

## BOOK REVIEWS

### RESEARCH UNDONE: THE POSTMODERN EMBRACE

Ian Stronach and Maggie MacLure (Open University Press, 1997), pp. ix + 193, paperback £16.99 and hardback £50.

Reviewed by JOHN HALLIDAY

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Titles linking the topics of education and postmodernism are becoming more common. What is distinctive about this book is its specific concern with research and the inclusion of examples which attempt to address 'the question of how one could engage educational research and postmodernism' (p 2). It builds upon the authors' previously published work in this area and those familiar with this work will find little to surprise them in the book. Nevertheless they may well be pleased to have what the authors see as a series of 'openings' collected together and they may be amused by some of the new writing which includes comments on a poem, transcripts of imaginary interviews between readers and authors, and a cartoon.

Those who are unfamiliar with this work and in particular those who are unsettled by terms such as postmodernism, deconstruction and poststructuralism will struggle to understand the book. Indeed I know of two readers in this category who have found the opening chapters to be impenetrable and the remaining chapters to lead them to the view that 'anything goes' in educational research. They come to this view because the authors are faithful to their postmodernism. They avoid the definition of terms, the tidy formulation of conclusions and neat summaries in favour of a series of invitations to see educational research differently from what has become normal. They want to problematise the very notion of educational research and avoid suggesting that a definitive interpretation of an event or series of events is possible.

The authors use a variety of metaphorical constructions to make room for alternative views of research even though they accept that they will always be at risk of presenting their postmodern reading of any issue as better than alternative readings. They accept too that in any reading 'there will always be appeals to some tacit ground of value, politics or effectivity' (p. 9) and generally they resist making this ground explicit in their own readings. They are more forthcoming in making claims about what is not better research. For example they argue that much of what passes for normal and desirable research can obscure as much as it can reveal and suggest that

At a time when the English educational research community is contemplating setting up a charter to enhance its status by policing its membership, standards and practices... it seems to us that a better strategy for educational research might be to see how far it can get by failing to deliver simple truths. (p. 6)

In this they are not of course advocating failure but suggesting that research ought to be directed beyond succeeding in this narrow circumscribed way. They also argue correctly in my view that postmodernism may signal the end of many features of our present arrangements for schooling, teacher education and curriculum theorising. Their way of putting this argument about policy is provocative and irreverent.

If the young in postmodernity are to have 'flexible bodies' (Martin 1994), better to give them flexible foundations for their self-making than the

superstructural fantasies of 'adaptable skills' schooled into the supposedly stable 'base' of their being. If we really want to go back to the basics, then forget school history, kings and queens, and the ravings of contemporary politicians. Teach kids a subversive anthropology of their rulers' fantasies of tradition and identity. Help them to 'deconstruct' ritual and myth. And if they have to obey, let them at least sometimes obey the Lords of Misrule (p. 84).

When they consider research methodology, however, their writing is highly academic and reflects a painstaking deconstruction of linguistic formations such as binary oppositions, boundary drawing, metaphors of relationship, and indeed their own memorable phrases such as 'policy hysteria' and 'responsible anarchist'. Such deconstruction is interwoven with references to many of the authors who are termed postmodernists or who are believed to have said something important about postmodernism.

I suspect that those who will be most enthused by reading this book are those who already have a good idea of what might be wrong with traditional approaches to epistemology and research but who are not very familiar with the authors' work. The quality of the intellectual effort that has gone into the book will impress them. They will probably share the authors' view that many uncritically accepted features of current policy, theory and practice are precisely those that should be the legitimate concerns of research but their enthusiasm will wane if they look for some clear utopian vision to support this view in the book. That is because the subversive potential of the authors' work is concealed behind purposeful ambiguity and an intention to disappoint and unsettle.

There is no end to deconstructive possibilities and it is far from obvious that through ambiguity, disappointment and intellectual unsettling, better ways of solving real problems will emerge. Some readers may be attracted to Rorty's view that real problems often look much the same despite the intellectual efforts of some postmodernists. They may agree with Rorty that it is preferable to address those problems directly as part of intellectual effort. Of course methodological deliberations do have moral and political implications and in the face of loud and dominant voices calling for clarity, plain speaking, and guidance from researchers to help 'improve' educational practice, it may be most important now to keep critical educational research alive by resisting any singular epistemology. In this respect the book should be and has been widely welcomed. Such resistance does not necessarily lead to relativism. Indeed it may help to avoid relativism but it would be good at some stage to hear more from the authors directly about the political and moral as opposed to the methodological grounds for 'the practices of uncertainty' (p. 5).

