

## **Successful Teaching Placement in Scotland**

*Jane Medwell & Frances Simpson (2008) Exeter: Learning Matters.  
ISBN: 9781844451715. (pp. 176, £17.00, pb.)*

### **Review by Sharmistha Das**

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Targeted towards the prospective primary and early years teacher trainees, the book opens with a general overview of the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme in Scotland. The authors discuss the choices and options available to gain a qualified teacher status and become a fully registered teacher as outlined by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). Different parts of the book highlight the complexity of the learning context, i.e. the field experience, by discussing various components involved in this process. It is full of helpful tips, pointers, references and advice, all providing adequate guidance for a novice trainee to visualise a training context. Vignettes of case studies are used to illustrate the components, such as how to observe, plan, evaluate and assess etc. The introductory chapter rather sets a tone of rigid structure and accountability, although it must be said that the information provided here is valuable for creating an understanding of the procedures involved in school placement. Quite rightly there is a focus on developing generic skills such as planning, management and evidence collection throughout the ITE programme and the induction year. However, using this evidence and other skills to prepare for a profession which is continuously changing and developing requires systematic reflection on the process of learning. This is an aspect perhaps less emphasised than others such as self-management skills.

The authors appropriately point out that every host school is unique. Depending on the culture/ethos of the schools and the nature of partnership between the school and the university, experiences of the placements will vary. Unless the students are aware of these factors and are prepared to adapt to a new learning environment, there is no set formula that can ensure the quality of the placement experience they will have in a school. In an age of uncertainty, trainee teachers need to be equipped with skills which can be adapted. These cannot be attained without focusing on 'learning how to learn'. The book emphasises regulations and responsibilities. While these are crucially important factors in training to be a teacher, accountability alone cannot ensure effectiveness. In order to innovate and progress, critical reflection on all skills combined becomes the key to developing a teacher as a lifelong learner.

The authors give a practical piece of advice to the readers by reminding them of how 'successful' as well as less successful experiences during placements

can contribute equally to learning. Since this experience of the placement largely depends on the partnership between the school, the university and the local authority, information about the expectations of various stakeholders, namely, school mentor, class teacher, course tutor and the trainee teacher is provided. This is certainly useful for developing an understanding about the relationships which govern and nurture a planned nexus of learning during field placements. The tasks involved, including teaching observation, directed activities, evaluation meetings and setting targets are discussed step-by-step and in detail to illustrate the placement experience for the benefit of the trainee. For example, a checklist is provided for observing lessons led by the class teacher. Child protection issues are discussed along with pointers for how to deal with pupils with difficult behaviours.

Chapter four – Learning to teach on placement – provides useful tips for developing teaching skills on placement. There is a focus on developing relationships with the pupils in the class as a basis for shaping an effective learning environment. It is argued that knowing the children is the starting point for creating an individualised learning setting. Clear instructions, questioning techniques and active learning strategies are emphasised as models of good practice. The following chapter also provides useful information on how to assess and monitor children's progress and discusses 'personalised learning plans' in alignment with school targets. The components of the Standard for Full Registration and the Teacher Induction Scheme during the probation year are briefly discussed in the concluding chapter. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities and self-evaluation (as guided by GTCS) are emphasised for this stage.

Moral codes of behaviour expected of a teacher are laid out – from the very beginning of the book till the end. There is an emphasis on picking up the 'role' of a teacher by observing these rules and moral codes. Appropriate professional values such as working collaboratively with the school community are outlined as a necessity for meeting standards, instead of discussed to create in-depth understanding about the very process of learning that is taking place. This, however, is not always the case. For example, in Chapter Five, a suggested 'reflective task' guides the reader to discuss the assessment strategies with relevant school personnel in relation to the school improvement plan. This task should also help to create deeper knowledge about the assessment procedures within a holistic learning environment.

While it is necessary to emphasise and maintain a certain standard in schools, the book's predominant focus on rules and regulations coupled with the notion of responsibility and accountability raises concerns: is this an ideal picture of a training system which is aiming to develop independent lifelong learners? The underlying assumption behind the title – Successful Teaching Placement in Scotland – prompts the reader to define success by following a set of rules without using much reflection to create deeper understanding of the values that are being fostered by the education system. Although a generic picture of placement was portrayed, this may not be a typical representation of all school placements in Scotland. Initial Teacher Education is about educating teachers as well as training them. The book emphasises the latter approach – the 'apprenticeship' model. However, the former remains elusive.

