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Book Review

Somebody Else's Kids

By Torey Hayden

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I was first introduced to the work of educator and psychologist Torey Hayden in the mid-1990s, when I was still at high school and aspiring to a career in educational psychology. I didn't end up following that career path, but there was learning and perspective in Hayden's books which I've carried with me into my work with children and young people in schools, as a Guide leader, in education research, and as a parent. Much of her writing has strongly resonated with my more recent learning about trauma-informed practice and therapeutic parenting, despite being focused on a very different context: Hayden's experiences in the American education system of the 1970s and 1980s. Many of the themes explored and questions raised in Hayden's books parallel ongoing conversations in Scotland and beyond. Children's behaviour, especially in schools, and how to manage it; the presumption in favour of 'mainstream' education for most children; behaviour as communication; emotional regulation and co-regulation; and the importance of relationships all feature strongly in Hayden's writing about her practice and experiences.

This year marks the 45th anniversary of the publication of Hayden's second book, *Somebody Else's Kids*, first published in 1981. In contrast to her first book, *One Child* (1980), which is focused primarily on Hayden's experiences with a child she calls Sheila, *Somebody Else's Kids* explores in more depth Hayden's work with a small group of children in a 'special ed' class, which she describes as 'the class that created itself', comprising

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children for whom no other appropriate local education provision could be found. She approaches the children, and sets her expectations of them, according to their needs and capabilities rather than the standardised requirements of their grade in the US education system. An example is the child referred to as Lori, who has a brain injury affecting her ability to learn to read. Lori is desperate to meet adults' expectations for reading and compares herself to her twin sister who reads with ease. She becomes increasingly frustrated and upset by her lack of progress in that area, despite her very best efforts, and Hayden eventually decides against working with Lori on reading temporarily, focusing instead on building on Lori's strengths and supporting her self-esteem. As a result, Hayden is criticised by the more experienced teacher responsible for Lori's mainstream class, who tells her she is being 'too soft', as well as by senior leaders within the school who object that she is not teaching the set curriculum for Lori's grade.

Despite this example of Hayden's caring, individualised, and flexible approach to teaching, there are examples in the book of the wide range of behaviour management approaches used within Hayden's classroom, and within the educational context of the time and place. Describing a boy who has been aggressive and habitually disruptive and destructive in class, Hayden reflects:

> I simply did not have the wherewithal to force Tomaso to remain in a time-out space. There were few other courses [of action] available. I refused to consider sending him to the Principal for whacks. Beating him would hardly show him how to be less violent. Similarly, sending him home or to juvenile hall was not what I felt was dealing effectively with the problem. If ever a kid needed to be in school, it was Tomaso. (p.85)

This example illustrates practices, used by Hayden herself and by others, which would be severely frowned upon now, and may well have been frowned upon by some at that time. Approaches such as the hitting ('whacks') of children by adults in positions of power are now recognised in many countries, including the UK, to be unacceptable; but isolation as a behaviour management approach – arguably a more extreme version of 'time out' – is still common (e.g. Thornton et al., 2025). However, in apparent contrast to some of the other teachers, Hayden reflects on the practicality of such approaches, as well as on the extent to which they

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would address the *reasons* for the child's behaviour, rather than assuming that these are the only and correct methods to elicit improvements. She also recognises that the relational context of school is going to be important for this child.

In many ways, this is a book of its time. It is not clear the extent to which the characters and situations in the book are fictionalised or altered as a means of protecting the children involved; in the edition I have, at least, there is no clear statement about this, which in itself highlights the different context in which Hayden was writing, as compared to modern memoirs of this nature. In terms of language, too, the book is dated; much of the terminology could be considered inappropriate, if not offensive, to modern readers. In places, it is an extremely difficult book to read, describing as it does the feelings and experiences of the children in the class, as well as the attitudes, expectations and behaviours of adults towards 'different' children at that time. The book also shines a light on the US education system in the context of 'Public Law 94-142', known as 'the mainstreaming act', which had only recently come into force. Hayden describes this as a 'beautiful, idealistic law', and contrasts this with 'my kids and me, caught in reality' (p.8).

Hayden herself describes this book as an expression of her frustration with the inflexibility of the system she was working within. On her own website (Hayden, n.d.), she refers to it as the book which she feels least able to return to – she doesn't consider it well-written and believes it would have been a better book 'if I had been just a little less angry when I wrote it'. Perhaps her anger and frustration with the system, and with others' more behaviourist and less relationship-based approaches to teaching and working with children, are also themes which are recognisable to current readers.

What stands out to me, and what seems to underpin Hayden's whole philosophy of teaching, is the extent to which Hayden prioritises developing her own relationship with each child as an individual, and the relationships between the children, to create a sense of belonging and camaraderie, as a foundation for any academic learning which might then be achieved. She also makes a point of engaging with the children's parents and carers, and building relationships with them, where possible. Furthermore, she demonstrates the importance of looking beyond a child's overt behaviour, to try to understand the reasons for that

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behaviour, and the needs and feelings which underpin it. I see much of this reflected in current conversations about the use of trauma-informed and relational practice in schools, and the importance of creating a positive ethos and 'promoting good behaviour', as compared to more rigid, punitive, sanctions-based approaches.

Somebody Else's Kids is a thought-provoking exploration of some of the challenges and tensions in the education systems and practices experienced in 1970s America by the author, and most importantly, by the children in her care. Many of these challenges and tensions will resonate with readers almost half a century later.

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About the review author

Leanne has over 20 years' experience as a children's services researcher, including more than a decade as a research associate at CELCIS. Her main research interests are around the education of care experienced learners, and support for adopted children and their families. She is also a recently qualified therapeutic parenting coach.

The review author was reviewing their own copy of this book.

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