

Education(al) research and education policy making: is conflict inevitable?[†]

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The relationship between research and policy and practice in education is a long-standing issue in many countries. Focusing on the UK Government, which is responsible for education in England, this paper looks at the criticisms of education research that have been made in recent years by government and related non-departmental public bodies and stakeholders. It then looks in more detail at specific examples of the use that has—and has not—been made of research in developing policy. But rather than produce a balance sheet of pluses and minuses in policy makers' use of evidence, the paper emphasises the realities of the policy making process and the difficulties in establishing consistently and exclusively evidence-based policy. At the same time, it argues that researchers should beware of allowing their work to be shaped entirely by the Government's call for research that is directly useful to policy by always prioritising applied or practice-based approaches. The paper concludes by highlighting the need for BERA to promote all types of education research—regardless of its utility for policy makers—and, as part of this, for the education research community to ensure that appropriate quality criteria are available for all approaches.

Introduction

As BERA members well know, the relationship between research, policy and practice in education has been high on the agenda of the research and policy communities for a number of years now. In the UK it was highlighted in the mid-1990s, when a succession of commentators questioned the value and quality of much of the work of our community. It then became a particular issue for New Labour with its proclaimed commitment to evidence-informed policy and its emphasis on finding out and disseminating 'what works'. But it is also an issue in other countries. For example, BERA has been active in fostering dialogue with education researchers in the USA, where the education research community is facing similar scrutiny in terms of the quality, relevance and impact of its work (e.g. What Works Clearinghouse¹; Center for Education, 2004). Some of our Australian colleagues have been grappling with these same issues (see Yates, 2005).

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Much of my own time in recent years has been spent in meetings discussing this issue—whether as Dean and then Director of the Institute of Education, as Vice-President and now President of BERA, as a member of the first Teaching and Learning Research Programme² steering committee, as a member of the General Teaching Council for England³ and, most explicitly, as a member of the reconstituted National Educational Research Forum.⁴ I have also addressed it more reflectively in my 2002 publication, *Making sense of education policy*, and in papers I have given to the Higher Education Academy's Education Subject Centre (ESCALATE)⁵ (Whitty, 2003) and to the Scottish Executive Education Department (Whitty, 2005).

While I shall draw on this work, in this paper I am going to focus specifically on relations between education researchers and government policy makers. I shall explore the extent to which that relationship is inherently one of conflict or at least a site of mutual misunderstanding and even suspicion, but also suggest some ways in which we ourselves might help to minimise the misunderstandings.

Ministerial views on the research–policy relationship

David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment from 1997 to 2001, looked at the research–policy relationship in detail in his 2000 Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) lecture entitled 'Influence or irrelevance?'. In this he threw down the gauntlet to the social science community to contribute more directly and 'productively' to policy making. But some academics read his lecture as a sinister demand that research should support government policy. After all, on taking office, he had told head teachers that the 'cynics' and 'energy sappers' should move aside rather than 'erode the enthusiasm and hope that currently exists' (Gardiner, 1997)—and it sometimes seemed that he felt that was all education researchers ever did.

Similarly, his successor, Charles Clarke, was wont to complain that education research never gave him anything useful, though his own characterisation of his perspective as a 'saloon bar' view suggests that even he recognised that his complaint was not itself securely evidence-informed. Nevertheless, throughout his period of office there were rumours that he wanted to do something drastic about the quality and relevance of education research.

The current Secretary of State, Ruth Kelly,⁶ actually cites research in her speeches more often than her predecessors (e.g. Kelly, 2005a, b). However, the potential tension between government and education researchers was recently highlighted again when the *Times Educational Supplement* ran a story about Peter Tymms's work at Durham University under the title 'Why this man scares Ruth Kelly' (Mansell, 2005). It described what they called his 'bitter row' with government over his analysis of the National Curriculum Key Stage 2 performance data, which seemed to demonstrate that the Government's much proclaimed success in raising standards in primary schools was no such thing.

So now seems an opportune time to reflect again on the nature of the relationship between education researchers and government—and to consider the implications for BERA.

