

BOOK REVIEW

Education – An ‘Impossible Profession’: Psychoanalytic explorations of learning and classrooms

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Reviewed by Helen Lucey

The starting point for *Education – An ‘Impossible Profession’* is a set of questions about the experience of being in a classroom that most texts on teaching and learning avoid. It puts difficulty, delight, despair, as well as aggression, love, care and envy, as absolutely central to, rather than as unwelcome by-products of, the business of classrooms. It highlights the muddle, chaos and unknowability of learning, in contrast to what most psychological and sociological educational theorists hold as an altogether more rational, linear, contained and knowable process. The author mentions at the beginning how unhelpful and undermining this rational approach had been to her as a primary school teacher, whose experiences of herself and her pupils never chimed with how the books said it could and should be. In this way the initial premise of the book is deeply psychosocial, in that it addresses the schism between available discourses through which to understand experiences of schooling and examines these in the context of pupils’ (and the view, in this book, is from the pupils rather than the teachers) affectual, embodied, conscious and unconscious experiences of being pupils and teachers. It draws on a range of psychoanalytic theories to examine the instability of the pedagogical encounter, subject as it is to complex peer and teacher relationships, policy demands, classroom contexts, professional, social and personal pressures.

The book is based on a UK research project that explored children’s learner-identities in mathematics at Key Stage 2 and consistently prioritises the perspectives of the children as learners. In this in-depth, observational and interview based study, Bibby and her colleagues worked with one class of children over 5 terms from year 4 (aged 9) to year 6 (aged 10 or 11).

The children also conducted their own research alongside the researchers, designing, administering and analysing questionnaires, interviews with classmates and with adults in the school.

The introductory chapter sets out the theoretical framework for the book, with a section on key concepts including the dynamic unconscious, psychic reality, the defended subject, splitting, denial, projection and people as psychosocial beings. The theoretical base is very broad (something that the author is unapologetic about) and draws on Freud, Klein, Bion, Winnicott, Benjamin and Lacan. Chapter 2 uses Menzies-Lyth’s study of social defences in a teaching hospital to reflect on life in educational institutions. The discussion of the primary task of the school is very thought-provoking and highlights well how the objective aims of the school, that is the development of the child and the creation, control and transmission of knowledge, arouse strong and conflicting feelings including love, resentment, hate, aggression and gratitude. Chapter 3 draws on the Lacan’s ‘mirror stage’ to think about the stream of judgements, identifications, recognitions and misrecognitions contained and carried in classroom relationships - and the consequences that different kinds of mirroring between teachers and pupils may have for children. Extracts from observations are used to explore ideas about negative mirroring, an absent mirror and being overlooked in the minutiae of interactions between teachers and pupils. Chapter 4 builds on these ideas about mirroring and identification but now turns to Winnicott’s work on the importance of the maternal facilitating environment to think about the impact of accountability cultures in classrooms and of how difficult it is for teachers to protect learners from the demands of the institution, in the form of Ofsted, government and local authority targets. The emphasis in Chapters 5 and 6 is on groups and group processes, with the focus on how groups are ‘objectively’ formed in schools, for example through age, subject and performance. Freud, Foulkes and Bion and drawn on, and again illustrated through the data, to challenge the individual nature of learning and to think about what a group is, what holds them together, how the boundaries of groups are established and maintained and what is outside the group. Chapter 5 explores the terrible tensions about wanting and not wanting to be part of a group, of wanting to stand out, of hiding or becoming invisible in the group. It also highlights how the groups that the children make for themselves, rather than the ones that are imposed on them, tend not to be taken seriously by teachers, and what this might

feel like for pupils. Chapter 6 focuses on Bion to look closely at the unconscious processes of learning, not learning and the refusal to learn in classroom groups. It gives a beautifully lucid account of Bion’s ideas about basic assumption groups and group states of mind; concepts that are put to use and elaborated on through the data, and which flows into chapter 7 in a discussion of ‘Thoughts, thinking, learning and knowing’. Here the author turns to Klein and the origins of thinking and the development of Klein’s ideas in Bion’s theorisation of the K link, the importance of affect and the necessity of learning from experience. In chapter 8, the focus is still on the importance of relationships for enabling or posing obstacles to thinking, this time drawing on Jessica Benjamin’s work on intersubjectivity.

I liked this book very much, even though recognising myself in the aggression, sadism and love that the teachers in the study displayed towards their pupils was at times uncomfortable. It will not help us ‘cure’ the ills of the education system, but it does encourage us to think and act more mindfully about the ways in which we are being encouraged to act, as teachers and learners. And it gives us not only food for thought, but some tools for thinking about the problems we face in this context.

One of its successes is that the author manages to bring extremely complex theory alive and put it hard to work in the task of bringing to light some of the less visible, unconscious dimensions of life in primary school classrooms. That it is focused on mathematics, supposedly one of the ‘rational’ subjects that schools attempt to teach us, is an unusual bonus. Bibby also never loses sight of the wider context, of policy and politics, culture and the family, and this strengthens the book enormously. Academic texts based on research do not always manage to be both erudite and grounded, but this one has, making it appealing for those already familiar with psychoanalytic theories, and for those readers for whom may be encountering newer territories (such as final year undergraduate and postgraduate students). It will undoubtedly make an important contribution to the growing field of psychosocial studies in the field of education.