

Book Reviews

Reviews Editor: Dr. Paul Downes, Dublin City University

Two of the reviewed books involve international edited collections on seminal themes for emotional education, namely, bullying among university students and social and emotional learning across diverse education sectors. Both of these areas are key to *engagement* with education and the other side of the coin, disengagement from education. It is this very theme of engagement that is brought to the fore in another reviewed book, focusing on the complexity of needs of those who have fallen outside education or employment systems. The fourth reviewed book interrogates socio-cultural dimensions to autism in childhood, with implications for stimulating educational environments to engage those with autism.

Paul Downes
Reviews Editor

1. *Disengagement from Education*

Author: Lynne Rogers
Publisher: Institute of Education Press, London
Year of Publication: 2016
ISBN: 978-1-85856-681

Early school leaving has been recognized as a serious and far-reaching issue at the European level (e.g. EU 2020 strategy, European Commission, 2010) and the topic has been very high on the political, public and scientific agenda in recent years. Many publications, reports and projects have been dedicated to the issue. What does the book *Disengagement from Education* contribute to the field?

As already indicated in the title of the book, the focus is not directly on the early school leaving (ESL), known under the term ‘not in education, employment and training’ (NEET) in the UK, but rather on the disengagement that at the most extreme end refers to early school leaving. This a priori focus on the disengagement (rather than ESL) is much needed and implies a specific understanding of ESL. Disengagement is viewed as a process along a continuum and the focus is on the related indicators, risk factors, contexts and issues. Moreover, I found it valuable that the book covers the process of disengagement in relation to different transitions young people face; thus not only transition to secondary school (which is usually of main concern in the texts on ESL), but also transition to college or from alternative provision to mainstream education. I found the book especially novel and unique in the section where it discusses education and (dis)engagement of young people in the criminal justice settings, a context often overlooked in general ESL debates.

Greatly appreciated is the literature review and case studies on curricula and pedagogy as well as on teachers and teacher training. These two chapters are also closely linked to the chapters on transitions and alternative educational provision and together these chapters elucidate what can be done in our educational systems to support those who struggle to stay in school. In my opinion, what is described in these chapters is very relevant also for *any* student to thrive in school, including but not limited to more emphasis on strong respectful participatory relations between educators and students, more relevant organic (‘in vivo’, practical, vocational) learning experiences, more individualized approaches (personalized curriculum), the use of informational technology, and well-timed transition programmes. Even though the author gives recognition to the demandingness of teacher profession nowadays in general and in particular with students who are disengaged, teachers’ perspectives could be more acknowledged in the teacher chapter. Also worth mentioning is that in several chapters throughout the book the socio-emotional dimension of teaching and learning (e.g. via teacher-students relationship, socio-emotional factors in coping with transition) is highlighted, a dimension often neglected in tackling ESL (see e.g. Downes, 2011).

The book should be high on the recommended reading list for all the staff working in and around schools (teachers, heads and other professionals), educators in initial and in-service teacher education,

students, parents, employers, researchers and last but not the least – policy-makers. This book helps understand the complexity and multi-levelness of disengagement and yet helps see potentials of each contribution to the big picture.

Despite *Disengagement from Education* being a scientific monograph, it is written in an easy-to-read-and-understand language. The book is well-structured, each of the 12 chapters (further grouped in four parts) begins with a short paragraph that forecasts the topics discussed in a chapter and concludes with a chapter summary (both visually separated). Each chapter also includes endnote which presents authors' conclusions on the topic.

To conclude, the book certainly fills the gap recognized by European Commission (2011), namely that lack of evidence-based policy-making is one of the main causes of ineffective policies in tackling ESL. The book is bringing a lot of world-wide international evidence-based (scientific) reviews and examples of good practises (case studies, including personal testimonies of people involved in these practices, projects, initiatives). These examples further illustrate the main idea and make the reading more interesting and 'concrete', 'alive', and may also inspire practitioners and policy-makers alike. The drawback is that, albeit very international it relies heavily on studies and practices in the English speaking territories (e.g. UK, Australia, US) with very rare examples from other European countries, Asia and Africa. Considering the attention the topic of ESL has been receiving in Europe, I wished for a little more balance in this respect with some more examples from other European countries. Nevertheless, I would characterize this monograph as an – inspirational, reader-friendly, scientific – book.