## ADULT LEARNING: A READER

Peter Sutherland (editor) (Kogan Page, 1998), pp. xiv + 208, paperback £19.99

Reviewed by TOM STEELE

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Coming at a time when the rhetoric of 'lifelong learning' and widening access has reached a height in the publication of the government's discussion paper the *Learning Age* and the recent Scottish Office contribution *Opportunity Scotland*, this is a welcome volume of essays of research into how adults learn. It will greatly assist those working in the field of access to HE and adult education to counter the trend towards more conservative admissions policies following the capping of university expansion in 1994. The volume is divided into five sections which examine consecutively: cognitive processes, learning and education, adults learning in small group situations, the educational context and the particular context of the mature student in Higher Education. The editor, Peter Sutherland, contributes a sixth section which makes the job of the reviewer much easier by summarising the implications for teaching of the preceding chapters.

Although most of the contributors work in the British context, there are useful contributions from Australia and a very useful piece of theoretical scene-setting from the American critical theorist, Jack Mezirow. Many essays are based on small-scale local research, for example at Keele University and an unnamed post-1992 university, while others, like Richardson's, take the broad overview. With the exception of Richardson's work, however, it is curious just how little overlap there is between authorities referenced. Vast numbers of authors are cited in the index but the frequency of citation is very low, which must demonstrate just how localised is much research and how fragmented the research culture. This may reflect how under-resourced adult education is generally compared with the compulsory sector. By and large the contributions fall into two categories: theoretical and contextual perspectives and psychologically-based small scale research. I found the small scale studies very useful in confirming features commonly understood by those in adult education. These included Boulton-Lewis's coruscation of the myth that the older you are the harder it is to learn. This is nonsense, of course, and, interestingly, she finds, against the grain of other contributors, that mature students can cope just as well with traditional pedagogic methods of teaching as their younger colleagues. A number of other contributors emphasise the value of andragogic, self-activating methods and Schmeck suggests that women students might actually be more comfortable with this than men. Sutherland, himself, argues for the close connection between experiential learning and constructivist approaches, which implies that teachers should adopt a role closer to that of facilitator. Dart, in a piece on metacognitive behaviour, or thinking about thinking, confirms this general tendency by demonstrating that learning is deepest when learners are enabled to relate new material to existing understanding. Here the effective methodologies relied on collaborative learning groups and learning contracts with the teacher as facilitator. Magolda, in the same vein, argued that learning must be connected with life, an injunction that some will remember was embedded in the WEA's founding principles in 1903.

The contextual studies were particularly valuable in dispelling some myths about how adults perform. Richardson shows that adults tend to exhibit more desirable 'deep' approaches to learning than younger students—almost certainly because of their motivation to relate learning experientially—that they are no more deficient in learning skills and that there is no evidence of age-related deficits. Newstead *et*

al. found that there is a significant distinction to be made between 'mature' students at the younger end and those over the age of twenty-five who are more likely not to be simply finding a way around traditional qualifications (highers and A levels). So, intriguingly, students over the age of twenty-five that enter university with non-traditional or access type qualifications, perform better than younger ones with the same type of qualifications.

Finally, Mezirow's contribution was significant in denying that the emancipatory agenda of adult education is dead. In a brief but compelling survey of the countervailing voices in contemporary Western culture, which opposed interpretative and relativist theories to the older rationalist Enlightenment thought, he argues that contemporary resolutions are to be found in the work of Jürgen Habermas and his own 'transformative' theory. Strong claims, no doubt, which will be hotly challenged by post-modernist theorists. But what has adult education been if not a kind of 'communicative action' in which educators have entered into dialogue with ordinary people, in small groups, in which the claims of the academy to a monopoly of knowledge have been challenged by those with greater experience of life and in which, on the other hand, proper scholarly methods are brought to bear on common prejudice and popular superstition? At times this has been a powerfully democratic and emancipatory pursuit which has realised reforming energies and new fields of knowledge. The worse off have long been excluded from higher education. In the new era of 'mass' higher education and 'lifelong learning' (and what some are already calling 'Missed' *Opportunity Scotland*) it is essential they are not fobbed off with a second rate product which does not reflect their aspirations or their abilities. This book provides many good arguments for bucking the trend.

