The Profession of Educational Research

Presidential Address to the British Educational Research Association given at the Annual Conference, Lancaster University, September 1996.

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Introduction

My title, 'The Profession of Educational Research', is to some degree ambiguous. We might want to distinguish questions about what it means to profess, or to claim to be engaged in, educational research from questions about a 'profession' in the sense of a group of people who are seen, by themselves and others, to be engaged in the same occupation, perhaps furthermore an occupation for which distinctive kinds of claims are made. I shall be concerned with both these senses of the word, but especially with the second; and in that this is so, there probably should be a question mark after my title. To what extent, I want to ask, do we see ourselves as professional educational researchers, and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) as our professional association? And what are the implications of whatever answers we give to these questions?

I have been led to focus on these questions partly by a long-standing sense of puzzlement about what I suspect are the very diverse ways in which we in BERA see not only educational research but also ourselves and others as educational researchers; and partly by a more immediate series of events over the last few months: David Hargreaves' 1996 Teacher Training Agency Annual Lecture; our own day conference in London in May 1996 on 'The Future of Educational Research'; and the reactions from members of BERA to these. I have wondered how clear and consistent we as an association have been in our concerns and our commitments.

The questions which I want to explore, then, are these:

* How helpful and how necessary is it for at least some of us to see ourselves as professional educational researchers?
* In so far as it is helpful to see ourselves in this way, how do we want and expect the impact of our work to relate to the concerns and commitments of other groups, both professional and others?
* How should we organise ourselves to achieve our professional purposes, for example through effective collaborative working?
* What part can BERA play as an effective professional association, if that is what is needed?

The Historical Position of BERA

Throughout its history, BERA has been characterised by *openness*. As Jean Rudduck made clear when she took a historical perspective on BERA in her presidential address 2 years ago (Rudduck, 1995), from the beginning we aimed, in Brian Simon's words, 'to reach across established boundaries and find new ways of thinking about and conducting research in

education'; pluralism and dialogue in relation to different approaches to research have from the outset been important concerns. Jean reminded us of John Elliott's call, in his presidential address in 1989, for BERA to be a 'conversational research community' (Elliott, 1990) in which vigorous intellectual debate is conducted against a background of fundamental research principles; and she suggested, on the basis of her review of the values asserted over the years, that 'principles which serve as the core of the BERA community' include 'respect for evidence, respect for persons, respect for democratic values and respect for the integrity of our acts at every level of the research enterprise'. Openness has also been apparent in the concern to welcome researchers from the various educational disciplines, from other countries, from outside the school system, and of course practitioner researchers. So far as I am aware, such pluralism and openness has always been universally endorsed within BERA.

That openness has for the most part been unqualified. At the very beginning, however, it was not. Those of us who first met together in 1973 to explore the possibility of forming a British educational research association were aiming, in so far as we were clear about it, to form an association of professional educational researchers. One of our problems, of course, was about how one could tell such animals from others. At the inaugural conference in Birmingham in 1974, there was a strong movement led by David Hamilton against any such idea, and within a year or so it was virtually forgotten. That, I think, was not only inevitable but also right: sustainable distinctions between professional educational researchers and others would have had to be of many different kinds, would have been extremely difficult to make clearly in principle and even more difficult in practice, and would have been a source of constant legitimate contention and understandable bitterness that would have soured the atmosphere of BERA and distracted us from more constructive activities.

The outcome, however, has been that BERA has been a professional association for educational researchers only in the loosest of senses. It is certainly true that it has increasingly been accepted by such bodies as the Economic and Social Research Council and the Higher Education Funding Council for England as at least one of the 'learned societies' to be consulted on issues relating to educational research, and that is much to be welcomed. But we have not given the kind of attention to the training of professional educational researchers, to career structures, to the way that educational research is organised, or even to professional standards that might have been expected from a professional association; and although we have been much concerned about the influence of educational research, that has not led us to engage in much critical self-examination about our professional practices. We tend as a result to be somewhat taken aback when these practices are examined critically in public, even by our own members.

Such comments are not criticisms, but rather reflections on the consequences of BERA being such an open organisation; they also beg the question of whether or not it is at all helpful to think in terms of professional educational researchers. Given the problems already mentioned, is that a helpful concept at all?

