

A JOURNALIST'S VIEW OF BERA97 AT YORK

George Low, Editor of *Education Journal*

(reproduced by kind permission of the publisher, Dmitri Coryton, and George Low from *Education Journal* 16 October 1997)

Empty chairs

Professors of education are an endangered species, the President of BERA, Professor Margaret Brown, told the annual meeting in York last month. Even at the most prestigious universities chairs were being left unfilled because of a shortage of qualified candidates applying and other university posts were not being filled when their present incumbents retired.

Prof. Brown, who is a leading researcher into mathematical education at King's College, London University, said the shortage of knowledge and expertise was not confined to the professor level but ran right through the educational research profession in universities. 'Those lecturers already employed in university posts find it difficult to gather the necessary qualifications and experience and young researchers find it difficult to plan or sustain a career. There are few easy routes to starting a career in educational research these days'.

She complained that overall spending on educational research was around 0.17% of the total budget, much less than the average of 3% in industry, much lower than our industrial competitors and minute compared with the 10 to 20% spent on defence research. She blamed HM chief inspector Mr Chris Woodhead for fuelling the view that educational research was so poor it was better to cut back spending. She said he was partly to blame for the crisis in teacher recruitment by denigrating the teachers and accused

him of now turning his fire on the educational researchers.

She promised the research world would mount a careful defence during his review. It was not true, she said, that they spent most of their time looking at race and class and not enough on classroom practice. If teaching was to be a research-based profession then more had to be spent on high quality research and on disseminating the results to the practitioners.

There were special problems in recruiting educational researchers, she said, particularly in curriculum areas such as mathematics and a teaching qualification. The number of teachers completing higher degrees had decreased with the cutback in LEA support arrangements and part-time release and cover and because of the tremendous in-school pressures caused by the national curriculum and its assessment arrangements, Ofsted and league tables. The new professional qualifications proposed by the TTA might well be taken at the expense of academic study.

Researchers began later in education than in other departments, most of them having completed eight years of study, including at least one three-year research project. 'If they are going to contribute to research at the same level as other academics they are going to need a great deal of time to catch up with scholarship, research skills and experience', she said. This might well mean that universities would cut back in the

education area and take better qualified research students elsewhere.

There was a tendency too for Government quangos to commission short-term focused research on tight timescales to the detriment of longer term, large scale national assessment and curriculum projects, thus driving many contract researchers into safer and securer posts, often outside research altogether. 'There comes a limit to the amount of insecurity people can tolerate', she said. 'We must all take responsibility for raising the profile of educational research and ensuring that it is seen not as a trivial pursuit, but as delivering high quality products, which, while not necessarily offering quick fixes, are generally useful to policy makers and others within the education system. In the long term this is the most powerful way of reducing the threats to our future'.

Pre-school

Future development of pre-school education should put security as a high priority, according to a research report from Caroline Sharp, senior research officer of the NFER. In a study based on a survey in six LEAs, a questionnaire to 953 parents, and visits and interviews with providers, she found that parents' concern over their children's happiness and safety rather than access or opening hours were the deciding factors in their choice of school or play group. There was a high degree of frustration over the choice available to them, particularly to working

parents, but there was more criticism than praise for the voucher scheme.

Parents' responses revealed a high level of anxiety about security: doors that were not always locked and play areas not sufficiently protected. Some wanted security locks, alarm and buzzer systems and security cameras fitted and better enforcement of security systems by staff. But visits to the most popular centres showed that parents were just as concerned with good staff-child relationships, guidance on good behaviour and opportunities to learn basic skills. They had different views on the desirability of children having the freedom to choose their own activities.

Although parents preferred a pre-school that was part of an infant or primary school because of the disruption of transferring from pre-school to school, they had anxieties about poor adult-child ratios, particularly in reception classes, insufficient teaching of the 3Rs and inadequate information for parents. Parents of children in play groups were the most likely to help with activities and those in private nurseries and school reception classes the least likely to get involved. It was usually the mothers who found out about the options and visited pre-schools.

Caroline Sharp found little enthusiasm for the previous Government's voucher scheme. 'Although they told us they wanted to see an expansion in pre-school choices, they did not feel the voucher scheme would bring about the hoped-for expansion. In fact they were concerned it would mean a reduction in choice with more four-year-olds being taken into reception classes and playgroups threatened with closure. Many objected to the voucher scheme's subsidy of private nursery fees. On the whole they were very satisfied with what the pre-schools provided but over a quarter

thought that some things could be improved'.