The abuse of education research

The election of New Labour was not, of course, the start of the affair. Throughout the 1990s there had been a whole series of reviews and criticisms of research in education. In 1991 and 1995 reviews were undertaken for the ESRC and a few years later another review was undertaken for Leverhulme, which considered the quality, funding and uses of research in education (see Rudduck & McIntyre, 1998). But the debate became dominated by a range of seemingly damning, albeit sometimes contradictory, criticisms made—for example, by David Hargreaves (1996) for the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), Tooley & Darby (1998) for the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), and by Hillage *et al.* (1998) for the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) itself.

Although the overall picture was not entirely bleak, politicians reading the headlines and press reports could perhaps be forgiven for believing that UK education research as a whole was characterised by the following features:

- Lack of rigour
- Failure to produce cumulative research findings
- Theoretical incoherence
- Ideological bias
- Irrelevance to schools
- Lack of involvement of teachers
- Inaccessibility and poor dissemination
- Poor cost effectiveness

Part of the problem is that subsequently all education research has tended to be tarred by the same brush and judged as wanting against the policy priorities of particular Ministers. But this is neither fair nor a good evidence base for decisions about the future funding of education research. I will make just a few points about this now, but will return to the issue later.

Firstly, with regard to quality, no one who regularly reviews papers and research proposals could deny that there is some poor-quality research in education, but then so there is in medicine and other fields with which education is often unfavourably compared. Yet education is one of the social sciences that the ESRC currently regards as meeting world-class quality criteria, notwithstanding its disappointing Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)⁷ grade profile in 2001 (Diamond, 2005a). Clearly, there is some excellent research going on in education departments and it is galling that this is so rarely acknowledged.

Secondly, with regard to relevance, not all research in education has the same focus or purpose. So the frequent charge from politicians of our irrelevance to schools and classrooms in terms of helping to raise achievement is surely both

inaccurate, if one looks at the long history of classroom ethnography or action research (Hammersley, 1993), and anyway irrelevant to much of our work. While we may applaud the Government's focus on raising achievement and may even see it as the key agenda for most education departments in universities, it would make little sense to judge the birth cohort studies or our work in the history of education on their contribution to improving Standard Assessment Task results—at least directly.

Thirdly, even research that is centrally concerned with improving practice and supporting teachers—in whatever phase of education—needs to be more diverse in its nature than the rhetoric of 'what works' sometimes seems to imply. Research defined too narrowly would actually be very limited as an evidence base for a teaching profession that is facing the huge challenges of a rapidly changing world, where what works today may not work tomorrow. Some research therefore needs to ask different sorts of questions, including why something works and, equally important, why it works in some contexts and not in others. And anyway, the professional literacy of teachers surely involves more than purely instrumental knowledge. It is therefore appropriate that a research-based profession should be informed by research that questions prevailing assumptions—and considers such questions as whether an activity is a worthwhile endeavour in the first place and what constitutes socially-just schooling (Gale & Densmore, 2003).

So, while we must always take the criticisms of education research seriously, and be prepared to contribute to evidence-informed policy and practice, we must beware of inadvertently accepting the assumptions underlying them and allowing inappropriate assumptions, on the part of Ministers and others, to define our field. And, while seeking to improve the quality of all UK research in education, we must resist attempts to impose inappropriate quality criteria. In my view, education research and BERA as a professional association and learned society needs to be a broad church, and the assessment of quality must take into account fitness-for-purpose.

This means that, while some of our work will be aligned in various ways to the Government's agenda, some of it will necessarily be regarded by government as irrelevant or useless. Furthermore, some of it may well be seen as oppositional. Such a range of orientations to government policy is entirely appropriate for education research in a free society.

