<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Book review: All our children learning by Benjamin S Bloom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Ho, Wah Kam</td>
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<td>Source</td>
<td><em>Teaching and Learning, 3(2)65-67</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Published by</td>
<td>Institute of Education (Singapore)</td>
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All Our Children Learning by Benjamin S Bloom

All Our Children Learning\(^1\) is a collection of Benjamin Bloom’s selected papers written between 1954 and 1979. Bloom, who recently retired from The University of Chicago, needs no introduction to teachers. The well-known *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*\(^2\) is associated with his name; so is one version of the mastery learning model.

The theory underpinning the mastery learning approach which Bloom advocates is explained in “Learning for Mastery”, one of the papers in this collection. The argument of the paper can be expressed very simply: as teaching is a purposeful activity, it should be possible to ensure that most pupils learn well what has been taught. While Bloom’s mastery learning approach is essentially group-based, the provision of different types of instruction to enable different types of learners to master what is taught is an important feature of the approach. In his own words: “Our approach has been to supplement regular group instruction by using diagnostic procedures and alternative instructional methods and materials in such a way as to bring a large proportion of the students to a predetermined standard of achievement” (p.166). The quality of instruction is an important precondition. There are other preconditions: for example, pupils are given help when they run into learning difficulties and they are also provided with sufficient time to learn and reach levels of mastery prescribed by the teacher. Much of the success of mastery learning strategies probably lies in the willingness of the pupils (because they are sufficiently motivated) to correct their mistakes and re-learn at appropriate points in the teaching-learning process. In another paper, entitled “Changes in Evaluation Methods”, Bloom mentions studies which estimate the “time-cost” in implementing mastery learning as being in the region of 10 to 20 percent of additional time over the normal scheduled time for each class. In an ideal situation, of course, the additional time needed should steadily decrease as the mastery learning strategy takes effect.

The guidelines that Bloom formulated in his 1968 paper, “Learning for Mastery”, were in due course largely confirmed by research. This research has since been documented in his book
entitled *Human Characteristics and School Learning*, the main argument of which is re-stated in a paper in this collection, “New Views of the Learner: Implications for Instruction and Curriculum”. In this paper, Bloom takes the position that “learning characteristics such as good-poor and fast-slow are alterable by appropriate school conditions” (p. 136). The key word is *alterable*.

In the opening essay to the collection, Bloom notes that what is central in the new directions in educational research is the increasing attention to *alterable* factors in the teaching-learning process. Much of this research should lead directly to improvements in teaching and learning. For example, the quality of instruction and the percentage of time-on-task (time actually spent in learning) in the classroom can, and should, be *altered* to the advantage of the pupil. The opening essay pulls together the thirteen papers categorised under four main headings.

The four main sections are: Overviews of Education, Home and School, Instruction and Curriculum Development, and Evaluation. The three papers in the first section provide collectively a general view of contemporary education not only in the United States but also in several other countries covered in studies conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), of which Bloom is a founding member. The second section contains three papers which deal with the relationship between the home and the school. In essence, Bloom’s view is that “when the home and the school have similar emphases on motivation and learning, the child has little difficulty in his later school learning”. The third section on instruction and curriculum development, which is separately introduced by Lorin Anderson, contains four papers, two of which are “Learning for Mastery” and “New Views of the Learner”, cited in an earlier part of this review. In a sense, the perceptions outlined in these two papers build upon points raised about the task of curriculum development discussed in Bloom’s 1975 paper entitled “The Role of Educational Sciences in Curriculum Development”, which is included in this section. Evaluation is the subject of the final section. Bloom views evaluation (or testing) as an important part of teaching and learning and, in addition, recognises the effects of evaluation. He thinks that these effects can be properly used “to enhance the student’s learning as well as his regard for himself”. This positive aspect of evaluation is in fact built into the mastery learning strategy that Bloom advocates. The final set of papers on evaluation is introduced by George Madaus.
In different ways, then, the four sets of papers in this collection deal with the impact that educational research has had on views about teaching and learning and about the environments in which learning takes place. More significantly, in these papers the conventional wisdom about different aspects of education (or what Bloom calls “innocence in education”) is being challenged.

Despite its modest sub-title, “A Primer for Parents, Teachers and other Educators”, this is an important book, which serves to bring together in a single volume a number of those papers by Bloom, which have, over the years, influenced views on different aspects of education. Bloom’s style of writing is admirably clear and very readable; he has that special gift of putting his ideas across without having to resort to jargon. Finally, readers may like to know that a copy of All Our Children Learning is in the IE Library.

Ho Wah Kam

Footnotes