## Faith schools in the twenty-first century

*Stephen McKinney (Ed.) (2008). Edinburgh: Dunedin. ISBN: 13 9781903765814 (pp. ix + 79, £14.50, pb.)*

### **Review by Graeme Nixon**

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This collection on contemporary issues surrounding faith schools offers a range of views from the four authors that seek to map the current debate (Stephen McKinney); consider the arguments for abolition, retention and approaches to faith schooling (Harry Brighouse); analyse the question of the inclusion of non-Catholics in Catholic schools (Maurice Ryan); explore the alleged connection between faith schooling and sectarianism in Scotland (Stephen McKinney), and consider the future of faith schools in Scotland set against current political developments (Robert Davies).

Along the way the reader is introduced to the currency of these issues and the multi-faceted nature of the debate with regards to the various manifestations of faith schools, whether as a result of established tradition, historical or modern immigration, or out of the desire by certain faith communities to exploit a politically advantageous atmosphere in which to establish faith-based education for their children (as is the case with certain faith groups in Blair's Britain). Whilst a lot of the analysis centres on the Scottish situation three of the contributors widen the debate to encompass the United Kingdom (McKinney), international Catholicism (Ryan), as well as a more philosophical consideration of the debate from a scholar on the outside of denominational commitment (Brighouse).

This book raises a number of interesting issues and the well-researched analysis should be of interest to anyone in education. For example, McKinney cogently argues that many of the questions levelled at faith schools regarding rational autonomy should also be levelled at so-called non-denominational schools which may purport to be established on 'rationally decisive evidence' (rather than faith), but where the transparent reality of such evidence is often lacking. Indeed, some may argue that such an accusation could be levelled at the current review of the curriculum in Scotland (the Curriculum for Excellence), critiquing the apparent prescriptivism of the review. Brighouse, inviting the reader to build an education from scratch, asks a similar question regarding the extent to which children of any religious or philosophical familial background possess rational autonomy with regard to their career, sexuality and political outlook.

Brighouse's holistic approach within faith schools advocates an engagement with mainstream culture; a robustly liberal approach, and rational autonomy stimulated by consideration of other world views. Brighouse argues that prohibition of faith schools is neither realistic nor desirable and that careful state regulation is key to the holistic vision he outlines. His interesting analysis is informed by a consideration of the complexities and messiness of attempts to separate church and state within the USA.

Ryan's consideration of the inclusion of non-Catholics in Catholic schools sets the debate in the context of an increasingly plural, post 9-11 and globalised

world, and considers the merits and demerits of retrenchment and multi-religious approaches within Catholic schools given these developments. Ryan argues that Vatican II created an aspiration that Catholic schools should be outward-looking and engage with wider society. He concludes that Catholic schools provide grounding in a tradition that facilitates tolerance towards other traditions and that therefore there are good arguments for including non-Catholics in developing religious literacy in a denominational setting.

In considering the allegation that faith schools lead to sectarianism, McKinney, draws on a number of interviewees (both favourable towards and opposed to faith schools) who consider this within a Scottish context. McKinney provides an historical analysis of the establishment of Catholic schools in Scotland and a critique of populist and, in his view simplistic, notions that sectarianism and faith schools are intimately connected. The crux of his argument is that Catholic schools are associated rather than causally connected with sectarianism.

The concluding chapter, written by Robert Davies, sets the debate about faith schools in the wider philosophical milieu of what he construes to be the dominant post-war secularisation thesis. For Davies, this led to confidence in the academic community that faith schools would wither and increasingly be seen as an oxymoron in a society that championed democratic access to knowledge. For Davies, however, Multiculturalism and increasing consumer choice led to a questioning of the inevitability of secularisation and the optimism of certain academics that faith schools would suffer a slow extinction. Davies' views that New Labour policies have been instrumental in undermining a comprehensive vision of education demand attention, as does his claim that New Labour support for new faith schools may have led to a powerful lobby opposed to faith-based education whose antipathy may have lasting consequences. Davies' assertion that the economic conditions currently experienced may provide a greater currency for faith schools is particularly prescient. He concludes that Catholic schools in Scotland are flourishing and particularly well-placed to meet these challenges given that he considers them outward looking and committed to communitarian values beyond any consumerist ethic.