In practice, though, and perhaps even in principle, most members of BERA would probably agree with Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (2003) that:

We do not believe that all educational research should be useful, for two reasons ... [Firstly] there should be scope for some research in education to be absolutely uninterested in considerations of use. [Secondly] it is impossible to state, with any certainty, which research will be useful in the future. Having said this, we believe strongly that the majority of research in education should be undertaken with a view to improving educational provision. (p. 632)

To that extent, there may be less actual conflict between government priorities and researcher priorities than is sometimes suggested. This makes it important to look in more detail at how the relationship works out in practice. It is certainly not

straightforward, either in general terms or in relation to the particular governments we have now, bearing in mind that we have different governments responsible for education in the different devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Even where the priorities of governments and researchers are broadly similar, there may well be conflicts in practice.

New Labour and education research

To explore this, I will look at the New Labour Government's treatment of education research in more detail. In this section, I shall be largely referring to the UK Government, which is responsible for education in England.

The first thing to acknowledge is that, while the election of New Labour in May 1997 did not bring in a golden age for education, there were some important and positive contrasts with the previous Conservative administrations, not least for research in education. In rhetorical terms at least, the emphasis on evidence-informed policy was a welcome change. And, as John Furlong (2005) has pointed out, it also brought resources. For example, in the party's first three years in government, annual research expenditure in the English Education Department doubled from £5.4 million to over £10.4 million. Several major research programmes and centres have been established, such as the Centre for the Economics of Education⁸ and the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning.⁹ The major budgets associated with key government programmes have also funded significant research operations, for example, the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC).¹⁰ The Department, and its equivalents in the devolved administrations, along with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and others, have also been involved in the ESRC-managed Teaching & Learning Research Programme, which is the largest programme of research in education in UK history. The programme is committed to the application of its findings to policy and practice and, more specifically, to conducting research with the potential to improve outcomes for learners.

As well as targeted programmes of research, there has been an attempt to bring greater coherence to education research—both in terms of synthesising research that is already available and coordinating future projects. From 2000, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) funded a five-year programme of systematic reviews of education research supported by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre (EPPI) (see Oakley, 2002). The National Educational Research Forum (NERF) was set up in 1999 with the aim of better coordinating research efforts. The Schools Research Liaison Group, which pre-dates NERF, serves a similar purpose, being a mechanism by which the DfES and non-departmental public bodies share research agendas and devise strategies for addressing common problems such as priority-setting.

But greater funding and public visibility have not been without their costs for education research. New Labour's founding commitment to the 'Third Way'

brought with it a mantra of ‘what works’, often interpreted in a rather narrow and mechanistic way. Under this commitment, and as the main funder of research and initiatives, the Government has been increasingly explicit about the type of research that it sees as best fulfilling its aims. This was evident in David Blunkett’s aforementioned ESRC lecture and his call for a ‘revolution in the relations between government and the research community’ to support the Government’s modernising agenda, which was coupled with an emphasis on research that demonstrates what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective (2000, p. 21).

The model against which research is most often judged in politicians’ minds seems to be what Sharon Gewirtz (2003) has characterised as the ‘hyper-rationalist-technicist’ approach. This is epitomised by David Hargreaves’s call for research that:

- (i) demonstrates conclusively that if teachers change their practice from x to y there will be a significant and enduring improvement in teaching and learning and (ii) has developed an effective method of convincing teachers of the benefits of, and means to, changing from x to y. (1996, p. 5)

While I think David Hargreaves’s position is actually more sophisticated than Gewirtz suggests, something closer to her caricature was implicit in the draft of the first consultation paper produced by NERF (2000), which seemed to advocate a particularly limited and instrumental view of research. Indeed, this view of education research was seen as highly sinister by my colleague Stephen Ball, who claimed that it treated research as ‘about providing accounts of what works for unselfconscious classroom drones to implement’ and that it portended ‘an absolute standardization of research purposes, procedures, reporting and dissemination’ (Ball, 2001, pp. 266–267). Similar criticisms have been levelled at systematic reviewing (e.g. MacLure, 2005).

I am sure that most BERA members would resist such a view of education research, both in terms of its narrow focus and its engineering model of the way in which research relates to improvement. I imagine they would be particularly outraged if this became the only sort of research in education that was supported by public funds. However, it is surely difficult to claim that academics should have more rights than elected governments in determining priorities for public expenditure, so we need to argue the case for public support of a broader view of what research in education is about and the criteria against which it should be judged.

