Self-evaluation: What’s in it for Schools?
J. MacBeath & A. McGlynn, 2002
London, Routledge/Falmer
ISBN 0 41527 742 6

Self-evaluation is the popular flavour of the times. It is not, particularly, a Government-led movement and all the better for that. This book is written by two of the leading authorities in the field who cover the subject comprehensively. At first sight, it is a series of statements of the obvious to those who have lived with the growth of the school improvement over the last 10 years. Who could dispute that teaching, learning, culture and leadership should be the subject of internal scrutiny? Unfortunately, this thought has not yet entered the collective consciousness of some schools. These schools are the target audience for this book. But, what of the rest of us? It is a book that begins with appropriate philosophical questions; some, that have lain dormant in many forums for years, like ‘what do we really mean by effectiveness?’ The authors establish the reasons for evaluation and this is an important argument to rehearse because there are still teachers who do not accept that this is part of professional life. After reading briefly about the research that they quote, this is shamefully obvious.

Chapter five, about evaluating ethos and culture, begins by reminding us what changes have taken place in public perception in the matter of corporal punishment over the last few years. This is a cheering thought for those battling apparently without success, to change school cultures throughout the country. Several of the excellent ethos indicators from the Improving School Effectiveness Project are printed out so that the reader can use them. Argyris’s double loop learning is perhaps not considered everyday by busy educators, but in this chapter it turns the question ‘How good is our school?’ into ‘How good is self-evaluation in our school?’ Any passing inspector will clearly be more impressed by a self-aware school in whatever state of supposed effectiveness than by one that has never questioned its ethos. The authors pose other, potentially inflammatory questions to improve the health of the school, like ‘How do we deal with dissent?’ (85). Get the book, read what the others questions are. Chapter six, called ‘Benchmarking’ should more properly bear the subtitle on p.100 ‘From benchmarking to improvement: five steps’. On the face of it benchmarking is boring, but this chapter puts into context, explains it thoroughly and describes how to use it constructively. A clearer and more useful chapter would be difficult to write. Except perhaps, the next chapter ‘Preparing for inspection’. This exposes some of the dubious practices that have occurred in the past to fool inspectors, as a tool for guiding those, already terrified at the prospect, in to more useful channels for their nervous energy. The last chapter is about evaluating leadership, not the same as headship, because these authors are committed to distributed leadership. There are, again, useful instruments here and an exhortation to the brave (and who wants to be thought of as timid?) to invite 360 degree appraisal. The purpose of the book is hidden on the next to last page ‘self-evaluating leaders and learning schools … are prepared for external scrutiny at any time and welcome the challenging visitor’ (139). This is surely one of the targets worth aiming for!

So I liked the book then? Yes. What a shame that the modern rush to production should lead to misleading and missing references in the text and list of references. Still, the meaning is clear. Let us work together for a better world!

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Education for Values: Morals, Ethics and Citizenship in Contemporary Teaching
ROY GARDNER, JO CAIRNS & DENIS LAWTON, 2000
London, Kogan Page
ISBN 0 7494 3065 6

The prescriptive nature of the original incarnation of the National Curriculum caused concerns about exactly what values were being inculcated in children in British schools. The subsequent debate has led to a much clearer articulation of the values base for the revised curriculum for the year 2000 but concerns continue to be expressed. Nonetheless, the issue of values strikes at the heart of the current educational policy with its emphasis on a market-driven policy based on standards, benchmarking and the delivery of a ‘packaged’ curriculum. Even if values can be built into the curriculum the increasingly pluralist nature of society raises knotty questions about exactly whose values should be presented to young people.

In light of these facts Education for Values: Morals, Ethics and Citizenship in Contemporary Teaching is a timely, welcome and substantial addition to the debate on the curriculum and on the enterprise of education as a whole. The book brings together an international group of authors and is based on a conference entitled ‘Values and the Curriculum’ held in London at the Institute of Education. The book attempts to consider critically the role and future of education and values and is structured in five parts including: ‘Approaches to teaching values’; ‘Issues in education in values’; ‘Teacher Education and Values’; ‘Research for Education in values’; and ‘Comparative studies’.

The editors, Roy Gardner, Jo Cairns and Denis Lawton, have done a good job in drawing together a diverse set of contributions on a complex topic. The introduction by Jo Cairns gives a brief overview of recent policy developments in the curriculum and provides a framework for the conceptualisation of the book. The first chapter, also by Cairns, provides a more expansive reflection on the dilemma that teachers face when attempting to define their role in developing values in pupils and there is a pithy analysis of the development of the issue from the time of the 1944 Education Act to the advent of the revised National Curriculum. Some of the central questions in values education are raised such as the recurrent problem of whether we wish to have a ‘schooling in values’ or whether we wish to impart ‘values in schooling’.

