across time and space.

The dialogue will begin with two short presentations. **Julie McLeod** from Melbourne University, Australia, will talk about *Making sense of memory and the mixed-up dreams of progressive education*, taking teachers' and students' memories of alternative and radical schooling in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s as a route into thinking about the slippery meanings and promises of progressive education. Following this, **Frances Kelly** from Auckland University, New Zealand, will present on the project *Children without schools* (Kelly, Locke and Mullen, 2023–2025), focusing on an experiment in progressive education carried out in 1942 in the agricultural Manawatū district of Aotearoa New Zealand. Finally, examples of experiments, new, and alternative approaches to schooling and teacher education from the research project *Edutopias: Reforms of Everyday School Practices: Denmark, 1945–1975*, based at Aarhus University in Denmark, will be brought to the table for discussion.

We invite scholars and other interested participants to join this online seminar, with the aim of sharing and discussing knowledge on school experiments and progressive education. If you have any questions about the digital dialogue, or if you encounter any technical difficulties with the Zoom link on the day of the event, please get in touch with Lisa Rosén Rasmussen (lisa@edu.au.dk).

This is the third in a series of four digital dialogues, organised as part of the research project [EDUTOPIAS](#) based at Aarhus University, Denmark. In this research project Ning de Coninck-Smith, Lisa Rosén Rasmussen, Pernille Svare Nygaard, and Kamilla Ane Petersen study the Danish school reforms introduced 1945-1975 from the perspective of the promising spaces of teacher training, school experiments, school architecture and independent small schools. The aim is to develop a new understanding of reforms as complex and conflicting everyday processes, which not only address the curriculum or school structure, but also change the affective, spatial, and embodied relations between teachers, parents, and students.

Guest speakers full abstracts and bios

Julie McLeod

Abstract: Making sense of memory and the mixed-up dreams of progressive education

This presentation takes teachers' and students' memories of alternative and radical schooling in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s as a route into thinking about the slippery meaning and promises of progressive education. In considering the different registers of progressive agendas, from the everyday to the aspirational, it reflects on how these memories travel across time/ space and leave a mark on the biographical and policy present. It offers some memory vignettes that spring from the seemingly 'minor encounters' of schooling, tracing some of their gendered dynamics and yearnings for schools to be otherwise. Attending to the potency of memories of daily experiences, and the 'ordinary affects' (2007) of the mundane or even upsetting aspects of radical schooling provides a counterpoint to imperatives to resurrect and rearticulate grand – grandiose – narratives of radical education. A further set of persistent questions concerns how progressive experiments 'land' in different geo-political contexts, and in this case, what this might mean in relation to intersections of progressive education, colonialism and race in Oceania. A second set of ongoing questions relate to what I think as a paradox in how progressive movements seem simultaneously to be submerged or even forgotten in contemporary educational discourse yet also ever present in the sense of a spectre on the edge of current reforms.

Bio: Julie McLeod is Professor of Curriculum, Equity and Social Change at the University of Melbourne Faculty of Education. Her research crosses over history and sociology of education, motivated by questions about education, identities and social change. She is interested in the temporalities of reform and genealogies of educational common sense, particularly in relation to radical and progressive movements. She is currently President of the Australian and New Zealand History of Education Society (2026-2028).

Frances Kelly

Abstract: Children without schools: a 1942 experiment in radical education. Frances will present on the project *Children without schools* (Kelly, Locke and Mullen, 2023-2025) which examines a ‘micro’ level experiment in progressive education. This small, localised and ephemeral scheme took place between February 9 and March 7, 1942, in the agricultural Manawatū district in Aotearoa New Zealand. Although the month-long Emergency Education Scheme came about because of necessity, during a ‘state of exception’ (Priem, 2022) when nine schools in the rural towns of Feilding and Palmerston North were needed by the military, its significance derives from the radical alternative it offered to a traditional imaginary of education within schools. For one month, 1800 children experienced education *without* schools in an arts-oriented, civic-minded and site-responsive form of education deeply connected to community, that encouraged children’s self-governance. While this radical scheme was an exceptional *event*, a singular occurrence never replicated, it nonetheless revealed possibilities for reimagining postwar education in ways that influenced subsequent reform. Frances will outline aspects of the project, and our attention to both ‘binding the event’ as occurring in a specific place and time, while also ‘unbinding the event’ through recognising its “complex, mobile social processes”, drawing on Robin Wagner-Pacifici’s theorisation of historical events as ‘restless’ (2010, p.1353).

Associate Professor Frances Kelly is based in the School of Education and Social Practice, in the Faculty of Arts and Education at Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland, in Aotearoa New Zealand. Frances is the New Zealand representative for the Australia New Zealand History of Education Society (ANZHEs) and Co-Editor of *History of Education Review*. She has an enduring interest in mid-century educational experiments in New Zealand.

<https://profiles.auckland.ac.nz/f-kelly>