

BOOK REVIEWS

IMPROVING SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS

John MacBeath and Peter Mortimore, (eds.), Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001, ISBN 0 335 20687 5 (pp.230, £17.99 paperback).

TOM BRYCE

The Improving School Effectiveness Project (ISEP) was in one respect a classical study of school effectiveness, studying 80 Scottish primary and secondary schools. What factors could be shown to yield good progress and achievement, positive attitudes to learning, and therefore make schools effective? In another sense it was innovative, for the researchers set out to study school improvement through active forms of feedback of pupil data into the school development planning and improvement strategies in 24 of these schools. This entailed the use of more ethnographic methodologies, “revealing the inner life of schools and identifying the brakes and accelerators of improvement” (p. ix). With Scottish Office funding, the researchers from Strathclyde’s Quality in Education (QIE) Research Centre and the London Institute of Education carried out their work during 1995–1997, a short period during which to expect bravely-faced feedback, sometimes of a disappointing sort, to impact upon teachers’ individual and collective efforts. This book (published four years on, one may note) pulls together contributions from some 15 researchers, those members of the overlapping groups who tackled the various projects which constituted the ambitious whole.

The book tries to address all who might be interested in improving schools, practitioners, policy makers and researchers alike,

- easing the reader into how the main quantitative analyses were done to link test results and progress, taking into account a variety of factors like socio-economic context, the provision of learning support, and so forth;
- outlining how their case study work led to measures of school quality and how these seemed to link to pupils’ learning, teachers’ teaching and managers’ managing;
- and demonstrating how the use of the researchers’ ‘critical friend’ strategy opened up the micropolitics of schools (and of course presented complexities for the researchers in trying to find generalisable messages amidst a sea of variation).

Improving School Effectiveness therefore strikes a middle ground, being neither a full research account, nor a guide to practitioners in plain teacher talk. It does so rather well, all things considered, pulling several perspectives into a fairly sophisticated analysis, although it is not an easy read. While researchers of the effectiveness ilk will be pleased to study this text, they might be a little frustrated if going beyond it to see that there is no full report of the research project (or none that I could see listed) and most of the technical cross-references are to presented papers, not journal articles. This *is* the report of the ISEP Project. Policy makers and educationists will be interested in the policy context for the work set out in chapter 2 (though I think the significance of the powerful and unique link developed between MacBeath and HMCI McGlynn is understated). Practitioners who seek to engage in ‘real’ school

self-evaluation do have ideas to draw upon. That said, those who don't have 'critical friends' of the skill, determination and patience (!) exemplified by the research team might find it difficult to extract what they would need to make things work in their own unique circumstances.

For the effectiveness parts of the research, the team used AAP mathematics and reading test scores alongside standardised test scores (the Suffolk reading scale), Standard Grade English Language, Mathematics and overall grades as outcome measures, and coupled them with questionnaire findings obtained from pupils, parents and teachers giving indications of how schools and teaching are seen. A multilevel research design enabled the researchers to parcel out the effects of individual schools on pupils' achievements and progress, differences which they found to be more marked at primary than at secondary (underlining the need for *early* intervention strategies). The impact of social disadvantage was demonstrated to be significant among the secondary outcome measures, implying that schools with concentrations of disadvantaged pupils depress all pupils' performances. Using value-added approaches, the researchers showed that background has much less impact upon progress than upon attainment. In other words, some schools added greater value to their pupils than did others (more often in primaries than in secondaries, and more so in mathematics than in reading). Overall, the research team concluded that: "In terms of the progress gained, ... the *school* has a greater influence than pupils' background characteristics such as age, gender or socio-economic disadvantage." (p. 72)

School-level variations also showed up in the analyses of the questionnaires given to pupils, to parents and to teachers. On the whole, Scottish pupils, judging by this sample, are generally positive and appreciative of what teachers try to do, contrasting markedly with the echoes of Gow and McPherson's *flung aside forgotten children* in 1980. Four factors underlined the discerning views of parents of both primary and secondary pupils – school communication and welcome; pupils' work and learning; teacher/pupil relationships and behaviour; my child's experience of school. As far as teachers are concerned, there was clear-cut evidence from the value-added measures that primary teachers' perceptions of the processes going on in their schools tied in directly with measures of the progress being made by pupils. Effective schools have good leadership and are well-managed, with an explicit focus upon learning and teaching (and the intellectual progress which can be made) and upon positive standards of behaviour. However, taking into account the findings of the case study schools in the improvement parts of the research, the team's analysis shows that in schools facing the greatest challenges of low prior attainment and socio-economic disadvantage, low teacher expectation and low morale may be additional obstacles to improvement; "value-added is not a concept that has significantly permeated the perceptions of teachers" (p. 120). The messages here for teacher educators and government are serious. Spreading the word *about* school effectiveness isn't likely to go far (alas); policy may be strengthened by surer outcomes, fiat underlined by facts. Much more important were the *processes* which schools underwent to improve themselves in this study ; and while engagement by school staff with 'critical friends' clearly wasn't easy during ISEP (for anyone), it proved to be significant. In its educational context, the book does give *some pow'r the giftie gie us, tae see oorsels as ithers see us*, and for that, teacher educators, inspectors and policy makers should take note. The final sentences of chapter 10 are: "While support for real improvement involves challenge and accountability, more fundamentally, this study emphasizes it is about helping schools understand and develop their own capacity. This means focusing on individuals, their internal learning context and the external context. Without this, the chances of deep and lasting changes that can lead to improved pupil learning are slim." Yes, agreed, and what a motif for the post-McCrone world.