A Profession of Educational Researchers?

(i) The Lack of Adequate Evidence

The first and perhaps the most important thing to be said in discussing educational researchers in Britain, professional or not, is that I do not think we know much about

ourselves. How many people in Britain describe themselves, or are described by others, as being educational researchers or as doing educational research? How is that population distributed in terms, for example, of conceptions of educational research, reasons for doing educational research, research topics and reasons for choice of topic, number of years over which research on that topic has been sustained, relation of research to other professional activities, membership of research teams, extent to which income and job prospects depend on research activities and reports, and so on.

Much of our debate about what educational research in Britain is like, and what is or is not wrong with it, is conducted on the basis of very limited and inadequate information. We have useful and interesting accounts of how educational research is structured in this and other countries (e.g. Calderhead, 1994), of priorities in research funding (e.g. Stoney *et al.,* 1995), and of changing patterns in the management of educational research (Nisbet, 1995), but little information about educational researchers. The same is true of our knowledge of the use made of educational research. So far as I know, the last large-scale study in Britain of teachers' use of, and attitudes towards, educational research was that by Cane & Schroeder published in 1970. Perhaps one of the things which BERA could usefully do is to take steps to improve the quality of the evidence on which these debates depend.

(ii) Good Educational Research is Difficult

There are, however, things that we do know about. One thing I know from several decades of experience is that I find it very difficult to do educational research well. It requires rigorous thinking, perceptiveness, imagination, self-awareness, social skills and self-discipline in such demanding combinations that I am usually disappointed with the quality of my own work. To judge from the many papers that I have to referee for research journals, other researchers also find it difficult to do well, and many seem to lack an understanding of the diverse basic disciplines required.

In addition, the range of possible research strategies available is large and constantly increasing, thus not only imposing the considerable challenge of gaining an understanding of them but also adding to the complexity of identifying the most appropriate researcher stance, research questions and strategies to gain the most fruitful purchase on one's topic according to the context and purpose of the investigation. Even to be able to read critically and intelligently the previous research conducted on a particular aspect of education, from different perspectives and using different approaches, is a highly demanding task. My point here is simple: to be a good educational researcher one needs extensive knowledge, wide-ranging expertise and creative intelligence, to an extent that is only likely to be achievable through the kind of disciplined commitment that is sometimes described as professionalism.

In my perception, debates about the relative merits of different ways of organising, funding and doing research, including the debates of recent months, tend not to pay sufficient attention to the complex expertise that is required to do research well.

(iii) Amateurism in University Departments of Education

Another thing that we know is that, as recently as the 1992 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), the pattern of research activities in British university departments of education

(UDEs) was predominantly one of fragmentation. Michael Bassey, who gathered and analysed the relevant evidence, showed that (in a random selection of UDES) the publications of staff were typically scattered over a large number of fields of enquiry. Michael commented on his findings, and on his experience as a member of the Educational Panel for the RAE, as follows:

> There are some outstanding works giving significant insights, for example in constructivist learning, pupil assessment, school effectiveness and science education, but beyond that I am less certain that much of the research reported in the literature does extend theory, or illuminate policy, or improve practice in significant ways. I have a strong impression of individualism, of researchers working in isolation from each other, dabbling in an amateurish way at issues which are too big to be tackled by lone researchers. I consider that much educational research is in a dilettante tradition that looks like a game of trivial pursuits. (Bassey, 1993)

Michael Beveridge took the fragmented nature of research activities in UDEs as the main theme of his talk at our May conference. He suggested that UDEs lacked the integrating language and concepts which overarching disciplines could give to departments defined in disciplinary terms; and that there therefore tends to be a relatively low level of intellectual and social integration among the academic staff. He and David Hargreaves suggest that UDEs are typically characterised by a division of staff into two broad groups: one concerned primarily with initial teacher education, with a general professional orientation and frequently a reluctance to engage in research; the other of foundation subject specialists, whose concern is with scholarship and who are rarely concerned with contributing directly to the quality of the work of schools. Even within these broad groups, they contend, there tends to be little integration, with staff pursuing their specialisms in ones and twos, just as Michael Bassey's evidence suggests.

