

Enlarging the Democratic Promise of Education...

Presidential Address to the British Educational Research Association given at the University of Oxford, September 1994, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Association.

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Looking Back

This is a vintage year for anniversaries: 50 for D-Day, 50 for the 1944 Education Act, 25 for Woodstock, 20 for the British Educational Research Association (BERA) which was inaugurated in 1974. Let us look back at what the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)* was writing about 20 years ago this month. (Incidentally, in September 1974 the *TES* cost 7p and the upwardly and outwardly mobile could apply for the post of Director of Education in the Isle of Man at a salary of £5823.)

The Prime Minister (Harold Wilson) was, it seems, expected to see the Queen about a General Election. That fact apart, much of what we read has a disconcertingly familiar ring. The 6 September edition tells us, for instance, 'that the school year opens in a more than usually unsettled atmosphere' and the editorial observes that 'for reasons that do not necessarily indicate a sudden burst of enlightenment on the part of leading Conservative and Labour politicians, there is the suggestion that education may figure prominently in party election campaigns'. Parental choice and the organisation of secondary education were forecast as the main focus for vigorous attacks and counter-attacks by the two parties, with pupil behaviour and motivation as runners-up. The 13 September *TES* featured a discussion of the Conservative Party's education manifesto: the Parents' Charter figured prominently in a restatement of the intention to give parents more influence over choice of school. But it seemed that parent power was already flourishing given the evidence of a letter from a parent to a head teacher reproduced in the *TES* that same week; it reads: 'Dear Sir. Our Rob will not be doing anymore towards his education. It seems pointless him attending school any longer. I therefore give him my permission to leave'.

We also learn that, if elected, 'a Conservative Government would appoint a high level committee under an impartial Chairman to conduct an enquiry into what has been achieved by comprehensive schools'. In the same issue, we learn about the problem of oversized classes in primary schools - and the National Association of School Masters' solution: 'Call up Mum's Army; they need not necessarily be trained and could be paid between one third and one half of the basic teacher's salary'.

Big issues apart, life below stairs seems to have proceeded with the same mix of zany innocence and mild confusion then as now. One local education authority had produced a form for its schools to fill in as part of the record of attendance. It read: 'Attendance: note as either *regular or irregular*. If regular, give reasons'. At the British Association for the Advancement of Science Dr J. N. of Reading University offered some words of comfort to education. He reported that, 'Children are easier to condition than rats. Unlike rats children will work for almost anything. Sweets, tokens and even Green Shield Stamps'. In August of this year, 1994, there was an article in the *TES* saying that uninspiring teaching is the cause of

underachievement in mathematics. Not so 20 years ago. The Mathematical Association cracked the problem of motivation-without recourse to Green Shield Stamps. The *TES* report says: 'When shown how to deduce the relationship between the angles at the centre and circumference on the same arc of a circle from the angle properties of isosceles triangles, thirteen year-old boys have been known to applaud quite spontaneously!' And there was a (pre-teacher-competences) advertisement for a mathematics/physics master that embodied the (pre-Chippendales) traditional values: 'We want a man who considers himself a real school master. The applicant must be a Graduate and must have played First Class Rugby'.

Returning to the big issues, concern about equity was much in evidence. A question had been put (relating to the discussion of comprehensive schooling) to the Secretary of State for Education: 'If we are not to divide children into sheep and goats, how are we to divide them?'. And Professor Halsey was reported as saying, in the context of the publication of a White Paper, that we have 'a long way to go to equality'. He went on: 'It will take many years and a great deal of patience to bring about social equality in Britain just by expanding educational opportunity'. We have evidence in 1994 that although the numbers entering higher education have increased significantly, students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds are still under-represented. In 1994, issues of differentiation and labelling have a sharp new relevance for us and I shall come back to them later.

