Australian Journal of Teacher Education

Volume 16 | Issue 2 Article 4

1991

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REVIEW ARTICLE

HOW CAN WE KNOW ABOUT KNOWING IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION?

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Colin W. Evers & Gabriele Lakomski (1991) *Knowing Educational Administration* Pergamon Press, 250 pp hdbk, c. A$85

This book is subtitled *"Contemporary Methodological Controversies in Educational Administration Research"*. We are here not talking about educational administration as such, but about *theories* of educational administration, and at a level of abstraction which many administrators will find daunting. In describing prevailing controversies over epistemologies in educational administration, the authors present yet another one, namely whether their Quinean/holistic point of view can accommodate ethics and a rational knowledge without a foundational justification as flawed as the ones they criticise.

Many of the chapters had appeared in discrete form by the two authors in international journals. They have been pulled together here skilfully and coherently. One cannot dispute the scholarly presentation of material. Educational administrators such as Griffiths, Greenfield, Hodgkinson, Hoy, Willower, Sergiovanni, Kemmis, Bates are discussed in some detail. Because their administrative policies are secondary to a pursuit of their epistemological assumptions, a prior knowledge of their work makes following the argument much easier. Writings from Dewey, Taylor, Simon, Gadamer, Habermas, Giddens, Churchlands provide a broader post-positivistic epistemological context to their argument.

The authors begin from the assumption that *"Promoting good rationality is... a matter of promoting the kind of reasoning employed in and exhibited by 'our best theories'"* (p. 183). What counts as 'best'? *"We believe that the mistake lies with the epistemological enterprise of foundational justification... Foundational justification proceeds typically by identifying an epistemically privileged set of claims and then attempting to use these to justify other claims."* (p. 213).

Most of the educational administration theorists discussed in this book are defined as holding one of two types of foundationalist theories. Firstly, the *oppositional diversity thesis* is held by those who claim that research paradigms are incommensurable. *"The scientists who live in different paradigms live in different worlds"*. Popkewitz (1984, p. 35) for example divides educational sciences into the three paradigms - empirical analytic (quantitative), symbolic (qualitative and interpretive) and critical (where political criteria are applied). Burrell and Morgan's (1982, p. 217) interpretive, functionalist, radical structuralist and radical humanist paradigms illustrate another four mutually exclusive sets of basic assumptions about the way research relates to the world. Qualitative (action research) is seen as incommensurable with quantitative models, because of their different goals - social improvement or validity.

The second is a *complementary diversity thesis* which acknowledges that even the incommensurable paradigms used by Kuhn, Newtonian physics and quantum theory, continue to be used side by side in current scientific research. They are simply acknowledged to be serving different human purposes. This *methodological* pluralism allows for appropriate ways of approaching different, or even the same, research problems and supports. Folk theories can coexist happily with meta-analysis and behavioural science regardless of their different epistemological assumptions. The problem of how they can resolve their differences, or even if they need to, is left unanswered. Evers and Lakomski are content to avoid detailed discussion as to how Giddens can maintain the explanation/understanding distinction, for instance, simply referring (p. 225) to an unpublished 1987 paper by Jim Walker. In admitting the problem of unambiguously identifying educational research paradigms, they raise the question of how their own coherent theory can be placed outside a complementary diversity thesis. One of their main problems is the self-reference necessary to pursue a more

epistemological argument here. To even describe epistemologies as inadequate on the grounds of foundationalist theory is to be involved in the same sort of contradiction-generating paradox as "This sentence is false", for they must be criticising them from within an epistemology which is open to the same criticism.

Evers and Lakomski argue that the very idea of research paradigms is mistaken and incoherent because it relies on a notion of observational truth, a distinction between paradigms and the 'real' world. For them, shared concepts and justifications, meaning and truth are brought into a productive relation with one another through 'touchstone' - which denies a distinction between rationality and content; good and problem-solving; and ethical and empirical claims. Touchstone is defined (p. 233) as non-foundationalist because it is merely the shifting and historically explicable amount of theory that is shared by rival theories and theorists. All our beliefs are in principle open to revision not against how they fit "the real world", but how they cohere with all of our other beliefs. This is a holistic theory operating not only according to empirical adequacy, but to principles of consistency, simplicity, comprehensiveness, fecundity, familiarity of principle and explanatory power (p. 229). So when Evers and Lakomski say (p. 213) *"We do not need alternatives to science: we need better science"*, they appear *prima facie* to have considerably revised the notion of science.

