
CONFERENCE PRESS COVERAGE

'Education' (7th October 1994)

BERA Annual Conference

Inspection

External inspection and internal appraisal are causing schools and teachers to take a more critical view of their work - but it is too soon to expect the pupils to feel the effect.

The evidence was provided in reports of two research projects delivered at the recent annual conference of the British Educational Research Association.

In the first of these, John Gray of Cambridge University and Brian Wilcox of Sheffield University, note that inspection on the scale now planned is new, both here and abroad. That it is proving effective, in some measure, is clear from their observations of reactions to inspectors' findings. Teachers might resent criticism but, in at least one case, they say: 'The expectation that there would be a re-inspection a year or so later galvanised the staff.' Moreover, school governors take a lively interest in inspection reports and headteachers are expected to answer for shortcomings.

Sluggish implementation of inspectors' recommendations is more likely to be found in schools which receive little post-inspection support from their LEA, where school development plans are inadequate, and where headteachers are not convinced of a need to change.

While most schools seem to take the business of implementation seriously, their immediate attention is more likely to be focused on administrative matters than those concerning teaching and learning, assessment, curriculum delivery and evaluation, possibly because changes here are more difficult to accomplish quickly.

Overall, the research team pronounced the implementation of recommendations patchy: 'Only a third of the recommendations could be said to have been substantially implemented; for just under a quarter there had been little or

no implementation.' They blame the headteachers for this: 'We saw little attempt by the headteachers involved to turn the inspection recommendations into broader visions and strategies which were owned by the staff.' Implementation was most successful where inspectors visited schools afterwards to encourage action and provide advice.

Their conclusion makes it clear that there is still a long way to go: 'Ultimately, of course, the hope is that implementation will lead to improvements in the quality of education and the learning achieved by pupils ... None of the schools were able to cite any evidence meeting this acid test of improvement.'

Teacher appraisal

Professor Ted Wragg of Exeter University reported that although teachers claimed to have found appraisal beneficial only half of them said it had affected their mode of working; for the 20 per cent in between it was only a boost to self-confidence and self-awareness. Many did not respond positively to their appraisal, some of them probably because they were criticized and, in other cases, because of shortcomings in those appointed to appraise them; one teacher went so far as to claim that the process had helped her 'not one little bit'.

One marked, and unexpected, result was the fact that male teachers appraised by men were much more at ease than their female colleagues appraised by women.

The team concluded that the whole exercise needed to be better planned and better directed. Moreover, that all concerned needed more training and more time if the job were to be done as effectively as it deserved.

Teacher training

Fears that teaching was being de-professionalised by the shift towards school-based training were exposed during an investigation by Rae Stark, of Strathclyde University. He found that most primary school teachers undertook their new role as

student mentors reluctantly, feeling that they had quite enough work to do already in teaching the children. They wanted proper training for the work, which they regard as essential, and called for clear guidelines.

Many said they lacked the confidence to teach adults, or act as mentors. Mr. Stark concluded that for them the work of student training was in the nature of a gift and added, darkly: 'There is evidence that this generosity will not continue indefinitely. The pressure on resources in the current economic climate is causing local authorities and schools to reconsider (sic) how much longer they can afford to go on giving.'

The difficulty of training students and teaching infants at the same time surfaced in another investigation on similar ground by Jill Collison, St. Martin's College, Lancaster. 'There can be little doubt that the dynamics of infant classrooms can militate against active mentoring,' she said.

She found only one teacher who had given serious attention to the needs of student teachers and reflected their needs in planning her lessons.

Teachers who do not know how to do this, Miss Collison observes, constantly undermine both the trainees' confidence and authority. She concludes with a call for more co-operation between training colleges and the teachers called upon to act as mentors. 'Teachers need to know more about the aims required of them and colleges need to consider afresh their input,' she said.

Target help

Teachers' perceptions of children's progress and of their own methods have been sharpened by the national curriculum and specified attainment targets. Evidence of this was an outcome of research carried out in English primary schools by Professor Caroline Gipps, London University.

She found that many teachers at KS1 and 2 had abandoned the guesswork of traditional 'intuitive' assessment in favour of systematic testing, closer observation of individual progress and better planning. According to their headteachers, staff discussion about working methods has increased and has

resulted in much closer collaboration among all concerned.

Introduction of the assessment programme caused much anxiety among the teachers, who feared labelling children. Accordingly, they went to more than usual trouble to ensure that the children did well, presenting information more variously and with more explanation.

A similar picture emerged from research carried out in Scottish primary schools by Professor Wynne Harlen, BERA's retiring president, who concluded that both teaching and learning had been improved by the assessment process.

Professor Harlen also found evidence that teachers saw the record-keeping associated with assessment more as an end in itself, rather than as a means of providing a measure of the effectiveness of their own teaching. Even where teachers were trying to adjust their methods in the light of the evidence they had collected they had no clear idea how to go about it.

