

Wilson, John, *Reflection and practice: Teacher education and the teaching profession*. Ontario: The Althouse Press, 1993. Price \$18.95 softbound.

Reviewed by Valerie J. Overgaard, Simon Fraser University.

For those of us who feel we have been suffering from a surfeit of books on teaching and teacher education which take the political, personal, and practical to be the central issues, John Wilson's book is a welcome and refreshing addition to the literature. In an aggressive attack on what he sees to be the trend to de-intellectualize schools, Wilson does not mince words. The result is a stimulating read.

His argument begins with a discussion of the nature of a profession, which Wilson says is distinguished by a special kind of knowledge and ability. The members of a profession possess this knowledge and ability to a higher degree than those outside the profession. Furthermore, there is consensus, because of the clarity of what the knowledge and ability comprise, about the implications for training in the profession. Teaching, Wilson says, is a profession in principle, but in current practice it is not. In the remainder of the book, he proceeds to explain why he holds this particular view and to suggest how the situation can be changed.

Wilson claims that teachers have steadfastly worked in opposition to the kinds of attributes that constitute a profession. In their great push for egalitarianism, they have disregarded the need for standards in their profession. Collectively they have neglected intellectual integrity and in so doing have alienated universities, the only group that might offer them redemption. Teachers have allied themselves, instead, with the practical and ideological positions of schools. In short, Wilson says, teachers have engaged in 'self-mutilation.' Teacher education institutions in Wilson's country (Great Britain) also come under his criticism for their yielding to the practical and ideological. Rather than hiring academics or scholars with intellectual abilities and passion for reason, education departments have selected as faculty school practitioners, whose interests are the practical exigencies of schools and who hold and promote particular political values. The result in teacher education institutions has been to neglect intellectual pursuits, getting clear about the purpose and the concepts of education, and the sophisticated reflection essential for teacher preparation. These pursuits have been replaced with courses on methods, which in fact are little more than current fads ultimately tied to ideological positions.

Wilson's solutions to these problems are, as he says, radical. He outlines the need to get clear about the qualities we believe to be important for educators to have. Wilson attempts to develop an admittedly incomplete taxonomy under

the categories of “types of understanding” (e.g., understanding concepts via analytic philosophy, understanding one’s own and other’s emotions via psychology, understanding one’s teaching subject); “general virtues and qualities” (e.g., self-esteem, concern for others, enthusiasm for subject and learning); and, “skills” (e.g., competence in technology and learning-aids, classroom management). Wilson suggests that an articulated set of the attributes of a good teacher should be used to recruit people into teaching and then to plan teacher education programs which will enhance the attributes. This approach, he says, will mean splitting the practical and the reflective. The former, finding out how best to proceed in a number of practical situations, can best be learned from master teachers in the schools. The latter, getting clear about education as a *sui generis* enterprise, and understanding its central concepts, must involve working with scholars (analytic philosophers and clinical psychologists) in the universities.

In the end, Wilson argues, only philosophers can set things straight. He says that currently teacher education institutions are largely staffed by third rate and often ideologically corrupt people and that the only way to improve things is to invite first rate thinkers to appoint first rate people to important positions in education (deans, directors, professors). These people must then be given conditions in which they can think about education and restructure teacher education appropriately.

It is clear from this brief synopsis of Wilson’s thesis, that intellectualism and objectivity are the important values for education and teaching, that there will be few critical theorists who will take his arguments seriously, let alone be convinced by them. Nor, perhaps, will those who argue that standards of good teaching are impossible to develop, given the relative nature of our values for education, be enamoured of his positions on getting clear about just those things. However, in a field that is currently dominated by writing which conceives of teaching as essentially a political activity (liberating students from the oppression of dominant class), or that views teaching as being best understood in terms of the teacher’s personal beliefs, Wilson’s book is a refreshing challenge. Those who are more open to considering a variety of views will see it as an important contribution to the debate on teacher education.

