



Book Reviews

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In this issue of the IJEE book reviews section we focus on a single text, “Children’s social and emotional wellbeing in schools: a critical perspective” (2012, Policy Press), written by Debbie Watson, Carl Emery and Phil Bayliss, with contributions from Margaret Boushel and Karen McInnes. There are two reviews – by Ruth Cigman and Katherine Ecclestone – followed by a response from the authors.

The text by Watson et al. provides a critical perspective on an area that is central to the mission statement of ENSEC, and as a result has been viewed by some as challenging the core principles of our organisation. Having read the book, my own view is that it is less incendiary and controversial in its key propositions about children’s wellbeing than it has perhaps been given credit for – reinforcing the age-old maxim that we should never judge a book by its cover. Watson et al do challenge many of the assumed truths in the field of social and emotional wellbeing, but their critique is primarily about how the concept itself is constructed and understood. They offer an alternative perspective on wellbeing, but at the core of their thesis is the view that, “engaging with children’s social and emotional development is vital, and the contested nature of the concept of wellbeing does not mean that there is not a need for many of the activities taking place on the ground” (p.209).

The two reviews and the authors’ response to these raise interesting and important issues in relation to the text, but also more broadly the field in which we work. I would like to thank Ruth, Kathryn, Debbie, Carl and Phil for their contributions to this important debate.

The book itself is available to purchase via the Policy Press website:
<http://www.policypress.co.uk/display.asp?K=9781847425133>

In the next issue we revert back to our standard book review format – I will contact ENSEC members in the coming months with details of the texts I have available for review,

This is a much-needed book. The concept of wellbeing is ubiquitous and perplexing and the book explores it on the levels of theory, policy, practice and research, arguing compellingly for more dialogical engagement with children. Its subtitle, ‘A critical perspective’, requires this multi-layered approach, and the book offers a ‘narrative’ that exposes our “uncritical acceptance of the need to improve wellbeing—which is poorly defined and *inconsistent*” (p. 222).

I agree with many of the book’s aspirations: to think of wellbeing less as quantity and more as quality, less as imposed from without and more as expressed from within. I approve of the book’s democratic and pragmatic spirit, and its desire to open up the debate without arid theorising. Unfortunately I come from the discipline that is under attack when the authors urge us not to get lost in “circular and long-standing debates” that “philosophers have not yet managed to resolve” (p. 29). It is not for personal reasons that I think it advisable to comment on this. Philosophy’s role in contemporary social and educational debate is important, and the book shows how urgently it needs clarification.

The project of speaking across, not merely within, disciplines has never been more timely. The book attempts to close schisms between empirically-informed policy, educational practice and what it calls ‘theory’. I learned much about the first two topics: the rolling out of programmes like SEAL and UKRP with flimsy empirical backing, the reliance on questionnaires in preference to attention to children’s voices. But what about theory?

The primary source is the work of Deleuze, whose work is popular with many empirical researchers in quest of a theoretical underpinning. My difficulties with this are simple but I think profound, and they apply generally to attempts to underpin empirical work this way. First, the question *why Deleuze?* is not raised in the book, nor I suspect has it been seriously raised by the authors. This is rather like a builder who goes into a store and picks the first set of scaffolding she sees without wondering whether it is the sturdiest. Second, Deleuze is no easy read, and the writing in the theoretical sections reflects this. What we need is plain, gritty writing, richly illustrated with examples. What we get are digressions into turgid theory, full of questionable assertions (“the purpose of philosophy is to create concepts” (p. 5)) and technical terms that appear in **bold** without the practical clarification they need. This is a pity, since the ideas of Deleuze are important. Why must non-philosophical readers (the book aims to reach a wide audience) struggle to get a handle on these ideas?