I want to make several comments on this:

(a)   First, the criterion which Michael Bassey is associating with professionalism, in contrast with amateurism, is not the criterion of expertise that I discussed previously. His criteria are 'the likely impact' of the research on educational policy and practice and the 'significance' of the issues investigated. His complaint is that without collaborative and sustained attention by several researchers to carefully chosen issues, the significance of the research is likely to be very low. I fully concur with that view; it is a second important characteristic of professionalism.

(b)   Second, Michael's evidence suggested, and his judgement was, that the research being conducted in UDEs varied from the outstanding to the trivial. It is important for us to recognise that much of the research conducted in universities can fall well short of professional standards; and it is also important to recognise that a good deal of research conducted in UDEs is highly professional.

(c)   Third, there has been a good deal of change in UDEs since the 1992 RAE, much of it due to the efforts of people like Michael Bassey and also Stewart Ranson, in helping departments to think in collaborative terms about research. It would be surprising if there had been a radical transformation in that short time but, on the other hand, how strong is the evidence for the picture which Michael Beveridge and David Hargreaves paint of the typical UDE? Their picture is a particularly pessimistic one. It may be correct - and most of us will recognise elements of it - but once again it would be useful

to have more evidence about educational researchers, in this case about the various kinds of researchers in UDEs and about how they set about their research work.

(d)   Fourth, whether or not there has been substantial change, there is every reason why there *should* be, and I cannot see what the barriers to such change would be. As schools develop confidence and competence in playing the parts in both initial and continuing teacher education which they are best fitted to play, the justification has surely disappeared for there to be any members of UDE staff whose expertise is not very largely concerned with being researchers and with research-based knowledge. In my experience, most people initially recruited to UDEs primarily on the basis of their practical expertise as teachers are very ready to become researchers. Strong leadership may certainly be required to support such staff, to persuade them that they need to *learn* to be researchers, to guide them into significant team-based research programmes and- most difficult of all - to persuade them that their sense of obligation to their students should not be allowed to distract them from their equal professional obligation as educational researchers. Equally, while strong links with the so-called foundation disciplines are very important for the vigour of educational research, there can now be little justification for anyone being a member of a UDE whose work is not aimed at - in John Elliott's formulation - contributing to the wisdom which enables educators more effectively to realise educational values. The future of UDEs, I have no doubt, is as departments staffed by *educational researchers.* The number and size of these departments will depend primarily, I believe, on our *professionalism* as researchers.

(iv) The Teaching Profession and a Profession of Educational Researchers

I have emphasised that we have proper concerns about amateurism in research and that these concerns are focused on the academic staff of university departments of education. Now I want to discuss briefly what I think is the main source of the ambiguity which many of us feel about the very idea that educational research should be seen primarily as a professional activity. That ambiguity stems, of course, from the deeply held belief by many that teachers, and practitioners more generally, should also be researchers, or even that educational research is essentially something done by practitioners. The openness of BERA allows it to accommodate comfortably all shades of opinion on this issue, I believe, as well as ensuring that practitioner researchers feel that this is an association for them just as much as for academic researchers. That is an important and valuable quality of the Association which we certainly must not lose. I believe, however, that our sensitivity to the range of views on this issue may have inhibited us from tackling very important questions, especially those concerning the relation between the practice of teachers on one hand and research done by professional researchers on the other.

Such questions have not been totally ignored but they have not in my experience been much debated. John Elliott in his presidential address in 1989 offered one view of this relationship:

> that educational research is a form of practical inquiry which fuses inquiry with practice. There can be no educational research if teachers play no important role in the process of articulating, analysing and hypothesising solutions to complex educational problems. The specialist inquiries of professional researchers should be viewed as subordinate to this fundamental process. (Elliott, 1990, p. 16)

Although this could be interpreted in a number of ways, John leaves us in no doubt as to the centrality of the roles which teachers should play in educational research. I have yet to hear anyone expressing views opposing such central involvement by teachers, but the key question seems rather to be whether John is right in seeing that as the only satisfactory way of research being done.