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2. *Bullying Among University Students*

Editors: Helen Cowie & Carrie-Anne Myers
Publisher: Routledge, New York
Year of Publication: 2015
ISBN: 978-1-138-80926-0

This book makes a welcome contribution to the field of bullying studies on a topic that up to recently has not received adequate attention. The editors have brought together a significant amount of disparate research related to bullying among university students that otherwise may have been unknown to the reader and in doing so have created a critical mass of knowledge that will be the foundation of future research on this topic. I think it is noteworthy that rather than simply try to transpose established concepts of bullying from schools and workplaces the editors have attempted to open a discussion about how to conceptualise bullying among university students and have set out some of the challenges that will be encountered in addressing this insidious issue in higher education.

Following on from an overview of bullying among university students chapters in the book are organised into four themes, *student experience, nature of bullying at university, social context of bullying at university, and interventions and policies*. The book gives priority to the *experience of students* by placing this theme first and of particular importance the editors included a chapter by Rashid Aziz on the experiences of research students who can be quite vulnerable due to an unequal and almost intimate relationship with their thesis supervisor. However, no reference is made to the possibility of a research student bullying or harassing their supervisor which further research might show to be just as big a problem due to unrealistic expectations on the part of students.

Looking at the nature of bullying Ian Rivers makes an excellent contribution on the plight of LGBT students in relation to homophobic bullying in higher education. It seems somewhat ironic that centres of intellect and creative thinking would fail to be proactive and inclusive on LGBT issues. A recent example of this occurred in Ireland when universities found themselves unable to explicitly support the 2016 marriage equality referendum leaving it to students unions to raise the rainbow flag instead.

Under the theme of the *social context of bullying* authors Mali Porhola, Kristen Cvancara, EstaKaal, Kaja Tampere and Beatrice Torres provide findings from a large cross-cultural study about bullying in universities. Presenting data from Argentina, Australia, Finland and USA they argue that contrasting experiences of bullying in different countries arises out of cultural, political, geographic, historical, economic and educational contexts. However, I am not sure that these authors gave enough attention to the nuanced differences in how bullying is theoretically conceptualised and/or defined in different cultures which makes it difficult to contrast and compare bullying among university students across cultures.

The final theme in this book naturally explores how universities can respond to the problem of bullying among students. Throughout the text reference is made to the problems and issues that can be caused

by bullying experiences including anxiety, depression, poor self-worth, and suicidal ideation among other issues. The editors did not shy away from pointing to solutions that were both individual and institutional. In her chapter Mari Luca discusses how inexperienced individuals can inadvertently contribute to and/or experience sexual bullying. This is supported by an argument for the role of individual counselling in helping students to cope with the negative and stressful effects of an increasingly sexualised culture in universities. Recent decisions by some high profile universities to require all freshmen and women to undertake sexual consent courses illustrates this issue further. In terms of an institutionalised response to bullying among university students although Marilyn Campbell's research relates only to Australia her contribution sets out the importance of universities developing appropriate policies and procedures that not only support the promotion of bullying prevention but also can provide students with the confidence to report and intervene when bullying occurs. Similar to other research among children in schools and employees in workplaces her chapter concludes that the presence of anti-bullying policies and procedures provides a framework in which a bully free culture can be development in universities.

The editors of this book are to be commended for taking a holistic approach to the problem of bullying among students at university. From a cross-national point of view not all of the chapters in the book connect with this theme although the book as whole does provide accounts from different cultures leaving the reader to develop his/her own cross-cultural perspectives. If individual chapters do not always remain faithful to the title of the book in terms of 'cross-national perspectives' every chapter does give an account of the connection between bullying behaviour and emotional wellbeing among university students and as such this book will be of great benefit to anyone interested in studying this aspect of bullying in higher education.