You come away from this book with the impression that the editors had to struggle to pull things together, that the breadth and depth of the work strained all, even to the point of rounding it all up in the 'report'. But it was ambitious and the book rightly does not oversimplify human relationships and organizational complexities; it does penetrate and illuminate where it should. At the conclusion of most projects, researchers usually say they would do it all differently, were they to start again. While the editors resist this in the final chapter, they say, rather more profoundly, that an ISEP shouldn't be done again. The world has moved on and the pace of change is so rapid, that *individuals* (never mind schools or classes or subjects) must be the new focus for schools and researchers alike.

ENHANCING QUALITY IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Gordon Kirk, Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2001, ISBN 1-903765-01-3
(pp 81: £9.50 paperback)

WALTER HUMES

This is a lucid and well-informed account of recent developments and current issues in teacher education. It deals with both initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD), and sets the analysis against the background of a changing institutional context and debates about partnership and quality assurance. The perspective is that of an 'insider', someone who has been centrally involved in many of the policy discussions at national level. This, it will be suggested, has many advantages in terms of enabling Kirk to report on the thinking that informed decisions, but also some disadvantages.

At an institutional level, the most significant development has been the merger of former teacher education institutions (TEIs) with universities, to form faculties of education, a process that may be completed by the time this review is published. (The details of the merger of the Aberdeen and Dundee campuses of Northern College with, respectively, Aberdeen University and Dundee University are still being finalised at the time of writing). Kirk rehearses the stages which preceded these mergers, and the pressures which made them inevitable, in a clear and systematic manner. He concludes his account with an optimistic reading of the exercise as offering 'the prospect of a significant enhancement of the educational experience of staff and students; it promises richer and more challenging programmes of professional education and of continuing support for teachers' (p. 15). This is part of the story but not the whole story. What is missing is a sense of the process as experienced, not by management, but by the teaching staff and students in TEIs. The degree of mutual misunderstanding (and, in some cases, hostility) by universities and TEIs was considerable and this created many problems. One illustration will serve to make the point. A report on the Glasgow University /St Andrew's College merger prepared by a University Vice-Principal was comprehensively rejected by faculty staff. It was perceived as a whitewash, a report written by management, for management, designed to serve the interests of management. The many concerns which had been expressed during the 'consultation' process – not least about a perceived decline in the quality of provision for students – were not adequately reflected in the report.

Some of these concerns continue to be felt even in those institutions where the merger took place some time ago. The difficulty of reconciling competing claims on staff – relatively high teaching loads (compared with other faculties), pressure to

secure research grants and publish in peer-refereed journals, time spent on visits to students on teaching placements, and the need to maintain a high level of CPD activity and income – are still not fully appreciated by some senior figures in universities.

A similar need to supplement Kirk's 'insider' account with the voices of others is evident in some of the other sections of the book. In his coverage of changes in both ITE and CPD programmes he offers a good account of the political and professional pressures to which teacher educators have been subject, and sets out the development of official thinking in a highly accessible way. The respective roles of central government, local government and the General Teaching Council (GTC) are outlined with admirable clarity. Where there is a sense of unease in Kirk's easy acceptance of the dominant discourse of teacher education – 'guidelines', 'competences', 'standards', 'benchmarks'. To be fair, he does seek to address some of the arguments of critics, such as David Carr, but these are dismissed in fairly robust terms and the 'self-evident' wisdom of officialdom defended. This point also applies to the chapter on quality assurance where the rebarbative jargon of the Quality Assurance Agency is presented as a satisfactory way of ensuring public accountability. It should also be noted that Kirk's book was completed before the McCrone agreement had been reached so the most recent developments on CPD and Chartered Teacher status are not dealt with.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter in the book is the one on partnership. Kirk acknowledges the protean character of the concept, its capacity to be interpreted in a variety of ways by different stakeholders. He gives a balanced account of the reasons for the failure to introduce a mentoring scheme into secondary schools in the mid 1990s and offers practical suggestions for steps that the GTC, TELs and local authorities might take to move forward on the partnership issue. It is certainly in everyone's interests to find a better arrangement than the one that exists at present, which depends far too heavily on goodwill and personal contacts.

For many years Gordon Kirk has been an important national figure in matters relating to teacher professionalism. He has spoken and written effectively on a wide range of issues about which he clearly feels passionately. Although his position on some of these issues might be disputed, what is not in dispute is his knowledge of the field. The depth of that knowledge is evident in this book, which provides a welcome addition to the specifically Scottish literature on teacher education.

