REVIEW ESSAY

Barrow, R. *Giving Teaching Back to Teachers: A Critical Introduction to Curriculum Theory.* London: The Althouse Press, 1984, 301 pp.

Readers are likely to approach this book either with high expectations or with a certain caution, for the back cover sings its praises in very high terms indeed. We are told to expect "brutal clarity", a "major new critique", a "comprehensive overview", "impartiality and rigour". In the words of Professor Egan, "this is one of those rare books that can be confidently given to the student as an introduction to curriculum theory while at the same time being a significant contribution to scholarship which no one in the field can afford to ignore." High praise indeed, and the question naturally arises as to whether this book, in fact, lives up to its billing.

Professor Egan is certainly right to say that the book should not be ignored. Barrow presents a cogent case, powerfully argued and, as one has come to expect from his work, written in clear, attractive and sometimes felicitous English. At the same time, the book contains some surprising gaps, which prevent it from becoming the "comprehensive overview" promised by the publishers and some of the arguments are at times prolonged unnecessarily. Above all, the book lacks a sense of historical context and does not acknowledge that others have made essentially the same points, though perhaps in different ways, in earlier times. The argument would have more depth, for example, if the book contained a chapter explaining the historical development of curriculum theory, both as a phenomenon in its own right and as a strand in a more complex social and cultural setting, along the lines charted by, say, the work of Seguel or Kliebard. However, neither Sequel nor Kliebard is mentioned in the bibliography, which is at times a shade idiosyncratic. It lists, for example, fifteen works by Barrow himself, but ignores some of Decker Walker's work, as well as such key books as Shipman's *Inside A Curriculum Project*, Sharp's *Knowledge, Ideology and The Politics of Schooling*, or Gage's *The Scientific Basis of The Art of Teaching*.

Nonetheless, these reservations aside, the book is important. As one would expect from Professor Barrow, it insists on the importance of thinking things through clearly and carefully: "The emphasis in curriculum work should fall less on procedures or styles of operation, and more on establishing a sound theoretical base for such prescriptions as we feel we may legitimately make." (p. 68) Thus, curriculum work is not, should not and indeed cannot ever be a science, applied or otherwise. It cannot ignore questions of goals or intentions, for to do so is neither morally nor philosophically justified. And, in any case, the empirically based research necessary for a "science" of curriculum is neither sufficient to do the job nor sound enough to be trusted, consisting largely of "a startling number of disputed tautologies, unsubstantiated empirical claims and truisms" (p. 97). In short, Barrow has no time for those who see themselves as curriculum engineers, whose task it is to help their clients turn their dreams into reality, the "have model, will travel" types, so to speak. Indeed, he gives very short shrift to any attempt to explain curriculum work in terms of models, diagrams or action-plans: "What is required is not a ground plan for designing curricula, but a recognition of the various sorts of questions that will require some answers...." (p. 55) There is no one best way. Questions of curriculum design, development and implementation are practical, political, contextually bound and can be dealt with only eclectically, provided, of course, that one is rational and philosophically coherent and does not ignore questions of "why" in the rush to solve those of "how". In Barrow's words, "The best way to sell a curriculum... is to give teachers a clear idea of what they are being asked to do, why they are being asked to do it, and why they should be doing it." (p. 69) But, one cannot help wondering, what happens when they do not agree with what they are being rationally urged to do?

In much of this argument, Barrow is surely right. One should not undertake curriculum work without thinking long and hard about goals and this is a philosophical task in all senses of the word. Curricula cannot satisfactorily be derived from needs assessments and other allegedly empirical measures. Nor has curriculum theory yet discovered a "scientific" technique of design, development or implementation. Indeed, the whole process is too complex, too subjective and far too political to be reduced to formulas. Barrow is right to argue that we should think in terms of questions to be tackled, rather than steps to be followed. Interestingly, he is, in this regard, more sympathetic to Tyler than some have been, arguing that Tyler's famous four steps are in reality questions to be answered, using whatever means are most suitable in any given context.

