

BOOK REVIEWS

POLICY RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Jenny Ozga (Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 2000) ISBN 0-335-20295-0 (pp. xiii + 146, £14 Paperback)

WALTER HUMES

The nature and function of educational research has, in recent years, been subject to much critical scrutiny. Successive issues of *Research Intelligence*, the newsletter of the British Educational Research Association, have contained accounts of (and rejoinders to) various analyses of the state of educational research. The most influential of these have been David Hargreaves' 1996 lecture to the Teacher Training Agency, the Ofsted-commissioned Tooley Report of 1998, and the Department for Education and Employment-commissioned Hillage Report, also of 1998. All of these contributions were highly critical of the quality of much research in education: Hargreaves said that it seldom made a serious contribution to fundamental theory or knowledge; Tooley developed criteria for the assessment of a sample of research publications and concluded that many lacked a clear focus, were partisan and methodologically weak; Hillage commented adversely on the impact of research on policy and practice, and the failure of researchers to communicate their findings to non-academic audiences.

In Scotland a recent Minister for Education (Sam Galbraith) joined the attack, comparing educational research unfavourably with research in medicine, and suggesting that value judgements too often crept into reports, thereby weakening their 'scientific' basis. Similarly, the Chief Inspector of Schools in Scotland (Douglas Osler) has expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of much educational research and has claimed that the inspectorate has a greater body of information at its disposal than any number of research projects could collect. With such views being held by powerful individuals within the Scottish Executive Education Department, the decision to phase out government funding for the Scottish Council for Research in Education was hardly surprising.

It is against this background that Jenny Ozga's book on *Policy Research in Educational Settings* is particularly significant. Her aim is 'to contribute to an argument in favour of the informed, independent contestation of policy by a research community of teachers and academics who have together developed capacities that allow them to speak with authority against misguided, mistaken and unjust education policy' (p.1). She suggests that the critiques of Hargreaves, Tooley and Hillage are best understood as 'part of an overarching project to reform the education profession' (p.36). This project, if successful, would lead to a severe restriction of what counts as worthwhile research and would be 'a significant blow to the development of engaged, informed professionals' (p.36).

Ozga mounts a direct challenge to what is becoming the new orthodoxy – the idea of evidence-informed policy and practice. This posits a model teacher whose thinking and actions are to be shaped by a version of educational research that is narrowly utilitarian and exclusively directed towards improving performance. She argues that research **into** policy should not be reduced to research **for** policy. Whereas the former allows for independent critical analysis of the policy-making process, the latter limits research to that which appears to be directly relevant to the current policy agenda.

A particular strength of Ozga's analysis is the subtle account she offers of the complexity of educational policy-making. Drawing on the work of Stephen Ball, Roger Dale and others, she shows the inadequacy of simple, linear, 'rational' models of how educational policies originate, progress and evolve. She argues that 'a historically grounded approach to education policy research' (p.113) highlights the need to understand the political, social and economic contexts of educational reforms, an approach that serves to reveal the ideological character of many policy initiatives. This, in turn, exposes the inadequacies of positivist accounts of educational research and lends support to her view that the field must be regarded as 'contested terrain' (a phrase that she uses as the sub-title for the book as a whole). Instead of a comfortable consensus between policy-makers and academics, she suggests that what is needed is a research community of practitioners and researchers who are prepared to question, challenge and develop an alternative discourse.

At a practical level the book offers useful advice (in a chapter entitled 'Resources for policy research') on research methods and the kinds of topics that are worth investigating. Here she touches on a variety of themes – globalisation, patterns of governance, social inclusion and exclusion, the feminisation of educational management – and shows how policy texts need to be deconstructed at different levels of analysis.

Policy Research in Educational Settings provides a useful and timely counterweight to the trend towards 'highly controlled research practices, where topics, problems and resources [are] established and regulated by policy makers, and spaces for independent research are diminished' (p.129). Its eloquent defence of critical theory also serves as a powerful indictment of those academics who have been only too willing to collude in their own intellectual containment.

CONTESTING CHILDHOOD

Lyness, M. G. (London: Falmer, 2000). ISBN 0750 70823 9 (153 pages; £15.99; paperback).

