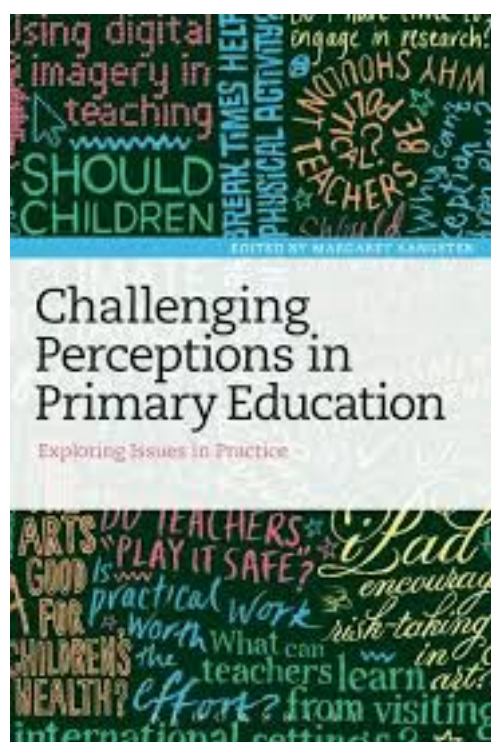


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Review of Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education: Exploring Issues in Practice

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This informative text questions the influence of beliefs, practices, and policies on primary education. The critical stance of the text challenges practitioners to reflect on their perceptions of key educational issues. It highlights the importance of teacher autonomy and wider perspectives about educational environments, instructional practices, and curriculum in England while also considering other countries

The editor's thought-provoking introduction to the book sets the tone by considering three challenges to current perceptions in primary education. First, the editor challenges the current anachronistic form of education based on traditions that are no longer suitable for today's children. She points out that educators must provide children with critical thinking and adaptable tools for an unknown future. To accomplish this task, she recommends "a captivating learning experience" that motivates children to engage in lifelong learning (p. xvii). Second, she questions the expectations that primary schools have for children. If the main goal of school is only to transmit the basic skills – reading, writing, and calculating – then the definition of education is narrowed. Sangster proposes that children and their parents' voices should be taken into consideration by the goal designers so primary school children can achieve more. Third, the editor critiques the dominant notion of learning as a teacher-crafted discipline. To contradict the misinterpretation, the editor upholds students' self-driven learning that leads to equity, diversity and inclusion in schools. Being faced with these challenges, the editor finally advocates for teachers' professional autonomy to keep them "unique in their interpretation of education, unique in their procedural choices and unique in their relationships with the children in their class" (p. xviii).

The book is a collection of thirty-two individual chapters written by authors affiliated with Canterbury Christ Church University, an institution deeply engaged in teacher education. The text covers five major sections: Creating a Good Learning Environment; Developing an Effective Curriculum; Using Imagery in

Teaching; Learning from Education in Other Countries; and Exploring Wider Perspectives on Education. Next, I will review the five sections with brief descriptions.

Part One: Creating a good learning environment

Focusing on the cultivation of vibrant learners and the creation of a positive learning environment, this section answers the following question: How can teachers create a classroom environment that is inspiring and stimulating for children? Barnes provides an excellent introduction to the section by presenting twelve principles that promote a shared value system of teachers and students; highlight the influence of the object's power on learning; emphasize flexible classroom arrangement and positive interaction with the social environment; and privilege "positive emotional connections" over "simple knowledge acquisition" (p. 6). Walter continues consideration of these issues with the learning environment and promotes SMSC (students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development) in schools. As she discovers, SMSC provides opportunities for students to have a more meaningful and comprehensive education, as opposed to a standard-driven, strictly measurable agenda that results in children's "fear of official definition of failure" (p. 12). In addition, the section provides readers with other thought-provoking approaches that include specialist pedagogy, pupils and teachers' deceptions, and school trips.

Additionally, this section promotes a deeper understanding of positive learning environments by exploring approaches to and the occurrence of learning. In his chapter, Vincent considers play as "a powerful motivator for learning" (p. 17) and suggests the inclusion of play in the curriculum. Aligned with Vincent's claim, Hope writes his article to recommend learning through doing. As he writes, "through making, they (children) can see their own ideas come to fruition and see themselves as active agents in

the creation of new things” (p. 21). In her chapter, Sangster points out that student learning can be enhanced when informative assessment is applied in class to maximize opportunities for each student to learn. Hardman takes a further step by going over the occurrence of learning in his article, revealing that learning is messy and results from a complexity of classroom dynamics, rather than a linear process. In all, Part one does a thorough exploration into the creation of a good learning environment and indicates its inseparable connection with an offer of an effective curriculum. Part two goes one step further by presenting what an effective curriculum is and how teachers can develop it.

