

BOOK REVIEWS

EDUCATION, ASSESSMENT AND SOCIETY

Patricia M. Broadfoot (Open University Press, 1996) (Assessing Assessment Series editor Harry Torrance), pp.xiv + 241, pb.£16.99

Reviewed by SALLY BROWN

This book is about some fundamental issues in the sociology of educational assessment. It is concerned with the roles played by assessment in modern mass education systems, particularly those of England and France. Patricia Broadfoot has a world reputation for her work on assessment, and she is especially experienced in the policy and practice of these two countries. As always, her text is lucid and interesting, but she sets herself a formidable task. She seems to have two audiences: the 'education' community and sociologists. The former have been immersed in, almost obsessed with, assessment but largely unaware of all the complexities of its social roles and purposes in contemporary society. The sociologists, on the other hand, have been apparently uninterested in this area of theoretical complexity, and have failed to explore why assessment should have such a dominant role in educational provision.

For those engaged or interested in the practice of assessment, the first three chapters of Part I of the book provide a clear overview of both the place and very great significance of assessment in industrialised countries. For those without detailed understanding of the work of Weber, Durkheim, Bernstein and Foucault, however, Chapter 4 will be hard-going. As the basis for understanding the growth of educational assessment, Professor Broadfoot identifies three central themes which, she argues, emerge from the very different theoretical perspectives of these four sociological theorists: 'individualism', 'rational authority' and 'contradiction and legitimation'. She is convincing in asserting the importance of these themes for explaining why things are the way they are, and proceeds in the next chapter (also difficult for those not versed in sociological argument) to carry her analysis into the current (and historical) systems of two national states (France and England). This concludes Part I of the book.

Part II focuses on comparative case studies of assessment in these two national systems. These case studies are very well presented, both descriptively and analytically. From a Scottish perspective, one cannot help introducing other comparisons with the north-of-the-border system and, for me, this reinforces the similarities between Scotland and England rather than the differences upon which we usually focus. The purpose of the case studies, however, is not a bland comparative exercise, but rather to illustrate in these two countries the centrality of ideas of the 'responsible individual' and a 'rationality' which identifies 'progress' primarily (perhaps only) in scientific and technological terms. Very close to the end of the book Patricia Broadfoot reconfirms her view that the need for a sociological understanding of assessment in industrial societies is increasingly pressing, as the tentacles of rational evaluation intrude ever further into the provision and process of education as well as all other areas of economic and social life (p.241).

An important aspect of the problem, as she sees it, relates to the ways in which the educational literature and research on assessment have focused on technical

concepts and procedures. Fundamental questions about the social role and purposes of assessment have been neglected in the urgency to improve the efficiency of this aspect of educational practice. This, she suggests, has constrained the debate within the status quo and is likely to lead to inertia in the education system and its inability to respond to changing social needs (p.15).

The policy priority, she argues, has been to establish efficient social control, not to question its legitimacy or its power to centre debate on means rather than ends. Whoever it is who has the power to determine the assessment criteria, also determines what is pursued in the name of education and any attempt to release education from the constrictions of assessment procedures... would result in the collapse of the system itself (p.8).

If the problem with the educationists is their preoccupation with matters of assessment techniques, that of the sociologists is their failure to pay any attention to assessment. The reasons for their lack of interest in explanations of why assessment procedures play such a central role in modern industrial societies are by no means self evident. Maybe one of the problems is that assessment was seen for so long as the territory of the psychologists, or more particularly the psychometricians who left their legacy of the scientific/technological approach to the study of the individual?

In evaluating this book there seem to me to be two kinds of question to be asked. The first is concerned with whether it provides a high quality sociological study of assessment. In my view the answer to that is a firm 'yes'. The second invites a more speculative answer and asks how likely it is that the material and arguments it presents will encourage (a) sociologists to focus on educational assessment and (b) assessment workers to engage with sociological theory and analysis. I am less sure about this. It is not clear to me that the text will grab the sociologists' attention on behalf of assessment, and many assessment specialists will need more of a shallow-end introduction to the ideas of sociology. Nevertheless, a book to be warmly commended.

THE COMPLEAT OBSERVER? A FIELD RESEARCH GUIDE TO OBSERVATION

Jack Sanger (The Falmer Press, 1996), pp. 141, pb. £13.95

Reviewed by PAMELA MUNN

This is the second in Falmer's Qualitative Studies Series under the general editorship of Ivor Goodson. As the title suggests, parallels are invited with Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler* and indeed a substantial extract from the introduction to that volume reminds us that the art of angling is not to be taught by words but by practice. Nevertheless, Walton undertakes 'to acquaint the Reader with many things that are not usually known to every angler'. He makes it clear, however, that his book is by no means the last word on the subject, 'For Angling may be said to be so like the Mathematics, that is can never be fully learnt; at least not so fully, but that there will still be more new experiments left for the trial of other men than succeed us.' How does Sanger's book measure up to the challenging comparison he has set himself?

