Reflecting on the 1990 Conference

(Scanned from RI 37 pages 10 – 14)

From Behind the Scenes

Organising the BERA Annual Conference is somewhat like having a large party round at the house — so much time is spent making sure everyone has food, drink, music, and conversation you do not have too much time to enjoy it yourself. You live with the worry that people will grumble, leave early, disturb the neighbours, loath your decor or stub cigarettes into the carpet.

This year, though, the party was fine. As we packed the last stray papers, re-arranged the furniture and pulled stubborn blue-tac remains off the plaster, the organising group felt real satisfaction through the tired relief. We had sought a particular 'conference spirit' and feel pleased that we got there — helped by the wholesale energies of BERA stalwarts, the weather, and despite the irritation of having to deal with 'friends of friends' who insisted on trying to gate-crash.

The group: Di Bentley, Leonie Burton, Gwyn Edwards, Pam Lomax, Janet Powney, Mike Watts, Gaby Weiner were assisted by others as time permitted (John Gilbert, Caroline Gipps, Barry Jones) and relied heavily on the good graces and willing patience of the Froebel College staff. Good luck to Mike Bassey and the group at Nottingham next year. Anyone want to buy (or raffle) a BERA 1990 T-shirt?

Mike Watts

Roehampton Institute

ROEHAMPTON 1990

It was the year of the T-shirt. Jade green, they were, emblazoned with "BERA 1990" and "Educational research for all", implying perhaps that anyone can do it? Even the Extra-large size proved to be a teensy bit stretched around the buttocks explaining why John Elliott and John Gray wore theirs under their shirts? Fitter BERA members like Michael Bassey and David Hustler sported theirs openly, but it was worn with most glamour by Brian Simon as he delivered the Stenhouse Lecture.

T-shirts being the global symbol they are, practical, sex-less and cheap, it seems appropriate that we should have one. Putting the date on it might have been a mistake: no hope of selling any left-overs next year in Nottingham. Watch this space for news of the remaindered sale, they would make an ideal extra for Santa's stockings. Maybe there is an Action Research school somewhere, wishing to advertise the fact by putting all its sports teams in jade green BERA strip?

All those who bought a 1990 can be relived on to buy the even more tasteful 1991 with its palindromic date, but what then? No chance of wearing 'em both at once like bragging Butlin's badges. Wearing them on consecutive days will be possible until 1993, but in 1994 members will have five for a four-day conference. The 1990 will not have worn out by then, because it will only have been worn and washed four times. The motto was printed without references. We are a learned society and this was a mistake at the printers. There is a competition for a motto for next

year. Make sure you include a full reference with your suggestion. The first prize is a 1990 BERA T-shirt.

Roehampton 1990 was the year of the mulberry tree. Right outside the refectory, beautiful umbrella with vine-like leaves. Despite the "do not pick the fruit and flowers" instruction in the conference notes, many members' route to breakfast took them on the detour under the tree, disturbing the gobbling squirrels. These members were recognisable by their pink lips and fingers and the odd purple stains down the front of their T-shirts. Plant a five-year old tree to be sure of a crop in 1995.

Roehampton 1990 was the year of relaxed amity amongst the organising committee. Delightful in jade-green they personned the enquiry desk, fine tuned the seminar programme and showed no signs of inter-personal strife.

Roehampton 1990. A vintage year. You read about it, thanks to Janet Powney, in a double page spread in the Times Educational Supplement. They missed some headlines:

- *"Pam Lomax brags about her age to Brian Simon."*
- *"Caroline Gipps is short with Desmond Nuttall."*
- *"Sally Brown sums up."*
- *"Clem Adelman churns out the Classics."*

but you remember if you were there. The sun shone all the time.

Violet

Education from an Italian **'visitor'**

Education in the UK is in the middle of a revolution. And, in this revolution, what will be the role of the research community in the management of change?

In the theatre of the BERA conference I have been offered the opportunity to see a few scenes of the play. It was interesting to observe the interactions among the players in the scenes: academics, teachers, school administrators, each with their different perspectives and their different questions for which they wanted answers. The picture seems one of almost frenetic activity: factual evidence being collected, analysed, interpreted, and used to improve education in a process which must impinge on bettering teachers' qualifications and development.

The curriculum becoming national is not something so impressive to me since, in Italy, this has always been the case, as far as I know. What does impress me in the UK is the movement produced as a reaction to the change. In Italy we do have very important changes taking place but not the partnership among so many different members of the education community growing from those changes. It might be a cheap explanation for our lack of partnership to say that Italy is a country of individualists and that changes are more likely to be tackled individually by people or by separate institutions. But I prefer other reasons: educational research at home receives little support and this could be a major reason for the non-existence of a 'BERA' equivalent in Italy.