Part Two: Developing an effective curriculum

In England, the present curriculum emphasizes the core subjects alone, marginalizing other subjects that make contributions to children’s learning (Sangster, 2015). But, is this type of curriculum effectively able to provide students with a captivating experience? To address this thorny issue, part two offers several solutions that are summed up in two approaches: preserving and integrating marginalized subjects in the curriculum and valuing students’ lives by relating them to the curriculum.

In his chapter, Barnes argues for the protection of the arts in schools due to their important role in the social and emotional development of children. His argumentative writing cites various types of resources, including philosophical works, psychological discoveries, educational studies and international documents related to children’s learning or well-being, to demonstrate art’s educational value. Next, Whyte moves away from the arts and draws upon a government document and previous studies to justify geography as one of the foundational subjects in curriculum due to its broad influences on children’s daily routines and global and social connectivity. Later, Scoffham directs the reader toward children’s futures and proposes a need for the subject of climate-change in primary

schools. As he suggests, doing so will prepare students for their future, possibly allaying fears that students may have learned from the media’s sensational news coverage.

Focusing on the value of students’ life and the curriculum, Matthews describes children’s mathematical knowledge as being socially constructed within the context of their shared life experience. This approach highlights application of conceptual understanding into different situations and connections of learning in the school to learning at home. Then, Schulze proposes that second language learning should be brought into learners’ real life. According to her, this learning brings the students not only “a truly holistic sensory experience” but also strong motivations (p. 65), running counter to the learning environment that is tightly structured with the pressure of testing, and thus assails the learners’ senses. Lastly, Howells, in her chapter, explores the educational values inherent in schools’ break-times. She calls for more physical space for schools’ playgrounds and more focus on children’s break-time for physical activity. To sum up, Part two promotes an effective curriculum that connects students’ real life and their social and emotional development to subject teaching. Part three furthers the conversation about what to include in an effective curriculum by discussing the impact of visual imagery on teaching and learning as it is increasingly incorporated into classrooms in England (Sangster, 2015).

Part three: Using imagery in teaching

Four chapters in Part three explore the application of imagery to classroom teaching in two aspects. First, this section focuses on the use of digital imagery, and it retains a complex stance that addresses both positive and negative attitudes in relation to the digital age. Bentley’s chapter clarifies potential threats that the use of digital imagery poses to children’s learning. Drawing upon the theories of Sweller (1988), Miller (1956) and Paivio (1986), Bentley discovers that the issues of image-text mismatches and unnecessary cognitive loads can emerge from

teachers' application of digital imagery in teaching. However, Hewlett and March, in their chapter, maintain that electronic programs and devices, such as the iPad, can empower children to take risks in the pursuit of artistic endeavor. Both of them find that the iPad gives children the freedom to make mistakes and leads them to bolder experimentation when they develop and refine their initial ideas in the process of making artwork.

This section expands the discussion of using imagery in relation to its connection to visual literacy. In his chapter, Gregory shows his great concern for the gradual disappearance of the subject of art and design in primary schools. To address this issue, Gregory undertakes a thorough and informative discussion of this subject's three strands—seeing, knowing and believing—that contribute to the development of students' visual literacy, an important skill in today's society. Gillespie furthers this discussion in the context of religious education. Gillespie highlights the need for nurturing children's visual literacy as he believes that this ability is of great value when it is used as a tool for their exploration of religious knowledge. In conclusion, Part three, as well as Part two and Part one, maps primary education in contemporary England.

Part four: Learning from education in other countries

Six chapters in Part four focus on a critical analysis of primary education at the world level which is important because what a teacher can learn from education in other countries is a complicated topic. However, this section serves as a holistic picture of different perspectives on teachers' international visits and placement, international comparisons in education, and the transfer of educational approaches and ideas.

In terms of teachers' international visits, the tone of this section is supportive but a little prudent. Hammond believes that visiting is an eye-opening

and transformative experience for teachers. Clarke further regards this transformation as being conducive to the development of the teachers' identities. But in discussion of student-teachers' international placements in developing countries, Mahon raises a concern. Although he believes that international experiences shape the student-teachers' understanding of challenges faced by non-English-speaking students, he worries that teachers and students in those developing countries may not benefit from this offer of voluntary teaching.

Alternatively, Wilson takes a more ambivalent attitude toward international comparisons in education. On one hand, he agrees that comparisons enable teachers in England to interpret new ideas well and support their students' learning. On the other hand, he uses PISA (the Program for International Student Assessment) as a counterexample to indicate that comparisons can decrease diversity in education policies in different countries.