All this is unexceptionable and, indeed, worth saying and Barrow says it very well. What is a little puzzling is the vehemence of the argument, since most people in the "real world" of schooling would seem to be on

Barrow's side. The only people who believe that curriculum development, in the widest sense of the term, is "scientific" are the curriculum engineers themselves. Teachers certainly do not believe it, school and other administrators are not convinced, and academics are sceptical. Indeed, one has the impression that the "scientific" study of curriculum is rather under a cloud these days as Marxists, phenomenonologists, existentialists, sociologists of knowledge, ethnographers, reconceptualists and a swarm of other heretics sound their trumpets. Surprisingly, Barrow deals with these movements in curriculum theory in a paragraph, although one would have hoped that a systematic and comprehensive examination of the field would have taken them fully into account, even if only to subject them to the same analysis as that given to the "scientific" approach.

Nor, of course, is the argument new. Even in the heyday of Bobbitt, Charters and Snedden (and just imagine what Barrow could have done with Snedden's peths, lotments and strands!), the "scientific" approach was rejected as inadequate and misconceived. Thus, Boyd Bode could write in 1924 that "the notion that ideals can be evoked from a process of environmental fact finding is just another of the many delusions to which our sinful flesh is heir"[1] and again in 1927 "...if we start with a wrong assumption no amount of energy and ingenuity in the manipulation of scientific technique will convert this initial error into a sound principle."[2] Barrow, in short, is heir to a substantial tradition and an examination of this historical context would have both strengthened the argument and increased the book's utility.

It is, of course, the failure of the "scientific" approach to deliver the goods or to tidy up its conceptual house that has in recent years led Walker, Reid and others to argue for naturalistic research into curricular matters, using both historical and ethnographic methods. Simply put, the argument has been that we do not know enough to be prescriptive, even if that were possible in principle, and that we should therefore begin with the descriptive and explanatory. It would have been both useful and interesting to have Barrow's opinions on naturalistic research, both on the actual work done and on the theoretical framework underlying it. To speak personally, I would have welcomed a less extended analysis of educational psychology and of research into teaching, which takes up almost half of the book and which becomes repetitive at times (How many ways are there to say that variables are uncontrolled, concepts are fuzzy, hypotheses are tottering and conclusions are built on sand?) and more attention to other developments in the curriculum field. Barrow's chapters on curriculum implementation and evaluation, for example, are useful short analyses of those topics, though necessarily written from the particular perspective of the author. Similar chapters on the research programmes of, say, the Young-Whitty, the Walker-Reid, the Apple-Giroux, the Sharp-Harris (Obviously, I use the labels only as shorthand examples) schools would have helped the book a great deal.

Unlike some more radical critics, Barrow, while he attacks the research that exists on teaching, learning and human development, does not reject in principle the idea that sound and reliable empirical research is possible. In this regard, it would have been interesting to see his comments on, say, Gage's reflections in *The Scientific Basis of the Art of Teaching*. At times as well, his rejection of the literature on teaching is rather too sweeping. Thus, for instance, he dismisses Joyce's model of teaching, since to speak of models "is misleading in that it implies clear distinctions and straightforward limited alternatives where they do not exist", so that to think of teaching "in terms of even a dozen or so models is to distort and impoverish one's conception of teaching." (p. 56) Indeed, "Teaching may take on of a million forms so subtly distinguished and interrelated that it would be fruitless to clarify them, even if one has time, as a million models." (p. 52) This is surely too cavalier. In part, the argument is semantic, hinging upon what one means by the word "model", and not especially important; for "model" we can substitute "type" or "approach" or "class" or whatever suitably general word we can find. The important point, however, is that it can be very useful indeed to think in terms of categories or approaches or whatever one chooses to call them. Even if the argument smacks of Dr. Johnson's kicking the stone, it is beyond dispute that models are useful as bases for thinking. No one who is not totally credulous will treat Joyce's or any other "models" as though they were platonic Forms or even tidy, clear-cut, discrete descriptions of reality. They are, rather, analytical tools, perhaps even ideal types. Without them, or something like them, we could hardly think about certain kinds of phenomena at all.

However, this is to move beyond the scope of a review, although it indicates one of the very great attractions of Professor Barrow's book. In this, as in his other work, he challenges the reader. He does not sit on fences, he is not fuzzy, he does not fudge and he writes in attractive, engaging style. In short he makes one think.