Although the NERF consultation exercise actually led to the acknowledgement of the need for a pluralist view of research, it also argued for a means of prioritising resources based on research making a ‘worthwhile contribution’ to education and ‘maximising impact’ (NERF, 2001). We need to establish what this might mean in our case and whether this is an appropriate test for all education research. ESRC, for example, values relevance to the development of a discipline as well as to policy and practice, as Ian Diamond made a point of stressing in his lecture at this year’s BERA conference (Diamond, 2005b).

Some of the criteria for public support of medieval history, to take Charles Clarke’s favourite scapegoat, are different from those for business studies, even if

there is another set of criteria that applies to both. Much the same surely applies to the different components of education studies and we should not be cajoled into accepting that the only research in education that is worthwhile is research that has immediate pay-offs for policy and practice.

That said, and at the risk of seeming to narrow the field myself, I want to focus now on the sort of work that fits New Labour's apparent preference for research on issues which are (to use David Blunkett's words) 'central and directly relevant to the policy debate' (Blunkett, 2000, p. 2).

Understanding the use and misuse of education research

At this point, it should be noted that, in his ESRC lecture, David Blunkett did at least recognise that relevance to the Government's agenda did not imply unconditional support for government policy and that there had been misunderstandings on both sides:

sometimes, when [research] does try to be directly relevant to the main policy and political debates, [it seems to be] driven by ideology paraded as intellectual inquiry or critique, setting out with the sole aim of collecting evidence that will prove policy wrong rather than genuinely seeking to evaluate or interpret impact. A number of studies have tried to claim evidence of poor outcomes when policies have barely been implemented. I acknowledge that previous criticisms I have made of particular studies have been interpreted by some as denial of evidence which conflicts with policy but we must move forward now—government in its capacity to give serious consideration to 'difficult' findings and researchers in their capacity to remain open minded [about our policies]. (Blunkett, 2000, p. 2)

But how realistic is this in practice? Even if it were of the highest international quality and clearly demonstrated what works, would governments consistently seek out the best research and make good use of it? Would they submit research to rigorous evaluation before using it to inform or justify policy? And if they did, how would this fit with the timescale of policy making and implementation? I will start with the negative cases, where research has been ignored or where it has been used selectively.

One well-known example is the use that was made in England of evidence on class size during the 1997 general election. Evidence on the effects of class size is notoriously contentious and difficult to interpret, and the controversies continue to this day (see Blatchford *et al.*, 2004). Even so, New Labour's commitment in the 1997 election to cut class sizes at Key Stage 1 traded quite consciously on research findings accepted by most researchers and most teachers—evidence that, if smaller classes have an unambiguously positive impact anywhere, it is most marked in the very early years of schooling and in the most socially disadvantaged areas. So, the manifesto commitment to cut class sizes at Key Stage 1 to below 30 using monies that had formerly been used to send able children to private schools¹¹ looked like a socially progressive policy based on robust research findings. Yet, as a policy it was probably driven as much by the findings of election opinion polling as those of education research, given that most classes over 30 were in marginal suburban constituencies, not in inner-city areas where classes were already below that level.

Some even more robust findings on the beneficial effects of cutting infant class size to 15 in disadvantaged areas did not influence the policy at all, presumably because it would have been extremely expensive, but possibly also because additional votes in these inner-city constituencies would not swing the election (Whitty, 2002).

One could argue that as far as New Labour was concerned, 1997 had to be all about getting into power, and only then could things be different thereafter. Yet, even in power, New Labour has sometimes used research quite selectively and has not appeared particularly concerned about the quality of research as long as it serves its policy purposes. One notorious example of this that I have cited before is the way in which research was used in the English White Paper of 2001, *Schools: achieving success* (DfES, 2001). One paragraph stated bluntly: 'There are those who have said that specialist schools will create a two-tier system. They won't' (p. 40). In making its case on specialist schools the White Paper unashamedly used research carried out for the Specialist Schools Trust, which at the time had not been submitted to peer review and was regarded as flawed by key researchers in the field (e.g. Goldstein, 2001). This particular example is even more striking given that, at the very same time, the Department of Health was publicly rejecting some potentially damaging research on the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine and autism on the grounds that it could not be taken seriously because it had not been subjected to scientific peer review. In neither case am I making any judgement about the actual quality of the research, merely noting the different terms on which government was prepared to use it, motivated presumably by considerations other than the robustness of the research.