For example, Wilson’s discussion of methods courses is an provocative one that gives one cause to reconsider the role of courses that focus on teaching general methods such as cooperative learning or integration:

Certainly the most obvious and probably most important point is that the relationship of method to content is very often a logical one. What we decide to mean by ‘competence in French,’ ‘learning classics,’ ‘being good at mathematics,’ etc. necessitates certain types of

methods and obviates others. . . . It is false and dangerous to imagine we can profitably argue about 'methods' by themselves, except in marginal cases. False, because the arguments are really disguised arguments about content; and dangerous, because unless they are recognized as such we shall not handle them the right way. (p.90)

Wilson goes on to say that what are taken to be theories about methods (say, a 'learning theory') are usually gross generalizations which ignore the need for judgment and neglect important questions about worthwhile content. Furthermore, Wilson says, many methods are simply ideological fashions. "There is, for instance, a general climate in favour of more 'participation', or 'democratic involvement', on the part of the pupils, and against what is (unintelligibly) termed 'authoritarian' styles of teaching. . . . This is clearly an ideological position; and equally clearly, an absurdly doctrinaire one" (p. 94).

In the final analysis, one might not agree with Wilson's argument about the role of methods courses in teacher education or his positions on relativism and de-intellectualism generally. It is important, nonetheless, to consider the arguments in light of one's own positions and to challenge them both. Wilson offers a careful analysis of a number of current trends in education which ought to be matters for debate, but are often taken to be matters of fact.

Less compelling, I think, are Wilson's forays into analytic psychology. In Chapter Two, for example, he discusses what he sees to be the current fear of and opposition to discipline and authority — intellectual and other kinds of authority. He engages in an analysis of the child's "inevitable psychological posture" (p. 52) as the small and weak in the face of the adult's power. This position creates in children a feeling of hostility, suspicion and fear. Wilson says "it is easy to see how the business of being an educator — a parent or a teacher — regenerates one's own paranoid feelings by reactivating one's own childhood position" (p. 52). The consequence of this paranoia (a 'mental illness' in Wilson's terms) is the need to oppose discipline and authority in schools, to move to an egalitarian (the student is equal to the teacher) and relative (all knowledge is of equal worth) position. This dabbling in psychology seems incongruent and unnecessary for Wilson's argument. That there is apparent dislike or abandonment of authority is a matter that can be asserted with assurance. Whether or not this is a result of the child in all of us rebelling against a powerful "parent" is neither important nor persuasive.

What is both convincing and inspiring is Wilson's passion for his subject. He laments what he sees to be the downward spiral in the quality of education which he has witnessed over the last three decades as a teacher and teacher educator. His criticisms are combined with positive suggestions for improvement.

There are few who could argue with his point that there are serious problems that must be addressed in teaching and teacher education. Even if one disagrees with his particular analysis of the problems, one must agree that the present general lack of trust in the system of which he speaks could result in a backlash of managerial and regulative initiatives by governments. This will please few of those involved in education. As educators, we need to pay attention to the problems. And, lest there are those who think Wilson is merely speaking of problems in Great Britain, a preface written by Don Gutteridge and Geoffrey Milburn places the problems firmly in the Canadian and North American context.

Wilson's closing words attest to his passionate concern for education:

I hope that what I say will be useful, and in some of it may even be right; but it is much more important that philosophers and others more able than myself take these problems seriously. For the urgency and complexity of the problems are surely undeniable, and my own solutions of comparatively little account. My chief hope is that other writers will take the former to heart, and improve on the latter. (p. 164)

Goedegebuure, L., Kaiser, F., Maassen, P., Meek, L., van Vught, F., & de Veert, E. (eds.), *Higher education policy: An international comparative perspective*. Oxford: International Association of Universities and Pergamon Press, 1993, pp. xiv, 362. Price: \$83.00.

Reviewed by Robert Pike, Queen's University.

The research programme which led to this book was initiated and funded by the Bertelsmann Foundation in Germany, administered by the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) in the Netherlands, and forms one of a series focussing on Issues in Higher Education which is edited by Guy Neave, Director of Research at the International Association of Universities in Paris. The series is intended to be "resolutely comparative" in its approach, and the Bertelsmann Foundation has given much attention to projects which focus upon means of increasing efficiency and improving performance in the public sector. Not surprisingly, therefore, the issues of authority, accountability and quality assessment are recurrent themes in the book which examines recent higher educational policy developments in 11 countries – or, more exactly, nine countries