



**Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre**

PUBLICATION NO.20

INDICATORS IN THE U.S. AND THE U.K.

C.T. FITZ-GIBBON

Evaluation and Research in Education  
1990

## INDICATORS IN THE US AND THE UK

Carol Taylor Fitz-Gibbon

*Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre, School of Education,  
University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE1 7RU.*

An educational indicator is 'a statistic or composite statistic that reflects some important aspect of education' (Shavelson, this issue). By collecting indicators at regular intervals we can track the performance of a system. Indicators, often referred to as 'Performance Indicators', are on the educational agenda in both the US and the UK. Have the two educational systems anything to learn from each other? As one way to explore this question three pairs of speakers were invited to present papers in a symposium at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in Boston, April 1990. Each pair consisted of one person from the US and one from the UK.

To try to ensure communication across the barrier of the common language, speakers were asked to present not their own paper but that of the other member of their pair. Like so many experimental designs, this design foundered on the rock of attrition... not, thank goodness, actual mortality, but those many minor problems which prevent people from being present as planned. However, for Rich Shavelson (former president of AERA and currently Dean of the Education Faculty at the University of California at Santa Barbara) and Peter Tymms (now at Moray House, Edinburgh, Scotland and formerly at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England) the design worked and produced two interesting papers elegantly presented by the non-authors. Ruth Mitchell (formerly at the University of California at Los Angeles and now Associate Director of the Council for Basic Education, Washington, DC) valiantly and interestingly presented both her own paper and that of Brian Wilcox (former president of the British Educational Research Association and Honorary Professorial Fellow at Sheffield University, on leave from Sheffield Local Education Authority). John Gray (Professor of Education at Sheffield University) and David Jesson (also at Sheffield University) presented a lucid analysis of principles relating to the design of performance indicator systems.

### **Achievement Indicators in the US and the UK**

At the heart of educational indicator systems will lie measures of achievement. One way in which the US and the UK have confused each other, if not themselves, is in the use of the term 'achievement'. The US has an extensive array of so-called 'achievement' tests, frequently administered at key stages of pupil's careers.

These tests are, however, secret, speeded, largely multiple choice, objective tests. They have been developed to meet psychometric criteria and are likely to be insensitive to instructional effects (i.e. they do not reflect good or poor teaching). They probably represent measures of ability to a greater extent than measures of classroom-related achievement. It seems likely that much educational research in the US has suffered from the use of such inadequate measures of educational output. This probability has, indeed, long been recognised by many researchers (e.g. Carver, 1975; Willms, 1985). Shavelson presents a telling anecdote about the kind of student-behaviour induced by such 'achievement' measures and illustrates how he and others are working to set right this primary flaw: the lack of good dependent variables in the US. Indicators which are insensitive to teachers' work and to pupils' genuine achievements will have no place in the effective indicator systems which we all seek. This sensitivity to instruction may be a feature of the 'authentic' testing now being called for in the US. Only research will tell, in time.

If you have ever had the experience of administering a set of these traditional, standardised 'achievement' tests in an inner city school, and watched the desultory and disinterested approach taken by many students to this apparently arcane exercise, you will understand the other charming term adopted in the US: 'high stakes' testing. Tests are taken seriously when something rests on the outcome.

Authentic, high stakes testing has been enjoyed in the UK for about a century. As described here by Tymms, examination 'Boards' (usually non-profit organisations, often originally linked to universities) publish syllabuses, set examinations, grade the papers blind and award highly valued certificates for those who succeed. These certificates help students to gain employment and obtain entry to higher education, until recently with up to 100% grants. The published syllabus, the availability of papers from previous years, the reporting back to the profession of typical errors made by students and the substantial involvement of teachers in the work of examination boards, ensures that the examinations relate to classroom practice. This is, of course, as Shavelson notes, because 'what is monitored becomes what is taught'. It is therefore important to note that the examinations require authentic academic behaviours such as writing essays and working out problems. Tymms' paper provides illustrations drawn, as are Shavelson's, from the area of science.

Even as researchers such as Shavelson and his colleagues in the US move towards developing tests more like those used in the UK, the UK seems perversely to be hurrying along alleys that US experience can be said to have already demonstrated to be blind: teacher-given grades and massive amounts of criterion-referenced testing. These are topics related to the present topic of performance indicators but not ones to which justice can be done here.

### **Inspection or Site-visits**

People rarely criticise their own in-group publicly and therein lies a problem for learning. Ruth Mitchell has courageously managed to break this pattern and criticises from the inside an exercise in self-monitoring.

Complex systems often consists of semi-autonomous nested hierarchies. One reason for semi-autonomy rather than complete autonomy is this very problem of self-evaluation, the problem of being expected to ferret out and report on one's own inadequacies. Mitchell's vivid portrayal of one system's attempt at self-

monitoring reveals the flaws which undermine such systems, no matter how idealistic they might have been in their original conception. Without credible and acceptable comparative data and agreed assessable standards, the procedures amount to guessing at best and 'horse-trading' at worst. The expert-panel evaluation which Ruth Mitchell describes is different from the role of the *independent* inspectorate in the UK (Her Majesty's Inspectors, HMI) but HMI nevertheless lay claim to insider expertise, as in the self-evaluation exercise described by Mitchell. Is 'expertise' a substitute for more formal methodology?

