

Letter to the Editor

Transatlantic comparisons

I was recently privileged to sit in on several teacher-education classes in an American university. This experience provided a fascinating glimpse into the similarities and differences between our two systems for the education of teachers, and also between the views of students and teacher-educators in two countries, on what are perceived to be some pressing issues in schooling. The classes I attended were all focused on the teaching of reading and language, and ranged from language-arts classes for prospective elementary school teachers, to content area reading classes for students intending to teach various subjects at junior high and high school levels.

My first impressions came as somewhat of a surprise to me in that I had expected to be immediately struck by the differences between American and English concerns in the teaching of reading. My prior reading of American text-books and general academic literature in this area had led me to expect that courses would reflect a very highly structured, analytic view of reading teaching, with processes being broken down into skills, and these skills themselves being analysed into sub-skills. Doubtless this does take place, but, in the classes I observed, students discussed issues which will be familiar to anyone who has taken or led reading and language teacher-education classes in this country. The raising, by American students, of issues such as curriculum integration, language and reading across the curriculum and child-centredness gave me almost a feeling of nostalgia. These issues constantly arise in the reading-education classes taught here by myself and by colleagues, but these days tend to be aired from a defensive viewpoint as we struggle to come to terms, at primary level at least, with increasing demands for subject specialism, separation and detailed schemes of work.

Other issues raised included the importance of language-experience approaches to the teaching of reading and the wonderment that, after twenty years of research, these are still not universally accepted and used in elementary schools. My students regularly make the same point, as they do about a further issue: that of the most useful form of testing reading. In the classes I attended American student teachers were urged to find ways of integrating the testing of reading into teaching and to use more informal testing procedures. I do the same with my own students, only to have them come back to me after teaching-practice experience with the complaint that the only testing they were encouraged or allowed to do was to administer the Schonell reading test. In a way it is reassuring to know that the gap between what is recommended as good practice in teaching reading and what is actually done in schools is as wide in the United States as it is here.

Of course differences between American and British approaches did become apparent, but these were concerned more with the structure of teacher-education than with the content of reading and language classes. The American system works on a modular basis as opposed to the more developmentally-based British approach. I felt I would regret not being able to see the long-term development and, in many ways, maturation of students going through a three or four year teacher-training course. The development of students through a 15 week semester course would not seem as satisfying from a tutor's point of view.

The biggest difference that I noticed was in the role of testing in the courses I observed. The American education system seems to be almost completely designed around tests of one sort or another, so much so that there is a ready market for handbooks on how to prepare for and take tests. It was certainly a strange experience to watch American students take a fifty question multiple-choice test on the content of the course they were taking, and to learn that such tests were a regular part of assessment at university level. In the British system perhaps we stress more the ability to construct well-referenced and rational arguments in our assessment of students, but I must admit to some envy of my American counterparts as I sit down to mark yet another pile of eighteen 2000 word essays!

American students do, however, have the chance to get back at their professors for all the tests they are required to take. They are asked to make formal evaluations of the courses they take, and it is clear that these evaluations are not mere tokens, but are taken very seriously indeed. This is a dimension of accountability which, even in the current debate on teacher-assessment, seems not to have loomed very large in British education. Maybe it is an area in which we have something to learn.

While I was observing these American students it was clear that they were also observing me, and from the lively interest they showed when invited to ask me questions, their willingness to learn from different perspectives was apparent. It was also obvious, and a source of some pride

to me, that the British education system, although there were many aspects of it with which they were unfamiliar, was held in very high esteem. It is, perhaps, a useful point at which to know, given the dissatisfactions which seem to be continually expressed in some quarters with our education system and its products, that its reputation is so high in at least one other country of the world.

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