Looking Back with BERA - through the eyes of past presidents

'To begin at the beginning', as Dylan Thomas said

John Nisbet gave the address at BERA's inaugural meeting in 1974. He told us that only in the last 10 years had educational research established itself as a topic in its own right and he recalled that when he started to teach educational research (in the 1950s) the textbooks he inherited were Burt's *Mental and Scholastic Tests*, Whipple's *Manual of Mental and Physical Tests* and Vernon's *The Measurement of Abilities*. Brian Simon, in his Presidential Address to BERA 3 years on, recalled the time when a very distinguished psychometrist announced that 'the only serious problem facing educational research was the final perfection of selection techniques, for which all the necessary tools ... were already available' (1978, p. 3). In short, psychometrics was educational research. (See also Stones, 1985.)

It was against this background of long-term imperialism that BERA was set up-a bold move in many ways. BERA grew out of an informal interest group launched by Edgar Stones and others, which was joined by an increasing number of people who wanted something different: 'to reach across established boundaries and find new ways of thinking about and conducting research in education' (Simon, 1978, p. 2). At the early BERA conferences battles over territory took a while to play themselves out. The early polemics were characterised by one BERA president (Stenhouse, 1980) as aggressive tête-à-têtes, with the quantitative head snapping at the qualitative, the psychometric snapping at the ethnographic and the positivist snapping at the humanist. Ted Wragg (1982) called for less savage and personalised critiques of published work-Jim Eggleston had already offered a stem rebuke: 'Internecine warfare between rival methodologies is unhelpful. The only grounds for rejecting the application of any discipline to educational problems are that it fails to contribute to educational theory or that it fails to provide useful data and concepts' (1979, p. 12). A pledge of mutual respect is that the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has now insisted that its research

students are trained to be bi-methodological - or bi-focal - (i.e. competent across quantitative *and* qualitative areas).

Brian Simon's view (1978, p. 3) that research was now free to shift its allegiance from the differentiation of children to their education would recognise, now, an ironic turning back on itself. And John Nisbet's early optimism that the new educational research would strengthen the information base of decision-making has not proved true-in 1974 it was an aspiration; in 1994 it is a matter of profound resentment. And while Stones (1975) was busy challenging the racist assumptions of Jensen's research on pupil learning, others were warning us of the danger of policy-makers looking to research for certainties, short cuts and as a source of policy confirmation. As Jack Wrigley told us (1976), research is essentially a mode of thinking; its function, added Brian Simon, is to *reduce* uncertainty: 'Indeed it is precisely when certainties are proclaimed that one may be sure that scientific probity has gone out of the window' (1978, p. 7).

One of the interesting things about looking back over 20 years is to see how different strands of the overall educational enterprise have moved at different rates. Research methods, for instance, freed from the dominance of psychometrics, burgeoned with a wild energy. The curriculum development movement contributed in a direct way to the necessary destabilisation of research methodology. A number of us, myself included, had careers, as Barry MacDonald said, 'that were carved out of the opportunity structure that opened up as the innovation industry recast the credentials of personal advance' (1991, p. 5). We were 'plucked from nowhere by an unsystematic trawling procedure' (MacDonald, 1991) which used long nets to catch its aspiring but academically under-qualified recruits, and we 'hooked ourselves', like William Morris a hundred years before, 'on to the practical movement' (in Briggs, 1962, p. 36). When the curriculum development movement came to an end, the expectation was that we would be put back into the sea and swim into the new ROSLA (raising of the school leaving age) departments in schools, but instead many of us turned tail and established what Barry calls 'beach heads of an unfamiliar kind' in departments of education in colleges and universities, under the banner of curriculum studies, school and classroom studies, and, of course, evaluation. As he said, with characteristic self-deprecation, the curriculum developers and their camp followers the curriculum evaluators had to invent a research they could do-and they were seen by many as using 'unholy methodological improvisation'. But in fact qualitative researchers took strength from the traditions of historical research and social anthropology, and they steadily gained ground over the period, engaging in patches of fierce outsider and insider criticism, generally defending their methods and ethical integrity - and trying to evade total capture by what Philip Jackson (1990, p. 154) calls 'the ancient bugaboo'.

