

EITN Issue 17 Book Reviews

Edited by Sarah Cornelius and Claire Molloy, November 2009

Service Integration in Schools: Research and Policy Discourses, Practices and Future Prospects

J. Forbes and C. Watson (eds.)

Rotterdam: Sense Publishers (2009), pp. 212, Pbk., €45, ISBN 9789087905866

Reviewed by Walter Humes, University of the West of Scotland

This book had its origins in a series of research seminars, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, exploring the implications of inter-agency and inter-disciplinary collaborative working, evident for example in the establishment of Children's Services Departments in local authorities, bringing together staff from education, health and social work. Three universities (Aberdeen, Birmingham and Ulster) led the seminars, thus ensuring that perspectives from different parts of the United Kingdom were represented. Those invited to participate included policy makers and practitioners as well as academic researchers.

The papers are grouped into four sections, each with a useful introduction giving an overview of the field. Part one deals with the discourses of inter-professionalism and includes papers describing collaborative working between health and education professionals, and between teachers and speech and language therapists. In his overview Mike Cowie points out that 'the nature of collaborative working is certainly not unproblematic' and that there is a danger of neglecting 'issues to do with identity, power and status in particular contexts'. Part two focuses specifically on service integration and schools, and provides comparative accounts of the situation in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It is pointed out that while schools and local authorities are often exhorted to engage in 'joined-up thinking'; this quality is not always evident within government. The authors of the chapter on Northern Ireland note that effective service integration requires 'economic, legal and political accountability as well as moral, social and educational responsibility'.

The third part of the book is concerned with questions of leadership and management within inter-agency structures, which involve both organisational change and individual change on the part of professionals. Promoting integration requires effective partnerships and this, in turn, requires opportunities for professional learning which encourages the exercise of distributed leadership. The boundaries between traditionally separate professions represent discursive space which can promote either constructive change or retreat to familiar territory. An important note of caution is struck by David Hartley who sees the service integration agenda as being supported by an ideologically-driven desire for workforce reform, designed to service a consumerist and marketised culture.

In the fourth and final section of the book, the papers explore the relationship between the local and the global in discourses of service integration. Drawing on comparative evidence from South Africa, New Zealand and Australia, as well as England, Graham Butt and Helen Gunter conclude that reforms in the direction of increased professional integration are 'as much about changing cultures as they are about changing structures'. Cate Watson contrasts the closure and uniformity of the discourse of integration at a global level with the instability of practice experienced at a local level. Finally, Jon Nixon calls for a new vocabulary of integration which emphasises inter-professional relationships and is not afraid to use terms such as hope, friendship and trust.

In her general introduction to the whole collection, Joan Forbes makes it plain that the aim is not to offer definitive solutions to complex problems, but rather to introduce the reader to 'a series of alternative perspectives, questions and suggestions that explore what is at stake and what is worthwhile retaining and changing in public services to children'. This modest ambition is both timely and appropriate. Too often in education it is assumed that structural change in itself will stimulate a range of other desired changes (in attitude, in values, in culture, in identity). The contributors to this volume are well aware that a more subtle approach is needed, one which respects the knowledge, skills and experience of people with very different professional backgrounds, but who share a common desire to improve the life chances of children.