

A very human

ARE prophets honoured in their own countries? Undoubtedly they can be, but it is only when abroad that one truly appreciates the wider perspective.

I felt this particularly in Melbourne in 1997, when I basked in reflected glory watching the outgoing past-president of the International School Psychology Association (ISPA) — a British educational psychologist — being fulsomely thanked for his service and praised for his important contribution to the development of this worldwide body.

ISPA is the world association for educational and school psychologists. In the early 1970s, a group of school psychologists from a number of countries, under the leadership of the late Calvin Catterall, formed an International School Psychology Committee. The Committee's aim was to promote worldwide co-operation amongst school and educational psychologists.

The number of psychologists committed to this aim grew steadily, until in 1982 the ISPA was officially founded. Since then, its membership has both increased and expanded to more than 50 countries. In addition, ISPA has become recognised by the United Nations as an important non-governmental organisation speaking on behalf of children and young people and their families.

Bob Burden of Exeter University, a Fellow of this Society, became President Elect of ISPA in 1990. His elevation actually pre-dated by one year the affiliation of our own Society to ISPA. Having been a member of the Division of Educational Psychology Committee at that time, I can confirm that the leading role being played in ISPA by Bob, himself a past Chair of the Division, was most helpful in persuading us that we really should be shouldering our international responsibilities at a corporate level rather than relying on a few individual members to fly the flag on our behalf.

Sharing experiences

Later, much later, outside a pub in Reading as we shared a round or two after a long evening's work with the Education Section Committee, Bob recalled that his first encounter with ISPA had been at York in 1980. However, he only really became involved some eight years later.

Peter Farrell, course tutor of the

JOHN SHEPPARD *interviews Bob Burden, Professor of Applied Educational Psychology at Exeter University.*

Manchester educational psychology training course, had invited Bob to share a floor at the International Colloquium in Interlaken. 'From that week on I was hooked', says Bob. He found the atmosphere there so friendly, the camaraderie so strong, that not only has he attended every annual Colloquium since, but for much of that time he has been on the ISPA Executive Committee.

I know just what he means. Bob and I have both argued in ISPA committees that this 'social' aspect is what we most value in the Association. In fact, some colleagues showed signs of anxiety that the British delegation wanted to abolish the 'scientific' programme at the annual Colloquium — not so, but Bob does talk fondly of ISPA's 'unique family atmosphere.'

'Unlike some of my international colleagues, I saw the consolidation, not expansion, of ISPA as a main priority — getting the foundations right first, and developing a family atmosphere where people from all parts of the world could gather to share their experiences, working practices and ideas for the future of the profession.'

Such a base is not something that can be achieved overnight, he warns, and it does involve considerable effort. 'Nevertheless, the growing list of accomplishments in this area really does reflect the growing strength and solidarity of our association. I believe

our influence has begun to spread not only to educational psychology services across the world, but in such powerful bodies as the UN and UNESCO.'

Since 1985, Bob has been editor of the journal *School Psychology International* (SPI). SPI publishes articles by and on behalf of practising school psychologists around the world. Bob is keen that this should not become dominated by academics out of touch with the real field, nor appropriated by those who have plenty of alternative outlets.

He is very happy to receive British contributions to this international journal, but worries that applied psychologists in the UK tend to hide their lights under any handy bushel.

Ecosystemic approach

While one has to wonder just how much time Bob gets to spend with his wife Pauline at their long-time home in Tiverton, it is clear that, notwithstanding the obvious and persistent East London accent, he regards himself as firmly attached to Devon. In British educational psychology circles, he is probably best known in connection with the Exeter postgraduate course.

In September 1971, Bob was appointed from the West Sussex Psychological Service to the position of lecturer in education. He had specific responsibility for running the new one-year professional training course, and the first students were admitted the following autumn.

In 1984, his long-standing colleague and friend John Thacker took over responsibility as course tutor. This allowed Bob to take on other duties, but to continue as associate tutor. They are both still there running the course, as they have done now for 24 years.

It is perhaps significant that Bob lists as first among his many interests the training of applied educational (school) psychologists. He declares himself particularly proud of the way in which he and John developed what they call 'an ecosystemic approach to ed psych practice'.

This approach takes context into full and proper account, does not treat the child as



Bob Burden

Psychologist

Some isolated specimen with internal problems, and attempts to correct and improve the system that is responsible for the less the child is in. This perspective came to focus particularly on the role of the educational psychologist as consultant.

Bob's considerable contribution to training is well known in Britain. It may not be properly appreciated in this country, however, just how widely his expertise is valued. His 1994 paper 'Recent developments in educational psychology: An international perspective', for instance, produced on behalf of ISPA, was commissioned by UNESCO.