Overall, then, the field of research methods has seen a remarkable expansion and one largely guided by democratic concerns. There have been numerous self-contained campaigns-for example those mounted in support of teacher/practitioner research and action research by Lawrence Stenhouse, John Elliott, Jack Whitehead, Pam Lomax and others. Action research, firmly anchored via the CARN (Classroom Action Research Network), attracts increasingly large numbers of researchers from abroad to its annual conferences, and practitioner research found a niche and developed powerful continuity in higher degree work for teachers - which has also undergone a sea change over the last 20 years.

There have been other powerful campaigns. Feminist research is now recognised - although its early claims to a distinctive methodology were vigorously debated at BERA meetings (see

Delamont, 1983, who, of all the BERA Presidents, mounted the strongest case for reviewing women's place in research). Feminist research constructed a rationale, defined its distinctive characteristics and is now 'robust enough for dissent within the movement to be a basis for theoretical advance.

Life-history also takes its place within the panoply of approaches that have served to democratise the process of research. It has not been without its critics-including the usually mild-mannered Philip Jackson who confessed to squirming when the biographical method takes us into 'the nether world of personal sorrows and passions' (1990, p. 159). And, still more recently, approaches focusing on narrative and voice offer a new language of possibility in research-and an insistence on the checking out of the rhetoric of 'partnership' (the blurring of the boundaries between 'researcher' and 'researched' and the re-drawing of the lines of power and control) that is the democratic hallmark of many new approaches.

Within the 20 years, evaluation has developed its own field. I still remember the tense anticipation at conferences in the early 1970s where Parlett & Hamilton's paper on illuminative evaluation was scheduled for discussion. Since then the repertoire of forms has been much extended and the general spirit of development is summed up in the title of Helen Simons's book (1987) *Getting to Know Schools in a Democracy*. At the same time there have been significant advances in quantitative techniques: multi-level modelling has, for instance, proved a sophisticated means of defence against those who advocate so-called 'raw' measurement as the basis for judging schools. It has offered a consistent challenge to the distortion created by simplifying tendencies in the quantification of educational output.

A concern with democracy has, I think, been apparent in many aspects of BERA's activities during the 20 years. Not only has there been the democratisation of research methods through the development of new modes of enquiry, but there has also been a commitment to explore the ethics of research. Work has been done by members of BERA Council to scrutinise the detail of research contracts in order to ensure that the rights of all parties are respected, and there has been a proper insistence that research of quality should be heard.

Concern for democracy has been apparent in debates about the communication of research-from Peter Chambers's (1983) presidential plea that research should reduce its mystique and elitism to Michael Bassegy's exposé of the games researchers-in-writing play, including shoring up our authority with rows of sand bags - the inert name-plus-date references. And there have been calls from numerous Presidents to balance the option of writing for specialist, insider audiences (which tends to win us more Brownie points in the Research Assessment Exercises) with the often tougher option of writing explicitly for practitioner, policy-maker and parent audiences.

BERA has attempted to develop an 'outward-looking stance' (Hamilton, 1985, p. 11) and has opened up its membership, not only in terms of the disciplines but also to fellow researchers from other countries and to practitioners from outside as well as inside the school system. And this year's conference signals a renewed commitment to the interests and needs of new researchers and research students in training.

In 1993 the BERA membership rejected the suggestion that conference papers should be subject to a review and selection procedure and our annual conference therefore remains open. BERA has tried to avoid the trappings and spirit of an establishment academy of the

kind that Becker talks about in his book, *Art Worlds* (1982). He tells the story of the establishment's ultimate acceptance and display of Duchamp's *objet trouvé*, the public urinal, and their rejection of the zoo keeper's *objet trouvé*, an elephant, presented as a study in lumbering grey grace. Who knows whether they acted out of cultural elitism or out of what they thought was a proper sense of what constitutes quality in art. There have been some mutterings at recent BERA conferences when it has been thought-a consequence perhaps of the pressures of the Research Assessment Exercises - that too many of us are bringing along our elephants. If we choose openness, then we have to work on quality. Wynne Harlen confronted the issue in her 1993 Presidential Address and subsequently in a series of BERA seminars.