'Education needs research'. I already know that, but I now have much more evidence and useful arguments to support such a statement — I feel I've got more interesting ideas here than at many

other international conferences, even ones more specific on my subject (i.e. science education). I would say thanks to BERA for this.

And I would also say that as an outsider dropping in on quite a British microcosm of debate did not prevent me really enjoying the conference. Outstanding speeches, even more valuable discussions, a lovely surrounding with beautiful secolar trees and squirrels running on their branches, gentle old buildings with terraces and secalades and a lake. And above all so many nice, interesting, friendly people, a night for dancing, for listening to good jazz played by BERA members and friends, for sight-seeing in London. I've loved it. I hope you'll invite me again.

Luisa Viglietta

IRRSAE Piemonte, Torino, Italia

A Reflection on the BERA 16th Annual Conference

As a representative froam the Hong Kong Educational Research Association, I am very grateful for your invitiation to participate in the conference. I felt that I contributed a little to it but I gained a lot from it. During the 4-day sessions, I had a good opportunity to be exposted to the research areas of national curriculum, researcher-teacher cooperative research, and learning of science. Most of the papers were well-written and briefly presented. Thoughtful and critical comments were given after the speaker and audience from the exchange of views on the common issue or problem no matter how different their views are. A good researcher should be able not only to produce a fine report but also to listen to different arguments and to accommodate those ideas which are of theoretical, methodological or implementational values to him or her. As expected, I met some new friends at the conference and exchanged views on diversified topics with them. I highly valued my above experience. However, as a complete stranger in Landon and at the Roehampton Institute, I got lost several times when I came to register for the conference and tried to find my way to the residence assigned to me. I suggest that the organizing body of future conferences gives more direction and assistance to those scholars who come from other countries the first time.

Dr. Lamfat Lo, Chairman, Hong Kong Education Res. Association

September 13, 1990

The BERA Annual Conference

The Conference was a great success.

Congratulations. I learnt quite a lot. I used to be working in an institute devoted to language teacher education in Hong Kong and I found the sessions on Teacher Education very stimulating. However, the proportion of presentations on UK educational issues to studies on other aspects was to me, as an overseas participant, relatively large. This is especially obvious when one is looking for classroom based studies on subject areas, e.g. language teaching. This may explain why the Hong Kong ERA

conference is usually crowded with teachers from the secondary schools and the BERA's with tertiary level educators.

A final word, a little more instructions to the overseas participants i) before the conference, and ii) at the registration counter will certainly help a lot. By (i) I mean the finalised programme and the 'how-to-get-there' instructions before the Conference and (ii) the facilities of the Conference venue and the hostel blocks.

David Ma, Department of Engligh, City Polytechnic of Hong Kong

And the papers said

FRESH HORIZONS BECKON ON THE FRONTIERS OF STUDY

The British Education Research Association is determined to put the confrontations of recent years behind it. Caroline St John-Brooks reports from this year's optimistic conference.

Every year, the conference of BERA takes place at the end of August; the fag-end of the summer holidays, just before the new school term begins. Three days of intense intellectual activity involving 200 or so researchers provide the perfect opportunity to take stock. Where is education research going? What are the key issues of the day?

At last year's conference, the research community was in disarray. Demoralised by radical changes in which they had played no part, members were further stunned by a combative address by David Hargreaves, professor of education at Cambridge University, who argued that teacher education ought to be moved right out of the universities and colleges (ie out of the hands of BERA members) and into the schools.

"It was really depressing last year," said one participant. "But there's a new atmosphere now. People accept that the Education Reform Act really is here, and are getting very interested in what its effects might be. Huge new areas of research are opening up."

The new tone was set by Sally Brown — the new professor of education at Stirling University and this year's president of the association — in her inaugural address. BERA, she said must move away from "crisis responses", and look hard at the way it communicated with others in the educational community — including Government policy-makers.

The research community, she said, must stop whingeing and focus on the job in hand: assembling firm evidence to be presented to policy-makers in a form which they would find convincing and useable. In the past, research evidence emerging in dribs and drabs had been fragmented, and therefore easy to dismiss. "What is needed," she concluded, "is a rational account of accumulated evidence across contexts within a coherent theoretical framework."

In fact, this process had already been started by John Elliott, her predecessor. At last year's conference, four BERA task groups were set up on assessment, the curriculum, teacher education and local management of schools. Their job was to pull together current findings, look at them in the light of the new policies, and identify future areas for research. This year, the task groups reported

back. Assessment, for example, was discussed by Tricia Broadfoot, Bryan Dockrell, Caroline Gipps, Wynne Harlen and Desmond Nuttall — a highpowered line-up which exemplifies the fact that current policies, though criticised at the outset for ignoring the research world, now give some researchers much higher profiles than they had before.

