

schema for understanding students in higher education. In summary, the book is worth reading for its insights into student perspectives, if not for its approach to the measurement of learning.

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David W. Piper, ed., *Is Higher Education Fair?* Sturminster Newton: The Society for Research into Higher Education; 1981, 194 pp.

This book was produced in association with a conference on 'Biases in Higher Education' organized by the British Society for Research into Higher Education in 1981. Since eight of the nine separately-authored chapters in the book explore evidence of bias in higher education in specific areas of British society, whilst the other chapter is entitled 'Bias is of the Essence', it is clear that the question which forms its title is strongly rhetorical. According to the editor who works at University of London Institute of Education, the initial premise is made that education is a service to the community. Then, the question is asked: which sections of that community are disadvantaged? Different ways of classifying the community are then considered: by social class, region, race, age, sex, able-bodiedness, religion and language. In his words, "how does each of these factors affect the chances of individuals applying for, being accepted in, succeeding in and benefiting from the educational system? Each chapter reviews and interprets the evidence". The evidence naturally tends to be drawn from the British research literature, although all of the substantive chapters except those dealing with age and language, incorporate substantial numbers of research references drawn from other European and North American sources.

The concept of 'bias' in higher education is very slippery to handle. . . so slippery, in fact, that in this book the task of conceptual clarification is left largely up to the individual authors. Some of them have a go at it, and generally they refer to those 'taken for granted' aspects of the structure and processes of higher education which tends to exclude, or substantially reduce, the educational chances of specific groups of people. However, a few of the authors also write about overt discrimination, notably against women and racial minorities, and others-with or without a clear definition of bias-are not content to concentrate solely upon the field of higher education, but range over primary and secondary schooling as well. For this broader approach there is certainly some justification: universities and colleges are at the top of the educational ladder, and many of the effects of social disadvantage are exhibited in the processes of academic and social selection which occur long before the stage of admission to higher learning.

But herein lies a difficulty because, if, as Tyrrell Burgess argues in an introductory chapter, bias is of the essence in universities and colleges because of their excessively autonomous and academically exclusive nature, then presumably only a drastic reorganisation of the principles and practices of higher learning will bring any substantial gain to the disadvantaged members of western societies. Burgess, drawing upon his experience as head of the School for Independent Study at the North Eastern London Polytechnic, believes that he has the answer to the difficulty in the form of a student-centred approach to learning focussed around the formulation of problems, the proposal of solutions and the testing of these solutions. The disadvantaged would start from the problems which concern them, and along with all other students, formulate educational programmes which constitute solutions to those problems. In his view, higher education should tend towards service and towards accommodating everyone.

Burgess's ideas are thought-provoking and provocative (with Mrs. Thatcher's economic axe busily whittling away at British institutions of higher learning, one can imagine that many scholars in that country would consider his critique of excessive autonomy in higher education as about as appropriate as laughter at a funeral). However, he does not deal with one major limitation of open admissions systems as modes of equalisation: namely that substantial cultural differences between social groups may mean that some groups place less priority on education than others even when it is made readily accessible to them. The editor, David Piper, touches upon this problem obliquely in his introductory remarks when he observes that education tends to weaken and subvert aspects of minority culture: if a group eschews education, it is likely to remain disadvantaged; if the group pursues it vigorously, then it may have to give up some of its traditional ways. So too, Bill Williamson in a valuable paper on 'Class Bias' reviews a wide international body of literature which shows that the expansion of higher education in many advanced industrial countries since the 1960's had increased the opportunities for post-secondary attendance for all social strata, but has not seriously disturbed the opportunities for children of the lower stratum relative to those from higher social classes (the Canadian situation would appear to be similar here). One possible explanation for this phenomenon which he explores is the 'cultural accessibility' of higher education to children of different strata: that is, social class perceptions of the value of higher learning. He cautions though – and quite rightly – that excessive emphasis upon cultural differences may downplay the importance of the relative structural positions of different groups with respect to the control and funding of education and to the structure of the social division of labour. Also his belief is (hope springs eternal!) that massive government commitment to a dense network of full-time and part-time higher education facilities open to a wider social constituency than existing British institutions might help to make a difference.