A current example of problematic use of research evidence is provided by the Academies programme. Although we do not yet have the data against which to assess Tony Blair's claim that Academies are working (e.g. Smithers *et al.*, 2005), the use of evidence to date has been less than convincing. Quite apart from the way in which the Government has spun the critical PricewaterhouseCoopers report (DfES, 2005) and the critical report by Ofsted on Unity City Academy in Middlesbrough (e.g. see Ford, 2005), Stephen Gorard (2005) has demonstrated that there are serious questions about the way in which the Government has used performance data to justify continuing with the policy. His own analysis of early results indicated that claims that these schools were, in general, performing better for equivalent students than the schools they had replaced could not be sustained on the basis of the evidence then available. In a carefully worded conclusion, he says:

any improvement may take time and will be very challenging, and it would be hasty to condemn the programme as a whole on the [limited data available so far]. On the other hand, it is quite clear that it would be equally hasty and far less warranted to credit the programme with success at this stage. Yet this is what the government and the Academies are doing. To point this out is not to make a criticism of the individuals involved or their practice, but of the way in which policy is being made on the basis of little useful evidence, and is seldom allowed to be seen to fail for electoral reasons. To expand the [Academies] programme on the basis of what has happened so far is so removed from the evidence-based policy making that is a mantra of government today that it is scarcely worth pointing out. (p. 376)

This parallels concerns expressed by the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee (2005), which used both the specialist school and Academies programmes to argue that:

Despite the government's proclaimed attachment to evidence-based policy, expensive schemes seem to be rolled out before being adequately tested and evaluated compared to other less expensive alternatives. (p. 17)

Gorard argues that a more equitable policy than the Academies programme would be one targeted at individuals for as long as they remain disadvantaged and in whichever area or institution they move to. My final example of the complex relations between research and policy also relates to this issue and is one that touches me personally in a number of ways.

In July 2005 an article in the *Times Educational Supplement* commented on the relative influence on policy of consultancy companies, think tanks and the higher education research community (Slater, 2005). It began as follows:

If you want to influence Labour's education policy, you could do worse than target a think tank and a management consultancy. More than London University's Institute of Education, the teaching unions or even the Labour Party, the Institute for Public Policy Research and McKinsey have the ear of people in high places. (p. 15)

My initial defensive reaction, as Director of the Institute, was that this claim was somewhat misleading, not least because the influential new recruit to McKinsey's that the article cited, Michael Barber, was formerly a professor at the Institute. Furthermore, two of the only four university-based educationists mentioned as having any ongoing influence at the DfES, David Hopkins and Tim Brighouse, are actually based at the Institute. However, the following week, I came to realise that the article's central claim about our lack of influence was unfortunately true.

Ruth Kelly made a keynote speech—as it happens, at the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)—in which she acknowledged that the gap between poorer and richer children's results in primary schools had not been reduced by New Labour policies. The DfES's own research had apparently shown that, while all pupils did better in 2004 than in 1998, those pupils from higher income families made more progress than those on free school meals, even though schools in deprived areas improved more than those in wealthier neighbourhoods. She also advocated more use of individual interventions, singling out Reading Recovery¹² for special mention and support (Kelly, 2005b).

I was not surprised either at this finding or the proposed remedy. But I was puzzled that New Labour should have been surprised. After all, nearly eight years previously, just as New Labour was coming to power, along with Peter Mortimore, I published a paper entitled 'Can school improvement overcome the effects of disadvantage?' (Mortimore & Whitty, 1997), which predicted this very outcome. In it, we warned that a careful reading of the school effectiveness research (of which Peter was one of the leading UK exponents) indicated that, if all schools were brought up to the level of the best, the social class gap in performance would be even starker than it was then—unless, that is, positive action were to be taken to provide extra support for disadvantaged pupils, including, incidentally, Reading Recovery.