Much of my own research has been aimed at understanding the professional work and expertise of classroom teachers. As I have struggled to understand the nature of that expertise, I have been struck much more by the ways in which it differs from research expertise than by its similarities. For teachers, many of the most important judgements must be made instantaneously, and it remains a source of wonder for me how fluently and effectively skilled teachers take account of a great many facets of the situations in which they find themselves in their instantaneous decisions about what course of action they will next adopt. The balancing of different considerations concerning different pupils, their preferred ways of learning, the opportunities they should be given, the overall classroom environment for learning, how long different pupils need to learn something, how much time there is, and so much else, in order to find the best compromise on each particular occasion, and very quickly, fills me with awe. Even so, teachers need to find ways of reducing the complexity of the information which confronts them, and often seem to do so in three main ways: focusing on the short term and facing new situations as they arise; reducing for most pedagogical purposes all the complex knowledge they have about individual pupils to simple typifications; and most of the time not problematising most aspects of their situations and of their own practices. Teachers vary in the way they achieve simplification of their situations, but severe simplification of one sort or another (in comparison with what they and others might ideally like) is necessary.

I recognise very little of this as connecting with what is needed to be a competent researcher. Single-minded concern with a clearly formulated agenda, detailed advance planning and/or intensive reflection on what has happened, problematising every aspect of one's own practice and of the situation one has encountered, are I think the highly contrasting hallmarks of professional research activity. So I become really puzzled when John Elliott suggests that 'involvement in educational research is an integral part of teachers' professionalism'. It seems to me simply unreasonable to demand of teachers that they be researchers as well as teachers, when the expertise required for the two activities is so very different; but of course much depends on what 'research' and 'involvement in educational research' are taken to include.

There are, of course, some people with both the energy and the Leonardo-like breadth to be simultaneously active as professionally expert classroom teachers and also professionally expert researchers, and we should be very pleased about the existence of such people without expecting the majority of us to be like them. In addition, there are many elements of research expertise which the majority of teachers can helpfully develop, not least the capacity to formulate questions about aspects of their own teaching and systematically to collect and analyse evidence relevant to these questions. And, if we are not persuaded of the realism of asking teachers to be the front runners in conducting educational research, we need to be clear about the alternative answers that we are offering to the question of how we expect the work of professional educational researchers and the practice of teachers to be related. Lawrence Stenhouse saw that relationship in the following way:

The function of educational research in its application to practice is to provide a theory of educational practice testable by the experiments of teachers in classrooms. In a sense this calls for the development of the role of the teacher as researcher, but only in a minimal sense. The basic desideratum is systematic enquiry; it is not necessary that this enquiry be made public unless it offers a contribution to a public theory of education. (Stenhouse, in Rudduck & Hopkins, 1985, p. 29)

That certainly seems to me an acceptable alternative to the model offered by John Elliott. (David Hargreaves would, I think, say that that's all very well, but it depends on the premise that educational research provides useful theories of educational practice that can be tested by teachers in classrooms; and the problem, he suggests, is that that is not happening because classroom teachers do not have sufficient influence on the research undertaken. I shall return to that issue later.)

For Lawrence Stenhouse educational research, as the above quotation indicates, was 'systematic enquiry ... to provide a theory of educational practice ... made public'. For me, these are key concepts in relation to *professional* educational research: the conduct and claims of the research need to be open to public scrutiny and criticism; the enquiry must be systematic, with all the complex requirements that that entails; the purpose must be to improve our theoretical understanding; and it should usefully inform the development of educational practice. A great deal of very important educational activity, however, shares some but not all of these characteristics; and that is especially, though not exclusively, true of work done by teachers and other educational practitioners. No useful purpose is served in my view by arguing about which of these activities are research activities and which are not. It is entirely appropriate for all such activities to be viewed as research activities; but we do need the narrower and more demanding definition as a guide to the demands which we should be making on those of us who are professional educational researchers.

Enhancing the Professionalism of Educational Research

When I talk about enhancing the professionalism of educational research, it will, I hope, be understood that I am not talking about all educational research, but only that large part of it done by people who consider themselves to be professional educational researchers or who ought to do so because it is the whole or a large part of what they are paid to do.

I want to focus now on some of the possible implications of thinking of ourselves as professional educational researchers, both in general and from the point of view of BERA in so far as it functions or should function as the professional association for such researchers. In doing so, I shall be especially concerned with the important commentaries and suggestions directed towards us as professional educational researchers in recent months.