The book is a prolonged argument for one particular view of curriculum and against another. It is an argument that Professor Barrow wins, although he will find that many more people agree with him than he might suspect. He examines the major aspect of curriculum theory: definitions, design, content, implementation and evaluation. In doing so, he also devotes a good deal of space to examining, in his words, "educational

psychology and the timing and organization of curriculum'' and ''research into techniques, methods and styles of teaching''. The book ends with a chapter devoted to teacher education which, he argues, suffers from ''an endemic confusion of form with substance, or manner with content'' (p. 256) and which is too much concerned with using and producing research findings which are not well-founded. Indeed, Barrow urges a drastic reduction of this kind of research, which should be conducted only by those with a ''clear conceptual grasp of the enterprise of education itself.'' (p. 257) Here, as elsewhere, Barrow wishes to see philosophy, in the form of conceptual analysis, given its rightful place — at the helm. It is hard to resist the old Latin tag, however: *quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Who is to ensure that the philosophers are up to scratch? Not only should philosophy regulate the research, however; it should also dominate the education of teachers: ''If teachers are to make sound educational judgements about their practice, they need to have a set of very clear educational concepts.'' (p. 265) Thus, when teachers are properly (i.e., philosophically) educated, they can be safely left alone to do their job. ''Let us prepare teachers for autonomy, and then let us given teaching back to teachers.'' (p. 269)

It is difficult to know what to make of this statement. It is not at all obvious, for example, that teaching has in fact ever been taken away from teachers. Teacher-proof curricula remain a dream (or a nightmare), despite the various attempts to create them. Virtually all the research on curriculum implementation indicates that classrooms remain remarkably untouched by curriculum innovations. If the suggestion is that teachers should determine curricula, one can only respond that this is to remain naively ignorant of political realities. Indeed, in this regard, Professor Barrow could usefully have included in his book some discussion of the political milieu of curriculum-making. The occasional sentence or phrase indicates that he is well aware that political forces are influential in determining curricula, but nowhere is there a sustained discussion of them. In any case, Barrow himself notes that ''I am not arguing that individual teachers should be free to pursue whatever aims they choose....'' and he accepts ''some common set of social and educational goals.'' (p. 261) Nowhere does he explain by what process these goals would be arrived at, except that whoever did it would be guided by reason. And here is the crux of the problem, of course: precisely (or even approximately) how is reason to be made to prevail? And in such a contested and crucial arena as education, whose view of what is reasonable is to be accepted? It is one thing to be concerned about the procedural rules of reasoning, but it is something altogether different to assume that observing the rules will bring us to a universally agreeable destination. In education, as in politics, power counts and no discussion of curriculum can afford to ignore it. The concept of hegemony is being thrown around rather glibly these days, but it is getting at a crucial curricular issue and two sentences on Marxism cannot begin to touch it. Indeed, we would all benefit if Professor Barrow were to turn his analytical powers upon it. The central point, however, is that curriculum, in Raymond Williams' words, is a selection from the culture, and one should not ignore the questions of who does the selecting, for what purpose and by what criteria.

This is a book which should be read by all interested in curriculum questions. Professor Egan is right to say that it should not be ignored. It is not, however, a comprehensive overview since it omits some aspects of curriculum studies and says little or nothing about some recent approaches to curriculum theory and research. Nor, I suspect, is it an introductory text that can be used alone, despite some peculiar footnotes: ''Plato: an Athenian philosopher, 4th century BC. Pupil of Socrates; author of dialogues such as *Republic*. See Barrow, *Plato and Education* 1970) or my personal favourite: ''K. Marx: 19th century author of *Capital* (sic) (1938), founding father of some versions of Marxism. His influence on educational theory has been negligible.'' (p. 272).

The book assumes a certain familiarity with the field and a reader without this would be at a disadvantage in engaging with the arguments advanced. It could be used to good advantage with Pratt's *Curriculum: Design and Development* (not least because Barrow takes particular issue with this book), with Stenhouse's *Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*, or with Apple's *Ideology and Curriculum*. This is not to disparage the book. The curriculum field is such that no one book can properly do it justice. Indeed, the very idea of a ''textbook'' on curriculum is a contradiction. One thing is certain: the book should be used. It makes a useful addition to the literature. Indeed, at times it is downright entertaining, and the curriculum field has not been noted for its ability to bring a smile to the lips. But, above all, it makes an important case with admirably clarity and coherence and, at times, with a certain provocative panache.

Ken Osborne
University of Manitoba

Notes

[1] W.H. Drost, *David Snedden and Education for Social Efficiency*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967, p. 172

[2] B. Bode, *Modern Educational Theories*. New York: Macmillan, 1927, p. 79