In Scotland, during the pilot year of the voucher scheme in 1996, there was a mixed reaction from parents: they were pleased by the guarantee of a free place regardless of income. But some parents were paying top-up fees in the private sector and having to pay for extras such as snacks, toys and registration fees in all sectors. There was an apparent increase in their reluctance as parents to become involved in playgroup activities and a decrease in their readiness to engage in fund-raising.

The advent of the voucher appeared to have increased the amount of time children spent in nursery or playgroup but not necessarily the percentage of children attending some kind of pre-school. Procedures for reimbursing the providers should be substantially speeded up and made more efficient. The authors of the Scottish study were Christine Stephen, Lesley Low, Sally Brown, Peter Cope, Brian Morris and Steve Waterhouse.

Primary

Children born in the summer are likely to be outperformed by classmates born at other times of the year when it comes to taking tests during the early primary period - according to Caroline Sharp and Dougal Hutchinson of the NFER, who studied the performance of 3000 children from 114 LEAs across England and Wales in the KS1 Maths and English.

They found that the oldest children performed significantly better than their younger classmates and that the poor performance of the summer-borns could have important consequences for their self-esteem unless an age correction factor is built in. Based on the study, the optimum school entry policy would be either termly or biannual entry

(September and January) with pupils entering in the term in which they had their fifth birthday. 'If decisions such as future allocation to sets or streams are made on the basis of the KS1 assessments then age-related differences could have even longer-lasting consequences for the children concerned', they warn.

In another study by Caroline Gipps and Pat Tunstall of the London University Institute of Education, London University, children of six and seven were found to have a clear idea of success or failure in school subjects such as maths, reading, painting and getting on with work. They found that putting effort into their work was the way to succeed and specific competence came second. They could distinguish effort from ability and linked effort with asking questions and paying attention.

A key finding was the role of the teacher in providing feedback to pupils. 'Teacher influence on the children came through heavily. Approval and disapproval for their efforts emerged as something very important to these children and kept them on task. However children who try harder and fail regularly in a competitive environment are likely to cease trying and will lower their goals in order to protect their self-esteem,' Professor Gipps says.

In a study of background factors and pupil attainment in Scottish schools, a joint study between the London University Institute of Education and Strathclyde University found a high correlation in eight year old performance in reading but less so in mathematics. In all, around 5% of total variance in reading measures remained attributable to school, but somewhat more in mathematics. The systematic differences in maths achievement increase over time - a finding which is in line with that in London primary schools. The

researchers believe the findings have important implications for the Government's national literacy drive.

Parents

This is a small scale in-depth study of Japanese and English parents' views of teachers. Based on the experience of parents who have known both systems, the report by Fukuyo Tomita at the Institute of Education, London University, shows some surprising differences. Japanese parents have high expectations of their teachers as partners in their children's academic and personal development but do not expect the teachers to bear the sole responsibility. British teachers have more pride in their status as teachers, perhaps because of the Japanese parents' over expectations and dissatisfactions with their teachers. The Japanese parents expect their teachers to share and impose the same values as they do. The expectations of the two sets of parents show clearly a distinction between the collective emphasis in Japanese teaching and the individual emphasis in Britain.

Governors

Governors now feel more accountable to parents than to their LEA, according to a study by Catherine Farrell and Jennifer Law of the University of Glamorgan Business School. The research, carried out amongst 27 governors in five primary and secondary schools in one valleys' authority in South Wales, shows governors have higher regard for the views of parents and the local community than either the LEA or school inspectors. However, they felt responsible for the performance of the school as outlined in an inspection report. Few of them felt their role was to hold the head teacher to account; their main function was a mixture of advice and support. The annual parents' meeting and annual report were seen as important but governors were

resigned to a general lack of interest. The report suggests ways in which accountability to the LEA can be improved, notably through greater involvement in the LEA machinery.

Competitive pressures between schools in the marketplace have led to a 'privileging of the academic' - as opposed to the personal, social and pastoral aspect of schooling, according to a study by Professor Ron Glatter and Philip Woods at the Open University and Carl Bagley of Staffordshire University. This has meant a trend of traditionalism - concern with exam performance, homework, setting/banding, school uniform. From this has stemmed a disposition towards authoritarian styles of teaching, management, discipline and relationships with parents.