Much of the rest of the text acts as a counterpoint to the opening chapter. Colin Wringe provides a very interesting chapter that attempts to provide a third approach to moral education that avoids the bi-polar opposition of ‘social utility’ or ‘group values’ as rationales for moral motivation (Chapter 3). Robert Fisher suggests that philosophical enquiry can be a vehicle for values education (Chapter 4). Brahm Norwich and Jenny Corbett argue that values can encompass both individual and social needs and can, therefore, assist in realising both personal and societal potential. John Annette examines the recent revival of the concept of citizenship and the challenge that such a slippery concept raises about the nature and purpose of education (Chapter 7). John Tomlinson and Vivienne Little analyse the ethical principles that inform teaching and their epistemological basis (Chapter 10) and David Scott offers an exposition of ‘Research for Education in Values’ that will of particular interest to many in higher education (Chapter 13). The final comparative section, which itself contains a further six chapters, provides perspectives from diverse cultures such as South Africa, China, Fiji and Canada that are both instructive and especially relevant to a world in which cultural diversity and tolerance must form a central pillar of any education in values.

This is an interesting and substantial text on a topic of increasing contemporary interest.

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Professional Leadership in Schools: Effective Middle Management and Subject Leadership
JAMES WILLIAMS, 2002
London, Kogan Page
ISBN 0 7494 3292 6

Middle managers and subject leaders in schools have been a somewhat neglected
species. Most academic texts and the developing ‘National’ programmes of school leadership, such as NPQH, HEADLAMP and LPSH, have tended to focus on headteachers and their senior colleagues. More recently a number of research reports, books, journal articles and the expanded vision articulated by the National College for School Leadership, have begun to explore this rich and important field of study.

Professional Leadership in Schools: Effective Middle Management and Subject Leadership by James Williams owes its origins to a Masters degree programme at Brunel University, to which the author has contributed. The book is aimed at teachers who are newly appointed as heads of department, those aspiring to such a position, and experienced heads of department in need of practical help and advice on new situations that they might face. The author places a strong emphasis on the fact that people need two things in order to lead and be led successfully: motivation and good working conditions (v). One can only applaud this approach and it is not surprising that Williams suggests that the jury is still out on whether or not the government’s strategy of performance related pay will help to address the key issues of recruitment and retention of teachers.

Each chapter of the text is ‘a self-contained view of a specific aspect of management’ (viii) and the structure of the chapters is well conceived. Chapter 1 offers a general overview of ‘What is management?’ and successive chapters go on to explore such issues as mentoring, the difference between leadership and management, time management, action planning, managing performance, selecting and interviewing staff, managing change, and financial management. These topics are well chosen and their appeal to those new to managerial positions will be very clear.

The ‘theoretical base’ for much of the text is quite limited and there is a string reliance on some of the ‘classical texts’ on management theory but this is not necessarily surprising when one bears in mind that the target audience is expected to be quite new to the field. The style of the text is admirably straightforward and there is a lot of sensible and straightforward advice about managing real situations. Indeed, the author has pulled off the quite difficult trick of providing something that will be of genuine and immediate utility to practitioners whilst still introducing them to relevant conceptual frameworks; this kind of text is quite common in the US publishing context but not so in the UK.

This is a good, well structured and practical introduction to the topic middle management in schools.

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Leaders and Leadership in Education
HELEN M. GUNTER, 2001
Paul Chapman Publishing
ISBN 0 76195 493 7

As Helen Gunter herself says, there is a lot of debate currently about leadership. There is certainly no shortage of books about it. Does this one deserve a place on your bookshelf? The author sets out to investigate leadership in education, using Bourdieu’s concepts of field and habitus with the intention of ‘opening up spaces for discussion’ (4). Plenty of such spaces are explored. In the first chapter, leadership is examined as paradigm, as academic tribal territory, as power structure, as praxis and as intellectual work. Subsequent chapters explore leadership in relation to school performance, improvement and effectiveness; leadership as a field for research and theorising; preparation for leadership; and the exercise of leadership through headship or middle management and in the classroom. The final chapter probes ideas of professionalism, linked to accountability and to conceptually informed practice. The majority of examples are from the UK context, but many international authors are referenced.

A strength of this book is the author’s self-critique; she acknowledges the development of her own thinking, and also the impact on her personal intellectual stance of earlier teaching experience and current teaching/research work she is doing. She explains clearly in the first chapter how she interprets Bourdieu’s theory of practice and how she has tried to use it. In both her introduction and her final chapter she invites readers to engage actively with the ideas, indeed to contact her
if they have contributions to the debate. Such engagement is facilitated practically because the book has separate indices, by author/page and by topic, which makes it easy to refer back and forth.

The answer to the question I asked earlier depends on your purpose. This is an academic book, not a ‘how to’ guide. It does not provide school leaders with answers to practical problems nor assist directly with accruing brownie points for NPQH. However, those pursuing postgraduate academic qualifications, or others wishing to reflect on educational leadership in both its historical and current academic contexts, are likely to find it interesting and informative.

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