Over its 20 years BERA has tried, in Brian Wilcox's words (1986), to support the development of 'an ecumenical research movement'. John Elliott, in similar spirit, called for a conversational research community: groups of people prepared to take on the exploration of reasoned dissent, where significant educational issues and new research practices are the subject of constant critical review and development. The hallmarks of such conversational communities, he said, are 'educational creativity' and a 'tolerance of intellectual deviance and methodological pluralism' (1990, p. 3). He called for debate about issues and practices to be conducted with intellectual vigour but always against a background of fundamental research principles and it is these principles that serve as the core of the BERA community. They 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. Sadly, the language-in-action of central policy-makers does not seem to be structured by the same grammar of concerns.

The Political Context of Research

At BERA's inaugural meeting in 1974, John Nisbet quoted Margaret Thatcher's recent comments on research-and we recognise now the tactic she later perfected of manipulating meaning to give a pseudo-democratic, common-sense appeal (part of what Michael Apple [1993, p. 20] calls 'the restoration politics of authoritarian populism'). She was justifying the possibility of curbing the practice of 'responsive' funding within the Department of Education and Science (DES). She argued that the DES's research 'had to move away from a basis of *patronage* - the rather passive support of ideas that were essentially other people's, related to problems which were often of other people's choosing-to a basis of commission. This meant the active initiation of work by the Department on problems of its own choosing, focusing much more on issues which offered a real possibility of yielding usable conclusions, (and) within a procedure and timetable which were relevant to its needs' (Nisbet, 1974, p. 11). We know how much at odds government 'timetables' usually are with the timetables required for research of quality. One of my colleagues, John Gray, recalls visiting the then Secretary of State for Education to discuss research on school effectiveness and being told that he was really only interested in research that could be completed and reported before the next election.

The sceptics among us might see the Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs)-which were introduced in the second decade of BERA's existence - as less about quality and more about formulae for the distribution of resources, but their virtue is that within the research community itself they have helped to put quality at the centre of the debate. But the RAE cast a long shadow. They can lead us to prioritise research that has short-term goals rather

than research that builds longer-term, cumulative understandings. They can lead us to work in a spirit of competitive individualism rather than easy collaboration. They can lead to a proliferation of outlets for publication as though publication itself rather than the impact of ideas on structures of thinking and practice are what matters. And they can lead us to seek out and claim novel arenas for our research--because personal or institutional ownership is an important dimension of the system of judgement.

Martin Trow, a distinguished policy analyst from the USA, was recently invited to review issues in the Government's policy for higher education--including the strategies for assessing the quality of research and teaching. In his report (1994) he described the Government's White Paper, *Higher Education: a new framework* (1991), as a document of 'hard managerialism: a brief collection of assertions and instructions to the academic community, wholly without argument or evidence for the policies it sets forth' (p. 13). He goes on: 'Its character can be suggested by the fact that this authoritative document ... devotes no fewer than 28 numbered paragraphs to the issue of "quality assurance", while saying nothing about capital investment in laboratories, libraries, classrooms or equipment...'. (I remembered Laurie Taylor's representation of the resource problem some years back [1986, pp. 109-110]. A minute from the University of Poppleton's Equipment Committee tells heads of department whether their annual bids for resources have been accepted or rejected: the Department of Archaeology was allowed £8 to purchase a 'very small Roman artefact for Demonstration Purposes' provided that it would be available for exhibition in the Admin. block on Open Day; the Music Department had its request for £2.00 to buy a second-hand nose-flute turned down; the Department of Biology had its bid for a Beckman DU7 Scanning Spectrophotometer, at £16,000, rejected--with the comment 'Who are you kidding!', but its request for 'Six Assorted Frogs--prices subject to seasonal adjustment' was accepted!) (For those readers unfamiliar with Laurie Taylor's column, the University of Poppleton is a fictional establishment but one whose concerns and responses bear some resemblance to the real world of higher education!)

