

JUDITH C. ISHERWOOD & PATRICK A. BAKER (Editors). *Visiting Scholar, Geoffrey Isherwood: A Reader for educational leaders*. Ste-Anne-de Bellevue, QC: Shoreline. (2002). 217 pp. (ISBN 1-896754-29-8).

Visiting Scholar is really two books in one. Upon approaching retirement from his academic career, Geoffrey Isherwood had begun to write the story of his career as an educator, but he died before the work was completed. The editors decided to publish what Geof had been able to put on paper before his death, and to round it out with selections from some of his other writings from previous years. This is one of the two major themes of the book. The other is a collection of personal narratives and reminiscences concerning Geof obtained from former students and colleagues. Hence, the book is intended to serve two main aims: the first is to provide insight into Geof's convictions concerning the theory and practice of educational administration; the second is to pay tribute to Geof as teacher, mentor, scholar, and wise friend.

I did not know Geof very well, but I think he would have had mixed feelings about having these two themes mixed together in the same volume. I am certain that he would have been quite comfortable with a published monograph outlining the convictions he had arrived at over a long and extremely successful career as a distinguished and much admired professor of educational administration. I wonder if publishing the eulogies would have pleased him. However, I suppose they do attest to Geof's effectiveness as a professor of educational administration, and as a mentor to his students, be they novices or seasoned professionals. For that reason it seems to be a useful part of the whole book.

After a suitable introduction, the book begins with Geof's *On Becoming a School Administrator*, the essay he was writing when death forced him to leave the work unfinished. His presentation is written in the narrative style of an autobiography. Beginning with his work as a schoolteacher and principal, it continues chronologically up to the time he began to work at McGill University. It is clear that by the time Geof was approaching retirement age, he had grown away from the quantitative, statistical, positivistic research methods he was trained to use while studying for his doctorate, through qualitative, descriptive ethnographic approaches, and finally to research through reflection on personal experience. In his presentation, he used the narrative approach of the storyteller. This makes his work interesting and very readable. But is it research?

Can autobiographical narrative be a useful method of social research? Can it be dignified under the rubric 'reflexive ethnography'? Is it objective enough to produce valid, reliable findings that can be generalized to other situations in which other individuals find themselves looking for guidance as to administrative behavior?

Larry Sackney of the University of Saskatchewan, one of the contributors to this book, seems to think so. He writes:

The narrative view is consistent with symbolic interaction, which makes us sensitive to how we process interaction based on interpretations. Interaction, by definition is narrative; it embodies the flow of human experience . . . I can imagine that reflexive ethnography, where the researcher's personal experiences become important in how it illuminates the culture under study, was an important element in his final work. (p. 82)

Another contributor, Dave McCabe, Superintendent of Education, Eastern School District, PEI, seems to have a different point of view. He writes: "I have found it useful to maintain a well-sanitized version of my life work in the form of an elegantly formatted "Résumé" . . . In these cleverly edited pages is recorded . . . an unbroken chain of solid accomplishments. Here is proclaimed an extraordinary ability to overcome great obstacles to change. Moreover, it suggests the eminent arrival of a true leader – a heroic sort of fellow who comes along, at long last, to unleash the powerful magic of tools like strategic planning, program reviews, clinical supervision, and restructuring to right the wrongs of public schooling in my community." (pp. 95-96)

Clearly, autobiographical narrative can be used for a variety of purposes. But serious questions can be raised. Is it possible for individuals to remember without bias the events of their own lives? I suspect we can remember events and actions that took place in the past with fair accuracy, even to the point of assigning dates to them; but can we recall honestly our personal motives for actions taken in the distant past? I am not sure. However, it seems to me that autobiographical ethnography can be useful to the degree that the things we recall offer opportunities to make valid, useful generalizations. I believe that in his narrative (pp. 19 – 46), Geof uses his experiences to good effect. In his storytelling, he presents us with memories that seem to have been very carefully selected with a view to raising important questions in our minds concerning principles and practices of educational administration. No doubt Geof would have addressed these later on in his book, had he been given the opportunity.