For this reviewer a number of questions and possible omissions are raised. Despite the stated aims to avoid unnecessary polemic or denominational triumphalism there could be a more robust statement of the views of scholars opposed to faith schools or of those who query an unquestioningly confessional approach (the views of Stephen Law with regards to philosophic liberalism come to mind). Furthermore, the tone of Davies' chapter, which implies that Catholic faith schooling is, by dint of prior existence, immune to the debate about the morality of faith schooling when applied to modern manifestations, could be questioned. The views, stated by McKinney and Davies, that Catholic schools are enjoying unprecedented success and political recognition is also something worthy of further investigation. The evidence of this success is not presented in the book. What, for example, are the statistics with regards to persistent catholicity beyond the denominational school experience? Indeed, there are academics, like Steve Bruce, who would say that any of the alleged successes of faith schools can be described in terms of secular virtues and that religious decline is now as apparent in denominations that enjoy faith schooling as in those who do not. Perhaps Davies himself recognises this when he concedes the

extent of secularisation in Western democracies? With regards to the political profile given faith schools in Scotland perhaps Davies and McKinney are guilty of tethering a little too much optimism to Scotland's First Minister Alex Salmond's recent contribution to the debate?

Overall, this book is of interest to anyone interested in the currency of faith schools and contemporary issues with regards to faith-based education. It will also be of obvious interest to anyone exploring what democratic education may actually mean in the Twenty First century.

## **Practice-based learning: developing excellence in teaching**

*Jenny Reeves and Alison Fox (eds.) (2008) Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press. ISBN: 978 1 903765 82 1 (pp.viii + 87, £14.50, pb.)*

**Review by Christine Fraser**

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For the last 30 years, at least, the drive to improve public services has been consistent and enduring. Within public sector education, in the UK and abroad, strengthening management has been seen as the way to achieve improvement, resulting in the adoption of practices from business and commerce. However, school improvement requires more than a top-dressing of imported ideas; it requires change at grass roots level. Such change affects not only day-to-day classroom activity, but raises questions about what it means to be a teacher. In chapter 1 of this book (number 24 in the Policy and Practice in Education series) the editors chart the effects of the school improvement agenda on teacher professionalism in post-devolution Scotland. In particular, they examine the construct of 'excellence' in teaching, through a comparison of the US National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and Scotland's Chartered Teacher Standard and Programme. The resulting description serves as the springboard for a closer examination of practice-based learning.

Chapter 2, written by Mike Carroll, Sheila Smith and Claire Whewell, looks at professional growth and development and the implications of teacher learning for schools and other organisations. A great many terms are introduced and, at times, I struggled with nuances of (or differences in?) meaning. Discussion of teacher learning, or the process by which 'teachers move towards expertise' (Kelly, 2006:506), could be better supported by a more consistent approach to defining, or describing the use of terminology and the relationships between terms. Nevertheless, the authors argue convincingly that change may be initiated through reflection on critical incidents, but the systematic and professional examination of practice should be informed by research and vice versa. The integration of experience and social learning theories, together with the cognitive

and reflective elements, make up four key processes found to support professional development (or teacher learning).

Yvonne Buchanan and Morag Redford, Chapter 3, describe three stages in professional enquiry and discuss some of the issues which teacher researchers face.

The logical, step-by-step approach to undertaking individual action inquiry, while comforting, masks the unpredictability and risks turning interventions into practice-based learning by numbers. Certainly, the first case study in Chapter 4 (Sheena Dunlop, Alan Massey and Caroline Scott) applies the format advocated in Chapter 3 and generates a successful intervention that changed practice and generated improvement. However, case studies two and three highlight some of the dilemmas and difficulties of researching real-world events – for example, data analysis in the SPIN VIG project and reliability of pupil data in the graphing example. The chapter concludes with summary of participants' learning and useful tips drawn from their experiences.

Collaborative professional enquiry (CPE) is the focus of two accounts in Chapter 5. Valerie Drew, Alison Fox and Mary McBride illustrate the tensions between a political rhetoric that encourages distributed leadership, exemplified in the Chartered Teacher Standard, and an education system that is suspicious of teacher activism. The notion of opening up spaces where teacher learning can occur and its effect on teacher professional identity are used to explain why involvement in collaborative professional enquiry alters practice. The concluding section outlines a manifesto for the adoption of CPE as the means for transformational change.