A key symposium — chaired by Professor Peter Mortimore, the new deputy director of London's Institute of Education — looked at the fresh research agenda set in motion by the Education Reform Act. Professor Paul Black, chairman of the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT) and deputy chairman of the National Curriculum Council, identified questions within the national curriculum, which he called a "golden opportunity for research". Though central government would inevitably be most interested in projects which promised "value for policy amendment and improved implementation", this is a clear way in for researchers keen to have an input.

But the political imperatives were not allowed to dictate things all the way. The issue of social justice may have disappeared from public view, but it is still very much alive, bubbling away under the surface. "Social justice is completely off the political agenda, but many people still think it is an important aspect of education and are carrying on anyway," said Gaby Weiner, of South Bank Polytechnic, who was running the day-long symposium on the subject. "Some of the people speaking today are completely unfunded, and supporting their research themselves. The whole symposium has been over-subscribed, and we've had a huge overflow of papers."

(TES 7/9/90)

GCSE FAILS TO CLOSE GENDER GAP, RESULTS SHOW

By John O'Leary, Higher Education Correspondent

The introduction of the GCSE has failed to close the gender gap in public examinations. Girls still do better than boys when extended writing is required, while boys thrive on questions involving calculation, according to research published yesterday.

Helen Patrick, research officer for the Cambridge university local examinations syndicate found notable differences between the sexes in two years' GCSE results in 14 subjects. Her research was the subject of a paper at the British Education Research Association's annual conference in London.

In all examining groups, girls outscored boys in English language and literature, geography, German and history. Boys consistently did better in mathematics and chemistry. Results in other subjects varied between examining groups, but girls tended to do better in French, physics and craft, design and technology, with the roles reversed in computer studies, biology and business studies.

The differences follow a similar pattern to those found in research on O-levels and other public examinations. In the two English examinations the gap was more than 10 per cent in the proportion of passes at grade C and above. There were also large differences in mathematics and art and design.

"This continuity is one of the features which concerns me about gender differences in public examination results." Ms Patrick said in her paper. "GCSE seems to be perpetuating features of previous examinations which it may not be desirable to perpetuate." There had been hopes that

because the GCSE is a common examination for the great majority of the age group, it would eradicate differences due to subject choice and entry patterns at O-level. The research showed that had not happened.

"Another possibility is that results are affected by examiner expectations." The main conclusion of the research, however, was that the nature and content of the examinations encouraged the differences, she said.

(The Times 1/9/9)

GIRLS ARE THE SMARTEST

Girls are top of the class at passing GCSEs, even in some sciences.

They are getting better results than boys in art, English, modern languages, geography. And they are now beating them in subjects traditionally regarded as male preserves — physics and technology. Boys are ahead in maths, chemistry, computer and business studies and biology, often thought of as the female sciences.

The differences were revealed yesterday in a breakdown of results from the 1988 and 1989 GCSEs. In English, 13 per cent more girls than boys achieved A-C grades — equal to an O-level pass — while boys had a six per cent advantage in maths.

Helen Patrick research officer for Cambridge University Local Examination's Syndicate, said: "Perhaps we are now giving girls more opportunities and they are making good use of them.

(Today 1/9/90)

Boys and girls still do well in different subjects at GCSE, according to Helen Patrick, research officer for the Cambridge University local examinations syndicate. In both 1988 and 1989, there were big differences in 14 subjects. No matter what the examining group, girls performed better in English and English Literature, history, geography, art and German. The boys did better in maths and chemistry.

Other results were not consistent across all the examining groups, but the boys mostly did best in computer studies, biology and business studies, while girls tended to score in French, craft design and technology, and physics. In some cases, the differences were very marked: in English and English literature, over 10 per cent more girls than boys obtained grade C or above; in maths, 6-7 per cent more boys than girls managed grade C or Helen Patrick was at a loss to explain why these differences should persist. She suggested a number of possible reasons, but pointed out that some such as the fact that girls were better at extended writing required in history or English, or that boys performed better on probability questions in mathematics — themselves cried out for explanation.

(TES 7/9/90)

Young people in Germany and Britain have very different attitudes to employment, a research team led by Professor John Bryner of London's City University found. They looked at 16-year olds in four different towns:

Liverpool and Bremen (where the job market is contracting) and Swindon and Paderborn (where it is expanding). Some 160 young people from each British town were matched to 160 in the German equivalent.

In Germany, it is taken for granted that all young people must be qualified to get a job, and a lengthy period of preparation is expected. But in Britain, many young people, as well as their families and employers, assume that getting a good job as soon as possible is what matters. "Training as a preliminary to employment has still not penetrated very deeply into the British psyche," concludes the report.