So I couldn't help but ask, isn't there a lesson for New Labour in all this? If they had listened more openly to the academic research community back in 1997, they might not have spent eight years pursuing policies with such perverse consequences for a supposedly progressive political party. While New Labour certainly listened to research on school improvement, it did not take seriously the research on the limitations of such an approach. As Denis Lawton put it in his recent book on Labour Party education policy, 'Research evidence as well as the views of education theorists have too often been ignored in favour of the quick-fix bright ideas of spin doctors and advisers at No. 10' (2005, p. 142).

But should we really be too surprised or shocked at this? Often the implication of both the critique of research and the response to it is that once the right sort of research evidence is in place and communicated clearly, it will always—or should always—have an influence on policy or practice. But I would suggest that this is, firstly, to take New Labour's rhetoric at face value and, secondly, to ascribe to the Government greater control over policy than it might actually have. New Labour contradictions aside, should we not recognise that, in reality, policy is driven by all sorts of considerations, of which the findings of education research are likely on some occasions to be pretty low down? As the Canadian commentator, Ben Levin, outlines, these factors include the vicissitudes of the moment, the requirements of staying in office and the beliefs and commitments of policy makers and their advisors. More fundamentally, we have to acknowledge that politics is substantially shaped by symbolic considerations that may have little to do with the real effects of policies, and that the focus sometimes has to be on what can be done, instead of on what might really make a difference (Levin, 2005, p. 23).

It is for these kinds of reasons that we cannot always expect policy makers to be scrupulous in their use of education research or adopt the same canons concerning its use as education researchers themselves. When I made this point at the aforementioned Scottish Executive Education Department conference (Whitty, 2005), at least one of those present was shocked that I should appear so accepting of this situation. Her response was that, as most research was paid for from public funds, governments had a duty to act on it, otherwise they were effectively squandering public resources. Now I think this is a good campaigning point, and one that BERA might want to make use of. But I nevertheless remain of the opinion that no one, let alone the social scientists we claim to be, can realistically expect governments to act on every piece of research we produce, regardless of other such considerations—and this applies even to research in the 'hyper-rationalist-technicist' tradition.

The use of education research: some (more) hopeful examples

However, that does not mean that there are not times when researchers' and policy makers' interests and timescales coincide. So, in the interests of balance, I will now look at a selection of more positive cases, where there is at least some *prima facie* evidence that education research has had an impact in various places and at various levels.

A frequently cited example is the research on assessment, carried out across the UK and elsewhere in the world, which has challenged prevailing political orthodoxies by demonstrating the importance of formative assessment and the concept of assessment for learning. The synthesis of this research by colleagues based at King's College London (Black & Wiliam, 1998) has been particularly influential. In England, it could be argued that the research has influenced teachers' practice more than it has policy. At the policy level, although it has informed the Government's Secondary National Strategy,¹³ the demands of accountability require that assessment is used for multiple purposes and this means that it often takes forms that are not conducive to deep learning. On the other hand, Jane Davidson, Welsh Assembly Minister for Education, reported that this same work has influenced policy in Wales to move away from National Curriculum tests and the publication of league tables (Davidson, 2005). It has also had some influence on the Scottish Executive's recent consultation on assessment, testing and reporting 3–14.¹⁴

Then, at classroom level, there are examples of how teachers undertaking classroom action research have changed their practice in response to their own research and their exposure to a wider research literature (e.g. Torrance & Pryor, 2001). This is particularly important for the development of teaching as a research-based profession. Ironically, in England, the Government decided to phase out its Best Practice Research Scholarships designed to encourage and enhance this process before it had received the results of an evaluation designed to consider its effectiveness (Furlong *et al.*, 2003). However, this work is actively encouraged under the General Teaching Council (GTC) Scotland's Teacher Researcher Programme aimed at helping to enhance teachers' professional practice and development. There is a similar initiative in Wales (Davidson, 2005). It may be that, in England, its importance will again be recognised in the General Teaching Council for England's (GTCE) Teacher Learning Academy and the Chartered London Teacher scheme.¹⁵

