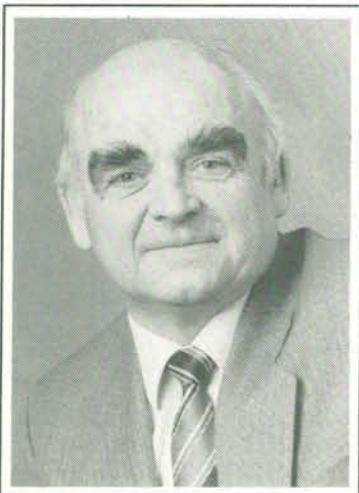


The DATA Annual Lecture 'In Search of Quality'

The second DATA Annual Lecture was given at the Design and Technology Exhibition in November by Keith Evans, Senior Research Fellow at the North East Wales Institute of Higher Education, and formerly Director of Education for the County of Clwyd.



Mr Evans took as his text the following passage from the Karmel Committee Review Report on the Quality of Education in Australia (Canberra, 1985):

The assessment of quality (in education) is complex and value laden. There is no simple uni-dimensional measure of quality. In the same way as the definition of what constitutes high-quality education is multi dimensional, so there is no simple prescription of the ingredients necessary to achieve high quality education; many factors interact — students and their backgrounds; staff and their skills; schools and their structures and ethos; curricula and societal expectations.

In the world outside education, models of quality have tended to focus on quality as:

- a means to prestige and market advantage (a traditional model such as the Rolls Royce is almost a metaphor for quality)
- a scientific way of meeting standards set by, and inspected by, experts (e.g. BS5750)
- a means of achieving customer satisfaction through 'excellence' (getting it right first time)
- a means of empowering the customer in a culture of consumerism (the customer is king).

All of these models derive from manufacturing industry, but have increasingly been extended to the service sector.

Schools and colleges, working in the new culture of devolved management and corporate status, are quite properly concerned with, and aspiring to, 'total quality'. They are staffed by professionals who have an altruistic commitment to the needs of their clients and to the deployment and development of skills and knowledge on their behalf. They are the avenues of opportunity through which young people will fulfil their potential. They prepare young people for entry into their communities, the broader society and the demands of citizenship in a democracy. They need to be self-reviewing, self-evaluating institutions, ensuring their preparedness for a range of accountabilities. And finally, in an age of open enrolment, total quality should satisfy the needs of current clients while at the same time proving attractive to potential parents.

The trouble seems to be that once we change our focus from the world of commerce and become involved in the multi dimensional network of stakeholders and relationships that make up the educational world, the concept of 'quality' tends to become blurred. Various commentators have described the concept as 'elusive', 'slippery', 'vague' and 'grandiose'.

The remainder of the lecture therefore concerned itself with:

- 1) Models of Quality, particularly those of 'Extended Professionals/Reflective Practitioners' working in 'Thinking/Learning Schools/Colleges', the stress here being on professionally self-aware educators and learning institutions with clearly defined and shared values.
- 2) Value Systems currently operative in the world of education, in particular the counterpoint between Societal Values with their strong flavour of the 3 Rs, of discipline, rationality, of primarily linear operation, and Individualistic Values with their stress on personal autonomy, on intuition, spontaneity, imagination and lateral thinking.
- 3) The importance of values like the principle that 'the education of every child is of equal value' in working towards that coherence which should underpin both the hidden and the overt curriculum.
- 4) Leadership as empowerment, stemming from the concept of the Head as a continuing learner, embracing three levels of operation, i.e. competence in doing the job, analysis of personal strengths and weaknesses, and a striving for continuous improvement nourished by study, reflection and curiosity. The essence of empowerment could be defined as 'the capacity to build and develop the self-esteem of colleagues'. Turning grey mice into tigers!

The final passage of this year's lecture tried to identify some characteristics of a 'quality culture' in schools, including:

- clarity about mission and values
- post heroic management
- self-critical, self renewing procedures, pre-empting current accountabilities
- a careful blend of demanding and caring
- promotion of creativity and innovation
- understanding of, and sensitivity to, the immediate community and the broader environment.