

Helen Phtiaka, *Special Kids for Special Treatment: How special do you have to be to find yourself in a special school?* London, The Falmer Press, 339 pp, 1997, ISBN 07507 0618 X.

The literature on pupil behaviour is enormous and stands testimony to the enduring interest in and concern with this issue. It is not uncommon for authors and researchers in this field to base their work upon assumptions about the meaning of such terms as 'emotional and behavioural difficulties', 'maladjustment', 'disturbed behaviour', etc. that are cast about as if their meanings are self-evident and beyond dispute. This lack of critical thinking has produced a 'fix-it' literature which focuses heavily upon supposed child deficits and mechanisms for remediating those deficits.

Helen Phtiaka's book comes as a refreshing alternative view to the banality of so much that has been written on the theme of behaviour. The account she has written is based upon her doctoral thesis and captures the depth of engagement with data that is characteristic of good work at this level. The book concentrates on the experiences of pupils in mainstream and special schools and in this respect it is quite remarkable because so rarely do researchers allow these voices to be heard in their work.

Phtiaka presents us with two in-depth case studies. She argues that behaviour differences between pupils are not in themselves sufficient to justify placement in a special unit.

A more important factor is the degree to which pupils exert control over their situation through their own decision-making. Drawing on a mixture of classroom observation and pupil interviews she identifies two types of 'deviant' behaviour which cut across the mainstream school and the special unit. For one group, it is the pupils' own choices that are important in determining either their transfer to a special unit or their continuation in the mainstream school. For another group of pupils their school careers are more likely to be decided by their schools. The argument that is put forward is derived from an attempt to connect sociological and psychological explanations of classroom behaviour. Whereas the former account for the deliberate use of deviant behaviour as a form of school resistance the latter are considered more appropriate where failure to remain in school is apparently due to a lack of good judgement or self-control.

Phtiaka describes her research as an exploratory study and there are certainly some unanswered questions thrown up. For instance, much more work needs to be done to investigate how schools facilitate or restrict pupil decision-making and thus turn resistance into deviance. The book's conclusion that the most important factor at the end of the day is the pupil's 'intelligence' in managing their situation

is not altogether convincing, not least because it de-emphasizes the power of teachers and schools to apply labels and determine outcomes in ways that address their own needs.

Despite some questions and reservations this is a book that is evocative in its representation of children's 'voices' and it is a book that certainly deserves to be read.

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