

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

Henriksson, Carina. (2008). *Living away from blessings: School failure as lived experience*. London, ON: Althouse Press. 164 pages, ISBN 978-0-920354-67-4

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School failure is a beast that students face on a day-to-day basis, with full knowledge of its encompassing impact on their lives. Carina Henriksson's *Living Away from Blessings: School Failure as Lived Experience* focuses on the factors that can lead to and perpetuate student failure in school systems. Henriksson uses student experiences to illustrate the raw social and environmental elements that can contribute to failure.

Henriksson's research, conducted in Sweden, focused primarily on the lived experiences of former students in an individualized program and adolescents enrolled in juvenile institutions. She also consulted teachers in the juvenile institutions to examine their practices outside of a normal classroom. These students have faced social stigmatization and personal disappointment because of their educational situations. Failure can be caused by many different variables, but Henriksson's goal was not to diagnose or find its roots. Using students' own experiences, she was able to uncover common themes that seemed to contribute to failure. As the author states, "students offer an understanding of school failure as *lived experience in the classroom*" (p. 19). Students in individualized programs do not feel that their education prepares them for the national "normal" program, leading to a sense of hopelessness:

The case study showed that out of 135 students in three individual programs, only 23 percent had left school duly qualified for university studies, and 46 percent had chosen to leave school altogether. If 'okay' means that students leave school fully qualified for higher education, then the programs were a failure. (p. 26)

Henriksson demonstrates that most student failure she encountered was behaviourally based, not academically rooted. The uneven relationship of respect between student and teacher can lead these students to feel alone and unworthy, especially in these individualized and institutionalized programs. Most students in these programs, according to Henriksson, have not experienced love, trust and safety as children, which can subsequently lead them to distrust any form of educational authority. Teachers are often seen as enemies, especially when students pick up on non-verbal cues and gestures more than they do the academic aspects of their schooling. Henriksson stressed that failure in the school system is often communication-based – often deriving from student-teacher relationships, not from lack of student knowledge itself. The failure felt by students is increased by stigmas, labels and exclusion that society also pins on them. Teachers, according to Henriksson, must see every child individually and be continually conscious of the learning environment they create. She argues that teaching is a moral profession, meaning that teachers in these settings must create an atmosphere of trust and joyfulness to avert failure.

Living Away from Blessings: School Failure as Lived Experience is unlike most education books; its primary focus is the students' experiences with failure, but not from a teacher's perspective. Henriksson had students first write out their experience in their own words; she then interviewed the same students on their written reflection. This multi-reflective process enabled students to examine the nuances and factors that contributed to their school failure. Henriksson herself strove to be impartial throughout the interview process and in reflecting the student's experiences:

This mental undulation, constantly questioning what the lived-experience descriptions are about, changing perspectives, questioning my (pre) understanding of the world and my ability to do the experience justice is fundamental to a reflective phenomenological attitude (p. 57).

However, in my reading of the book I found very few substantial examples of student failure and, more importantly, few detailed analyses and discussions of what could have been done to prevent it in that particular situation. Henriksson, however, was adamant in her refusal to diagnose or outline specific causes of failure. Her writing demonstrated empathy and understanding for the students that she interviewed and had gotten to know during this process. She was able to tap into the experiences and emotions of students that seem to have been failed most by the educational system and society in general.

Although Henriksson chose to conduct her research and base this book around the education system in Sweden, it could also have been conducted in Canada, where there are similar customs and cultures. I do, however, understand and applaud her willingness to expose Canadian educators to the Swedish school system. In translating students' experiences and conducting interviews, Henriksson was very thorough in terms of wording. She focused the majority of the first seven chapters of the book explaining how she conducted her research and only the final five chapters outlining her findings and recommended solutions. Her opinions and solutions, however, were reality-based and not rooted in unattainable ideals for a classroom. Henriksson's work took school failure a step further – questioning students on their confidence in society after they finish school. She was able to expose the fact that individualized programs, although inclusive and sometimes necessary, create labels and stigmas that lower self-esteem and self-confidence outside of the school setting.

Living Away from Blessings: School Failure as Lived Experience is a book that I would recommend to educators and the general public. Although it does not give any radically new solutions in dealing with school failure, it does give us a unique glimpse at the experiences of students who have been failed most by society. Henriksson is able to demonstrate that anything, even something as small as a gesture, can trigger or perpetuate a sense of failure among students. She writes: "It takes thoughtful reflection to guide and educate children" (p. 155). A deep sense of reflection is felt throughout the book and, more importantly, is created within its audience.