Brian Wilcox deals with the roles of HMI and other 'local' inspectors, located in Local Education Authorities (LEAs, known as 'School Districts' in the US). This inspection is certainly hierarchical, a visit from 'higher up' the system, and there is no return visit to inspect the inspectors. Wilcox attempts to create the kind of framework in which site visits can capture the finer points of quality which indicators might miss. It is worth bearing in mind that at the time of writing there is talk in the UK of LEAs 'withering on the vine'. Schools are to be given about 90% of the education budget, on a formula basis and are then to manage their own affairs. What role is there, then, for LEA inspectors? Will schools buy their services? Will they be declared redundant as budgets shrink? For LEAs, there should be considerable motivation towards devising credible and sustainable roles for inspectors at the local level. Neither of the articles which address this problem suggests that inspectors should act as researchers checking on the reliability and validity of a quantitative data base and acting collaboratively with teachers. This flavour of performance monitoring as research does, however, come across in the contribution by Tymms.

### Performance Indicators and LEAs

A major difference between US and UK educational systems is the routine presence, in US School Districts (LEAs), of units which deal with statistics, research, evaluation and monitoring. The Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) had such a unit but ILEA itself no longer exists and other LEAs are unprepared for extensive, quantitative performance monitoring. Gray and Jesson describe this state of affairs and provide some principles which they believe would help assist LEAs in setting their agendas. In doing so they argue that the LEA will need to adopt not only more rigorous and systematic approaches to the nature of the questions they ask, but also to review, in a hitherto unprecedented manner, the nature of the qualitative judgments they wish to make about their schools and the kinds of information they are willing and able to collect in relationship to their judgments. Personally I have to say that while admiring the elegance of their analysis I disagree with the solutions they suggest. But that is a debate which will have to be taken up elsewhere and readers will, meanwhile, make up their own minds.

### References

- Carver, R. P. (1975) The Coleman Report: Using inappropriately designed achievement tests. *American Educational Research Journal* 12(1), 77-86.
- Willms, J. D. (1985) Catholic school effects on academic achievement: New evidence from the High School and Beyond follow-up study. *Sociology of Education* 58, 98-114.



## BERA DIALOGUES

Series edited by **Pamela LOMAX**, Kingston Polytechnic

This new series, published in association with the *British Educational Research Association*, will provide a forum in which important educational developments can be debated, made public and used to inform policy and decision making about education.

### THE MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE

Edited by **Pamela LOMAX**, Kingston Polytechnic

The fundamental premise of this book is that education is about values and that all research acts within education should include an examination and a refinement of these values and an attempt to make them central to practice. The research presented is teacher research. The book is divided into three main sections: 1. Action Research for All; 2. Bringing About Change in Schools; 3. Supporting the Work of Teachers.

Paperback 1-85359-060-6 £9.95 (\$21.00)

1989 **BERA Dialogues 1**

Hardback 1-85359-061-4 £30.00 (\$63.00)

183 pages

### PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Edited by **Carol T. FITZ-GIBBON**, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne

This book provides an important series of readings designed to document and clarify the practical and policy issues surrounding the use of Performance Indicators in the world of education. After a brief historical perspective and an illustration of the various responses of Local Education Authorities, the book goes on to examine present developments in relation to previous movements towards accountability: inspection and school self-evaluation. Subsequent chapters look to the future and to the design of systems for performance monitoring.

Paperback 1-85359-092-4 £6.95 (\$15.00)

1990 **BERA Dialogues 2**

Hardback 1-85359-093-2 £23.00 (\$49.00)

120 pages

### MANAGING STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN SCHOOLS

Edited by **Pamela LOMAX**, Kingston Polytechnic

This book contains accounts written by teacher researchers who were using action research to improve management practices in their schools and colleges particularly in relation to the development of staff in schools.

Part two of the book is intended to raise issues to do with teacher action research as a method for developing a school staff. Part three contains accounts by school teachers who were managing change in particular school contexts and for whom a major part of the work involved staff development.

Paperback 1-85359-107-6 £6.95 (\$15.00)

1990 **BERA Dialogues 3**

Hardback 1-85359-108-4 £23.00 (\$49.00)

128 pages

### EMERGING PARTNERSHIPS: Current Research in Language and Literacy

Edited by **David WRAY**, University of Exeter

This volume contains accounts of some of the most interesting recent research into language and literacy development. The papers included cover early language development, preschool literacy development, children's writing, oral classroom language, the relationships between reading and writing, the use of word-processors, and literacy outside the school context.

Paperback 1-85359-109-2 £6.95 (\$15.00)

1990 **BERA Dialogues 4**

Hardback 1-85359-110-6 £23.00 (\$49.00)

136 pages



**MULTILINGUAL MATTERS LTD**  
Bank House, 8a Hill Road, Clevedon  
Avon, England, BS21 7HH