Williamson's chapter is one of the most valuable in this book. It carefully surveys a wide body of literature, draws conclusions, suggests some tentative solutions and eschews polemics. Similar praise can be given to the chapter by

Alan Little and Diana Robbins on 'Race Bias' which explores a wide range of British and American literature on race and educational opportunity, making depressingly plain that the demoralising effects of racism-discrimination, stereotyping and intimidation have had a major negative impact upon the educational opportunities of British black children. The authors then argue a case for affirmative action programmes in higher education which can be disassociated from those preferential admission policies which appear to favour some racial groups at the expense of others. In fact, drawing upon their substantial experience as students of British race relations, and learning much from the *Bakke* and *de Funis* cases in the United States, Little and Robbins stress that the British public are just as unlikely as the American public to be favourably disposed to admissions quotas which appear to place the good of the society before the rights of the individual. But then, of course, one confronts again here the conceptual problems of defining 'fairness' and 'bias' in higher education: in the *Bakke* case, a medical school admissions policy which was designed to be fair to the members of racial minority was deemed unfair to a white, middle-class individual.

Social class and race/ethnicity are perceived by sociologists as two major factors determining social stratification in western societies. Another factor is gender, the study of which – demonstrating a bias in itself – is usually restricted to investigations of the relatively disadvantaged status of women in various institutional spheres. In *Is Higher Education Fair?* the chapter by feminist Dale Spender on 'Sex Bias' deals predictably with this theme, but moves beyond the legitimate concerns of women students and academics for an adequate representation of their interests in predominantly male-run institutions of higher learning to the pursuit of an *idée fixe*: namely, that male definitions of reality are entrenched, to the overwhelming handicap of women, in every nook and cranny of the Ivory Tower. Possibly Spender's perspective is a response to the traditional views of 'women's proper role' which still seems to permeate much of British society including the universities: she notes, for example, that women comprise only 36.8 percent of undergraduates in British universities whereas, in Canada, the equivalent percentage in 1979-80 was 45.4 percent of the full-time undergraduate population and 50.7 percent if part-time students are added in. Even so, her chapter makes no positive mention of the inroads which women are making, in many western countries, into traditionally male preserves such as commerce, law and medicine. Nor does she refer to the growing bodies of research which suggests that most women in established professional careers have less difficulty in coping with occupational tension than their male colleagues. In short, anything which might indicate that women are making gains in the educational and occupational spheres is shunted aside, and what is left is a quasi-sociobiological position that favours, tentatively at least, the establishment of women's universities in which women can control their own education. Again, one suspects that Spender's solution reflects a long traditional of sex segregation

in British education (which has historically acted to the detriment of women's interests). Her arguments, flying the face of recent trends, remind me irresistibly of a skit in which Peter Sellers playing the role of the principal of a British private school is asked by an anxious parent, "and how do you segregate the sexes?" Replies Principal Sellers grimly "we pry them apart."

The other chapters in this book are a very mixed bag. Thus, psychologist John Richardson draws very heavily upon American, Canadian and European sources in his review of geographical biases in higher education, and Alan Woodley surveys mainly British source material in his review of the opportunities and the performance of adults in post-secondary studies. Woodley actually wonders whether higher education can really be perceived as 'unfair' to older students – after all, their scholastic performance is comparable to that of their younger colleagues and in some areas, such as mature admissions regulations, they might even be considered privileged. So too, in his review of 'Religious Bias' John Gay argues that it is possible to see such bias as two-sided – many British universities and colleges still show vestiges of their Christian origins (and church colleges still exist) but, on the other side of the coin, the processes of higher education tend to lead students to adopt a secular, humanist stance. Both Gay's and Woodley's chapters along with those of Ron Sturt on the topic of physical disability and opportunities for higher learning, and Gordon Brotherston on language bias, make abundantly evident that there are really some very substantial differences in the causes, patterns and degrees of 'bias' affecting many of the sections of community covered in this book. So too, there are substantial differences in the academic quality of the chapters which it contains. Those by Williamson and Little and Robbins are very good, and most of the other authors provide worthwhile overviews of their respective topics. However, the polemical character of Spender's contribution has already been mentioned, whilst Brotherston's thin account of language bias centres mainly around the British preoccupation with class-based and regional differences in language style and dialect.

So, after all this, to what general conclusion do we come? Notably, that neither the editor, nor Burgess in his introductory chapter, really does an adequate job of pulling together thematically the diverse issues and proposals touched upon by the other authors in the areas of their expertise. A concluding chapter would have helped, especially if it had focussed directly upon the linkage between the substantive chapters and some central concern such as the impact of budget cuts upon educational opportunity structures. As it is, the book reflects the typical diversity, and lack of coordination, of the conference proceedings from which it was derived.

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