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Key issues in teacher education - a sourcebook for teacher educators

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BOOK REVIEWS

Key issues in teacher education – a sourcebook for teacher educators, by Janet Stuart, Kwame Akyeampong and Alison Croft, Oxford, Macmillan Education, 2009, 237 pp., \$26,88 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4050-7999-0

In a recent analysis of teachers in the top-performing countries in education, with the broad notion that ‘the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers’, Barber and Mourshed (2007) concluded that three things matter most: getting the right people to become teachers; developing them into effective instructors; and ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child. Indeed, ‘students taught by high-performing teachers from age 8–11 will show, on average, a 53 percentile point difference in achievement from those taught by low-performing teachers’. While we may cavil at the notion of the teacher as instructor, we should acknowledge that the quality of teacher education, both pre-service and continuing professional development, is a major stumbling block to the improvement of the quality of learning in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Why should this be? The MUSTER (Multi-Site Teacher Education Research) research which provided the origins of this book identifies key factors which are recognisable in many systems: recruitment to the ranks of primary teacher educators is generally not from the best primary practitioners (you have to hold a degree), the style of teacher education programmes is often highly didactic with content which is frequently outdated, remoteness of the teacher educators from the realities of teaching in overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms, school experience or practicum often meaning substitute teaching with little or no serious mentoring or coaching and little opportunity to try new skills developed in college. In relation to continuous professional development, among the welter of training (and trainings) and workshops through which teachers are ‘in-serviced’, there is rarely commitment to structured long-term support for teachers in their schools and classrooms which is closely linked to promotional and financial opportunities.

This excellent book, authored by three experienced teacher educators, begins to address some of these issues. It targets all those who have a stake in the preparation of teachers, speaking mostly to those working in pre-service environments but beginning a discourse about continuing professional development. While useful for both secondary and primary practitioners, it may be more immediately relevant to primary teachers. The authors espouse a broadly social constructivist approach, which works well. In so doing, they have to make an interesting journey which takes account of the starting point of many current teacher education practices – reliance on cognitive development theory, use of rather feeble peer-group ‘microteaching’ and poor linkages with day-to-day understandings of ordinary schools. The outcome is a book which is well structured within a broadly reflective approach and which is always practical and consistent with its own methodological principles. For the newly appointed college of education tutor or primary education adviser, it could be inspiring; for the more experienced tutor, it will never be less than challenging. There are strong sections on

assessing teacher learning, on designing a teacher education programme and on open and distance learning approaches. Consistent use of the practical ideas and approaches could transform a teacher education experience.

There is also, perhaps, a missed opportunity to address the other central issue in many or most teacher education courses – the failure to ensure that every beginning teacher leaves their college of education with the real skills to teach young children in the crucial early primary years how to read, write and manipulate numbers. It might be argued that adding material of this kind might take away from the prime focus of the book and simply blur the main messages about approaches to teacher education. Nevertheless, such guidance needs to be immediately available to all primary teacher educators and advisers, and it could be argued that this would have grounded the book in the core needs of every primary teacher.

Craig, Kraft, and du Plessis (1998) set the challenge for all teacher educators as:

teacher educators should be active in classroom and school research, model good practices in their own teaching, impart clear subject pedagogies, have a clear concept of how adults and children learn, and take time to reflect with students about teaching practice.

This rare book speaks to all of these dimensions of teacher education. It should be carried daily, and used, by teacher educators in both college and continuing professional development contexts. Could some enterprising agency ensure appropriate distribution?

References

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Continuing higher education and lifelong learning. An international comparative study on structures, organisation and provisions, edited by Michaela Knust and Anke Hanft, Heidelberg, Springer, 2009, 367 pp., £126.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4020-9675-4

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Education, equality and social cohesion. A comparative analysis, by Andy Green, John Preston and Jan Germen Janmaat, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 226 pp., £18.99 (paperback), ISBN-13 987-0-230-22363-9 (first published in hardback 2006)

Writing book reviews is a subjective business and reviewing three at one go seems quite a task. However, all three books use the word 'comparative' in their titles which