

BOOK REVIEWS

WIDENING PARTICIPATION

Liz Thomas, London: Continuum, 2001, ISBN 0-8264-4873-9, (pp. 243: £22.50, paperback).

Review by MARTIN CLOONAN

This book is a very welcome addition to the growing literature on participation in post-compulsory education. As the lifelong learning agenda increasingly takes hold within post-school provision, one of the thorniest issues in progressing towards a learning society is that of ensuring that as many people as possible participate in post-compulsory education. In this sense the book is extremely timely. It is also well-written in an accessible style which makes it suitable for both under- and postgraduate readers. It also contains a wealth of material of interest to practitioners.

The book sets itself three aims: examining the reasons behind renewed interest in widening participation, looking at barriers to participation, and promoting a strategic approach to widening participation. Its fifteen chapters explore a range of issues including various perspectives on the need to widen participation, the importance of the labour market and a discussion of three case studies. The focus is heavily on the UK, although relevant examples are drawn in from elsewhere, especially Australia.

The book starts very well by exploring the differences between *widening* and *increasing* participation, arguing that the latter belies an economic imperative, while the former is more attuned to notions of social justice. Thomas then goes on to describe three positions in the widening participation debate: modernisers (motivated by economic imperative), progressives (motivated by notions of social justice and self-realisation) and cultural restorationists (reactionaries seeking to preserve traditional values and academic standards). She rightly notes that most policies span all of these approaches. Her conclusion is that widening, rather than simply increasing, participation is necessary if equality of opportunity is to be achieved.

Thomas locates four broad types of barrier to participation; those related to aspects of the compulsory and post-compulsory system, those related to the economy – especially the labour market and the unemployment rate, social and cultural factors, and individual “deficits”. Astutely she notes that the barriers inter-relate and can be hard to disentangle. Thus tackling one barrier is rarely enough and approaches which take a holistic approach stand a better chance of succeeding. Moreover, she argues, those institutions in the post-compulsory sector which use only past performance to determine their admissions’ policy are likely to perpetuate disadvantage.

She also illustrates tensions in Government policy which is simultaneously trying to widen participation while at the same time allowing more market forces to determine provision. Thomas notes that non-traditional students need more support from institutions, but that this is unlikely to be provided in an increasingly cash-conscious environment. She then goes on to use Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and cultural capital in a fruitful discussions of reasons for (non-) participation. This is perhaps the most theoretical part of a largely empirical book, but it remains accessible throughout.

With regard to strategy, it is clear that Thomas wants an holistic approach which is sustainable, rather than short-term, and which includes *all* stakeholders in its

construction. She argues that those who the strategy is aimed at should be genuinely consulted, not merely made the subject of other people's assumptions. Rather than funding a range of projects, Thomas argues that an overall *strategy* is required and one which is genuinely embraced by institutions' central administration and staff. Three case studies are then examined and evaluated by their own criteria in a manner which should prove highly beneficial to practitioners. The book concludes by returning to the key issues and re-iterating that all stakeholders need to be involved throughout. It thus retains a holistic view.

At times the book suffers from a tendency towards breadth at the expense of depth, so that some issues such as social capital are mentioned almost in passing. There is also an annoying amount of repetition as most of the chapters have an introduction and conclusion, both of which discuss the material in between. This can be a little tiresome.

The book is also perhaps a bit too even-handed and descriptive. Much of the early part of the book is a review of previous work without a focused position, other than the desire to deliver a strategic approach. Although implicitly pro-participation, it is not until page 71 that we are told that the book assumes that 'formal learning is of value to people... post-compulsory education should be available to everyone; and that certain groups face more severe barriers to access than the average'. This is fair enough, but it would have been better to know more what Thomas thinks about *informal learning* and for her to lay out her stall a little earlier.