EDUCATION AND THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

Lindsay Paterson, Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2000, ISBN 1-903765-005 (pp 90: £9.50 paperback)

HENRY MAITLES

My copy of Lindsay Paterson's *Education and the Scottish Parliament* is well-thumbed, and constantly repays visits. It is not primarily the content or even the central premise—of which more below—but rather the optimism that Lindsay Paterson brings to his analysis that gives the book its appeal. It is one in a series looking at policy and practice in education and has as its specific focus the role and potential of the Scottish Parliament to better shape education in Scotland. The introduction and the five chapters chart both the history of Scottish education and the role of politicians and civil society in shaping it from the time of the development of mass democracy and mass schooling to the fledgling Scottish Parliament.

Paterson puts the whole debate in perspective with his opening remarks that 'For over a century now, there has been a strengthening belief that a Parliament could make better policy for education than the unreformed Union has managed, and could link that efficiently to social need'. He develops this theme convincingly and with optimism. He outlines the issues affecting the Scottish Parliament in the field of education: huge expectation; gigantic expansion; the continuing desire for comprehensive education, yet dissatisfaction with the system (a rejection of the conservative policies of the 1980s and 1990s but a feeling that the comprehensive system needs to be made to work better); the ideals of social justice leading to policy with a focus on the desire to 'improve the quality of provision for people living in poverty', epitomised by the New Community Schools. He projects that the Parliament can either rely on the current education elite, which he describes as representing 'a victory for the safe tradition of civic Scotland' or can embrace radicalism and develop education in a refreshing positive manner. He argues that this would involve the Parliament forcing the education system 'to democratise, to open up, and to renew the ideals of social justice which underlay the founding of the welfare state ... popular participation ... against the policy community'. Although he recognises that this would be the 'tension' route, as to confront the traditional elites is clearly the hard option, he argues that this is the only possible route to open up the potential of Scottish education as a prime player in a more just society

However (there is always a however!), we are now nearly five years from the referendum, two years from the real start of the Scottish Parliament and into the fifth year of the New Labour government at Westminster and all the evidence is that things are moving in the opposite direction to the one hoped for by Paterson. For example, in terms of his well-explained 'ideals of social justice', poverty and inequality in society continue to grow and education is not immune from this. All the evidence is that as the wealth gap grows the inequality gap continues to do so as well. The number of children living in poverty has not been affected as yet by the Scottish Parliament. The recent (November 2001) league tables—as unadulterated as ever—do not show good schools/bad schools or good teachers/bad teachers (actually they obscure this) but do show the glaring inequalities in our education system. We could rank the schools in terms of parental income or free school meal entitlement and come out with virtually unchanged leagues. Indeed research in Glasgow and in Sheffield clearly shows the links between poverty and achievement. The New Labour agenda (in all parts of Britain) so far has done little for this inequality; reports from public sector institutes continue to show that spending on public services (New

Labour's priority areas) is no better than under the Conservative governments and that education spending in particular is at a 40 year low in terms of GDP. Under this type of underfunding, the ideals explained and espoused by Paterson are perceived not to be delivered and disillusion can set in. As regards the idea of a renewed democracy, and not counting the recent high profile expenses fiascos, when the Parliament votes against the Executive, for example over student fees, fisheries policy or warrant sales, the Executive has done whatever possible to mitigate the effects of its defeat — hardly promising for democracy.

And, indeed, the New Labour project is the nub of the problem. There is no discussion in the book as to how this impinges on the debate. Paterson concludes by maintaining that there are no easy answers but that 'Scottish education is starting to become creative'; notwithstanding the teachers' pay/conditions settlement, I have doubts about this. In late 1999/early 2000 when he was writing the book, perhaps this debate was still open; now it seems to be unrealistic. However, Jack McConnel's agenda is yet to be seen. Cathy Jamieson's appointment as Minister for Education and Young People is seen by many as a positive step; as the *Times Educational Supplement* (November 30, 2001) put it, she could 'champion the have-nots'. We'll wait and see but whilst we have our head in the clouds, we must have our feet on the ground.

It must be admitted here that Paterson does say that day to day issues such as those I've just outlined are not the scope of the book and that his agenda and areas for issue are the style and overall policy rather than the content and specific policy. Yet to some extent this is unrealistic. This is what makes Lindsay's work over-optimistic. The substance of educational reform from the Parliament has not matched the rhetoric. Nonetheless, Paterson has done education a service by developing a perspective that could deliver social justice and educational improvement, both of which are linked and, indeed, desired by society. He further has effectively outlined the potential role of our new Parliament in doing so. As such, and with the reservations outlined above in terms of what has happened, it is well worth reading.

Improving School Effectiveness is an important book for everyone who is interested in valuing the effectiveness of and securing improvement in schools: for teachers, heads, inspectors, policy-makers, and students and scholars of school effectiveness and improvement. Excerpt. School effectiveness is an issue that has occupied researchers and policy makers for three decades. No country facing the demands of the twenty-first century can afford to be indifferent to the questions it raises.