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3. Handbook of Social and Emotional learning: Research and Practice

Editors: J. A. Durlak, C.E. Domitrovich, R. P. Weissberg & T. P. Gullotta

Publisher: The Guilford Press, New York, London

Year of Publication: 2015

ISBN: 978-1-4625-2015-2

The *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning* offers a significant consolidation and development of issues pertaining to this vital theme, drawing on the work on many international leaders in this area. It

operates over a broad canvas covering social and emotional learning (SEL) from preschool through to higher education, afterschool and juvenile justice settings, as well as preservice and inservice teacher education. It embraces, at least to some degree, family and community contexts, as well as school climate dimensions, with a particular emphasis on assessment aspects that frame section III. Part I examines *Foundations*, Part II *Evidence-Based Programming*, with Part IV *Toward Widespread Practice and Policy*.

From many vantage points, this book represents a landmark account of the state of the art of social and emotional learning, especially in a US context. Interrogation is made in a consistent fashion across thematic areas of programs that work (based on at least three experimental studies), as well as promising approaches. Chapters go far beyond the merely descriptive to engage in critical, nuanced applications of the overarching framework for interrogating SEL studies and programs.

Against this backdrop, it is worth considering where the whole area of SEL needs to go from here, especially in an international context, while recognising that the primary focus of this Handbook was on a US one. Two interrelated issues are that of the debate between top-down programs and bottom-up processes, as well as that of student voices. Weare and Nind (2011) highlight a distinction that is perhaps too sharply drawn, though nevertheless highly relevant, in its contrast between two styles of approaches:

The European and Australian style and the type of whole-school approaches it generates tend to promote 'bottom up' principles such as empowerment, autonomy, democracy and local adaptability and ownership (WHO, 1997). All the agency-led whole-school programs named...have produced a wealth of well-planned materials, guidelines and advice, but are also deliberately non-prescriptive and principles based (pp.66).

They suggest that this flexible and non-prescriptive style is echoed in wider approaches to mental health across Europe and Australia, which emphasise the need for end-user involvement and the lay voice:

This approach contrasts with the US style of more top-down, manualised approaches, with scripts, prescriptive training and a strict requirement for programme fidelity. There are strong reasons to retain the democratic European and Australian approach for large-scale programs for mental health [as it leads to positive climates, empowered communities for sustainable, well-rooted long lasting changes] (Weare & Nind, 2011, pp. 66).

The key issue for current purposes is less on contrasts between Europe and the US but rather on how to engage in this balancing process between top-down and bottom-up approaches to SEL, mental health and wellbeing development. This is less a contrast between *a priori* principles of process and empirical effectiveness in terms of outcomes, as school and student ownership of the SEL communicative process impacts directly upon effectiveness; good process principles affect sustainability and long-term change. These contrasting directions need to be reconciled rather than opposed. Joseph Durlak's own chapter 26 on implementation issues is one helpful starting point for this debate. The question also arises for this whole paradigm of SEL concerning the different recognition to students' voices in cultural contexts beyond the US; the US is an exception internationally, as it has not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which gives children a right to be consulted on matters affecting their own welfare, giving due recognition to their age. Children's voices and experiences are underplayed in this Handbook.

Another area meriting further focus in depth is individual differences regarding risks and benefits of SEL. This includes the need for more recognition of different prevention and promotion levels, to distinguish universal prevention and promotion programs from those at selected (some, moderate risk) and indicated (few, chronic need) prevention levels.