## THE POWER OF BABEL - TEACHING AND LEARNING IN MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

Viv Edwards (Trentham Books in association with the Reading and Language Information Centre, University of Reading, 1998) pp. 90, paperback £11.95.

Reviewed by VALERIE HALLAM

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This is not a text for English as a Second Language teachers and practitioners! This is a book which should be read by all who are involved in teaching. Scotland is increasingly becoming a multicultural and multilingual society, and linguistic diversity is evident in many classrooms. From a global perspective, bilingualism or multilingualism is the norm. In order to prepare pupils for the next century, it is essential that they are educated to take their place in a society which will undoubtedly be characterised by diversity in all its manifestations, especially language. The Foreword to this book is by Jim Cummins, international authority on bilingualism, and this plus the introduction should be prescribed as required reading for all policy-makers and decision-takers in any educational context.

'The Power of Babel' is based on the fusion of two important premises. The first is that the maintenance and development of a child's first language helps and promotes the acquisition of a second language; the second that languages and cultures are sources of benefit and enrichment for all members of the class, and for teachers too. The focus is on linguistic diversity, but the introduction also clearly asserts that

children need to learn English as rapidly and as efficiently as possible if they are to compete on equal terms with their monolingual peers in the classroom.

This book contains many insightful, informed and well-documented discussions about issues which are of concern to all classroom practitioners (Primary and Secondary Sectors). The treatment of these issues and concerns within the book takes the form of a general exposition of their central concepts, followed by particularised examples in school-based case study contexts. Consequently 'The Power of Babel' is a text which will be of interest and value to research-minded classroom teachers, and to active researchers in other educational contexts.

There is an excellent overview of up-to-date and relevant research (including the most recent and exciting findings of Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier [1997]). Additionally, there is an extremely useful section which examines the terminology used to discuss linguistic diversity. The final chapter of the book provides a rich supply of 'Useful Names and Addresses'.

This book developed directly from In-Service courses at the University of Reading designed to help mainstream teachers in the Berkshire and Oxfordshire areas to meet the needs of multilingual pupils. A central feature of the course offered to these practising teachers was an involvement in an action-research project, based in the teachers' own schools and classrooms. All of the ideas developed in the case studies which are reported in this book are based on teachers' efforts to activate existing knowledge in pupils. Teachers share their experiences and illustrate how successfully parents and teachers (and other interested members of the community) can work collaboratively to promote linguistic and cultural diversity. The book is illustrated with convincing examples of pupils' work which exemplify the success of the approaches adopted by the teachers.

Viv Edwards's concise book is thorough, systematic and logical in its exploration and presentation of case studies. The book is divided into nine chapters, and the first six mirror a developmental sequence which deal with, for example: obtaining information; building an accurate picture of diversity; ways of responding to diversity within the curriculum; organisation within the school; and second language teaching issues. There is a central concern with respecting and rejoicing in individual differences, and developing important relationships with the home and the wider community.

All the recommendations made in the book are based on clearly cited examples of good practice and classroom innovativeness (action research) which were inspired by teachers wanting to do better for all pupils in their care. For example, in the section on welcoming new pupils to the school there are sensitive and sensible suggestions which really ought to be considered fully and subsequently implemented as appropriate in all schools. While this text is essentially concerned with issues pertaining to bilingual or multilingual children, the fundamental theoretical underpinning is a child-centred view of educational provision. Unavoidably within the text direct references are made to the National Curriculum in England, but it is precisely its child-centred focus which makes its ideas applicable in Scotland.

I cannot recommend this book too highly. It will provide a thought-provoking and potentially practice-enhancing resource for any teacher. However, if some long overdue changes are to be made, and especially if fallacious views commonly held about children for whom English is not their first language are to be dispelled, then we must allow Viv Edwards the final word on the conditions which must be met: '...senior managers and whole school policy are essential for any meaningful change' (p.78).