I enjoyed the book. It is written in what some might see as a quirky style, (à la Walton) using an autobiographical approach to illustrate some of the enduring

themes of any book on research methods. The reader is introduced to issues of validity, reliability, positivism and naturalism through accounts of Sanger's own experience of observation. He begins, 'It was not until 1980, thirty-seven years after being born, that I first realised that there was a world of difference between seeing and observing.' He then provides an extract from his classroom observation notes and used this as a way into a brief discussion of the differences between seeing and observing. This is the approach used in the other chapters which cover issues such as ethics, confidentiality, observation techniques, data analysis and reporting.

It is all done with a light touch, lots of practical examples, a gentle introduction to the big name theorists of social science and a range of examples which include education but are not confined to it. The book would therefore be useful to research methods students in the social sciences in general as well as to those with specific interests in education.

The book will not appeal to those who are looking for a straightforward text on how to carry out observations. Echoing Walton, it continually reminds readers about the uncertainties of social science research and the concluding chapter reminds us that there are lots of Jack Sangers in the book and that there are trade-offs to whatever approach to observation the researcher used. Those seeking the 'right way' to carry out observation will not find it here. Yet the book does contain practical examples and the allusions to songs, fiction and play succeed, in my opinion, in fulfilling the author's aims of helping along debates about observation. I can see myself using this book in research methods classes as a useful complement to existing writing on the topic.

How does it compare to say, the growing series of SCRE guides on research methods or to more standard texts such as those by Burgess or Cohen and Manion? It is distinctive in that the SCRE guides are written explicitly for teachers, whereas this book has a wider appeal across the social sciences. It also dips into social science theory which the SCRE guides with their strictly practical slant tend to avoid. However, it is not an aggressively theoretical book, but rather succeeds in indicating how practice in research methods largely depends upon theoretical frameworks of how we understand human relations. The author's preference for ethnography and a post-modernist view is clear.

In summary, this is not a book for those looking for guidance on highly structured observation and how to use statistics to describe such observation. Thus it is not the classic text book genre, detailing a number of observation techniques, providing practical exercises and summarising main points. Rather the reader is drawn into the writer's experience of observation, encouraged to reflect on the assumptions made, the kind of data collected and the meaning ascribed to these data. Practical examples are given, such as letters requesting permission to observe, sociograms as an observation technique, and seven types of creativity in data analysis. I think the blend of the theoretical, practical, anecdotal and allusive works well and I would recommend the book as a good starting point for those embarking on observations and for those wanting to reconsider observation as a research method.

REFLECTION THROUGH INTERACTION: THE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE OF PUPILS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Judith Watson (Falmer Press, 1996), pp. vi + 187, pb. £14.95

Reviewed by JOHN NISBET

There are lots of books about thinking, but this one is distinctive in several ways. While set in a context of constructivist learning theory, it is firmly rooted in classroom practice, being based on classroom observation and leading to practical implications for teaching and learning. The field work was done in special schools, where pupils are commonly considered to have particular problems with reflective thinking. In addition, the book includes reports from teacher-researchers, describing three imaginative programmes in mainstream schools.

The main focus of the research which forms the core of the book is on 'pupils who are described as having moderate levels of learning difficulty, or as 'slow learners' (p. 20). In four classrooms of pupils aged 10–12 years, 36 sessions (50 hours in all) were recorded, concentrating on the teacher and two target pupils in each class. For analysis, six categories of teacher talk and three kinds of pupil talk were categorised. 'Reflective episodes' were identified. There were also teacher interviews after data collection and analysis, to allow teachers to express their own ideas and pick up new perspectives.

'Reflection' is the key concept throughout, presented as the means by which teachers can best encourage learning in their classrooms. One of the teachers in the research produced the definition:

(Reflection is) 'thinking in depth about things ... just where your thinking is challenged, where you are not reacting at a superficial level, where you are thinking beyond the immediate thing to its implications and possibilities.'
(p.1)

It includes reasoning, the creative production of ideas, problem solving and metacognition, wherever cognitive activity 'goes beyond the information given' (in Bruner's phrase). Distinctive features of the author's interpretation is that, unlike the advocates of the 'thinking skills' approach, she recognises the important role of feelings and of social interaction in reflection. In the transcripts from classroom observation, the concept seems at times to cover almost any form of thought — even just response to a teacher's question. But questioning is only one of the ways in which teachers can foster reflection: other ways include

classroom talk, challenging activities and the creation of an ethos where expectations are high and pupils' thinking and self-awareness are shown to be valued. (cover blurb)

Is this not what every teacher aims to do? Like the man who discovered that he had been speaking prose all his life, some readers may say that these ways of encouraging reflection are just examples of what all 'good' teachers do. But the analysis goes further than this, especially in its identification of 'reflective episodes', which are 'critical learning opportunities for pupils with potential for cognitive growth'.