In Chapter 6, John l'Anson, Jenny Reeves and Claire Whewell draw together what has been learned about supporting teacher learning. This chapter provides tantalising links to socio-cultural and evolutionary theory which would merit further exposition. I should like to have been engaged by the authors in greater discussion of the drivers of change, personal or political, the learner-in-deficit model and the extent to which learning is individual or organisational (Fenwick, 2001). However, there is only so much you can fit into 90 pages!

There is an optimistic, 'can do' feeling about the book. It is written in an accessible style with real-life examples to inspire anyone embarking on practice-based projects. On a practical note, a glossary of terms and abbreviations would be a useful addition, especially for newcomers to the field and readers outwith Scotland. Overall, the breadth of material covered means readers are likely to return to this slim volume regularly and to draw on its references to deepen and expand their understanding of the process and products of practice-based learning.

## REFERENCES

- Fenwick, T. (2001) *Questioning the concept of the learning organisation*. London: Paul Chapman and Open University Press.
- Kelly, P. (2006) What is teacher learning? A socio-cultural perspective, *Oxford Review of Education*, 32 (4) 505-519.

## **Doing action research in early childhood studies: a step-by-step guide**

*Glenda MacNaughton & Patrick Hughes (2009) Berkshire: Open University Press. ISBN: ISBN: 978-0335228621 (pp. 208, £19.99, pb.)*

### **Review by Holly Linklater**

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This is a practical book designed to guide inexperienced researchers through the process of action research. As the title suggests, throughout this book the examples of research undertaken are connected with teaching and learning in the early years. However, the focus of the book is as a guide to action research and as such would be relevant to a wider audience than those working in early years education.

Action research is envisaged as a means of creating professional and social changes within educational settings. This guide presents the research process as being comprised of clear phases and steps to support 'students, practitioners, curriculum advisors, policy officers and managers who are just starting action research' (p1). This is a book designed for reference and to be worked with stage-by-stage. Indeed, it is not so much a book to be 'read' but referred to. The book is structured so that the reader is able to find the relevant sections (or parts within sections), depending on what level of research the reader is intending to engage in – from the informal school based, to research that might be part of academic studies. A preliminary skim read might be helpful before starting a research project to 'get a feel' for the process or before writing a proposal or report.

As an introductory text the step-by-step formula would not meet the expectations of academic rigor for research as part of postgraduate study. MacNaughton and Hughes acknowledge this and helpfully at the end of each 'step' they suggest readings and resources for 'going deeper'. The suggested further reading includes resources that can be found in print and online. This makes the book particularly useful for people who may not have easy access to a university library.

The authors have made excellent use of exemplar material such as extracts from the research journals of PhD students and practising teachers (which are not necessarily different groups). These scanned-in scraps of paper and scribbled notes may help some practitioners feel less daunted by the idea of 'doing research' – it is clear that what is all-important is the practitioners' thinking represented in the extracts, not their presentation. The book is careful to establish the authors' principled position that critical thinking is an essential part of teaching as well as research. Concrete guidance is offered with examples of 'thinking boxes' that can be used to develop topics and questions for research.

These 'thinking boxes' are typical of what is meant by 'a step by step guide': this book does not 'tell you what to do', but it does set out what are the issues you will need to engage with, and how you can start to think about them. The clear framework of the book, intended as a guide, is not restrictive, but is a constructive way to get started. For example, the distinctions between research

to change and research to improve may be helpful to clarify thinking for a practitioner new to action research. However, this simplification is an example of where someone working for postgraduate qualification would need to have a much broader grounding in the literature; the relationships between research and practice are rather more complex than suggested. But, within this, relevant to all researchers are the sections on how to form (develop and write) good research questions, and guidance on where to start.

Many of the sections that form the core of the book might be useful to undergraduate students, or researchers in the early stages of a Masters course – particularly those that may be feeling overwhelmed or confused and want to read a simple and clearly organised account of the different perspectives. The section on the 'action research family' makes reference to research in the USA, UK and Australia and provides brief histories to contextualise the development of different approaches to Action Research. The authors acknowledge the links with Teacher Research. The section on ethics is very helpful in terms of breadth of consideration given to the implications of conducting action research in settings where many of the participants are likely to be young children. Again, as the authors are keen to point out, this book is not designed to be sufficient for those working at postgraduate level. However, it might be a comforting place to start (or return to every once in a while).