There is also a failure to problematise the notion of participation, which is generally portrayed simply as a "good thing". This presents at least two problems. First, the issue of what is being participated in. There are few mentions of the necessity for quality here nor of the dangers of making participation compulsory, as some forms of the New Deal do. The second problem is a tendency towards pathologising non-participants. If participation is a "good" thing then, as Frank Coffield (1999) has noted, there is a danger of creating a new moral economy in which non-participants are stigmatised as being in some ways morally reprehensible. The idea that non-participation might be a form of resistance is also not considered here. However, Thomas herself does not pathologise non-participants and perhaps the strongest part of the book is the way in which she shows how complex barriers to participation are and the need to involve *all* stakeholders, especially potential learners, in programmes which seek to widen participation.

Elsewhere Scottish readers may lament the comparative lack of attention paid to research north of the border. The Cubie Report is mentioned, but not the research which accompanied it and which provides a wealth of evidence on the reality of trying to participate in Higher Education on a limited income. Schuller *et al's* excellent (1999) study of part-time students is ignored, as is the work coming out of the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning which is hosted jointly by the University of Stirling and Glasgow Caledonian University. But perhaps the most glaring omission here is the lack of reference to the work of Veronica McGivney, much of which predates a great deal of the current "flavour of the month" interest in widening participation (see, for example, McGivney 1999).

Thomas also misses some of the broader trends in Higher Education which impact on the widening participation agenda, in particular that of research. She rightly points out that institutions need to "own" widening participation projects if they are to succeed. However, when the Research Assessment Exercise dominates the lives of many departments and institutions, it is unlikely that they will devote as much energy to widening participation. For too many of the older universities, widening participation plays second fiddle to improving RAE scores and it would have been welcome for Thomas to recognise and discuss this.

However, such blemishes should not be allowed to detract from what is overall

a fine book. It is a highly valuable introduction to debates in widening participation and the issues which surround it. The book should be recommended for all those interested in securing a more diverse student population in post-compulsory education.

REFERENCES

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PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IN EDUCATION: IMPROVING PRACTICE

Reeves J., Forde C., O'Brien J., Smith P., Tomlinson H. (2002) London : Paul Chapman. ISBN 0-7619-7172-6. 194pp. £16.99 (paperback)

Reviewed by PAUL TAYLOR

This book is concerned with the important issue of improving practice and school performance so that each child's right to an education suitable for his or her needs may be achieved. The authors are all experienced in developing work-based learning programmes in the UK which are designed to improve performance.

The major theme of their book is that worthwhile and long-term improvement will only be achieved through teacher learning in a supportive environment in their school. The authors explore the impact of continuing professional development on improving performance and argue for an approach which enables teachers to respond to change rather than simply conform to a current set of prescriptions. In arguing this they recognise the importance of clearly specified standards which can act as benchmarks against which the teacher can reflect upon his or her practice. However, they argue that focussing CPD on the individual in isolation is not effective; what is required is for teacher learning to take place within the social context of the school. The authors recognise the limitations of schools as places for teacher learning; lack of opportunities to engage in discussions of practice or to see others teaching and the issue of teacher autonomy, all militate against the effectiveness of the school as a learning environment for teachers. However, they do consider a model where effective teacher learning may take place.

They devote three chapters to a case study of the Scottish Qualification for Headship (SQH) as an example of work based learning in which the school environment can provide a context for teacher learning and the sustainable improvement of performance. Key features of the SQH which are noteworthy are teacher self-evaluation against a standard (in this case, the Scottish Qualification for Headship), an examination of values and assumptions, a link between theory and practice, the importance of working with others to achieve organisational goals, the focus on action in context by taking forward projects within the school which will improve organisational practice, and the value of appropriate assessment in improving practice.

They conclude that any strategy for improvement must be based upon an understanding of teacher learning within the context of the school. Not only the

content of what teachers learn but also the environment within which that learning takes place and is supported, is important. Teacher learning must be located in practice if it is to be effective.

Finally, they argue against prescription for teachers, against forcing compliance to externally imposed standards, not so that teachers may return to some woolly notion of professionalism where 'teachers know best', but so that teachers can engage in the debate about the purposes and aims of education as well as developing strategies to improve aspects of practice. This is surely important if the issues of plummeting teacher morale and lack of self-esteem are to be addressed.

This book makes an important contribution to the debate on how school and individual performance may be enhanced. It would be of value to any teacher, education manager or academic who is interested in the issue of improvement in school performance.