Mary Jones, of Cambridge University, examining the question of quality control in the assessment and testing of young children, concluded that there was a real danger to education if the process was simplified to the extent that the teachers' diagnostic element was eliminated. The results of such a development might allow politicians to claim that standards were rising, she said, when, in fact, they were in decline.

'TES' (September 16th 1994)

The British Educational Research Association took over Oxford last weekend

A battle for hearts, minds and space

The British Educational Research Association conference is getting more like the Edinburgh Festival with each passing year.

More than 700 researchers turned up for the 20th anniversary conference in St Anne's College, Oxford, at the weekend and the fringe spilled into whatever meeting rooms and broom cupboards the organisers could requisition in neighbouring university buildings.

More than 400 papers were delivered during the four-day jamboree and up to 20 seminars were staged simultaneously. It was therefore no surprise to find Professor Robert Tauber of Pennsylvania State University delivering a paper entitled 'Acting lessons for teachers: using performance skills in the classroom; in a basement room two streets away from the conference centre. His time had come.

The exponential growth in the number of papers delivered is partly due to the lure of Oxford and partly explained by the fact that some of the participants were unashamedly out to enhance their CV and collect Brownie points for the next research assessment exercise. Last year there was a half-hearted attempt to introduce a refereeing system to cut down the number of papers and increase their quality, but such a move is antithetical to the culture of BERA which has, as the incoming president, Professor Jean Rudduck, pointed out, never aspired to the trappings and spirit of an establishment academy.

The attempts to persuade researchers to stop 'sandbagging' (the often tedious storing-up of references to previous research) and present more accessible papers have been much more successful, but the battle is not yet won, as the anonymous author of the following paragraph proved: 'The extent of splitting in a person's construal of two entities is defined as the ratio of the deficiency in actual overlap possible between their attributed characteristics to the total possible overlap, given the set of constructs one uses to construe them both.' Quite so.

The BERA leadership has bigger problems than opaque prose to deal with, however. Judging by the list of papers delivered it would appear that Britain's education researchers are currently most concerned about assessment, mentoring, school improvement, the school in the market place and, inevitably, inspection.

However, the research community's own agenda of worries reads rather differently. They continue to fret - justifiably - about the research that is commissioned and then never published by the Department for Education and the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, about the proliferation of short-

term contracts, and the fact that research is still following policy rather than helping to form it. But the publication of the National Commission on Education's recent report, which was largely based on research findings, has restored their hope in a better future which Jean Rudduck, for one, believes in.

During her presidential year she intends to work closely with the National Commission and to help focus the spotlight again on the needs of disadvantaged children. Like one teacher she quoted in her presidential address, she knows that tackling the old equity problem is as difficult as attempting to empty the ocean with a teacup. But she still intends to try.

The results of investigations into every aspect of school life. David Budge and Maureen O'Connor report

Inspectors risk being ignored

Although most schools appear terrified of inspections, many fail to implement the inspectors' recommendations for improvement. John Gray, of Homerton College, Cambridge, and Brian Wilcox, of Sheffield University, told the BERA conference that they had visited five primary schools one year after they had been inspected to find out if they had acted on the advice they had received. One of the schools, which were in five separate authorities, had not fully implemented any of the proposals whereas another had attempted to put every recommendation into practice.

'Overall, only a third of the recommendations could be said to have been at least substantially implemented and for just under a quarter there had been little or no implementation,' they said. 'For a small number of recommendations it was clear that the headteacher was unconvinced of either their validity or urgency, but most were treated seriously and differences were more likely to be the result of some recommendations being easier to accomplish than others.'

Gray and Wilcox found that surprisingly few of the inspectors' recommendations referred to teaching and learning. They concluded that the emphasis on documentation and

procedures was consistent with the 'now pervasive managerialist view of the curriculum.'

Furthermore, it was the recommendations concerning management/administrative procedures and the production of documentation that were more likely to be carried out. 'In contrast, recommendations involving issues of assessment, curriculum delivery and evaluation, and teaching and learning appear, at best, to have been only partially implemented within the first 12 months following inspection,' Gray and Wilcox say.

The study's authors were also disappointed to discover how little effort had been made to involve staff in the planning of any changes. This is likely to lead to 'superficial compliance' rather than any continuing commitment to change, they warn.

Although the schools in Gray and Wilcox's study had been inspected by local authority teams between May 1992 and January 1993 - before the Office for Standards in Education inspection system was set up - a more recent study whose findings were presented to the conference by a research team from Oxford Brookes University suggests that the pattern Gray and Wilcox identified is continuing. This second study, which involved 35 schools inspected by an OFSTED team in the spring term of 1994, found that only 38 per cent of staff intended to change their practice as a result of the inspection - 41.2 per cent of men and 34.9 per cent of women.