## GENDER AND CLASSROOM INTERACTION: A RESEARCH REVIEW

Christine Howe (SCRE, 1997), pp. iv + 56, paperback £7.50.

Reviewed by GERDA SIANN

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As best-sellers like *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venice* attest, the extent to which men and women differ in their psychological attributes and the underlying reasons for such differences are key issues in popular discourse. This contemporary interest in gender issues is reflected as well in the burgeoning lists offered by academic publishers in areas such as gender studies, women's studies and masculinities. Educationalists, who originally led this field, have in recent years contributed somewhat less than their peers in sociology, psychology and cultural studies which is why Christine Howe's succinct and learned monograph on gender and classroom interaction is to be particularly valued.

Professor Howe is concerned with a central question which is whether research supports the proposition that the social interaction of the school perpetuates gender differences in behaviour. That societies, both contemporary and historic, are characterised by gender divisions of varying degrees of rigidity and extent is indisputable; for educationalists the pertinent issue is the extent to which schools contribute to their continuation. In her book, Christine Howe not only asks what can be concluded from existing research but also considers the implications for further research.

In Chapter One she asks how classroom interaction might, in theory, result in discrimination and suggests that such gender differences might impact on three areas—choice of occupational sectors, gender differences in status within occupational sectors and gender differences in the prioritising of domestic versus paid employment. She indicates that her book will suggest that while there are gender differences in classroom interaction that can, in theory, be linked to gender divisions in society, the linkages remain theoretical because very few studies have directly made the link between gender differences in classroom social interaction and employment.

Chapter 2 deals with whole-class interaction. Howe points out that no research in this area has been conducted in Scotland and that, while it has covered the full range of primary schools, in secondary schools it has focused on maths and science. Hence its direct relevance to say social science subjects in contemporary secondary schools in Scotland might be questioned. Nevertheless she concludes that the research suggests that, in general, boys tend to create conditions where their contributions will be sought by teachers and are more likely to push themselves forward when contributions are not explicitly selected.

Chapter 3 deals with desk based group work and Howe notes that the relevant research indicates that girls ask for more help than boys; that both sexes are more likely to ask boys for help; that girls are more likely than boys to answer calls for help; that the gender distribution of groups affects social interaction; and that boys monopolise apparatus. She concludes, however, that research indicates that learning outcomes are not affected by such tendencies.

Chapter 4 focuses on the comparatively heavily researched area of group work around computers. This indicates that boys tend to dominate in computer use in classroom but that this domination does not lead to gender differences in learning outcomes. Nevertheless Howe suggests that this particular gender difference might

be associated with the fact that girls tend to opt out of careers in which computing is directly involved.

In Chapter 5 Howe turns her attention to the sociolinguistic and relatively small scale studies that focus on oral assessment and concludes that while the studies are limited, the findings somewhat inconsistent, and social context has been shown to play a major role, there is some evidence that boys interrupt more and that girls are more likely to use strategies that sustain conversations. She suggests that such gender differences are differentially rewarded/penalised.

In her last chapter Howe notes that '(p)robably the most striking point to emerge from the research is that contributions from boys predominate during classroom interaction'. She then considers whether the gender differences she has documented contribute to gender divisions in employment and suggests that, on balance, social interaction in schools does contribute to gender divisions in some areas, e.g. computing. Finally she concludes that boys are more focal in the classroom than girls; that while girls do not suffer academically, they feel more negatively about the school experience; and that further carefully evaluated research should be carried out in the area.

In general this book provides a careful documentation and cogent analysis of relevant research. What it seems to lack is a consideration of microsocial processes. For example, Professor Howe concludes in her last chapter that because boys are 'more focal within the teaching process', 'girls feel more negatively about the school experience'. I would suggest that this global assertion is not, in general, borne out by my observation of classrooms, or by research in the area (e.g. Siann *et al.*, 1996). In certain social contexts, predominantly in secondary schools and in areas of relative social deprivation, girls appear better disposed to their school experiences than boys.

