

Alexander, Robin. (1992). *Policy and practice in primary education*. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 226 pp., \$72.50 (hardcover).

In writing this book, Robin Alexander had two aims: to present an evaluation report entitled *Primary Education in Leeds* to a wider audience, and to reflect on the nature of policy and practice in primary education both locally and at the national level on the basis of the Leeds evaluation data. Alexander considered the former aim to be important because of widespread misinterpretations, in the English press and elsewhere, of the report's findings.

Having established its Primary Needs Programme (PNP) in 1985, Leeds City Council commissioned an independent evaluation of it in 1986 under the direction of Robin Alexander. Alexander and his team wrote 11 interim reports and produced a final report in July, 1991. They identified six evaluation themes: children's needs, curriculum, teaching strategies, home school links, management, and professional development and support. These are examined in turn in the first part of the book. This is followed, in part 2, by a broader discussion of policy, politics, and culture in primary education. Alexander attempts both to unpack the notion of "good primary practice" and to offer a conception of it. Finally, he discusses a number of issues related to improving primary education.

By way of introduction, the author offers some background information against which the PNP should be viewed. In particular, he notes one difficulty:

The inception of PNP was complicated by the fact that there were four competing (to some extent) views of the nature of the 'primary needs' which were to be addressed The competing priorities were:

- provision for children with special educational needs in mainstream primary schools;

- provision for children in inner-city primary schools suffering social and/or material disadvantage;
- the improvement of standards of literacy and numeracy (especially reading) among inner-city children;
- the improvement of the quality of primary education across the city as a whole.

These priorities were not in themselves incompatible but, because they had different points of origin in the [Local Education Authority] and reflected competing territorial ambitions, teachers found themselves being offered varying and sometimes conflicting versions of PNP's nature and purposes. (p. 4)

In setting out the program's aims, Leeds City Council attempted to accommodate each of these perspectives. The central aim was "to meet the educational needs of all children, and in particular those children experiencing learning difficulties" (p. 4). There were three specific goals:

- developing a curriculum which is broadly based, with a stimulating and challenging learning environment;
- developing flexible teaching strategies to meet the identified needs of individual pupils, including specific practical help for individuals and small groups, within the context of general classroom provision;
- developing productive links with parents and the community. (p. 4)

In evaluating the program, Alexander emphasizes a number of its strengths. These include the Local Education Authority's investment of resources in primary education, its discrimination in favor of children and schools whose educational and social needs were most acute, its initiatives to counter racism and to promote multicultural understanding, its comprehensive program for the inservice education of teachers, and the variety of beneficial outcomes which derived from increased staffing.

Perhaps the most important criticism of the program made by Alexander concerns the need for individuals and institutions to question what he considers to be the dominant ideology and prevalent orthodoxies of primary education. In particular, Alexander suggests that the notion of "good primary practice" should be regarded not as settled and unquestionable, but as inherently value-laden and therefore open to discussion and debate. The pitfalls associated with a rigid adherence to a particular conception of good practice emerge all too clearly in the book. When such a view is imposed from above on teachers who, in turn, may believe that their professional development is closely linked to their willingness and ability to put it into practice, we are likely to have a recipe for educational impoverishment. Of course, teachers may accept a particular (and inadequate) model of "good practice" not because it has been forced on them but simply because, being unaware of or having given little thought to competing alternatives, they believe it to be satisfactory.

The following examples illustrate the two positions which have just been outlined. The author notes that, despite the emphasis placed by the Local Education Authority upon a particular model of classroom organization, it was only partly adhered to by teachers. Indeed, many "found that their practice was constrained or compromised, rather than facilitated, by their attempting to conform to what they took to be official requirements on matters such as layout, display, furniture and grouping" (p. 39). This is in sharp contrast to the following observation from Alexander:

We gained the impression that — like several practices in primary education — the strategy for grouping has become an end in itself rather than a device adopted for particular educational purposes; moreover, as a strategy grouping may have become so deeply ingrained in primary consciousness and practice that to ask questions about its educational purposes may seem, to some, almost impertinent. (p. 67)

This is an important book in a number of respects. To begin with, the need for a thinking, reflective teaching force is a theme which is articulated throughout. In addition, Alexander calls for a new enquiry into primary education. This is especially important since, as the author acknowledges,

the introduction of the National Curriculum has failed to solve problems faced by local education authorities, particularly in regard to the need to provide a broad, balanced, and relevant curriculum. His notion of "good primary practice," which focuses on conceptual, value, pragmatic, empirical, and political considerations, is illuminating. However, and in the spirit of the book, it should be regarded as the first rather than the last word in the debate which he advocates.

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Brezinka, Wolfgang. (1992). *Philosophy of educational knowledge: An introduction to the foundations of science of education, philosophy of education, and practical pedagogics*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 301 pp., \$99.00 (hardcover).

The title of Wolfgang Brezinka's book, *Philosophy of Educational Knowledge: An Introduction to the Foundations of Science of Education, Philosophy of Education, and Practical Pedagogics* is eminently appropriate. This is the project that is clearly described in the introduction of the book. Arguing mainly from the position that there is a huge confusion in the use of the term "science" or "scientific" to describe educational studies and educational knowledge, Brezinka sets out to propose and defend a tripartite division of educational knowledge which he argues will also serve as a division of labor for educational researchers. *Science of education* is distinguished as a rigorous empirical science seeking factual knowledge of the causal relations involved in education. *Philosophy of education* refers to normative philosophical proposals or recommendations having to do with educational aims and ethical issues in education. Finally, *practical*