The survey of 821 teachers and heads carried out by Nicola Brimblecombe, Michael Ormston and Marian Shaw, also showed that senior managers were more likely to adopt new practices than the middle management tier were. The latter, however, appeared to be more receptive to change than classroom teachers. Most of the changes that the respondents intended to carry out were related to monitoring and assessment. Few mentioned altering the curriculum.

The Oxford Brookes survey also found that women were three times as likely as men to say they were nervous about an impending inspection. Senior staff also felt more confident about the exercise. 'It could be argued that as

they have more at stake than the classroom teacher and carry the ultimate responsibility for the school they should be more nervous,' the study's authors say. 'However, they also have more control over events, and this would seem to alleviate some of the stress suffered by those in lower echelons who may feel that inspection is something that is done to them. Senior staff are also probably liable to receive fewer classroom visits - a great stress - than ordinary teachers.'

'THE INDEPENDENT' (Thursday 6th October 1994)

Jean Rudduck looks at the problems of differentiation for those involved in the area of school research

Learning the values of equity

The virtue of the research assessment exercise in higher education is that it draws attention to issues of quality and keeps alive important debates about criteria for judging quality.

However, it can lead us to prioritise research that has short-term goals rather than that which builds longer-term, cumulative understandings. It can lead us to work in a spirit of competitive individualism rather than easy collaboration.

This can bring about a proliferation of outlets for publication, as though publication itself - rather than the impact of ideas on structures of thinking and practice - are what matters. And it can make us seek out and claim novel arenas for our research, because personal or institutional ownership is an important dimension of the system of judgement.

In the area of school research, where many of us choose to work, there remains a basic research agenda which is not novel, but which must not be bypassed.

It is to do with students' motivation and engagement in learning, their sense of self as a learner and their sense of the future, issues that lie at the politically awkward intersections of class and culture, opportunity and control.

We cannot effectively tackle concerns about achievement without understanding how

young people are responding to the current sharper spirit of differentiation with its effect on their sense of purpose and possibility in schooling.

'Differentiation' is a word whose significance varies according to context. As a classroom strategy that enables teachers to match the challenge of the task to the potential of the student, differentiation is a positive practice and one that students can understand and feel good about.

However, when it operates as an organisational 'dividing strategy' - as part of a technology of control - it becomes difficult for teachers to build a learning community where young people recognise and respect different strengths and needs in each other.

In the daily interaction of the classroom, the corridor and the playground, any system that highlights and legitimises the crude categorisation of difference runs the risk of strengthening the impulse within the peer group to give their own labels to those who are different, faltering or weak.

'Everyone's brainy in our class except us,' claimed three secondary school students to researchers during an Economic and Social Research Council study. 'They didn't want to work with us. They thought they'd have to do all the work because we're stupid,' the students said. Once students are caught in a sub-culture of derision, it is very difficult for them to regain confidence.

In one secondary school in a socially and economically disadvantaged area, teachers have worked for many years on equity issues and the building of self-respect. 'Setting' was recently introduced as a way of coping with the demands of the new curriculum and its attainment levels.

Some students in the bottom sets were angry at first at being syphoned off, and were determined to do well so that they could be moved up into higher sets - but during the course of the year they came to accept their lot.

The energy of anger turned into either a dull sense of powerlessness or a tough nonchalance - reactions that make re-engagement with learning, and in some cases with schooling - difficult.

Policy makers are courting contradiction when they talk about entitlement, and when they ask that achievement levels be raised - something that teachers are keen to work towards - while at the same time initiating structures that endorse the negative labelling of some young people and heighten the risk of their disengagement from learning.

It has taken a long time to get even a limited vision of equity on the social and educational agenda. If we are to keep the vision in focus, then teachers and researchers need to work in tandem.

This may not be easy. Indeed, I sometimes suspect that there is a conspiracy to keep us apart. It has happened in relation to initial teacher education and, to a large extent, in relation to in-service education and higher degree work.

The government has generally advanced its policies without taking much account of research or researchers. Research is safer if it is kept on the tight leash of a contract bidding system.

Indeed, there are some signs that the balance of research funding is slowly beginning to tip towards the study of continuing education and training, and away from school-focused concerns.

These new directions are to be applauded, but I hope that researchers will not feel compelled - through whatever pressures - to give up on issues of equity and achievement in schools.

Many teachers have been struggling, often with little support apart from their own sense of commitment to their students and to educational principles, to build whole-school policies on equal opportunities.

And they do sometimes ask what difference their efforts can make in a society where the 'official typescripts' for the roles of the powerful and the powerless are still so readily available.

They know that it will be a long haul - 'like emptying the ocean with a teacup,' said one teacher - aware that we are now working in a climate which endorses an even stronger marking out of winners and losers.