Let me cite some examples to illustrate the kinds of questions he raises. In the story about Roland, Geof causes us to wonder: How should a student be disciplined for smoking? Other questions engage us and cause us to reflect. How did disciplining Benny Johns influence Geof's reputation as a teacher? Is it a good idea to suspend students from school when they do not conform to school regulations? Should a principal ever raise the mark a teacher gave to a student? After completing a careful statistical analysis, should the principal ever raise the grades of the 'hard markers' and lower those of the 'easy markers' to create more comparable standards throughout the school?

What sorts of assignments should the newly-appointed teachers expect to be given? Does it make sense to give beginning teachers the most difficult pupils? Should pupils be sorted into classes homogeneously? Does that create segregated student societies in schools? If so, is this a bad thing? Why was Geof constantly sick over and over again in his first year of teaching, and does that happen to other novices? (It certainly did to me!) Should participation in extra-curricular activities be limited to those who achieve certain academic levels of attainment, and maintain acceptable behaviour standards, or should it be open to all students? I could go on and on, quoting examples of questions that arise in Geof's text. The point is that because of the way these questions are raised in the context of examples from real life (Geof's real life), they are much more engaging to the reader than the bare list I have cited above in this paragraph. Because these questions are presented within a story, they impress the mind of the reader. Moreover, they all have important implications for educational administration.

Allow me digress here to make a point based on my own experience. At the beginning of the 70s, the Province of Quebec began pressuring McGill University to account for all of its student services and their costs in a more coherent way than it formerly had. At that time, student services included student counseling, student health services, student residences, bursaries and loans, and student discipline, to mention just a few. These had all been established at different times over many years independently from one another, and there was very little if any administrative or financial coordination among them. We were required to reorganize them into a coherent administrative and budgetary system. In the light of these exigencies, in 1971, Principal Bell asked me to serve as Dean of Students. I was reluctant, and explained to him that I had had no formal training in either the budgeting or the administration of student services. He asked me: "If I can not find a director of student services from among the members of the Faculty of Education, where else should I look?" I accepted the position, and completed the required reorganization. Eleven months later, I was appointed to a five-year term as Vice-Principal (Academic), and five years after, I was re-appointed to a second term. When I stepped down after ten years of service as a senior administrator, I said to myself: "If only I had known in 1971 what I know now about academic administration, just from experience, my work would have been so much easier." On further reflection, I realized that I had learned very little of practical value from the crash course I gave myself through reading science-based textbooks on administration, or even from the brief summer course I took at the Business School at Western University in London, Ontario. I believe that a book such as that which Geof started to write would have been much more useful to me in 1971, when I undertook the position of an administrator at McGill, than any of the more traditional textbooks in educational administration would

have been. This is especially true of those texts that attempted to construct theories of administration on generalizations resulting from research using positivistic methods. Someone once suggested that researchers in education who limit themselves to positivistic research methods indicate thereby that they suffer from physics envy. Be that as it may, those “more scientific” approaches are not well suited to answering the kinds of questions that Geoff raises in his essay at the beginning of his book.

One thing that emerges throughout the whole of the book is Geof’s commitment to breaking down the walls that separate theoreticians from practitioners in the field of educational administration. This is evident not only in his teaching and writing in the university, but in the record of his activities in the field with his professional colleagues “out there, in the real world.”

There is a temptation in the university for sociologists of education to imitate the work of scholars in the Department of Sociology, and for psychologists working in the Faculty of Education to aspire to the methods used by professors in the Department of Psychology of the Faculty of Arts. There are some good reasons for this, including the higher prestige of our cousins in the Faculty of Arts, and their readier access to research grants. But if Geof ever fell into this trap, he was certainly able to escape from it very quickly. It seemed odd to me at the beginning of my university career forty-five years ago that there was so much more encouragement for scientists who were trying to teach chimpanzees to count than for those who were trying to find out how to be more effective at teaching arithmetic to human children.

Geof was more concerned with making contributions to the improvement of administrative practice in the real world of school systems than he was with competing for prestige with his peers in the business school. This is made very clear not only in his own writings, but in many of the laudatory essays in the book written by his former students and colleagues in the field. Given his success and that of his many students, it is clear that Geof had an exemplary career. I am proud to have known him, even a little.

Now some practical details about the book. I wish that it had an index at the end that would facilitate reference to specific topics and names in the text. And I wish there were not so many typographical errors throughout its pages. That having been said, I believe that this book is a very worthy addition to the literature in school administration. It would have been very helpful to me in 1971.

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