Much of what we get from Deleuze can be drawn more simply from Wittgenstein in my view: for example, the idea that philosophising is an *activity* that, when meaningful, is grounded in forms of life or social practices. The absence of such grounding is wonderfully expressed by Wittgenstein (1953) when he talks of language that “*goes on holiday*” (para. 38) or resembles “an engine idling, not when it is doing work” (para. 132). Regrettably, there is quite a bit of such language in the book. Take the discussion of (in bold)

hedonistic and desire theories (p. 19). However careful one is to avoid philosophical tail-chasing, it is hardly possible to explore the concept of wellbeing without considering pleasure (hedonism), desire (desire theories), the good life (eudaimonia). It is not that a clever or well-constructed theory is needed; it is that implicit assumptions about these relationships permeate the wellbeing debate. Economists tend to favour hedonistic theories; positive psychologists claim to be eudaimonists; most psychological questionnaires assume the validity of desire theories.

It is disappointing therefore to find, in the treatment of Aristotle, that his eudaimonia theory is classified as a form of desire theory. (This is presumably why eudaimonia does not get the **bold** treatment.) Aristotle is presented mainly through secondary and tertiary sources and his theory is puzzlingly described as ‘subjective’, the subjectivity/objectivity distinction being another theoretical thread that weaves through the book. However, Aristotle’s theory is neither desire-based nor subjective, and the reasons *why* it is not are of the first importance. I think I understand why the authors call themselves subjectivists about wellbeing; they want us to open our hearts to children and avoid *telling* children what is best for them. Matters are more complicated, however, and if we probe a little deeper, we see why the objective/subjective polarity obscures rather than illuminates wellbeing.

Aristotelian Martha Nussbaum is described as an **objective list theorist** who believes “the realisation of capabilities should be up to the individual” (p. 24). This is confusing; her objective list of capabilities is offered for debate, but this is not at all the same as saying it is “up to the individual”. There seems to be a need to soften Nussbaum’s objectivism without understanding why we *need* to acknowledge an objective aspect to wellbeing. Nussbaum points out, rightly, that the desires of disadvantaged individuals sometimes *embody* their disadvantages, as when a girl who has been raised to regard education as a male privilege denies that she is worse off without it. Objectivism is feared by the authors of this book, who associate it with paternalism, but a moment’s pause shows that this is not straightforward. Liberal philosopher Harry Brighouse (2006) has warned that “[t]he paternalistic role is very complicated”, pointing out that we impose *school* on children seven hours a day. Is this paternalistic? At what age is paternalism supposed to be an issue? Should we refrain from imposing our moral views on a six year-old who is physically violent, a nine year-old who steals?

The great thing about Aristotle is that he believes in the contextual cultivation of children’s emotions in the light of a substantial conception of the good, rather than the ad hoc assertion of principles. If this sounds paternalistic, consider the ways we impose conceptions of the good on children simply by raising and educating them. We should be attentive to children’s voices but let us not pretend that educational practice involves no moral imposition. I agree with the authors that the wellbeing agenda can be intrusive; it goes beyond what we normally regard as legitimate education of the emotions. To advance these thoughts, we must acknowledge subjective *and* objective aspects of wellbeing, and attempt to philosophise both simply and consequentially. Not only do we need good conversations with children; we need good conversations with each other, and a concerted effort to build sturdy bridges between theory and practice.

References

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Review 2 *Kathryn Ecclestone, University of Birmingham, UK*

Far more than other policy fads which have been promoted evangelically as the solution to perceived problems with the education system over the past 15 years or so ('learning styles' and 'personalised learning' come to mind), the unchallenged rise of interventions that claim to develop children's social and emotional well-being has captured the imagination of policy makers, researchers and practitioners. Making sense of the interplay between policy discourses, associated research and underlying theory behind a plethora of interventions is not a task for the faint-hearted. This book makes an important contribution to understanding a policy and practice field which has become characterised by enthusiasm for intervention, conceptual incoherence, the *ad hoc* rise of programmes, competition to define the problem and offer solutions, virtually no conclusive evidence from evaluations, and a marked lack of critique or challenge. As the authors observe, conceptual clarity is crucial, not just to make some sense of policy and its effects on practice, but to challenge an often-reductionist view of social and emotional well-being and then to propose more progressive, educationally-sound ways to develop it.

The book charts a way through the various policy initiatives, practical responses and evaluations that have led to government-sponsored 'universal' programmes, such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning strategy for primary and secondary schools, and the Penn Resilience Programme. It also outlines government strategies in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. The book offers a useful, comprehensive critique of the highly slippery and reductionist meanings of social and emotional well-being, and the inconclusive evidence base for the effectiveness and impact of interventions such as SEAL. Taking up some earlier critiques of this policy terrain, they also warn against the dangers of imposing a therapeutic approach that is rooted in pathologised, diminished images of vulnerability.