This mode of interpreting the processes in teaching and learning is in line with other major developments in constructivist thought. The author acknowledges a link with Woods' 'critical events', which are of longer duration than the episodes

singled out here. The Harvard Project Zero has produced a similar but wider concept, 'generative topics': these are (like the old familiar 'projects' of our primary schools days) topics within a subject in the curriculum which set up interesting and challenging lines of inquiry central to that discipline and thus 'offer students the opportunity to construct rich and flexible understandings' (Project Zero interim report). The concept also owes something to Vygotsky's ZPD, the zone of proximal development: the level of performance which is just out of reach, but which the learner can do with support or guidance — the 'buds' of development rather than the 'fruits'. The teacher's role is to identify the ZPD and help the learners through it, so that they move from the stage where they need help to the stage where they can do it for themselves, thus 'internalizing' the learning and making it their own. These various concepts provide insights into learning processes: the notion of 'reflective episodes' is a way of interpreting classroom interaction, and if teachers are on the lookout for these situations and know how to exploit them, then the opportunities for learning can be turned to advantage.

We have moved a long way from the tedious exercises in thinking skills which many institutions have introduced as an extra in the syllabus, presumably to make up for the lack of thinking in the way the rest of it is taught. The approach outlined here embeds thinking in the heart of classroom interaction, and represents a new stage in the age-old battle against inert ideas in education.

TOWARDS A COMPETENT WORKFORCE

Bob Mansfield and Lindsay Mitchell (Gower, 1996), pp.xxvi + 322, hb. £45.00.

Reviewed by DAVID RAFFE

In content and design Scottish Vocational Qualifications are much the same as National Vocational Qualifications, but Scotland has largely escaped the fierce debates about NVQs south of the Border. There, NVQs are under attack from traditionalists who defend the pre-existing vocational qualifications, from progressive advocates of a broader and more educationally-oriented approach, and even from the industrialists who are supposed to own them and the standards they embody. They are criticised for narrowness, for behaviourist psychology, for bureaucracy and cost, for neglecting learning processes, and for unreliable and bias-prone assessment. While producer interests have been under attack elsewhere in the public sector, NVQs have been the ultimate producer-driven system: a sophisticated technical model developed with little reference to the ways in which qualifications are used and the contexts in which they are acquired.

Despite all this criticism, the underlying 'NCVQ approach' has proved remarkably resilient. The reason for this has already been a topic for research projects, rather like historians trying to explain why the Light Brigade kept on charging. At the time of writing, it is expected that NVQ/SVQ specifications will be relaxed in response to the criticisms of the Beaumont and Dearing Reports (among others) but that much of the underlying model will be retained. This book is therefore timely and likely to be influential. Bob Mansfield and Lindsay Mitchell played leading roles in the various developments in the 1980s, including several Scottish projects, which led

to the present system of occupational standards and NVQs/SVQs. They are now directors of PRIME, a leading consultancy in the field. They are strong defenders of the key principles which underlie NVQs — or which should and could underlie them — but they are critical of the way in which NVQs have actually developed. As such they are close to the spirit of current policy thinking and may have an influence over its future development.

The book has two very different purposes. Much of it comprises a technical manual on functional analysis — the methodology for developing occupational standards — as well as on how to use the standards themselves. Yet the book is also a contribution to the policy debate and an *apologia*, if not for NVQs, at least for NVQs as they should have been and might yet be. Mansfield and Mitchell outline a view of economic and social change and argue that this calls for a broader, humanistic view of occupational competence which they summarise in their model of ‘job competence’. In the event NVQs developed along narrower, more task-oriented lines, which the authors attribute to their origins in low-level training schemes, to the politics of training and the influence of interest groups, and more generally to the lack of a clear strategy and vision. A strategy informed by their analysis and their model of job competence could still, they argue, result in a system of vocational training which met criteria of social justice as well as of economic efficiency.

