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What are the perceptions of pupils, parents, and their teachers in English primary schools of the role of the English primary curriculum in achieving 'success in life'?

Paula Moses

University of Cumbria, United Kingdom

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Individual

Abstract

My research is an exploration into the perceptions of parents, pupils and their teachers of the concept of 'success in life' and their views about how the National Primary School Curriculum in England (DfE, 2013) is designed and delivered to enable pupils to achieve it. My research is in response to the current Education Inspection Framework in England (Ofsted, 2019) which requires primary schools to 'adopt or create a curriculum which gives pupils, particularly the most disadvantaged, the knowledge and cultural capital needed to succeed in life' (Ofsted, 2021:6). This framework (Ofsted, 2019:6) caused me to question how the aim of 'success in life' or the terms 'knowledge and cultural capital' were defined by the Government, and to query how schools would interpret these concepts and put them into practice. However, no clear definitions exist within the policy documents or inspection framework of 'knowledge', 'cultural capital' or 'success in life' and this is the first research in England to ask pupils, parents and teachers to define and critique these concepts. (Ofsted, 2019; DfE, 2013)

My research follows a methodological approach which combines Husserl's phenomenology (Husserl, 2013) with the educational pragmatism of Dewey (2012). This approach was designed to use philosophical enquiry to identify a definition of the philosophical concept 'success in life' as well as making practical (pragmatic) suggestions as to how the primary school curriculum

in England could be designed and delivered. Husserl (2013:43) described his transcendental phenomenological approach as a 'new philosophy' designed to help us find 'genuine philosophical insights' into ideas by putting to one side 'all the convictions we have been accepting (about a specific phenomenon) up to now' (Husserl, 2013:6). However, Dewey's pragmatism provides a way, through dialogue and reflection, to ensure that the philosophical definition identified is useful and relevant to real life experiences and situations of the research participants (Dewey, 2010:118). This approach encourages participants to not simply 'recycle and rework adult talk' (Hammersley, 2013:120) or reproduce dominant forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2000, Grenfell, 2010). Instead, the research participants are empowered to describe an unadulterated definition of 'success in life' but also explain and explore its relevance to their own real lives and futures (Turley et al., 2017:153; Cersosimo, 2020:4).

The data gathering for this research has taken place over two years (2021-2022) with a group of 45 pupils aged 10 and 11 in Northwest England, as well as 20 parents and six teachers. The sample was recruited from two Primary Schools from different socio-economic backgrounds. For the first stage of the research in 2021, the pupils completed a questionnaire individually at school in a session that I facilitated. On the following day, the children then worked together to have a philosophical enquiry into the concept (Lipman, 2003). The second stage of the research in 2022, revisited these same pupils and asked them to work in small groups to carry out an imaginary variation exercise, to further critique the concept of success in life from several different angles and directions' (Rasmussen, 1998:556). Twenty parents completed questionnaires, followed by semi structured interviews with seven individuals. I also interviewed six teachers on whether 'knowledge and cultural capital' (Ofsted, 2019:6) are the tools to unlock the school curriculum's ability to enable children to succeed in life. The data gathered was analysed in-line with Husserl's descriptive phenomenology (Husserl, 2013) which includes 'substantial verbatim excerpts' (Reid et al., 2005:105) and 'illustrative quotations' (Willig, 2008:64) to maintain the original voice of the participants.

This research has a significant role to play for education policy as it provides first hand and in-depth perceptions and critique from pupils, parents and teachers on the role of the National Primary Curriculum in England (DfE, 2013) to enable success in life. This research is also significant

for the educational practice of primary school teachers as the findings will be useful for their work in designing and delivering a curriculum which is right for primary age children and enables them to have the best chance at success in their lives. Most importantly though, this research looks beyond the current measures for success used by statutory school assessment systems and discovers what is important to the pupils, parents and teachers currently operating the National Primary Curriculum in England. It provides a unique insight into their perceptions of success in life with the potential to challenge, inform and influence the policy motivation and ideology behind the design and delivery of Primary school education in England.

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Themes

Educational Research and Educational Policy-Making

Second Theme

Curriculum, Assessment and Pedagogy - (English in Education)