While this section shows different attitudes toward education in other countries, it conveys such a disbelief that one country's educational ideas can be directly and immediately transferred to another country. For Wilson, a successful transfer is a long-term process that requires practitioners' commitment to applying another country's educational ideas to their own national and local contexts. He skillfully clarifies this point by citing a famous case where Swiss mathematical materials were gradually transformed by teachers and researchers in England to improve student learning in the English context. The view of re-adjustment is further confirmed by Tancoke's chapter where approaches in English teaching were re-contextualized in order to be successfully applied in Indian primary schools. Comparatively, Lever and Newton discuss their teaching experience as student-teachers in Kenya, persuasively proving that the local resources should be taken into account by the western teachers who re-adjust their instructions toward the local children's needs.

Part five: Exploring wider perspectives on education

The last section, consisting of seven chapters, continues to inspire the reader to reflect on a wide range of controversial topics regarding people's attitude toward teachers' professional development.

Several chapters are contributed in promotion of teachers' professional autonomy. Yong's chapter is a critique of the conception of teaching as a craft. As Yong suggests, this view probably hinders teachers from learning theory and developing advanced thinking that guides them to teach in different contexts. Stone's chapter recommends action research as a systematic way employed by teachers to examine and improve their teaching practices. By citing Paulo Freire's (1968) work, Austin and Birrell denote the necessity for teachers to recognize their decision-making as a political process. They take the discussion further in connection to intellectual integrity where this recognition is meant to resist "a robotic state of acquiescent teaching" (p. 133). To support teachers' engagement in their own active professional development, Matthews makes a powerful statement that "(E)ducation should be set beyond the reach of party politics" (p. 138). With the use of several exciting lessons as vivid examples, Austin encourages teachers to take professional risks by striking a balance between teaching pragmatically and teaching creatively.

Additionally, many authors in this section make effective discussions in light of teachers' personal experience. Through a young teacher's story, Dorman clarifies the differences between a role model as an individual construction and a mentor as part of a hierarchical structure. Inspired by his own experience as a male primary school teacher, Mellor provocatively and insightfully states that a gender-neutral professional identity is unavoidably developed with teachers' competence as practitioners and commitment to children's learning,

consequently leading to the shortage of male teachers in primary schools.

Response

As a doctoral student majoring in elementary education and a former elementary school teacher with ten years of teaching experience, my encounter with this book is an emotional and academic engagement as I am led into "some challenging waters but also well-springs of opportunity and potential" (Gillespie, 2015, p. 88).

This book brings to light educational problems emerging in the interface between primary education and contemporary society. Within the context of expanding international competition, it invites readers to re-examine the meaning of education through their reflections on educational policies and practices in the time of accountability. The titles of the chapters are represented in the form of thought-provoking questions that constantly raise readers' critical awareness. What's more, the book expands readers' educational lens by broadly answering the questions, providing nuanced answers instead of focusing on one answer to an issue. To bolster these possible answers, the author's illustration of claims is supported by diverse examples and previous studies in the field of psychology, education, sociology, and philosophy. These rich citations as well as the host of information that they carry make the arguments understandable, persuasive and informative.

This book grasps exam-oriented learning, one of the core issues in contemporary primary schools; besides, it guides the reader to explore its alternatives. As the book reveals, learning is not only socio-culturally but also spatial-temporally constructed. In particular, the view of learning as a non-linear process deconstructs the notion of learning as the result of teaching (Hardman, 2015). It advocates deep learning with the focus on the unmeasurable, and it questions the appropriateness of testing as a way to ensure learning. Based on these progressive

understandings, the book also suggests future directions for the study of pedagogy.

Nonetheless, there are a few limitations. For example, there is ambiguity in the book's discussions of learning. As the book indicates, creativity and personality are emphasized as the features of learning; at the same time, knowing worthwhile experiences is also considered as learning. The question is what experience counts as worthwhile? Who decides that it is worthwhile? If a child's learning equals knowing something that is considered worthwhile by someone other than the child, it would be hard for readers to understand that this learning provides the child with a captivating experience. Of course, this inconsistency might be considered the editor's strategy for providing multiple educational opinions for readers to make a choice in balancing teaching for students and teaching for society, but to avoid confusion, more elaboration is needed.

Overall, despite a few limitations, the book is an excellent resource for practitioners and researchers interested in the field of teacher education, curriculum, pedagogy, and international education. I recommend the text as a text-book for graduates and undergraduates or as pre-reading or follow-up reading to seminars, tutorials, and group discussions. It is particularly beneficial to scholars committed to the development of inclusive education while highlighting teachers' agency and students' autonomy in the age of accountability. In conclusion, the book provides a "thirdspace" (Soja, 1996) where challenges and opportunities co-exist and move to a different vision of reality.

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