It would, I think, be true to say that these commentaries, especially that offered by David Hargreaves in his Teacher Training Agency Annual Lecture, have not been received by educational researchers with universal approbation. We need, however, to disentangle different elements of what he said and of our reactions. On one hand his overall tone was negative. He emphasised the large amount of money spent on educational research, whereas others, such as the 1992 Economic and Social Research Council Working Party on the Future of Research in Education, have generally reached conclusions such as: 'By any yardstick the

overall levels of support for [educational] research seem low, both in absolute and relative terms' (Gray *et al.,* 1992, p. 8). David also made some negative global judgements, such as: 'educational research is not in a healthy state; it is not having adequate influence on the improvement of practice; it is not good value for money' (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 5). Although he made it clear that these were his subjective judgements, not claims which could be substantiated on the basis of evidence, it is not surprising that they generated defensive reactions. Defensiveness comes easily to educationists as the inhabitants of an archetypically 'soft applied' academic field which, as Tony Becher (1989) makes clear, is guaranteed low academic status irrespective of the quality of its work. Many educational researchers would argue, however, that what has concerned them is the potential consequences of these negative views of educational research being expressed so publicly in such a setting by such an authoritative figure, at a time when both the Teacher Training Agency and Higher Education Funding Council for England might be influenced regarding the disposal of their research budgets; and indeed, Hargreaves made the specific suggestion that:

> a substantial proportion of the research budget can be prised out of the academic community, who currently distribute it as they think fit, and over several years transferred in phases to agencies committed to evidence-based research and to full partnership with teachers in the interests of improving practice. (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 7)

I do not know what agencies he had in mind, but I do not think it either wise or justifiable to oppose such a suggestion on the grounds that it is not in the interests of members of the academic community. Yet, while surely endorsing the appropriateness of research being conducted in full partnership with teachers in the interests of improving practice, we should be uninhibited in our assertions first, that present expenditure on educational research is very small in relation to the total national expenditure on education and in relation to the importance of education for the future social and economic welfare of all, and also in comparison with other comparably wealthy countries; and second, that whatever the agencies in which they are employed, *only professional educational researchers* have the necessary expertise to do the needed research.

We do, however, at the same time need to consider very coolly the validity of the specific criticisms being made of educational research and the suggestions for its improvement, because the best way for us to serve the interests of both educational research and professional educational researchers is to act effectively, and to be seen to be acting effectively, to improve the quality of the research that is done.

When we turn, therefore, to the substance of the recent commentaries and the suggestions for improvement, these seem to me to be generally very much in tune with recent thinking within BERA. I want to focus on three main themes: (i) priority areas for research; (ii) evaluating research in terms of its impact; and (iii) the involvement of user communities.

(i) Priority Areas for Research
In considering where best our research efforts and the funding to support them should be directed, we need to bear in mind again what a wide and diverse collection of people we are, and also the open and outward-looking approach to which we have consistently committed ourselves. We have to recognise the significance not only of our own internal diversity, but also the even greater diversity of those with whom we need to collaborate. That means that

we need to be highly conscious of the very different priorities to which we need to be responsive in different contexts. Our strength as educational researchers generally, and as professional researchers in particular, will be enhanced by being able to engage in constructive dialogue with as many different groups as possible about priorities that make sense to them. While there will be some amongst us who are unsympathetic to particular dialogues, we should remember that the opportunities for all of us to engage in the kind of educational research that we believe to be valuable will be enhanced by the success of as many as possible of these dialogues.

I want to illustrate this point with reference to one of the most important arenas in which educational researchers have to engage in dialogue with others, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It is important not only directly because of the substantial resources for which- we must compete in that context, but even more because it is in terms of the language and statistics of the ESRC that our academic colleagues in universities tend to judge the merits of educational research and researchers, and on that basis decide to what extent research resources should be allocated to education. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that educational researchers have been quite successful in competition with economists, psychologists, sociologists and others for ESRC research grants. It is important that BERA is indeed recognised by ESRC as a significant learned society, and that BERA members have been prominent in ESRC affairs, for example in contributing very substantially to the development of ESRC's research training policy. In so far as educational researchers are in different ways successful and influential in negotiating priorities in an ESRC context, the work of *all* those educational researchers working in academic institutions benefits, irrespective of the researcher's sympathy with ESRC priorities.