To return to the argument. David Hamilton focused the dilemma for us in his Presidential Address to BERA: 'If government and the academy are in a state of tension, should we regard that tension as an enduring, even necessary, feature of our existence; or should we regard it as dysfunctional and seek to reduce it?' (1985, p. 10). Tricia Broadfoot discussed the continuing hostile policy climate for research in general and for educational research in particular (1988, p. 3). Michael Bassey (1992, p. 9, quoting Ball, 1990), said that 'the role of expert knowledge and research is regarded (now) as less dependable than political intuition and common sense accounts of what people want'. BERA members have increasingly urged BERA to act more politically in support of research and the research community--in order to preserve 'the continued vitality of the democratic community of (educational) interests', as David Hamilton put it (1985, p.11). Jack Whitehead supported the plea for greater political commitment among researchers in a climate where industrial and commercial values are seen as beginning to threaten research values (1989, p. 4). And John Elliott called for BERA explicitly to hear and voice the concerns of the research community (1990, p.15) But seeing how to give effective voice to our discontent is not an easy task.

Are we to accept an oppositional style or should we now renew our efforts to set up non-abrasive dialogues with policy-makers, which is what Sally Brown (1991, p.6) recommended, in the hope that the time will come when evidence and informed judgement will underpin policy moves. Hickox & Moore (mimeo) offer a timely reminder; they urge us not to 'fall

into the naive trap of assuming a pre-Thatcherite, educational golden age of successful, progressive reform', which was brought to a 'cataclysmic close' by the pressure groups from the right and their influence on national policy-makers. It is not so much that the recent reforms have created problems for 'a previously liberal education system' but that they 'have not effectively identified and addressed the problems that in fact already existed'. I would go further and say that they have undoubtedly created a climate in which an even stronger strain of differentiation and labelling is flourishing, a stronger marking out of winners and losers.

Research, Democracy and Schooling

'Differentiation' is a word whose significance varies according to context. As a classroom strategy that enables teachers to match the challenge of the task to the potential of the student, differentiation is a positive practice and one that students can understand and feel good about. But when it operates as an organisational 'dividing strategy' - as part of a technology of control (see Meadmore, 1993) - it makes it difficult for teachers to build a learning community where young people recognise and respect different strengths and different needs in each other. In the day-to-day interactions of the classroom, the corridor and the playground, any system that highlights and legitimises the crude categorisation of difference runs the risk of strengthening the impulse within the peer group to give their own labels to those who are different or those who are faltering or those who are weak. 'Everyone's brainy in our class except us', claimed three secondary school students. In a mock middle-class voice they mimic the 'brainy' ones: 'Oh, we don't want to work with yaw' (see Harris & Rudduck, 1993). Once students are caught in a subculture of derision it is very difficult for them to regain confidence. In another secondary school in a socially and economically disadvantaged area, teachers had worked for many years on equity issues and the building of self-respect (see Harris *et al.*, 1995). Recently, setting was introduced as a way of coping with the demands of the new curriculum and its attainment levels. Some students in the bottom sets were angry at first at being syphoned off and were determined to do well so that they could be moved up into higher sets-but during the course of the year they came to accept their lot. The energy of anger turned into either a dull sense of powerlessness or a tough nonchalance, reactions that make re-engagement with learning - and in some cases with schooling - difficult.

