

CARINA HENRIKSSON. *Living Away From Blessings: School Failure as Lived Experience*. London, ON: The Althouse Press. (2008). 155 pp. \$29.95 (paperback). (ISBN 978-00920354-67-4)

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CARINA HENRIKSSON. *Living Away From Blessings: School Failure as Lived Experience*. London, ON: The Althouse Press. (2008). 155 pp. \$29.95 (paperback). (ISBN 978-00920354-67-4).

Carina Henriksson's book is an inquiry into Swedish students' lived experiences of school failure. The author incorporates students' oral and written descriptions of how they experience failure in Swedish schools due to educators' insensitivity or indifference. Henriksson's main argument reveals that students' experience of failure is not limited to low grades but can be ascribed to feelings of disappointment, distrust, marginalization, boredom, time-pressure, inferiority, insecurity, embarrassment, non-recognition and loss of human value. Drawing on hermeneutic phenomenology, the author presents experiential accounts of students' failure; these failures deny students further educational opportunities or successes, which she, significantly, calls "blessings." Henriksson's figurative use of blessings emphasizes the ways in which education can alter students' life trajectories. To be blessed by education underscores the important role that educators should play in guiding students on a path of educational development and achievement so that they can reap from academic benefits. She delineates that educators must be armed with phenomenological sensitivity and educational psychology in order to interpret learners' behaviours and vulnerabilities since indifference or offensive reactions could lead students to suffer lifelong scars.

The book has twelve chapters and is organized around Henriksson's research project with youth who are institutionalized or had previously left school. The text comprises interviews and vignettes which Henriksson rearranges into three categories: anecdotes, short stories volunteered by participants; "conecdotes," coherent stories of transcribed interviews; and "synecdotes," an amalgamation of interviews and written lived-experience descriptions of participants. In situating her methods of data collection and analysis, Henriksson includes rich descriptions of participants through specific examples of students' "lived-experiences". In one anecdote, a student recalls being ridiculed by his teacher and peers because he did not understand the concept of temperature, declaring

his scarred degradation in his own words: "For fifty years I have felt so stupid, a complete failure" (p.42). In another, Henriksson shares a lengthy interview with Ken, who refused to obey school rules and was expelled for getting into a fight with his teacher, punching the headmaster, and throwing a chair at the school counsellor. Later, the author opens dialogue on bullying and its effects by introducing Pierre, who was forced into deviant behaviour, truancy, and ultimately educational failure.

Despite a focus on the negative (school failure), Henriksson also juxtaposes positive lived experiences of students. For instance, her participants highlighted stories of caring teachers who went above and beyond the call of duty to foster an environment of pedagogical engagement, patience, and intellectual growth. Moreover, Henriksson endorses the assumption that every child has a right to education from which s/he should be equipped with basic skills and a feeling of trust in developed abilities. She notes that each child calls upon us as educators, and our initial duty is to respond to the call: not just to teach the basic skills of reading and writing, but to promote social and cultural integration and to honour students' democratic rights. Henriksson wraps up her conversation by asserting that if academic institutions function as barriers to students' educational success and perpetuate the loss of human value, then this is school failure which "forces children to live away from blessings" (p.155).

Henriksson presents institutional bureaucracy as one factor in barring students from success. Much time is expended on Ken's misdeeds, which the author suggests were initiated because of school rules. Henriksson seems to imply that, as represented by Ken's rebelliousness in chewing gum and wearing a knitted hat, students become victims of institutions with their unaccommodating and trivial rules. Blame, therefore, seems to rest mainly with the school, overlooking other areas where a child's formative development may occur, including their experiences at home. Yet by the end of the book, Henriksson declares that she does not condone students' bad behaviour. Another weakness in the text is Henriksson's injection of repetitive vignettes; a mere reference would suffice, as repetition renders such episodes monotonous.

The currency and relevance of issues dealt with are the book's major strengths. The author addresses crucial problems in schools that are presently being debated, such as marginalization and bullying. The issue of bullying is one of global concern (Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2003) and Pierre's story is significant as many students can identify with some aspects of it (Smith & Sharp, 1994). Pierre, a marginalized student was constantly tormented- physically and mentally- by his peers because of his obesity; and since the teachers turned a blind eye, he soon joined the 'gang' to avoid being bullied. As a result, he became the worst 'terrorizer' in the class before quitting school. Thus, Henriksson charges teachers to reexamine their pedagogy, which requires sensitivity to students' feelings and behaviours. The author paves the way for an important

conversation that school seems to be the dominant cause of students' failure instead of indiscipline or lack of parental guidance. Her argument is mostly well-structured; highlighting pressing issues in schools which are hard to ignore. The discourse presented should encourage educators to engage in pedagogical reflections on the relationships forged in the classroom and to reexamine whether they are contributing to students' successes or exacerbating the rift between children and their educational opportunities.

Irrespective of its shortfalls, *Living Away from Blessings* is a useful guide for pedagogical engagement in the classroom. Therefore, the book is highly recommended for teachers and administrators, as well as for students—who are often insensitive to the repercussions of bullying. Henriksson's discourse is edifying, touching on practical and pertinent issues critical to students' lived experiences in school settings which can produce lifelong scars and propel them into dismal futures. The writer asserts that when we as pedagogues allow students to feel or become insignificant, bored, marginalized or embarrassed, we often bar them from an abundance of future blessings. As such, teachers must be mindful of the relationships they foster with students as they often have the power to make a difference in the lives of those who are placed in their charge.

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