We must recognise the importance, then, of the work being done for us by those who formally or informally represent us in the ESRC context, but we must also recognise the constraints within which they must work. They can seek to advance the interests of educational researchers in general, but they have to do so in a way that will be listened to in an ESRC context. Thus, the report by the ESRC Working Party on Frameworks and Priorities for Research in Education (Gray *et al.,* 1992), a body that was dominated by BERA members, seemed to me a very thoughtful and helpful commentary in the ESRC context on how educational research might usefully move forwards, which among other things pushed as firmly as I should have thought wise at the substantive and methodological boundaries of the kinds of educational research which ESRC had previously funded. I am sure that it has since proved helpful in this respect for educational researchers. It was, however, the object of some extremely negative criticism within BERA.

My concern here is that when we comment on each others' efforts in such contexts of dialogue with those who have the power to facilitate educational research work or not, we should bear in mind not only the importance of such dialogue but also the strategic constraints which our representatives have to impose upon themselves. Vigorous debate within BERA about research priorities is certainly necessary, but it can be disabling for those representing the needs of educational research if that debate is not conducted within the spirit of a 'conversational research community' that John Elliott called for some years ago, and the mutual respect on which such a community depends.

As to specific suggestions for priority areas for educational research, I confess to being very impressed by those researchers who can find convincing arguments for giving priority to

some areas rather than to others. The ESRC Working Party persuasively argued for one set of priority areas, David Hargreaves and Michael Beveridge, working in a similar context, for another. That there is a substantial overlap is, perhaps, encouraging. That there is also considerable divergence is surely not surprising. But I should find it hard to believe that David and Michael do *not* think that The Changing Face of Higher Education, which is not on their list but was on the earlier one, is an area which merits substantial research attention; or that John Gray and his colleagues on the Working Party think that Effective Teaching or Assessment are not important areas for research, although these were not on their lists. I find it very difficult to identify any aspect of education which could not benefit greatly from sustained, high-quality research attention. To me as a researcher, it is a matter of the quality of the questions being asked, of the analysis that underlies these questions, and of the research plans for investigating them which distinguishes worthwhile research from that which is less worthwhile. I do have to recognise, however, that for non-researchers there will be important other criteria-determining priorities; I therefore have to be sympathetic to David Hargreaves' concern that it is others, the 'users' of educational research, who should have a major say in determining the broad areas to which priority should be given.

There does, however, appear to be very substantial consensus amongst us on two issues relating to priorities in research, both of which were examined most fully and carefully by Stewart Ranson in his contribution to our May conference, but have also been referred to in the other recent commentaries and also in successive BERA presidential addresses. We as educational researchers should expand our horizons both in terms of exploring learning and how it is influenced and facilitated in settings outside educational institutions as well as inside them, and also in terms of drawing more strongly on the wide range of intellectual resources available to us from social sciences and other disciplines. 1 suspect, however, that we readily assent to these as priorities because they are what we should *also* do, not criteria for selecting what it is most worthwhile to do.

(ii) The Impact of Educational Research

At the centre of David Hargreaves' commentary on the quality of current educational research is the thesis that: (1) educational researchers want their research to be judged by its impact; (2) in fact it does not have a substantial impact; and therefore (3) that something is wrong with the research.

The first of these claims, that educational researchers want their research to be judged by its impact, is strongly supported not only by the considerable evidence submitted by researchers to David Hargreaves himself but also by recent BERA presidents. For John Elliott, for example, the quality of educational research studies should be judged 'on the pragmatic test of whether they enable us to realise our values better' (Elliott, 1990, p. 12). Michael Bassey went so far as to suggest, 'as an alternative to measuring publication' for the Research Assessment Exercise, 'the possibility of trying to evaluate impact' (Bassey, 1993). Despite the strong support for this position, however, I believe that educational researchers are wrong if they want their research to be judged on the basis of its impact rather than on the basis of its professionalism. David Hargreaves' argument is entirely valid, but it is based on a premise about what educational researchers want which should not be true (as well as on his second premise about actual impact, which may or may not be true, since I do not have enough evidence to be able to judge).

