

BOOK REVIEW

Mary Darmanin (2024) *“So we can do our best.” Care in children’s relationships with teachers*. Msida: Malta University Press, 380 pp., ISBN: 978-9918-617-15-9

The title of Mary Darmanin’s book was inspired by a nine-year-old who very wisely captured the essence of education: teachers seek to do their best so that their students can do their best. Darmanin’s work sheds a poignant light upon the importance of student-teacher relationships and their centrality to education and learning. Whilst embodying scientific and theoretical rigour, the work is strikingly rooted in children’s lived experiences. Capturing the vivid and complex emotional lives of young students is truly a challenging task. However, Darmanin’s work, which is woven with conversations with nine to eleven-year-olds, achieves this succinctly. These conversations bring to light children’s immense wisdom and how, “[f]or children, the heart of the student-teacher relationship is the caring that leads to learning” (313). Darmanin aptly shows that what separates a teaching relationship from any other relationship is the aim for learning, and that learning can only occur within a secure relationship. This book is a timely example of the importance of students’ voices and that, as adults, we can learn a lot from listening to these voices.

To show the significance of student-teacher relationships, Darmanin precedes the empirical findings with a thorough review of literature regarding what wellbeing is and what it means during childhood, attachment theory, experiences of students on the margins, and the classroom climate. Especially salient is the attention to students on the margins, which demonstrates not only an advocacy for children in general, but also a sensitivity to those who face additional struggles within the school system. The combination of theories from the field of education, childhood research, sociology, and psychology is a testament to Darmanin’s broad interdisciplinary expertise. Of importance is the theory on attachment (Bowlby, 1969), whereby Darmanin—following previous research by Sabol and Pianta (2012) and Bergin and Bergin

(2009)—argues that forming a secure attachment with the teacher is essential to the student's learning. The study not only supports this argument but also provides further empirical evidence on how students experience such a secure attachment. Chapter 4 provides a phenomenological basis for understanding the ideal-type teacher. In this chapter, we can already see that children's conceptions "link[s] being a 'kind' teacher to the ideal-type teacher with whom one can 'get on well' on which, in turn, is premised the possibility of 'doing well'" (103). The following three chapters build on this finding in exploring experiential moments in children's lives. Students' accounts demonstrate that positive student-teacher relationships take time to develop, are marked by affection, patience and a sense of belonging within the classroom. These qualities precede and often lead to instructional support, which is essential for learning. As Darmanin says: "Children are well aware of what their learning needs are; they yearn for them to be satisfied" (164). Conversely, accounts of unhelpful relationships are marked by moments of unfairness, impatience, a lack of classroom control and a misattunement with students' pace and work needs. These chapters corroborate previous research on attachment, whereby insecure attachments are more likely to lead to negative feelings and challenging behaviour in children, whereas a positive attachment increases the likelihood of children asking for help when needed.

One significant finding in Darmanin's work is that children demonstrate profound insight into "the complexities of teaching, and a strong desire to be fair, even to exonerate teachers for traits and behaviours which are undesirable" (130). Additionally, "[m]any children comment that the poor behaviour of some children makes teachers lose their temper. . ." (255) and thus, there is awareness of not only what is going on internally for the student and teacher, but also a broad awareness of the mood in the classroom. These findings provide pangs of empathic compassion for children who are carrying such wisdom, but the results also inspire hope; knowing the fallibility of human nature, no teacher can fit the mould of an ideal-type teacher all the time. This book aptly underlines the dyadic nature of the student-teacher relationship and that the teacher needs to be receptive to their student's affect. Chapter 8 is of particular significance to this theme as it directly answers the question of what children would like their teachers to do more or less of. The results follow the findings from the previous chapters, but also highlight a further element of positive student-teacher relationships: a smiling face, a kind and calm voice, and a teacher who is honest in demonstrating their humanity. Educators and academics alike are often wrapped up in

a quest to find the next best pedagogical technique. However, Darmanin's book shows precisely that students do not need any grand gestures: just affection, care and good instructional support.

Although the study was conducted in Maltese state schools, it is clear that these findings have much to say about students' experiences in a broad manner. The book reports from a larger study on student-teacher relationships initiated by the National Institute for Childhood within the Malta Foundation for the Well-being of Society. This volume focuses on the students' perspectives, whilst forthcoming volumes will present findings from the perspective of parents and teachers. Taking on a critical realist lens and a phenomenological paradigm complemented the aim of capturing the aspects supporting and hindering students' lived experience of their relations with their teachers. The epistemological consistency, richness of the data, internal and external validity, and the systematically detailed methodological approach are evidence of the high quality of this research. I believe that this study can serve as a state-of-the-art example of research which is epistemologically consistent and methodologically rigorous. Students can learn a lot from reading this book about the qualities of good research. Teachers and educators will benefit from the book by entering into a reflective journey, which will lead to professional development. Lastly, academics will benefit from the added scholarship to the field accrued from the perspectives of middle-school children. As Darmanin herself notes, further research could benefit by looking at private or faith schools and how student-teacher relationships materialise in these. Additionally, since the data was collected in 2015, I believe that more recent studies could evaluate the effects of the recent technological advancements and how these hinder or facilitate relationships within the classroom.

Reading Darmanin's book has been an academically enriching experience, but also a deeply personal and emotional one. Indeed, reading this work, I was taken back to my childhood, and I embarked on an evaluative journey of my identity as a teacher. As a researcher, Darmanin's work further ignited my passion for using research as a means to advocate for children's voices. This book should be a compulsory read for everyone interested in children's wellbeing in education – not only for its academic value, but also for its potential to inspire change towards a more socially just education for all children.

References

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