DONALD CHRISTIE

Contesting Childhood is a timely and valuable publication which contributes effectively to current debates by clarifying some important issues and posing challenging questions about competing conceptions of childhood. Written from primarily a sociological perspective, the book exemplifies the eclecticism of the developing field of "Childhood Studies" by drawing also from several other relevant disciplines, including developmental, educational and forensic psychology as well as ethics, jurisprudence and social policy. Michael Lyness asks his readers to consider whether children should be seen as members of a minority group and whether childhood itself will compete with older stratifying systems such as gender and social class as a framework for sociological analysis. The book challenges the prevalent notion that there is a current crisis of childhood and argues that what we are seeing should be viewed more positively as reconstruction.

The concept of childhood has traditionally been defined simply in terms of perceived separateness between children and adults and their relative inferiority. Rather than talking about childhood as a concept, Lyness prefers to discuss socially constructed *conceptions* of childhood, locating our understandings of childhood in a social, political and cultural context. His book attempts to make sense of the different understandings of the position of children in society which are to be found in contemporary social policy, in relevant legal contexts and in several professional initiatives in education and child care. Lyness is critical of many of these initiatives, but reaches positive conclusions about children's potential to become active social agents, for example, by exercising genuine responsibility in school communities.

The opening chapter explores the moral ambiguity associated with current social policy, particularly in relation to the Children Act (1989) and the rights and responsibilities of parents and families. In the view of Lyness, parents and children face conflicting demands and economic pressures. In the new policy framework, parents are seen as having responsibilities towards children rather than rights over them while the interests of the child are paramount, but who decides what is in the child's best interests? In many spheres the parent still speaks on behalf of the child and it is parental choice and discretion rather than those of the child which are applied. The recent concessions made by the Scottish Executive in order to ease the repeal of Section 28 are an illustration which comes to mind of the power retained by parents, in this case to be consulted on the content of a school's sex education programme.

The contested nature of childhood is also explored in a thought-provoking chapter dealing with child sexual abuse. Lyness analyses the conflict between, on the one hand, attempts to shield and protect children and, on the other, strategies to involve children as competent social agents in challenging and preventing abuse. The chapter also provides a useful summary of research into the competence and reliability of children as witnesses whom the legal system increasingly seeks to involve in the process of identification and conviction of abusers. The dilemma here is that exposing children to legal proceedings conflicts with the desire to shield and protect them from unnecessary unpleasantness.

In Chapter 4 on *Children, Agency and Education Reform*, Lyness highlights the failure of the legislative framework created in the name of educational reform in the

1980s and 1990s to provide for children's participation rights. He argues that the expansion of parental influence through their closer involvement in the governance of schools and through consumerist initiatives such as the Parents' Charter, has been accompanied in an inverse relationship by a decrease in the influence of children on their schools. Lyness' analysis may be seen as flawed by Scottish readers, since it does not acknowledge the distinctively different legislative structure and, some might argue, the less prescriptive framework for the curriculum and organisation of Scottish schools. The most significant piece of recent educational legislation, The Standards in Scottish Schools, etc. Act, passed by the Scottish Parliament in July 2000, could in part have been written to answer Lyness' criticism about the lack of pupil participation in schools. The Act establishes a clear obligation on local authorities to take into account pupils' views about their schools and a requirement that individual schools must show in their development plans how they will consult children on decisions taken regarding the day-to-day running of the school. However, Lyness can hardly be criticised for not mentioning this particular piece of legislation, which was passed after the book was published! Nevertheless, the ethnocentrism and overall lack of a comparative perspective from the book is a weakness, especially since there are so many potentially illuminating examples of quite different approaches to the issue of children's rights in education to be found in other European countries, not to mention north of the border.

Contesting Childhood is a text which should be of interest to all those whom Lyness refers to as "child workers", namely, all those professionals who work within the fields of education and child care. It may shake the misplaced complacency inherent in much of the discourse surrounding children's rights, by encouraging deeper analysis of the tension between children's rights to protection and provision of services, on the one hand, and their rights to participation and self-determination on the other. I would confidently recommend it as a valuable stimulus for academic and professional reflection and a welcome addition to the literature supporting scholarship in the field of Childhood Studies.