What I find myself having to dissent from is not the proposition that our research should be purposefully and intelligently aimed at contributing to the improvement of practice, but the proposition that we as researchers should be held accountable for its impact. Some of my grounds for dissenting are very similar to those on which I argued, nearly 20 years ago when the teacher accountability movement was at its height, that teachers should not be held accountable for their pupils' attainments. My first reason for dissenting is that, while teachers and researchers can reasonably be expected to set about their work with expertise and professionalism, it is not reasonable to expect them to be *able* to ensure that their work has the desired impact. We have been all too well aware of our lack of ability as researchers to have the impact on policy that we might like to have; and I believe that it is no easier to ensure that we are able to influence practice.

In addition, it would be *wrong* for teachers or researchers to try to exercise such a degree of control over those they are trying to influence: it is in the nature of both these educational professions that they should influence others, in so far as they are able, by illuminating and persuasive exposition and by planned learning activities, and ultimately by rational argument. Educational researchers should not seek unilaterally to determine good educational practice: there are always other considerations and perspectives which should be given proper weight, prominent among these being the craft expertise of teachers which I discussed briefly earlier (the importance and professional sophistication of which is frequently underestimated by researchers), the obligations of democratically elected bodies to determine priorities, and the rights and concerns of students and parents. One of the things which we can usefully learn from our experience with the teaching profession is that a proper sense of one's professional expertise can easily and dangerously be inflated into an ideology of professionalism whereby one too easily discounts the expertise of non-members of the profession.

So when Michael Bassey talks of 'creating education through research' or when David Hargreaves talks of 'teaching as a research-based profession', I assume that they like the rhetorical phrases but do not mean that research should have a unilateral influence; and David indeed says so on his paper. Similarly, when educational researchers say that they want to be judged by the impact of their work, I think they are being hasty and certainly that they are wrong. 1 should be prepared to be judged on the basis of having taken all reasonable steps not only to ensure that my research conclusions were valid and potentially educationally valuable but also to make it appropriately accessible to relevant teachers or other practitioners; but that is very different from being judged according to the impact of my research.

So much for accountability. What about the goal that one's research should have an impact? Some of the above considerations apply to this as well. Yes, one's research should be useful, but it should be useful in enhancing understanding of the implications of, or offering evidence-based arguments for, certain practices. There will always, in any particular context, be other factors and other arguments to be weighed alongside those stemming from the research. This is not an argument against the importance of applicability to practice, but it is an argument against expectations that the applicability will be, or should be, simple. In addition, as David Hargreaves has forcibly argued, to be useful educational research needs to be cumulative. 'Replications', he rightly suggests, 'are more necessary in the social than the natural sciences because of the importance of contextual and cultural variations' (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 2). That, too, greatly complicates the process of intelligently making practical use of research.

I suspect that research in education *is* a good deal more cumulative than David Hargreaves suggests, but that we make very inadequate use of it, simply because we are *too* keen for our individual pieces of research to have an immediate impact on the policy or practice. Because it is such cumulative understandings that are of practical value, and because in my view educational research is so difficult that we often make mistakes or over-interpret our evidence, I am in no doubt that researchers should generally report their work in the first instance *for other researchers:* that is what our journals are appropriately for. But it is also the case that we have not as a profession, especially in this country, done enough to foster and to use the cumulative understandings to be gained from research. As Roger Murphy suggested last year (Murphy, 1996), we need more overviews of research focused on particular areas of policy or practice, and these should incorporate critical review, synthesis of findings and also extended discussion of the implications of research for policy and practice. The initiative of the Office for Standards in Education in funding a series of such overviews is very much to be welcomed. We in BERA should also be contributing to such work, and I intend to explore the possibility of us starting a new BERA journal specifically for this purpose, with an accompanying series of pamphlets for cheap and widespread distribution of the conclusions of each overview. This is one of the ways in which we can best, as Wynne Harlen (1994) suggested, be promoters of research-based educational knowledge as well as providers of it.