We cannot effectively tackle concerns about achievement in schools without understanding how young people are responding to the sharper spirit of competition that is abroad and its effects on their sense of purpose and possibility in schooling. Some secondary school students we interviewed had a sense of the 'new tests' being part of a larger mechanism for separating them, sorting them, labelling them and preparing them for their futures. (Interestingly, Bryan Dockrell reminded us, in his Presidential Address in 1986, that 'the primary purpose of all assessment is formative and not for reporting' [p. 12].) Connell (1994, p. 134) makes a strong statement when he says that 'school grades ... are not just aids to teaching, they are also tiny judicial decisions with legal status which cumulate into large authoritative decisions about people's lives - progression in school, selection into higher education, employment prospects'. Our data suggest that in such a context the socially disadvantaged students are the ones who find it hardest to compete.

In short, I have little doubt that many of the shaping experiences of students in school continue to be influenced by issues that lie at the politically awkward intersections of class and culture, gender and ethnicity, opportunity and control. The research agenda is familiar-

but it should not be passed over. At the same time I recognise the importance of extending the range of our concerns and endorse the ESRC's new initiative, which Frank Coffield is to co-ordinate, on The Learning Society. Indeed, past Presidents of BERA have urged such a broadening of the research agenda. Jim Eggleston encouraged educational researchers 'not to confine their attentions to any transient system of schooling but to explore a wider range of educational phenomena' (1979, pp. 7-8), and John Elliott said that educational research must not be confined to the 'study of formal schooling' but should concern itself with the 'quality of learning generally in society' and should confront other professional contexts where 'educational values have to be realised' (1990, p. 17). But I also believe that we have a continuing responsibility to help teachers get to grips, once the present period of organisational turbulence has settled, with the familiar but increasingly complex issues of motivation and engagement and the factors affecting students' sense of self-worth and sense of future.

These are the concerns on which the 'democratic promise of education' rests (Bastian *et al.*, 1985, p. 1). Robinson (1994, p. 50) is unequivocal in stating that 'the protection and promotion of democracy should be central to our education policy and practice'. But, as Ranson (1993, p. 334) points out, in the present climate, 'the institutional conditions for effective schools require the de-democratisation of institutional settings; ... participation as a principle gives way to exclusion'. It follows, Ranson adds, 'that clout in the market derives from the power of superior resources to subordinate others in competitive exchange' (p. 336). We also recognise, as Ruth Jonathan (1990, in Codd, 1993) points out, that when financial viability is directly linked to student recruitment, then parental choice of school can be a formidable mechanism for conformity. She saw the likelihood of 'those parents who are most informed and articulate influencing and obtaining the "best buy" for their children, thus giving a further twist to the spiral of cumulative advantage which results when the State is rolled back to enable (so called) "free and fair" competition between individuals and groups who have quite different starting points in the social race' (parenthesis added).

What Ranson and Jonathan perceive happening at different levels of the system, I see happening within the school. Data from the project that I have worked on with Susan Harris and Gwen Wallace confirm what seems to be a general trend - reported also by researchers from other countries, whereby schools' commitment to equity of provision for their students is giving way, under the pressure of the market, to greater differentiation. Despite differences of tradition and social context, the schools involved in our study are caught at some level between 'a desire ... to serve the competitive demands of a stratified society, and a desire ... to play a socially integrative and democratic role, serving the right of all children to develop to their fullest potential' (Bastian *et al.*, 1985, p. 1). We have the means, through our now much expanded repertoire of research methods, to select approaches which will enable us to 'particularize ... (the current) landscape' (Steedman, 1986, p. 60). If the effects of policies are presented through measures that suppress the individuality of experience, then it is easy to mislead. We need, in particular, to hear the voices of students and to give attention to their perspectives on the experience of being a learner in school.

Michael Apple urges us not to forget 'the decades of hard work it took to put even a limited vision of equality on the social and educational agenda' (1993, p. 22). He acknowledges that the 'democratic goal of expanding equality of opportunity (p. 16) has lost much of its political potency' and that the task is clouded now by the 'assemblage of concepts surrounding equality' (p. 16). And he warns us (1993, p. 7) that researchers in higher education are

sometimes so concerned with academic prestige that we may lose a sense of the ' "real" political issues ... (of) culture and power in schools'. In her Presidential Address 2 years ago, Caroline Gipps said that 'the system which is emerging will not be more fair, ... will not offer equity along with excellence' (p. 4). And she asked how the system, in this new wave of differentiation and exclusion, would deal with 'unchosen schools and unselected children'. We have seen, this summer, how one sixth former responded to A level grades that she thought signalled that she had not been 'selected' - it was through suicide.