#### *References*

- Gray, J. (1993) *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venice*. Harper Collins: London.  
Siann, G., Lightbody, P., Stocks, R., and Walsh, D. (1996) Motivation and attribution at secondary schools: the role of ethnic group and gender. *Gender and Education*, 8(3), 261-274.

## EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND

Margaret M Clark and Pamela Munn (editors) (Routledge, 1997), ppxv + 186, paperback £11.99.

Reviewed by MARTYN ROEBUCK

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This volume is welcome for its coverage and size, and for the editors' wish to draw attention to the distinct nature of Scottish education. The broadcasting media and the press, even the Scottish press, still refer to developments in England as UK Government policy. There is a useful "Setting the Scene" which highlights characteristics of Scottish provision, with italicised summaries of English equivalences. However the rest of the chapters are more heterogeneous in nature. Most expect a background of Scottish terminology and events. Some are essentially factual, and predominantly descriptive. Others are analytic and provide, as Lindsay Paterson states, "not just a description... [but] also an attempt to explain".

The volume is timely because of the Government emphasis on education and the new Scottish Parliament. At the same time, after 18 years of Conservative Government, it is too soon to provide a clear picture of the likely or even possible changes under the New Labour regime. This is particularly noticeable in the excellent review of 'The Under-Fives' by Joyce Watt, where in commenting on rapidly changing contexts she describes "what was" and tries to ascertain "what is" happening.

Margaret Clark summarises the developments in Primary Education in Scotland since the 1965 Memorandum giving a comparison of the Scottish procedures and parameters with those which applied in England. The next chapter on the Statutory Years of Secondary Education contrasts as Brian Boyd emphasises political issues ahead of description. He also makes more reference to the role of the authorities in curriculum and structural change, though mainly with reference to Strathclyde. He then highlights a range of key issues which have influenced the recent development and operation of schools. David Raffe follows on with a detailed analysis of changes in Upper Secondary Education since 1984. He weaves in references to the differences across the Border. There is then an insightful discussion of the position of the Scottish reform in relation to others in Europe, and why Scotland might have chosen a unified system. Finally in this mainly school section the complex area of provision, legislation and policy for children with Special Educational Needs is addressed by Alison Closs. She highlights key problems in curriculum provision and support, and issues related to staffing and training at all levels for SEN.

The Teacher Education chapter is largely based upon information from the Registrar of the GTC, and presumably reflects his view of the world. Oddly, in detailing the provision of initial teacher education, it counts the Northern College as two separate institutions, and relegates Stirling University to an 'also ran' category. The source for the content may also be the reason why relatively little reference is made to the main issue in teacher education: the organisation and provision for continuing professional development.

On Standards and Quality, Pamela Munn outlines the range of available national and international data sources. She emphasises the relatively low levels of achievement, pointing out that if the Scottish trends had been noted, the international comparisons would not have come as a surprise. Interestingly, while the chapter begins by saying "there is no OFSTED in Scotland" it does not elaborate. The chapter predates quantitative "target-setting" but usefully ends with examples of non-quantitative Scottish approaches to improving achievement. Next, in dealing with Devolved Management of Schools, Pamela compares Scottish School Boards with Governors. She describes the distinctively different frameworks within which each works, and gives a candid view of the operation of Boards and their relative lack of direct impact.

Lindsay Paterson presents a typically deep analysis of whether there is a Scottishness in education policy and how any Scottish policy-making works, exploring the balance between political and professional input, and the continuing homogeneity of Scottish provision despite pressures for change. The conspiracy theory so favoured by many analysers of policy loses out here to rational pragmatism in the context of a new form of nationalism. Finally, after a relatively superficial swansong from Cameron Harrison on the Scottish Curriculum, Pamela Munn rounds off by trying to see the future, but concentrates largely on current concerns such as pre5's and Higher Still. She notes the book's lack of reference to new technology, but surprisingly not its underplaying the uncertain future role of local Government; or how, in an overall context of declining funds, and a static teaching population, the system is going to pull morale and attainment up by the bootstraps. The last decade has seen a decline in local services, a loss of specialist

expertise in authorities and in teacher education, and inadequate professional development.