Logically, there need be no retreat to foundationalism. What counts as a better science from a coherentist view? Because it includes values, it shifts the emphasis from truth to *evidence*. How do we decide in judging contentious evidence which of the above principles are overriding? Even by including explanatory power, Evers and Lakomski are still begging the question about causal notions versus intentionality. If they allow reasons the same explanatory force as causes, as Davidson does, they might well by-pass it. But they make the mistake of reverting to a Quinean behaviourism, in which the meaning of a statement is still identified with the means of confirming evidence - they remain verificationists. The requirement of touchstone says it must be a theory that works, especially in such problems as getting researchers out of 'real' offices (p. 229). And the theory must not only be one which works but one which *is seen to be* working, i.e. it is still a behaviouristic view of science because the principles of simplicity and parsimony require us to focus on the relatively superficial aspects of any claim. To remove the distinction between ethical and empirical claims is in this case to reduce the former to the latter. Like Ted Trainer (1991) they reduce ethical concepts or principles to their prudential value - how they work in a shared world of human action. Evers and Lakomski admit they are reductionist, but they do not use the term 'behaviourist', because that might look suspiciously like a foundationalist assumption. Quine (1990, pp. 37-8) is more explicit

> *The behaviourist approach is mandatory. In psychology one may or may not be a behaviourist, but in linguistics one has no choice. Each of us learns his language by observing other people's verbal behaviour and having his own faltering verbal behaviour observed and reinforced and corrected by others. We depend strictly on overt behaviour in observable situations... There is nothing in linguistic meaning beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behaviour in observable circumstances.*

A coherence view accounts better than traditional falsification theory for the problem of us continuing to pursue theories of administration when presented with particular counter-examples. But if evidence rests on *coherent* evidence rather than paradigm-theory, then are we right to believe:

1. that if our beliefs are mostly true, then they are mostly coherent?; and
2. that if *"many of our beliefs cohere with many others, then many of our beliefs are true"* (Davidson)?

For instance, Greenfield's subjective apprehension of interpretations and a successful embedding of these into explanatory frameworks that invoke an agent's reasons and inner motivations is acknowledged as *"a relatively autonomous domain of discourse that is both predictively useful and explanatorily economical"* (p. 90). But Evers and Lakomski dismiss it as simply a folk theory which even if it is empirically adequate now will prove to be false if it is not capable of integration with *"the rest of our developing scientific world view"*. *"If humans are complex physical systems and physical science is true (at least in its domain of application), then if the fundamental theoretical categories of folk theory are not found in physical science, folk theory will actually be false."* And if the Churchlands' (1990) philosophy of mind were true then the above premises would be true. If intentionalist or hermeneutic views are dismissed from the

coherentist theory on the grounds of their truth or falsity, then Evers and Lakomski are operating within a paradigmatic theory which they have condemned as being foundationalist.

If they are using the notion of truth in some sort of new non-foundationalist sense, their coherent theory requires either a desperate conventionalism or dependence on power politics (*"we reach a decision on the theory which is strongest under present circumstances"* p. 233). Is the better science the more popular one? Amongst educational administrators? Or the general public? This seems to me to be a dangerous principle. Because favoured research methods are scientifically oriented, are they then the best, even where they rest on an outdated foundationalism? They might be comprehensive because of their banality, simply because of their reductive quality (cf. de Broglie's quote from physics: *There is nothing so dangerous as a precise definition*"). To prefer quantitative science over qualitative methods may have less to do with truth, even coherentist truth, than political history, and we should worry a bit about the consequence for values and intentions[1].

So, despite the acknowledged acceptance by even Cronbach and Campbell (p. 223) of the limitations of sole allegiance to a single viewpoint about knowledge and practice, Evers and Lakomski are left with the foundationalists' problem of an epistemically privileged set of claims, namely current touchstone of scientific materialism, without much faith in the capacity of intentionalism or hermeneutics to overthrow those touchstones. Acknowledging Greenfield's point that the standard of truth is only as plausible as the background theories it is being invoked to adjudicate (p. 79) allows them to rob foundational schemata of their point. They are caught in the self-referential paradox. To dismiss hermeneutic beliefs as indicative of mere methodological diversity rather than epistemological diversity (p. 224) is simply to illustrate Evers' and Lakomski's assumption that knowledge is founded upon scientific method. If we really want to discard the use of the word 'true' (p. 227), then we have to acknowledge that touchstone really *must* be more than the behaviourist/materialist agenda Evers and Lakomski have for it. The hermeneuticists who believe that meaning is meta-empirical may not be incommensurable with behaviourists, but merely assign less importance to empirical science within their epistemology. In placing a higher priority on meta-empirical matters, they are merely redefining their touchstone to include feelings, intentions, desires, understandings as a *valuable* component of knowing.

I want mind and matter to be held in equal regard by educational administrators and believe they can do this within a coherent unity theory even if they have to concede that our conceptual construction and speculative interpretation is dependent upon and constructed from within a sensed world. To accept Churchlands' argument (1990, p. 87) that *"it goes against modern psychological evidence that one's introspective judgements are on all fours with perceptual judgements generally, and provide knowledge that is in no way distinguished by any special status, purity or authority"* is simply to beg the question as to the priority of psychological research. Poets and artists may have as much *social* efficacy and certainly provide as much meaning. I believe (with the poets and artists) in an indubitable awareness of an individual self which can guide actions with as much force as external causes, and becomes more than a Churchlandish neural network. It uses imagination as well as logic to draw meaningful associations between theories, people, situations and experiences. Because we are working with people, and know our intentions in dealing with them, our construction of them as persons rather than historical bundles of acquired habits, we as educational administrators have to question further the arguments underlying the Evers and Lakomski behaviourist epistemology.

