

EDITORIAL

Robert F. Lawson*

On the Study of Education

In his recent book, *The Graves of Academe*, Richard Mitchell adds his name to the infamous list of outraged critics of "educationists".¹ The easy scapegoating, documented by isolated and extreme examples, allows the author, like so many other critics, to sweep under the rug the real problems of teacher education, of the schools, and implicitly of society and the university. To refute Mr. Mitchell's evidence, his question as to the existence of a body of knowledge in "education", his criticism of educational jargon and non-theory, is no formidable task, particularly in relation to the conceptual weaknesses, "clouded language", and boundary disputes of other fields more esteemed in the academic eye. Such refutation has little purpose however. Those of us convinced of the value and importance of teaching and the study of education would do better to take note of the pervasiveness of the criticism, to learn from actual policy or institutional effects of it, and to attend to self-criticism with more validity.

Institutional effects are being seen (most dramatically in the U.S.A.) in the frequent resource strangling of Faculties of Education, and internally in their race toward relevance and practicality (thus exacerbating the intellectual, though not necessarily the institutional problem). From the former effect one might note that the behaviour is predictable: economic and social pressure on the university, particularly on lack of productivity or perceived lack of social importance, will be translated into hierarchical actions consistent with academic values, thus will be turned against those fields considered academically marginal, and will be articulated largely by spokesmen of the "nouveau riche" areas. The only possible actions in face of these tendencies, other than obvious political counter-attack, are those which strengthen the conviction of the professional support network, and those which strengthen the ground and application of study in education.

We have little choice but to take more seriously than ever our commitment to practice informed by theory, and to examine the disciplines in education, including new interdisciplines, for their ability to inform institutional policy and professional practice.

It is, as a Harvard Committee put it some time ago,

...supremely important for the professional educator to acquire not merely the practical skills requisite for his work, but the ability to grasp such work as a subject of intellectual criticism, and the capacity to understand certain of its general ramifications. (*The Graduate Study of Education*, 1966)²

While the emphasis on practical skills has always been recognized, at least by students and by the public, the crucial importance of the intellectual integrity and generalizability of educational study has not been so obvious, even to educationists themselves. Systematic study of the social context of the school and of relevant knowledge from basic disciplines is requisite to the construction of an integrative and operational philosophy which can guide the translation of cultural content and educational knowledge into principles of application and specific improvements. Moreover, agreement on and about the conceptual ground of education is the only way in which the intellectual medium can be used to induct prospective teachers into their professional community.

Although the outcome of educational study must be synthetic and applied, the search for knowledge, and to some extent the transmission of present knowledge, can only proceed through a disciplinary channel, that is, through the search for specific information, guided by a specific theoretical construct,

*Dean of Faculty of Education, University of Calgary.

and using specific analytic tools. This specificity applies of course equally to the study of the institution, to policy, and to interpersonal matters as to the practice of teaching and learning. Without the provision of specific research there is nothing on which to base or develop the knowledge which grounds policy and application. In short, there is no escape from the rigors of a "discipline" and no shortcut through specific study.

It is not a presupposition of scholarship that all the answers will be found or that any answer will be other than tentative. It is imperative however that we break through the restrictions of caution and specificity which bind the researcher in order to fulfill the obligations on scholars of education to inform the public, the policy-makers, and the practitioners of what answers and questions can be derived from present knowledge.

The significant bases of knowledge and for research in the respective disciplines of education have recently been outlined in the review of Canadian research in education produced by the CSSE (Andrews and Rogers, eds., 1981).³ The report refers to the need for investment in research, mainly from the point of view of researchers themselves, and consistent with the emphasis I have put on specific research. For the purpose of direct improvement in education however, this emphasis must be seen as the start of a chain which involves synthesis, policy reference, and communication.

If the study of education proceeds along such a chain, it may be possible to eliminate the manifest abuses in teacher training, in policy formation, and in educational non-research. That means refusing to accept myth, admonition, and folk-wisdom for content, rejecting as policy authority without authoritativity, and standing fast against fashionably attractive whims of the moment. Education has been plagued by the same ills as have afflicted the society generally, but that is no excuse for an endeavor which presumes to lead in the transmission and development of the culture's treasury. Merchants may decide to attempt to sell their wines by faking a better label rather than by making a better wine; educators are not allowed that option.

As research and study start the chain, it is the researcher who must first derive the institutional grounds and predictive statements which should guide determination of educational actions. Before actions can be taken however, these particular projections, together with their supporting evidence, must be placed into a context of educational policy. Policy requires synthetic solutions, derived from specific studies but for a professional and public purpose. In addition to the research on particular problems, we should accept as an overriding but also specific task the aggregation and interconnection of sets of data and interpretation, and the comprehensive use of such information by policy researchers and decision-makers for synthesis which can properly arrange applications to identifiable problems.

The emphasis here is on discrimination but equality of importance among those tasks on the study to action chain which relate knowledge to melioration of educational problems. To improve the learning of an individual child and the behaviors supposed to result from that learning requires specific study of the learner, the teacher, the organization of content, and the school; to generalize the improvement requires study of the institution and the society (see, for example, the paper issued by Alberta Advanced Education and Manpower, "The Context of Continuing Development of Post-Secondary Education Services").⁴ To emphasize the part without the whole is to invite dysfunction in the system; to emphasize the whole without study of the parts is likely to result in superficiality and omission. The tasks are different but equally important, and both sets are based on what we can know about intellectual progress and social dynamics as applied to the study and conduct of education. It is this knowledge that specifies change requirements, grounds evaluation of mechanisms and instances, and provides predictive information for educational development.

Finally, if we are secure as we can be in the pursuit and application of knowledge, there is every reason to communicate the bases of our findings and the reasons for their projection into policy and practice. While such criticisms as Mitchell's would suggest renewed attempts to communicate with colleagues in other fields, it is primarily important and, I think, possible to inform the public of the source of educational decisions, and where we cannot adequately answer *their* criticisms, to re-examine the conclusions we may have reached.

Notes

- ¹ Richard Mitchell, *The Graves of Academe*, (Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1981).
- ² Harvard Committee, *The Graduate Study of Education*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1966).
- ³ J.H.M. Andrews and W.T. Rogers, eds., "Canadian Research in Education: A State of the Art Review", University of British Columbia, 1981.
- ⁴ Alberta Advanced Education and Manpower, "The Context for Continuing Development of Post-Secondary Services", issued 1981.