As a technical manual this book carries the authority of leading exponents of the art. It is also remarkably lucid, although readers unfamiliar with standards development may still find much of the discussion very abstract. As a policy argument I find it less convincing. This is partly because the authors present their own model largely in its own terms, rather than through direct comparisons with, and critiques of, alternative approaches. This makes the book easier to follow as a technical manual, since we are not distracted by alternative ways of thinking; but it also makes it difficult to see exactly how their approach differs from traditional approaches, on the one hand, and from the actual development of standards and NVQs/SVQs on the other. Mansfield and Mitchell say that their approach sometimes differs from the NCVQ’s ‘authorised version’ but they do not spell out where and how it differs. It does not help that their exposition is illustrated by real examples from standards development (which, moreover, do not suggest a particularly broad concept of competence). If their models of job competence and functional analysis have been extensively used in the development of standards and NVQs, can we identify sectors where their more enlightened approach to learning prevails, with the economic and social consequences that are claimed to follow? If not, and their models are implicated in what they describe as the ‘failure’ of the NVQ revolution, then these models cannot on their own reverse this failure.

This leads to my final point. The job competence model and functional analysis are fundamentally about *describing* occupational competence. So of course are occupational standards and NVQs/SVQs. The weaknesses of vocational training in Britain are well documented, but I know of no evidence that these weaknesses are significantly due to our inability to describe occupational competence adequately. The problems lie elsewhere, in the economic, social and political factors which have inhibited the *development* of competence. In other words, much of the policy attention of the last 10 or 15 years has been treating the wrong disease. It remains a matter of debate whether the treatment has merely delayed more accurate diagnosis and prescription, or whether it has actually made the patient worse.

CHANGING OUR SCHOOLS

Louise Stoll and Dean Fink (Open University Press, 1996) Buckingham, pp.xvi + 220, pb.£13.99

Reviewed by ALMA HARRIS

The flurry of publications on the subject of school effectiveness, and school improvement stand witness to the nation's current preoccupation with the performance of schools. There now exists a burgeoning collection of books which focus upon changing and improving schools. Some of the most recent additions to this list however, offer little which is new. Indeed, a close scrutiny of the texts in this field will reveal some duplication and repetition between various volumes.

Changing Our Schools by Stoll and Fink is a welcome departure from this trend. It moves away from the rhetoric and the theory, to consider the practicalities of changing schools. The book takes the important step of linking theoretical critique to practice by describing the what, why and how of change. The book explores and endeavours to make connections between three main aspects of planned change: the moral purposes and values underlying change efforts (the why), school effectiveness factors (the what) and school improvement processes (the how). This is not an easy task but Stoll and Fink have made significant progress in bringing the conceptual and practical dimensions of change together in a single volume.

The book argues that current change efforts tend to be guided by the past rather than driven by the future. In a neat illustration of this point in the introductory chapter, Stoll and Fink describe a recent visit to the Ukraine, where the tour guide points to a factory and says, 'this factory makes good watches' and then adds 'if this were 1965'. This underlines the book's substantive and important message that the process of change in schools must be planned for in a holistic and integrated way. Stoll and Fink rightly suggest that change which is ad hoc and disparate will ultimately suffer the same fate as the Ukraine factory.

The book is well written and while the improvement work referred to in Canada and the UK might be well traversed terrain for some readers, it does provide rich illustrative exemplars of educational change in action. In this respect, Stoll and Fink have carefully crafted together theory and practice concerning educational change and this is a major strength of the book. The narrative provides an up beat journey through the various components of educational change, which include culture, leadership, teaching and learning, evaluation and of course, school effectiveness and school improvement.

Stoll and Fink attempt to provide linkages between the various components in their pursuit of a holistic model of educational change. With certain chapters this works particularly well. The chapter which explores the power of school culture for example, is a very useful introduction to the way in which cultural change is central to successful school improvement. Yet, other chapters are only able to skim the surface and hint at the complex and controversial issues facing those concerned with the practicalities of educational change.

One important issue which Stoll and Fink highlight in the book is the theoretical and methodological divide which persists between the school effectiveness and school improvement paradigms. The last chapter focuses upon this theme and Stoll and Fink provide their own model linking school effectiveness and school improvement. However, both the model and the argument in their final chapter, fails to address the conceptual and epistemological divide between both fields.

On a more practical point, the authors also tend to underplay the complexity of the change process for different types of school. Their analysis does not explore whether schools in deprived socio-economic environments with difficult cultures respond to change efforts in the same way as schools in more affluent areas. They do not really grapple with the issue of differential strategies for change, or explore the process of change in different school contexts. Possibly in a future volume, Stoll and Fink will apply the same flair, clarity and sharpness of narrative to an analysis of how different types of schools strive to change, improve and develop.