But this paper suggests that this trend towards the traditional has been uneven and there are 'modernist' trends as well - an emphasis on computer facilities and more vocational qualifications. This the authors describe as a 'reworking of traditionalism' to progressive approaches to discipline or uniform. This involved social targeting of primary schools to improve the intake in terms of middle class and more able pupils. The paper argues for more democratically accountable arrangements that can monitor the working of the marketplace and the contextual factors that shape its character and influence parental choices and views. Specific central and local government strategies to inhibit inequalities are needed, the authors argue.

Teachers

Faced with the crisis in recruiting teachers in secondary schools and the policy steer towards mature entrants to the profession, it is vital to know more about how these policies operate in practice and the response of schools to the new kind of recruit. This Joan Whitehead and

Sylvia Morgan of UWE, Bristol and Lynne Preece of the OU (South West) have tried to do in a study which looks at students taking the part-time distance learning diploma (PDLC) and how they fared in the market place. Many had to endure severe workload problems during their first terms as a newly qualified teacher and support was not maintained in a systematic way. There is now a growing regionalisation of the labour market for teachers and a casualisation of the teaching profession, the authors find. They suggest offering a relocation allowance for NQTS to enable them to go to areas of shortage.

'What is apparent is the high level of commitment and the determination of these mature students', they point out, but the policy of diversifying entry routes to the teaching profession should be researched further to ensure it is successfully implemented.

What makes an effective mentoring school? This question is explored in a case study by Phil Hyman of Dallam School, Anne Roberts of Accrington Moorhead High School and Philip Wood of Camforth High School with Cliff O'Neill, Helen Channon-Shirt and David Brunton at the University College of St. Martin. It focuses on three schools which have received good evaluations of their work with trainee teachers. It sets out to establish a quality framework leading to an award which would limit the quality variations in mentoring between and within schools. Their hope is that this will go beyond a simple audit of mentoring and become a continual improvement model based on a TQM philosophy.

The concept of an expert teacher by the Teacher Training Agency is now the subject of several doctoral theses - among them that of Dr Rosie Turner

Blisset of the University of Hertfordshire. In it she argues that the current government model of knowledge requirements for expert teachers is inadequate and requires a more comprehensive conceptual framework. Without a strong image of self as a teacher, the novice is doomed to flounder, she insists, and this implies a firm set of beliefs and values. This should be accompanied by a similar model of learning. 'The danger of focusing only on teaching skills and competencies is that it ignores the complex reasoning, thinking and synthesis which underpins the best teaching', she says.

Computers

Children's ability to learn technology is often impaired by their gender and social class, according to Dr Elaine Millard of Sheffield University's Division of Education, who studied differences in attitudes towards information technology in five secondary schools. She found that far more boys had confidence in their computer literacy (40%) than girls (just 8%) and that 71% of boys spent some or a lot of their time in front of computer screens compared with 58% of girls.

The differences begin at home - with nearly twice as many boys as girls having access to a computer in their bedroom. Six times as many pupils in the more affluent areas have access to PCs compared to those in inner city schools - with five times as many using them specifically for homework.

Secondary schools have to think again about how they use computers in lessons. Children should be given more authentic learning tasks using computers. By linking their use to meaningful projects technology will become more inviting, especially for girls and those pupils who feel threatened because of their unfamiliarity with the new

technology. Schools have to try to counteract the prevailing cultural and social climate which has made effective home computing much more accessible to some groups of pupils than others. 'This is very far short of the democratic ideal', she says.

Music

The traditional school orchestra was challenged as a way of learning musical instruments by Mr Peter Cope of the University of Stirling's Department of Education, who asked: 'Why should a social activity such as the production of music by young children be surrounded with such formality?'

He argued that music lessons should become less elitist and more in tune with reality. 'Learning instruments should be like learning to play football. It is a social activity that should be accessible to amateurs from an early age. He cited fiddle groups, folk clubs, pipe bands and reel societies, as Scottish examples of how children of all ages and parents could join in lessons.

Such methods of teaching would improve motivation by emphasising real tunes rather than skills and bring a halt to drop-out rates and enhance proficiency, he said. If schools did not take these steps then music could be dropped from the school curriculum as a minority activity in times of cutbacks, he warned. 'If instrument teaching really struck a chord with local culture, the dismantling of it would be regarded as unthinkable.'

Listening to music can improve children's behaviour and improve their maths as well, two researchers from the London University Institute of Education have found. Dr Susan Hallam and John Price have found that background music can have a calming effect on disruptive and hyperactive children. Music which pupils rated as 'relaxing' could have

a beneficial effect on their concentration on maths problems.