(iii) The Involvement of User Communities

David Hargreaves suggests that any serious concern with the future of educational research

> means adopting as an essential prerequisite of improvement, the involvement of user communities, especially policy makers and practitioners, in all aspects of the research process, from creation of strategic research plans, the selection of research priorities and the funding of projects through to the dissemination and implementation of policies and practices arising from or influenced by research activities and findings. (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 6)

These are sentiments which accord well with the views of leaders of BERA in recent years. Sally Brown (1989) urged us to get ourselves engaged in ongoing 'non-abrasive dialogues' with policy-makers, even where we found their values and assumptions quite alien. Wynne Harlen asked:

> Have we tried hard enough to communicate with decision-makers, not just policy-makers, but the new decision-makers-parents, public, lay inspectors, school governors and board members? Do we have ourselves to blame, at least in part, for being marginalised? (Harlen, 1994, p. 4)

John Elliott has talked of the importance of establishing a dialogue about the role of educational research with national organisations representing parents, school governors and employers, as well as sustaining collaboration with teachers on a continuous basis, involving teacher unions and making educational research a central concern of a National Teachers' Council.

David Hargreaves's concerns about the active involvement of practitioners and policy-makers in the research process will thus receive a wide welcome in BERA. Why, he would then ask,

has more effective action not been taken already? The answer once again is partly that researchers cannot achieve such involvement solely by their own actions. Some years ago BERA Council made substantial efforts to establish collaborative arrangements with Chief Education Officers, but *they* had higher priorities and could not find the time to reciprocate effectively. But that is only part of the answer. There is also the need for researchers to agree in some detail what we want in this respect and to allocate time and resources to pursuing the goal vigorously. Neither of these will be very easy, but I believe that BERA must accept the responsibility and take the initiative here on behalf of professional educational researchers, both because we believe such partnership with decision-makers and practitioners is highly desirable, and also because if we fail to take such an initiative, we are likely increasingly to lose control over research policy and the use of research resources.

David Hargreaves is proposing a National Educational Research Forum because, he says:

> Practitioners and policy makers must take an active role in shaping educational research as a whole, not just in influencing a local project in which they happen to be involved; and researchers need to know that users are powerful partners with whom many aspects of research need to be negotiated and to whom in a real sense the research community is in part accountable. (Hargreaves, 1996, p. 6)

All of that I find in principle to be highly acceptable; and the more detailed plans which David has advanced are worthy of our careful attention. But there are important questions to be asked. 'The mechanism for selecting the (Forum) members would not be easily arrived at', David admits; and more fundamentally, how can we expect those who are selected adequately to reflect the concerns and needs of the innumerable parents, governors, teachers, head teachers and others whom they are nominally representing? And while I should be very pleased for the focus of my research activities to be shaped by the well-thought-out ideas of practitioners and policy-makers, I should not be content for them to have a decisive influence in judging the good sense of my research plans. I should want my fellow-professional researchers to be the major judges of that. Will it be possible to find appropriate mechanisms to ensure that the different decisions that need to be made are each made on the basis of appropriate expertise and authority?

There is much here to be thought about; and it is important that we think about these things constructively, with care and with some urgency. I propose that BERA should organise within the coming year, perhaps in collaboration with other bodies, a conference specifically focused on the possibility of a National Forum or Council for Educational Research, and possible alternatives, and on how such a body or bodies could best be structured and sustained to facilitate high quality, useful, professional educational research.

Conclusion

It is important that BERA should continue to be a very open association with very open ideas of what 'educational research' can mean. That should not prevent us, however, from recognising that many of us are, or should be, professional educational researchers, and that high standards of professionalism are of crucial importance for us.

Because that is so, BERA should be increasingly active in its thinking and. its campaigning in relation to the kinds of training, support, working conditions, and career opportunities needed to foster professionalism in educational research. We should also be ahead of the field in self-critically examining the contribution which we make to the development of policy and practice, and in seeking to enhance that contribution.

Finally, we need to be clearer in our own thinking and aspirations about how the work we do as professional educational researchers should on one hand be used, and on the other hand be guided, through our interaction with those many others who share our responsibility and our concern for quality in education. And we must continue to seek serious dialogue with such others as one way of helping us to attain such clarity.

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