Overall, the book provides a useful and accessible summary of current ideas relating to planned change in schools. The book is a highly accessible and coherent overview of the complex process of educational change. It is a panoramic yet practical account of school change which is to be welcomed by practitioners and researchers alike.

THE COMPETENT HEAD: A JOB ANALYSIS OF HEADS' TASKS AND PERSONALITY FACTORS

Dilum Jirasinghe and Geoffrey Lyons (Falmer Press, 1996), pp.ix + 164, pb. £14.95

Reviewed by DAVID BETTERIDGE

Serving as a head teacher resembles being a ship's captain, or a football manager, or a field commander in time of war. The job entails exercising what Aristotle called practical wisdom, that is to say making deliberative acts of judgment, often in the absence of reliable information. Decisions arrived at today, under pressure, will affect the circumstances that will demand our attention tomorrow. Not our own errors and changes of mind only, but those of others, not necessarily our allies, will constantly force us into reconsidering our priorities. Our agendas grow ever longer and less likely of achievement, and always we face a chorus of criticism. Being a 'competent head', the focus of the very interesting book under review, cannot be reduced to any set of pre-determined skills or streamlined procedures. It is neither a craft nor a science, although it may draw selectively on aspects of these.

The Competent Head enters this complex and fast-changing field with confidence. The authors set out to apply certain techniques of job analysis to the tasks demanded of head teachers. From their analysis, they derive a profile of management competencies that can and should, they believe, be used in fashioning 'objective and rigorous assessment criteria' for selecting competent individuals, and for developing and appraising their work in post. They further argue the case for the selection process being assured by the use of specialist assessment centres, conventional methods for selection (applications, references, interviews) being found to be unreliable.

Before finding fault with the book's rather too simplistic approach, the reviewer must acknowledge its virtues. First, the authors have written with admirable clarity. The reader never loses his/her way through the considerable volume of reporting, analysing and discussing that goes on. Second, the authors report interestingly on the research that they have done into the tasks currently perceived as being part and parcel of head teachers' responsibilities in England and Wales, and into the accompanying personality attributes deemed appropriate. Third, the authors translate their theories and research findings into a fairly detailed programme of action. This means that,

whether one is persuaded or not, the reader well understands what s/he is reacting to. Fourth, fair indication is given up to a point, of whatever difficulties and debates there may be relating to the matters under discussion. (The early chapter on management competencies is particularly helpful and well-referenced in this respect.) The book's shortcomings stem in large measure from the authors' failure to exercise this fourth virtue with sufficient scope — no Greenfield, no Sergiovanni, little of the breadth of view that would provide a reader new to the field (the battlefield) with a sense of where to situate the work among the models and paradigms currently in contention.

In distinction to the copious and detailed use made of management theory in treating the notions of 'competence' and 'competencies', there is too little consideration of theory when it comes to some specifically educational matters. Thus, for example, the reader is given somewhat uncontextualised and relatively under-referenced help with styles of leadership.

When it comes to the authors' project of deriving competencies from their research into what their sample of head teachers reveals, there is again a problem of scope. They admit that, 'We should also consider task categories not identified in the returns of this sample but which appear in other research returns' (p.84). The extra category they bring to our attention is the worthy one of 'thinking creatively', but the reader is left wondering what other important discoveries remain unconsidered as a result of the authors' self-imposed limits of research and reading.

Consider also the problematic nature of the relationship between 'school effectiveness' and head teachers' 'competence', as determined by their assessed ability in applying the 'competencies', as discovered by research into what head teachers do, or say they do. There are a whole series of questions to be clarified and studied before connections can be strongly established and credence won for the predictive validity of a competence-based approach to head teacher selection. The authors are splendidly honest here, while still maintaining their confidence. They admit: 'It is likely that the specification of headteacher competence will lead to an effectively managed school with successful outcomes, but it is by no means a *fait accompli*... No claims are made' (pp.103–4). Nor, regrettably, is the theoretical debate surrounding their difficulties more than lightly sketched in at this point. The criticisms so helpfully summarised earlier (pp.29–30), really need to be taken further here, and put to work.

Despite the above reservations, the book is still to be recommended. It provides an invigorating explication of what a competence-based approach entails. It provides examples of appraisal and self-appraisal schedules that use competencies; we may use them, build on them, or contend with them, as we please. And it provides plenty of bones of contention on which we can gnaw, leaving plenty of room for further necessary complementary study as we ponder, perhaps mischievously, a recent report that indicates that it is among more experienced and skilled drivers that we are most likely to encounter incidents of road rage.