(TES 7/9/90)

Assessment in the national curriculum is supposed to be free of bias against ethnic minorities or girls. But this is impossible and probably should not even be attempted, according to Patricia Murphy of the Open University. Drawing on the findings of the Assessment of Performance Unit, she looked at the way in which the achievement of boys and girls is directly related to their experience of the world.

In science, for example, there is no difference in the overall performance of boys and girls at 11 and 13 when it comes to the use of apparatus and measuring instruments. But individual results show boys doing much better on tasks using instruments such as stop watches and microscopes. The number of instruments on which boys outperform girls gradually increases, until at 15 they are doing better overall.

Surveys show that these instruments are precisely the ones which boys have more experience of handling out of school. So how far can such difference in performance be put down to innate aptitudes?

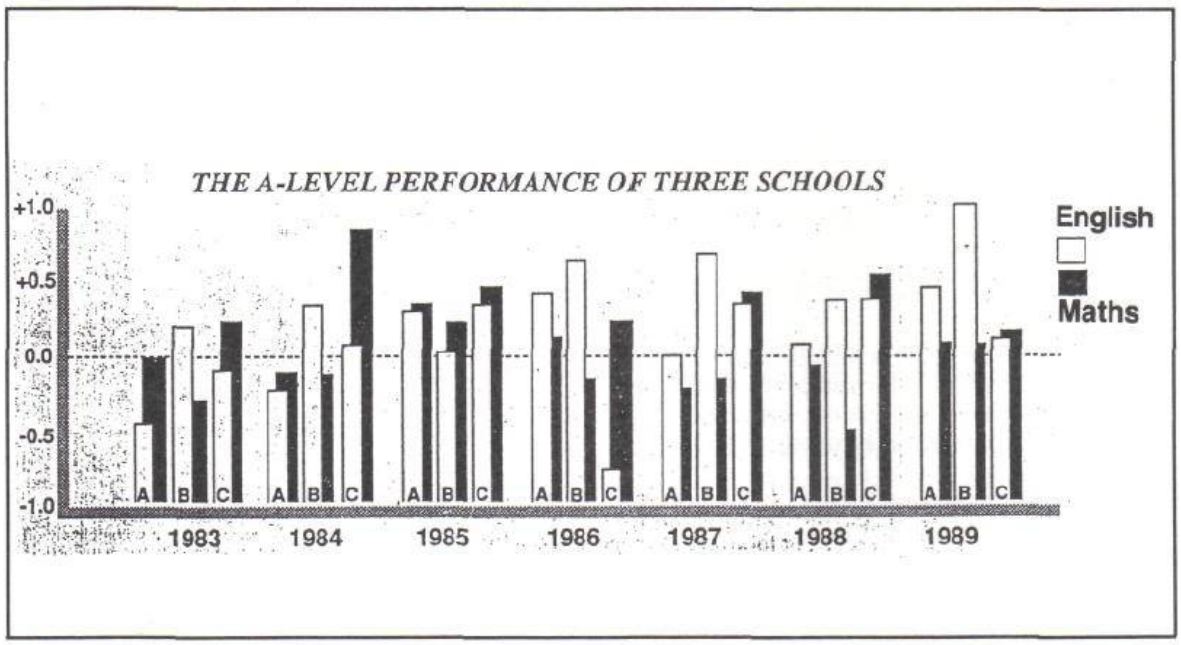
Patricia Murphy argues that boys and girls notice different features of their environment as being interesting and relevant. In particular, they perceive tasks in different ways. Girls see context as important; it gives meaning to what they are being asked to do. Boys are more likely to consider issues in isolation. Their learning styles and ways of expressing themselves, too, are rarely the same.

So what is "gender-fair" assessment? Patricia Murphy argues that rather than trying to eradicate bias from assessment we should be encouraging students of both sexes to view the world from many different perspectives.

(TES 7/9/90)

There is no such thing as a "good school" or a "poor school" — at sixth-form level, at any rate. This is the conclusion of Carol Fitzgibbon and Peter Tymms of Newcastle University. Figures from the A-

level information system (ALSIS) based at the university — which has been collecting examination results from Teeside to the Borders for the past seven years — show that the performance of chools can vary sharply.



For example, as the diagram above shows, a school's A-level results can rise or fall steeply in individual subjects. So school C, very much the best in maths in 1984, did shockingly badly in English in 1986. School B seems to have had a weak maths department and a strong English department for most of the period.

Through ALSIS, the sixth-form intake of each school is analysed and the final results controlled according to the ability and background of the students. So the 0.0 line represents the level of performance which might be expected, given the composition of the sixth form. Levels above or below this line, therefore, indicate the effectiveness of the school.

But the researchers argue that this does not in fact exist. In reality there are "good departments" and "bad departments," which themselves vary from year to year, and very sensitive performance indicators are needed to identify them. Parents and students, they suggest, have little hope of operating real consumer choice.

(TES 7/9/90)