The new Parliament will not have all the answers to the issues raised here. However this book will prove very good for electors, members and their advisers, as all strive to retain or regain the quality which should characterise Scottish education.

## RE-SCHOOLING SOCIETY

David Hartley (The Falmer Press 1997), pp.ix + 179, paperback £15.95 and hardback £52.00.

Reviewed by TONY EDWARDS

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A 1995 paper by David Hartley is included in James Tooley's recent 'survey of published education research', commissioned by Ofsted to illustrate (or expose) its character, relevance and quality. The paper, on 'the McDonaldisation of higher education', is cited as yet another example of partisanship in 'non-empirical research'. Hartley's book is also non-empirical, in not being based on new evidence. But although it expresses deep anxiety about the increasing uncertainties surrounding the educational task, it is certainly not partisan as Tooley defines that fault - namely, as a refusal to consider alternative interpretations of 'the facts'. It is remarkably wide-ranging in its speculations. It is also notably ambitious in the territory it explores.

What is less clear is its likely readership. The book begins from the daunting possibility that 'the so-called civilised world has reached the limits of civility and of social (not scientific) progress' (p.2). What follows in the opening three chapters is partly an account of post-modern conditions and (much more briefly) of what they have replaced, and partly a review of post-modernist perspectives on far-reaching economic, social and cultural changes. The text therefore switches between statements about what is happening, with due regard for the extreme difficulty of knowing (even tentatively and provisionally), and commentaries on what leading theorists have written about it. Given that we at least know that the transformations are highly complex, and that some prominent interpreters are not known for their comprehensibility (for example, Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Habermas), Hartley's own writing is commendably and consistently lucid. Nor does he commit one of the more venal sins attributed by Tooley to many publications he reviewed, an 'adulation of great thinkers' whose names are then used either to 'authorise' an explanation poorly grounded in evidence or to add an unmerited gloss to a banal argument. David Hartley engages with his sources, and their ideas are incorporated fluently within his own developing analysis. But in the nature of things, many of the theories defy rapid precis. Those already familiar with the originals may be intrigued, sometimes provoked. Readers who are not may well finish the three chapters by concluding only that it is all very difficult, despite the frequent invitations or instructions from the author to— 'reconsider... recall... consider this further' and so on.

Having sketched the very different 'worlds' for which the next generation is being schooled, Hartley then explores the impact of these fundamental changes on curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and management. Recognising the artificiality of dividing those topics into four separate chapters, he nevertheless manages lively and

certainly unconventional accounts of each. There is a tension between his examples of changes in progress which are sometimes quite detailed, and the temptation to draw general conclusions about developments which (at least at close quarters) appear to take different guises in different countries. The loss of 'grand narratives' has been so prominent a theme in post-modernist writing that there is a certain irony in portraying or implying common responses to apparently unavoidable global challenges.

In the curriculum chapter, an excellent point is made and well illustrated about the replacement of the right to equality by the right to difference, so that the politics of the curriculum becomes increasingly centred on cultural identity, the body and the environment. Yet alongside consumerist promotion of diversity and individual choice, Hartley notes the revival of the 'cult of efficiency' in assessment and management (and, more recently, in calls for a science of teaching). With eyes fixed mainly on England and on some significant Scottish variations on the same themes, he describes the growing insistence on measuring and comparing the performance of students and institutions, and how local management of schools has transferred rather than reduced bureaucracy. This reader at least greatly enjoyed his caustic account of the rising 'qualitariat' and the now pervasive language of TQM.

In the pedagogy chapter, Hartley traces the transformation of the discourse of child-centredness into the discourse of a learner-centredness supposedly fit for the purposes of a truly modern labour market. Starting from the (1992) Macfarlane Report in Scotland, he also offers an extended analysis of the impact (actual and potential) of computer-based learning on the inter-relationships of teacher, student and 'knowledge'. He argues persuasively against the continuing habit of merely adapting old methods to new technology rather than re-thinking the educational enterprise. His final chapter is headed with a question mark - 'education transformed'. State education, he suggests, 'is a monument to modernity' (p.155). Readers perplexed about what might happen to the monument in post-modern conditions should not expect a convenient prospectus; they are more likely to find their uncertainties reinforced.