

Reaching The Unseen Children

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I am deliberately borrowing my title from Jean Gross - [December guest column](#)

The book's sub-title is clunkier but is absolutely where the text is focused:
practical strategies for closing stubborn attainment gaps in disadvantaged groups.

And what the author succeeds in doing through 250 pages is to bring a number of fresh perspectives to familiar territory, most notably in the stand-out Chapter Seven which features in the [Guest Column](#).

It is also a book of 'Key take-aways' which feature regularly and offer excellent summaries for busy readers. The References section and Index are equally well crafted, the case studies memorable and instructive, the research references sharp and apposite.

The author knows her subject and subjects very well, from experiences in schools, local authorities, central government and the charity sector over many decades. She has a keen eye for individual children and their circumstances, and vividly reflects to the reader how they experience disadvantage - sometimes being swallowed up by it, sometimes pushing back tenaciously.

The narrative moves skilfully from understanding disadvantage in many social and educational forms to, importantly, addressing myths and wrong turnings often perpetuated by those in education and social services. The analysis is sympathetic yet trenchant. 'Verdicts' are pronounced - with compelling evidence - on such topics as building social capital, smaller classes, mentoring, setting and streaming.

The chapters on the word gap, the literacy gap and the maths gap offer both a superb synthesis of recent and current research and practice in these arenas and the author's own analysis of what works and what does not. Reflecting Jean Gross's own career and interests, the book affords a high profile to social and emotional learning and to successfully engaging all parents - more 'secrets' rooted in experience in many settings across the country.

'The seven secrets of self-efficacy' is the chapter worth buying the book for: a manifesto for bringing unseen children out of the shadows to flourish amidst their peers.

I end this review quoting from the opening chapter which introduces us to Jason, caught in a cycle of disadvantage:

I first met Jason when I was a young educational psychologist. He was referred because he was six and showing no signs of learning to read. Jason's small village school, which sat in the shadow of a spoil heap, served a former mining area on the Somerset coalfields.

When I talked to Jason I was struck by his limited vocabulary and lack of life experience. He had never been to the seaside, nor even played in a park. His horizons stretched not much further than the small council estate where he lived, the village shop and the school.

This effortless style characterises the book, a simultaneously easy and arresting read. That is Jean Gross's achievement: she makes us think deeply and anew about a landscape familiar to all those who work with children and young people. The messages are optimistic, the solutions practical - as long as we understand deeply and challenge not a few orthodoxies.

'*Must Do Better*' by Harry Hudson and Roy Blatchford will be published by John Catt Education in January 2022.