In place of reductionist forms of behavioural training that tend to be tacked onto the rest of children's experiences in schools, the authors seek to reinstate a relational, holistic view of children's well-being as human flourishing, rooted in a broader professional 'ethic of care' informed in part by feminism. Proposing this as a more progressive alternative to current approaches, the book advocates notions of play, attention to children's own sense of well-being framed through ideas about children's rights, voice and inclusion, and recognition of the overlooked contribution to fostering well-being played by support staff. Unlike universal interventions based on various forms of psychology, these alternatives embed well-being within an education that prepares people to flourish. In the final chapter, they relate this goal to the ideas of philosopher of

education, John White, who is a trenchant critic of an obsession with assessment, the growing irrelevance of subject disciplines and old, outdated ways of organising schools. The authors also draw on ideas and studies from Iceland and other countries to argue that teachers and other professionals working with children in schools should engage with children and young people in meaningful dialogic encounters.

The book presents an important challenge to a field which has largely escaped critical scrutiny and its analysis of the various government-sponsored universal initiatives and evaluation of the inconclusive evidence-base about the impact and effectiveness of these initiatives, are both useful and interesting. The authors' prognosis for the Coalition government's ambivalent stance on formal initiatives, reflected in its withdrawal of endorsement for SEAL, points to a new era where schools will be able to choose their own approaches to develop well-being.

As part of a small but growing body of inter-disciplinary critique, it is good to have support in published form for aspects of policy and practice. For practitioners on higher education courses or undertaking other forms of continuing professional development, the book requires them to engage critically with the tendency towards evangelical advocacy of interventions that tends to characterise much of what practitioners hear and read.

Despite its important critique, I found the book less convincing in showing how a relational, holistic alternative might work in practical, everyday terms. An important factor preventing serious consideration of such an alternative is a powerful, prevailing consensus that Britain faces a profound political and social crisis – about childhood and the state of children's mental health, about the fundamental purposes of education and the subject curriculum and, crucially, about adult authority. This crisis means that many academics, practitioners, policy makers and parents agree that vast numbers of children and young people are now deemed to have, or present themselves as having, problems with their social and emotional well-being, and that these problems require some sort of special attention. Much of the enthusiasm in schools for reductionist interventions arises from a profound sense of crisis.

Without some exploration of this broader socio-political and cultural context, ideas about child well-being from other very different contexts, and extensive quotes from John White and other philosophers in the final chapter, are difficult to translate into practices that can respond to the crisis-ridden uncertainties that lie behind attempts to intervene in children's social and emotional well-being. This means that, however valid the book's alternative view might be, it has to compete with the other products and programmes clamouring for schools' attention.

Lastly, any challenge to the conceptual and practical flaws of an area of policy and practice that has attracted so much evangelical interest, cost so much money, to so little discernible good effect, has to withstand the vagaries of policy shifts and fads in this area. It seems that waning policy interest in social and emotional aspects of learning is paving the way for a psychologised and behaviourist interpretation of an old discourse of 'character'. In a constantly shifting policy terrain, critics hoping to resist initiatives based on a pathologised view of children's well-being and propose a better educational alternative, might now need to

gear up to challenge a pathologised, reductionist view of character and the competing interventions that are likely to appear.

Kathryn Ecclestone is editor of a special edition of Research Papers in Education, 27, 4, on 'well-being and education', due to be published in October 2012

Authors' Response

We would like to thank Ruth Cigman and Kathryn Ecclestone for their critical and thought provoking comments about the book. In particular we note both reviewers' celebration of our ambitions in writing this. The key aim of the book was to encourage reflection and critical conversation about the development of social and emotional wellbeing across UK schools. We wanted to inform academics, the public and practitioners of the extent of SEWB practices within schools over the last decade.