The paper was well received, and it seems to have had some influence both on UNESCO thinking and on the development of educational psychology in those countries that look to UNESCO to guide them. Bob is currently working on a follow-up.

Supporting ideas

Among British educational psychologists, Bob's name has become closely associated with that of Reuven Feuerstein. Bob's interest in the theories and methods of Feuerstein — an Israeli guru — has persisted over years, while others have waxed and waned in their enthusiasm.

Feuerstein believes passionately that additional normative snapshot tests conducted under intentionally difficult conditions cannot give a full picture of a child's learning abilities, that intelligent behaviour can be taught, and that the teacher's task is not to fill the empty vessel but to mediate by assisting the learner in learning how to learn.

'As one of our creative experiences I took a group of trainees to Israel one Easter break, 1982 or '83 I think, to track down the elusive Reuven Feuerstein. We subsequently became great friends and his ideas have significantly influenced my work and thinking ever since.'

Bob arranged Feuerstein's first UK tour, its focus being the first training course in dynamic assessment held at Exeter. 'I think I can claim to be the UK expert on Feuerstein,' he says — modest maybe, but probably valid.

Perhaps less well remembered now, but certainly worthy of recall, is that a similar trip by Bob, John and the Exeter trainees in the early eighties brought back news of the 'eto Institute's conductive education for

children with cerebral palsy in Hungary, another report which has proved influential — if controversial — in Britain.

Collaborative research

Children's learning, one of Bob's areas of professional interest, focuses not only on what and how they learn but also on their perceptions of themselves as thinkers and learners. Bob's recent publications have reflected a growing emphasis on children's own construction of the contexts in which they are expected to learn, and on the sense they make of the assessment process itself and their rights within that process.

'In recent years I have become increasingly interested in the application of psychology to the area of foreign language teaching and learning.' Several articles on this subject have been followed by a book in 1997 aimed at bringing psychology to language teachers.

In its first year the book not only sold well, but was adopted as a key text in TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) courses around the world, was translated into Spanish, and achieved shortlisting for 'book of the year' in the area of TEFL.

Bob's co-author, linguist Marion Williams, tells me that in her field he is well thought of for his efforts and achievements in communicating across the disciplinary barrier. Bob himself says: 'This work has brought together two formerly distinctively different areas and has demonstrated how they can contribute a great deal to each other. It demonstrates also the immense value that can be gained from collaborative research by colleagues from different disciplines.'

Interests

Educational psychologists also know of Bob's keen interest in literature and film. A number of his publications reflect this particular area of interest. 'In many ways they represent a hobby, but they also serve a serious purpose in relating psychology to the arts. They have received a good deal of positive attention within mainstream psychology, as this is still an under-researched area.'

At a more general level, Bob is interested in 'post-positivist approaches to research methodology'. Suspecting that I might be sympathetic, if only I knew what these were, I asked him to explain.

'I am interested in people ...' (that much is quite apparent) '... really my PhD was that of a social historian as much as a psychologist.' His thesis was on the changing perceptions and needs of mothers of children with disabilities over the first five years of their life. 'Through that I got very much into phenomenology, the qualitative ... I have always been unhappy with some aspects of psychology as traditionally conceived and constrained.' In fact, though, he questions the ultimate utility of labels such as positivist. 'The stories that we tell ourselves transcend such boundaries.'

And next ... ?

So what of the future for this very human psychologist? Will he concentrate his efforts on work as Chair of the British Dyslexia Association Validation Board, or will he jet off to take full advantage of his honorary membership of the Venezuelan Association of School Psychologists?

In 1997, Bob was elected an Assistant Director at the Exeter University School of Education, with specific responsibility for research across the school. 'I am finding this particularly challenging in a time of devastating staff and financial cutbacks. My aim, however, is to re-establish Exeter School of Education as an internationally acclaimed top quality research establishment.' Some people never give up.

So, congratulations, Bob, on having been honoured in your own country with the recent award of a personal chair at Exeter, as Professor of Applied Educational Psychology.

Selected recent publications

- Burden, R.L. (1994). Trends and developments in educational psychology: An international perspective. Commissioned by UNESCO and subsequently published in *School Psychology International*, 15, 293–347.
- Burden, R.L. (1996). Pupils' perceptions of themselves as thinkers, learners and problem-solvers: Some preliminary findings from the Myself-as-Learner scale (MALS). *Educational and Child Psychology*, 13, 25–30.
- Burden, R.L. (1997). Translating values into rights: Respecting the voice of the child. In G. Lindsay and D. Thompson (Eds), *Values into Rights in Special Education*. London: David Fulton.
- Burden, R.L. & Williams, M.D. (Eds) (1997). *Thinking through the Curriculum*. London: Routledge.
- Williams, M.D. & Burden, R.L. (1997). *Psychology for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.