We need to look in particular, I think, at what I call 'the conditions of learning'. In 1981 Bruce Choppin asked whether what was provided for students in schools was what they really needed. Thirteen years later I am not convinced that the structures of schooling have changed sufficiently to take account of the social and sexual maturity of young people, the complexity of their domestic lives and the very real responsibilities that many of them carry out of school. There was a headline in the *TES* in July 1974 that read, 'Please don't treat us like children'. The year before, in 1973, the school leaving age had been raised to 16 and journalists were investigating responses. I have interviewed students in a variety of settings and the plea of the 15 and 16 year-olds of 20 years ago is often echoed by 12 and 13 year-olds: 'We want to be treated more like adults'. Perhaps 12 and 13 year-olds, once they have learned to cope with the upheavals and anxieties of the new school and are no longer its youngest members, have always called for more 'adult' treatment. But whatever the history, at a time when teachers are concentrating on raising expectations and enhancing academic performance, they might be helped by more attention being given, through research, to some of the fundamental structures and relationships of schooling. A comment from a secondary school student comes to mind: 'School's not labour and not play, so what is it?' That is a question we need to work on. It relates directly to democracy-which, as Robinson said, 'depends upon an informed and active population' who understand what it is they are engaged on and who feel 'that day to day they have some real say and control in their lives....' (1994, p. 50). The question may also relate directly to patterns of motivation and achievement.

House said 20 years ago (1974) that 'the school is an institution frozen in the order of institutions' (in MacDonald, 1991, p. 11); it is not easy for schools, in the present climate, to develop structures that genuinely and regularly consult students about aspects of schooling and that take seriously the question of 'voice' and 'participation'. But we can take some inspiration, I think, from the work of teachers who *have* been trying to & 'unfreeze' their schools and transform the traditional culture through whole-school policies on equal opportunities. They have struggled on, often with little support except their own commitment and that of their colleagues, and the task has been complex and sometimes personally harrowing. And they do sometimes ask what difference their efforts can make in a society where the 'official typescripts' for the powerful and the powerless are still so readily available. But they are realistic and determined and acknowledge that it will be a long haul. One teacher said that working on issues of democracy and equity was 'like emptying the ocean with a teacup', she went on: 'But I say to myself, " if we all keep going with our teacups then in the end things will really change" ' (see Rudduck, 1994, p. 49). And a teacher in another school said this:

It's a long term job. It's endless ... We have an idea which we'll never achieve There will be jumps forward and there will be bad times, but we have made it clear to everybody that that's what we are about. (Rudduck, 1994, p. 116)

I hope that some of us will find common purpose and focus in taking forward the work initiated by the National Commission on Education (1993). The Commission's approach has been reassuring in these troubled times. Peter Newsam (1995) characterised it as being 'pulled by the future, not pushed by the past'. And where policy-makers have often believed 'that it is possible to manage and "reform" major concerns, such as the education service, without needing to understand them' (Newsam, 1995), the Commission is respected by the research community for taking account of research evidence and for ensuring that its working parties included people with direct and expert knowledge of the educational service. Its 'vision statements' and related recommendations provide an agenda for research not only in relation to schools and the school system but also in relation to the broader learning needs of our society-an agenda which may enable us slowly and steadily to enlarge the democratic promise of education.

I think we should try to look ahead with a cautious optimism about the status of educational research and its contribution to the long-term improvement of education. To close I've adapted the words of William Morris (in Briggs, 1962, p. 11), written more than a hundred years ago, because they seemed appropriate to our situation:

The gods have been preparing troubles and terrors for our small corner of the world ...
but I do not believe they will have it in the shadows forever.

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