School Improvement

This is now a growth industry at BERA. Two papers looked at the role of the LEA in supporting schools, which is now on the agenda of both Ofsted and the Government White Paper. Geoffrey Southworth and Judy Sebba of Cambridge University School of Education, who carried out a project with Essex primary schools for the LEA, set out their ways of working with schools and linking external support to internal development, which they call 'a judicious blend of support and challenge'. At the heart of the process is the building of the school's own capacity for self-improvement. They conclude that not only school staff but also LEA officers and advisers may be in need of training - in target setting, benchmarking and interpreting data, for example.

Another view of the external researcher is provided by John Beresford, the research officer involved in school improvement projects in Cambridge, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. Writing with Gene Payne, a teacher at Sharnbrook Upper School in Bedfordshire, he describes the conditions necessary for beginning the process of self-improvement. This requires all school staff, not just the head, to take on new leadership roles in initiating change. Part of the process is developing teachers as researchers themselves. But this is a slow task, frequently ambushed by time and resource constraints, Beresford notes. Gene Payne describes how he used classroom seating arrangements as the focus for improvement in the Humanities department: this involved seeking students' views on their personal preferences.

MEDIAWATCH: BERA97 at York

Michael Bassey (using the report written for BERA by Justin Shaw of Communications Management)

'Teachers find Mozart soothes the savage breast' was the headline for a BERA conference research report on work by Susan Hallam and John Price, and by Anne Savan in *The Times* (6 September). *The Independent* (10 September) gave credit to a different composer: 'How Bach helps children to score in mathematics' and *The Guardian* (9 September) headline was more clever, if less evocative: 'Music makes maths add up'. Hallam's work attracted ten media reports associated with the conference: totalling 215 column centimetres and 7 radio interviews.

In 1994 the national and educational press coverage of the complete Annual Conference at Oxford amounted to less than that at 210 column centimetres. It involved 1 report in a national newspaper (*The Independent*), 2 in *The Times Educational Supplement*, and 1 in *Education*. In 1995 (Bath) nobody measured it. In 1996 (Lancaster) BERA employed Justin Shaw of Communications Management to run the press office and our media coverage jumped to 778 column centimetres.

This year Justin has lifted it to an all-time high of 1683 column centimetres. There were 16 articles in the national press (compared to 6 in 1996): 6 in *The Independent*, 2 in *The Guardian*, 3 in the *Sunday Times*, and 1 in each of *The Times*, *Daily Mail*, *Sunday Express*, *Daily Telegraph*, and *Financial Times*. In the education press there were 38 articles (20 in 1996) including 30 in the *TES*, 2 in *THES*, 3 in *Educational Journal*, 2 in *Nursery World* and 1 in *FE Now*. In addition there were 15 broadcast interviews. In total 69 people contributing to the conference got press mentions.

Inevitably some of the headlines (devised by sub-editors trying to sell newspapers, not by correspondents who try to report accurately) were

more spicy than academics would use themselves. Would *BERJ* consider titles like: 'Fashion-crazy girls missing out on computers', 'Course cut-throats and spies', and 'Boys are less green than girls'?

There was, as always, interest in doom and gloom. So we had news headings like 'Summer children disadvantaged at school', 'Verbal abuse spirals in the classroom', 'Reading levels of primary children worsen', 'Scramble to change rooms calls time on discipline', 'Empty chairs top teacher trainers' shaky pyramid' and 'School governors "have too much power"'. But more positive were the national headings 'Success for Scottish special needs' and 'Welsh counts when it comes to maths'.

The current offensive against the educational research community began before the conference with 'Woodhead in purge of PC school research' in the *Sunday Times* (31 Aug) and 'Most research is "waste of time"' (Smithers) in a *Times Educational Supplement* report (12 September) of a meeting of the previous week. This issue also carried a report headed 'Bias fears as right-winger heads inquiry' while on the same day *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* had a headline: 'Research inquiry sparks row'. *The Independent* on 16 October asked 'Paranoid? Or are they really out to get you?' This is likely to be a long debate, for the present let's leave it with the full headline to an article by Nigel Blake and Richard Smith in *The Times Educational Supplement* of 10 October: 'Beware a totalising society: empirical and theoretical research both have their place in forming policy and practice'.

And which national newspaper carried only one article and with this heading: 'Finance lessons for young urged'? *The Financial Times* of course.