I can accept the need for a coherentist theory without the Quinean materialism. I am probably happier with the Davidsonian/Dennett holistic theory (more compatible with Greenfield and Sergiovanni) which begins in our sensed world and constructs a more human shared reality from that. Ironically, even though Churchland believes that a completed neuroscience will embody the essential wisdom about our inner nature, he leaves space in his final chapter to allow for the value of introspective consciousness, even if it becomes little more than awareness of glucose consumption in the fore-brain, dopamine levels in the thalamus and so on. Self-awareness is something Evers and Lakomski say little about and the phenomenologists place a priority on. My postgraduate courses on ethics in educational administration have provided some evidence for believing that one of the important ways of knowing educational administration is precisely a reflection which creates self-awareness in the educational administrator to think about his/her own sets of values, and her/his reasons for holding them as well as testing those assumptions

against the "real world" schools. Ironically, though its language and erudition make it difficult to access, this book could well be used to generate such reflection. There should be more room within the coherent theory to allow for further debate between the humanists and the materialists.

ENDNOTE

1. For instance, see my article "On equitable cakecutting" (Haynes, 1989) where I argue that Dawkins presents a case for funding more women in maths and science on the grounds of equity, but does not argue for more men in arts and education because he "sees" the problem of equity/equality through a lens of national productivity rather than personal rights. He is coherent and he can provide facts to back up his case, but still there remain other ways [perhaps less powerful] of construing the facts, and defining the problem.

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BOOK REVIEW

Foden, F. (1989), *The Examiner : James Booth and the origins of common examinations.* University of Leeds Printing Service, Leeds, 1989, pp . viii + 221.

The use of examinations in the educative process has spread quickly throughout Western education systems since the time of their central role in the early development of educational opportunities in nineteenth century England. Examination change has been evolutionary and revolutionary in nature, involving a number of stages, individuals, institutions, catalytic events and chain reactions. Debate on their role has been virtually continual, at times fierce and sometimes productive. Teacher educators should be aware of this debate and its historical origins for during the past one hundred and fifty years examining has been at the very heart of the schooling process in Western society.

Examinations, their form and operation, have long provided issues of controversy in English schooling. A number of United Kingdom scholars have discussed the development and role of examinations. These include Sir P. Hartog and E.G. Rhodes' *An Examination of Examinations* (1936) and *The Marks of Examiners* (1936), J.L. Brereton's *The Case for Examinations : An account of their place in Education with some proposals for their Reform* (1944), G.B. Jeffery's *External Examinations in Secondary Schools* (1958), R.J. Montgomery's *Examinations : An account of their evolution as administrative devices in England* (1965), J. Roach's *Public Examinations in England : 1850-1900* (1971), R. Dore's *The Diploma Disease : Education, Qualification and Development* (1976) and R. Macleod's (Ed.). *Days of Judgement : Science, Examinations and the Organization of Knowledge in late Victorian Times* (1982). In spite of their obvious significance and the attention paid them, these studies do not represent an over-abundance of historical research into the actual origins of English school examinations. Moreover, Foden in his book *The Examiner* correctly observes:

> *... educational historians have, for the most part, tended to lack a proper focus for their treatment of examinations, and their accounts of how they came to have a significant role in the education system are often casual and inaccurate. Some quite respectable historians tend to make commonplace mistakes about the arrival and impact of examinations. (p. 112).*

Examinations began to be woven into the fabric of the education system of Britain during the period (1852-1857) when James Booth was a member and later President of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, now known as the Royal Society of Arts. Once they were introduced into the English education system their use spread "like an epidemic disease" (p. 111). In his book, *The Examiner,* Foden endeavours to add to the history of education literature regarding the significance of examinations to the provision of education. He observes that in traditional educational histories the introduction of examinations;

> *have usually been treated as interesting addenda to other and more important developments, the initiatives of reformers, the foundations of new institutions, government reports and Acts of Parliament. Their organic significance in the whole system tends to be missed. (p. 111)*

The book is both a biography and a history of the origins of examinations. It traces the major events in the life of James Booth, an energetic Irishman, who was foremost in setting in motion the process whereby examinations formed a critical role in English education. Foden devotes separate chapters to the various stages of the life of Booth and intertwines the history of the origin of public examinations conducted by the Society of Arts around his central character. The chapter headings illustrate this intermingling of biography and examination history. The first four chapters are biographical with titles such as Trinity Graduate, Irish Emigrant; Mathematician, Teacher; Priest and Industrial Educator followed by six chapters on the history of the origins of examinations. The final two chapters complete the biography of Booth.

The book should be required reading for those interested in the history of assessment. It has many features that recommend it to educational and social historians. The technique of