Further conceptual issues for SEL requiring more extended discussion, beyond the scope of the current book, include conformity/cultural conditioning and privacy concerns. Assessment dimensions for SEL raise issues in the critical tradition of Illich (1971) of schooling emotions down to size through letting unmeasured and unmeasurable experience slip out of children and young people's hands. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL 2013) define SEL as 'a process for helping children and even adults develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness' relied upon, for example, in Chapter 10 by Sara Rimm-Kaufmann and Chris Hulleman on elementary school settings. This includes 'managing our emotions'. Where is the distinction to be drawn between managing emotions as a recipe for cultural conformity and adaptation to the system, and a paradigm for individual identity and emotional expression? Life effectiveness may also be a contested term as to cultural contexts and value judgments as to what life goals are valuable, both within and beyond a conception of effectiveness. In some contexts, irrepressible nonconformity and propensity to conflict with school authorities may be the hallmark of future leaders or idiosyncratic, creative individuals with much to offer society over time. How can SEL ensure it is not simply cultural flattening into the bland, into a saturation of moderation? The language of 'programming' raises a further tension between programmed approaches and those more sensitive not only to individual differences but also to students' voices and individual phenomenology. Other issues worth further consideration are the potential for older students to react against any 'programming', as has been observed for bullying prevention contexts in school. In international contexts, a tension exists, at least to some degree, between plurality and diversity of approaches to SEL and definitional closure for comparability and consensual value judgments about what is valuable and effective. Privacy issues would benefit from a clearer demarcation of levels to distinguish a teacher's role in stress prevention, mental health promotion, as distinct from therapy (see Downes, 2003) and a potentially intrusive role upon families where teachers' are placed in roles of making judgments they are ill equipped to make.

These concerns raised are less as caveats to the importance of this Handbook as a key reference point and foundation for SEL into the future. Rather they are indicative of the vast conceptual terrain of social and emotional dimensions to education, for what WB Yeats described as the "foul and rag bone shop of the heart", and where in Hamlet's words, "there are more things on heaven and earth...than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (Hamlet. 1.5).

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4. Autism and the Social World of Childhood: A sociocultural perspective on theory and practice

Author: Carmel Conn
Publisher: Routledge, Oxford, New York
Year of Publication: 2014
ISBN: 978-0-415-83834-4

Autism and the Social World of Childhood addresses multiple aspects around autism from theoretical and practical perspectives. This book offers interesting contents for people who take an interest in both these theories and practices. Every chapter starts with an introduction comprising an outline or a case vignette. The different chapters contain general and detailed information with transitions guiding the reader throughout the book. Each chapter ends with a summary completing the overall picture. The book is divided into two sections: Part I with a more theoretical accent on autism and Part II describing practices, as well as issues and support approaches.

Part I *Theorizing autism and children's social worlds*, offers insights into theories and conceptualizations about children with and without autism. This section includes 5 chapters and addresses relevant aspects in development and learning of children with autism. A particular focus is put on the play, the social interactions and friendships within different social contexts including insights into educational settings.

Part II *Educational practice in inclusive school settings* describes approaches that foster reflective teaching and learning. Children with special educational needs, disability and particularly children with autism require special interventions and strategies. These are portrayed and deepened in the 3 chapters of this section.

Some important characteristics in children's lives and experiences are described, whereby the diversity of social interactions, variable play forms and friendship are highlighted. Social participation is presented as being influenced by norms, values, customs, practices and cultural tools (such as language, pictures and other forms of media). The careful investigation of these aspects may be helpful to understand children's experiences from the perspectives of all involved actors (children, peers, adults).

Autism is also described as being characterized by a range of conditions leading to different experiences due to differing cognitive, social, affective, sensory-perceptual and motor functioning. The conceptualizations of autism seen through a socio-cultural lens, which focuses on interaction, communication and play, are meant to find alternate forms of supporting children and adults within complex social phenomena. These forms intend to facilitate learning and development in line with personal and group resources, interests and needs. Thus, the reader gets insights into disability and disabling factors, which are often due to a lack of comprehensive, reflective and adapted environment. The presented considerations challenge some common views on autism focusing often on the individual's deficits. They also emphasize the importance of listening to and valuing all possible voices. The idea of overlapping roles and approaches of researchers and practitioners is depicted as particularly fruitful to develop a broader spectrum of professional attitudes.

In conclusion, this book offers noteworthy insights and suggestions for people interested in theories and practices of special needs education that focus on autism, as well as in education in general.

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