An additional motivation was concern that current wellbeing assumptions and discourses may be deleterious to wellbeing in so far as they legitimise individualism, surveillance and 'feelings rules' (Hochschild, 2003). As authors we hold a long term aim of influencing change in how UK schools approach wellbeing. The writing of the book was the first stage in this work - we needed to develop theoretical tools and premises in order to critique the status quo that has developed and provide a platform from which we hope to develop empirical studies. Throughout the book we use a theory of 'bodies' (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987) to develop understandings of the *being* aspect of wellbeing. Whilst we evidenced the phenomenologically experienced and the body politic in contemporary wellbeing policy, practice and research; we struggled to find examples of the 'social body' in any substantive sense. This is where the work drawn from psychosocial/relational Scandinavian and Barents-influenced models and approaches hold promise.

Ecclestone, in particular points to this lack of practical application in our writing. As a small start we are working with *Save the Children* and Manchester University on analysing and adapting for the UK context the *Harlem Children's Zone* concept. Our emphasis on contextualised, subjective and relational models of wellbeing is informing the development. We see this as welcome evidence that it is possible to erode the monolithic status of Objective List Theory in children's wellbeing. We also very much agree the need for a broader socio-political context - this is implied in the use of critical discourse analysis. Political focus on education continues, but with regard to young people, focus may currently be moving from educational experience or outcome to unemployment. The changes to the structure of the schooling system under the Coalition government are radical and may eventually impact all sorts of curriculum and school content issues including SEWB.

Why Deleuze? Two answers: firstly, why not Deleuze? Deleuze and Foucault were concerned with an ethics of encounter and were political in the sense that philosophy should result in action somewhere in the world, but philosophers should not predetermine what that action should be - actions are for others. In this sense a Deleuzian philosophy is “not just philosophy”. More importantly, a Deleuzian ethics of encounter is in opposition to dichotomous and dualist ways of thought. Desire or hedonistic theories of wellbeing are predicated on either possessing (or having access to) those aspects of desire or hedonism which constitute the “good life” or lacking them. Objective List Theories attempt to define the dialectic between possession and lack. Deleuze offers a nomadic vision of ethics, whereby as Braidotti argues ‘each nomadic connection offers at last the possibility of an ethical relation of opening out towards an empowering connection to others. Each relation is therefore an ethical project indexed on affirmation and mutual specification, not on the dialectics of recognition and lack’ (Braidotti, 2011, p.3). We are concerned to explore affirmational projects based on empowering connections between people and the world, which go beyond the further dialectic of subject/object relations grounded in a politics of difference and deficit.

The book set out to critique wellbeing from a standpoint that allowed us to foreground ‘minority voices’ on a largely accepted but poorly critiqued concept that required a synthesis of ideas drawn from Deleuze, Foucault and others. If this is about ‘clever or well-constructed theory’ (Cigman, this volume) then so be it - as long as we provoke people to challenge the ‘implicit assumptions about these relationships [that] permeate the wellbeing debate’ (*Ibid.*). The former is needed in order to disrupt the ways in which policy and practice have taken up the mantle of children’s wellbeing with little serious consideration of what it might mean. The latter is the clearly stated concern upon which this book was constructed.

Cigman engaged deeply with our analysis of philosophical accounts of wellbeing and raised issues that we will continue to digest and contemplate. The theoretical underpinning we chose was at times challenging and there are of course other analyses that we could have adopted throughout the writing and will explore further. The conceptual chapter aimed to “map” the existing territory, rather than to provide elaborate critiques of key theorists. We readily accept (and return to in later chapters) that a pure rejection of objectivism is naive and problematic and this is where we draw on the well-articulated words of John White. Our critique of objectivity is offered more as an antithesis to what we see as the domination of ‘majoritarian’ (white, western, objectified) knowledge and measures of children’s wellbeing.

Lastly, are we essentialist in our accusations of *paternalism* in the childhood wellbeing debates? Or is this concern with the wellbeing of our nation’s children a form of *welfarism* that is difficult to argue against? The straightforward response is that without knowing what we *mean* by wellbeing it is impossible to delineate intrusion from caring; protection from neglect ... and for us this is the crux of the debate. Only when we have a clearly shared conception of what the concept, problem, or need is, can we have the debate about how to address this in a manner that supports and cares for *all* children in schools.

References

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