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Book review

Book review: *Children's Life-Histories in Primary Schools: Imagining schooling as a positive experience*, by Eleanore Hargreaves, Denise Buchanan and Laura Quick

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Book review: *Children's Life-Histories in Primary Schools: Imagining schooling as a positive experience*, by Eleanore Hargreaves, Denise Buchanan and Laura Quick

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In *Children's Life-Histories in Primary Schools*, Eleanore Hargreaves, Denise Buchanan and Laura Quick present the life-histories of 23 children who were assessed as attaining below age-related expectations in mathematics and/or English. Being designated as low-attainers had several negative consequences for these children's self-confidence, engagement in learning, sense of agency and well-being. The children's accounts and experiences of schooling were, in many cases, far from positive, unlike the first impression given by the title of the book. However, through these heart-breaking life-histories, the authors challenge the reader to imagine what a positive experience of schooling would be like for these children and others in similar situations during their school years. Throughout the book, the life-histories of these 23 children are intertwined with issues of social justice.

Children's Life-Histories in Primary Schools continues the discussion on attainment grouping and the harmful effects it often has on children who are in lower-attainers' groups in mathematics and/or English (for example, Francis et al., 2017; McGillicuddy and Devine, 2020). The wider context of the book is the neoliberal performance culture that emphasises attainment and testing in mathematics and English, placing little value on other subjects or children's personal interests and social relationships. The theoretical framework used in this book is ambitious, as it combines two theories from social psychology: Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's self-determination theory and Chris Watkins's theory of learning versus performance orientations, with Nancy Fraser's theorisation of social justice as parity of participation. With these theories, the authors examine how schooling practices can either promote or undermine children's well-being, and, more broadly, social justice in education. Furthermore, the book raises the question of the purpose of education, specifically, what aspects of schooling are valued in society (for example, Biesta, 2009; Juvonen et al., 2024).

The book has a unique perspective, as it gives a voice to 23 children who participated in the CLIPS (Children's Life-Histories in Primary Schools) study that was conducted in four primary schools, three of which served disadvantaged communities. The research team was able to follow the children for four years during their primary school years, from ages 7–8 to 11–12. Teachers' and guardians' perspectives are intentionally left out in this book, and the focus is on children's experiences and perceptions of schooling. The omission of adults' perspectives and most background information is fascinating, and the reader is immersed in the children's life-histories and invited to take their position. The children's voices are filtered through the authors whose interpretations these life-histories are, but this book places a high emphasis on valuing children's perspectives, and this can be sensed throughout the book.

Listening to children and hearing their thoughts and ideas about meaningful schooling is an important contribution to the current discussion on socially just schooling, which *Children's Life-Histories in Primary Schools* does, but it is not enough. The authors also highlight the persistent need to critically revise practices and policies in education to ensure that all children have the opportunity to experience schooling positively. Teachers, school leaders and policymakers are crucial actors in creating learning environments where all children, regardless of their attainment in mathematics and English or their social backgrounds, are seen as learners who have desires and valuable strengths. Moreover, all children should have the right to use their potential – so that the perceived or internalised sense of inadequacy in mathematics and English, as defined by others, does not determine who they are or their educational and occupational paths. It was indeed striking how severely the CLIPS children dreaded negative feedback, failure and reprimands. This prevented them from engaging positively in learning and exercising their agency, which posed an obstacle to their confidence and well-being.

Some of the children who participated in the CLIPS study had encountered teachers who cared for their well-being and learning. However, the book poignantly reveals how teachers need to be more aware of how to treat their pupils respectfully and empathetically. Many children had negative experiences with teachers who did not understand their needs and were unable to support their learning and participation. These children felt that teachers did not understand them or see them; they felt invisible and unworthy of the teacher's attention. Even though they did not excel in mathematics or English, they had strengths that remained unnoticed. Most of these children did not aim for high-status jobs, but they emphasised the importance of empathy and care towards other people and nature. The following excerpts are examples of the personal values and interests the children demonstrated:

> Jack told us that he delighted in making other people happy and that if he won a million pounds, he would give half of it away to charity. (94)
>
> He [Laurie] himself hoped to grow up into a 'kind' and 'friendly' person as well as caring for his family. (98)
>
> Fin noted that the school as an institution 'wouldn't know how good I know about animals' because little focus was given to nature study. Nature study was not included in their school's curriculum, despite these children's interest; and despite Zeph, for example, being nick-named the 'animal dictionary'. Zeph came to assess his overall competence somewhat negatively as 'intelligent about animals but not on every other thing'. (163)

In these times, when neoliberal practices and policies widen the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged, democracy is under threat in many traditionally democratic countries, and the whole world is facing an environmental crisis, the book unveils that there is much to learn from these children.

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To summarise, even though teachers can do a lot for their pupils, it can also be difficult for them to be transformative agents when there are systemic structures and norms that guide teaching and learning in schools. Consequently, *Children's Life-Histories in Primary Schools* is important to both teachers and those involved in policymaking, both in the UK and internationally, as various grouping practices exist in many countries. Despite the ambitiousness of the theoretical framework of this study, the book is easy to read for those outside of academia, for example, teachers, school leaders, policymakers and parents with (school-aged) children. We all should be aware of how labelling and grouping, and the ways in which we speak about different learners, affect children who are viewed as less competent than others by their teachers and peers.

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