The section on 'the fourth phase' of data and analysis, and writing up and dissemination is brief. When reading the book in one go, this gives the impression of an imbalance in terms of the 'work' of a research project. However, if using the book as a guide one would by this point have a literature review and research questions, and the analysis and writing will be informed by these. Again this reflects the authors' clear understanding of the audience they are writing for, and an assumption that the writing-up is likely to be relatively informal. Or, if it is not, that the researcher will have been provided with sufficient specification with regard to what is required.

Given the insight to be gleaned from the very experienced authors, MacNaughton and Hughes, this book would benefit a wide readership.

## **Tackling gender inequality: raising pupil achievement**

*Christine Forde (ed.) (2008) Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press. ISBN: 978-1-903765-75-3 (pp.72, £14.50, pb.)*

### **Review by Kevin Stelfox**

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This book provides a useful introduction to thinking about the notions of gender and, in particular, ideas of masculinity and femininity, in relation to pupil achievement. It would be of interest to policy makers at a national or local level



and also teachers as it provides the reader with an alternative perspective with which to challenge current policy and practice.

In the first chapter, 'Gender in an inclusion agenda: boys first, girls first?', Forde briefly sets out the argument for why looking at issues around gender are still important in relation to education today. She starts by reviewing the patterns of gender inequality in respect of attainment. However she quickly points out the danger of just 'considering gender as disconnected from other aspects of pupil's identities' (p.4) There is also a brief discussion on the definitions of 'gender' and notions of masculinity and femininity, with the latter providing another dimension with which to critically view current education policy and practice. This chapter ends by looking at gender in relation to other social factors such as class, culture, ethnicity and sexuality.

In chapter two, 'Responding to concerns: policies and strategies in gender and education', Condie looks at the role of policy in gender equality and education and attempts to locate the issue within the broader social justice and inclusion debate. She draws on evidence from case studies and literature, looking at common themes that have emerged in relation to strategies within the classroom. In chapter three, 'Literacy and gender-contextualisation and development', McPhee explores historical factors that led to different conceptualisations of gender inequality in the school context. He moves on to look at strategies that have been developed for specific areas such as behaviour, literacy and the organisation of learning, before considering implications for policy and practice.

In chapter four, 'Organising boys and girls: are single-gender contexts the way forward?' Kane focuses on classroom management. She reviews literature around single-sex schools in order to locate a rationale for gender-specific groups. Kane identifies two themes from this: girls' participation and boys' negotiations of particular masculinities. She suggests that three classroom organisational strategies have developed in relation to the themes: mixed-gender groups, single-gender groups or classes, and subject-specific single-gender classes. Kane concludes that organising learning in relation to a single-gender context could in certain settings offer something worthwhile for the pupils. However she recognises that without proper planning the real danger was that it would reinforce gender stereotypes (p.52).

In chapter five, 'Self-Concept, self-esteem, identity and gender', Head argues that school is more than a place for academic learning; it provides a place where young people can develop and explore, 'subvert and reinforce hegemonic masculinities and femininities'(p.54). This process is located, influenced and best understood in relation to local communities and culture. In developing this position, five broad initiatives are used to discuss emerging issues. It is established that understanding gender identity is a complex issue and there are many factors that need to be taken into account. The complexity of the issue also needs to be reflected in the response.

In the final chapter, 'Taking gender forward', Condie, Forde and Head draw together the themes from each chapter. They conclude that in order to understand gender there is a need to take into account the complexity of all the factors that come into play when attempting to address this issue, and that 'simplistic solutions are unlikely to be the answer'(p.72).

This book offers a useful introduction to understanding some of the complex issues in relation to gender inequalities in the school context. By raising the multi dimensional aspects of gender inequalities the various authors ask questions and present challenges to policy makers and teachers. The book however, did not address fully the relationship between policy, strategy and practice, and it would have been useful to explore this further. The dynamics of how policy is interpreted and reinterpreted at each level, from Scottish Government down to the individual classroom, is not considered – nor are the implications of that process for moving forward in relation to addressing gender inequalities.