At the other extreme in terms of scale, the third example concerns early childhood education, where large-scale studies on the effectiveness of different forms of provision appear to be influencing policy on the nature of provision, as well as current moves towards integrating education and other children's services. This seems to have been confirmed by Ruth Kelly when in her first major education speech she said:

There is considerable evidence ... that sustained investment in early years support and education works. The most important ongoing study is probably the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study. This exciting new evidence means we can now say definitively ... that high quality pre-school experiences have lasting effects and continue to make a real difference to how well children do and how they develop soundly throughout the early years of primary school. This is especially so for those children from disadvantaged backgrounds. (Kelly, 2005a)

As some of this evidence has been around for some time, it could be argued that this case is similar to my earlier negative example of research being ignored until it suited the Government. But, in a sense, I use it against myself, as it demonstrates that

whether research is used constructively in policy or not depends on *us* as well as them. Kathy Sylva, director of the EPPE Project, herself makes this point when she uses the project to demonstrate that ‘it is possible to influence government policy at national and local level through a combination of rigorous research methods, user-friendly dissemination, the combining of quantitative and qualitative approaches, and adequately funded research activity’ (Sylva, 2004, p. 1).

Implications for the research community

While these examples, both negative and positive, are interesting, it is not my main intention to produce a balance sheet of pluses and minuses in policy makers’ use of evidence. Rather, I want to consider what lessons there are in all this for us as the research community and the different ways in which we might relate to policy.

Clearly, if we want to influence policy there are things that we can do to facilitate this. Part of this involves responding to criticisms, and working with the Government’s agenda, though not at the expense of our values as researchers. It is notable that both the early years and assessment examples acknowledge some of the criticisms of education research that have been made, and seek to work with some aspects of the Government’s approach to research and its agenda for education. For example, Sylva (2004) highlights the importance of improving the accessibility of research reporting. Gewirtz (2003), meanwhile, shows how the positive influence of the assessment studies has been achieved in part by demonstrating that formative assessment can raise attainment according to official indicators. That, in turn, has allowed the other benefits, which the researchers perhaps value more highly, to be realised in some contexts. Thus, although the ‘engineering model’ of the research–policy relationship is problematic in many ways, it can sometimes be used to further progressive and emancipatory ends.

Importantly though, as Gewirtz herself notes, such ‘concessions’ should not be allowed to undermine the credibility of research that seeks to work against or to disrupt the engineering paradigm, or inform policy and practice in more subtle and modest ways, by feeding into public debate and the discursive milieu within which policy makers operate. One could even argue that this is a more democratic mode of action—attempting to influence public debate rather than seek privileged access to policy (MacDonald, 1974).

We should remember that we do not always have to be close to government to influence policy. Levin (1998) uses the notion of ‘policy epidemic’ as a tool for thinking about cross-national policy sharing. He also asks whether ‘prevention’ could be a similarly useful idea to apply to education—in terms of preventing unfavourable policy epidemics. He suggests that there may be ways of strengthening the public mind on education to increase ‘resistance’ to superficial but seemingly attractive policies. In this respect, building partnerships among different stakeholders and making use of a range of opportunities to disseminate research findings is crucial.

Research can influence policy and practice in different ways—often indirectly and sometimes in ways that were not intended. Rather than seeing impact as only likely to arise from research conceived in the engineering mode, we should welcome the sometimes serendipitous nature of the relationship between research and policy. Carol Weiss, herself one of the strongest US advocates and exponents of evidence-based policy making, has helpfully set out the varied ways in which research can achieve impact:

It takes an extraordinary concatenation of circumstances for research to influence policy directly ... [rather] research helps people reconsider issues, it helps them think differently, it helps them re-conceptualise what the problem is and how prevalent it is, it helps them discard some old assumptions, it punctures old myths. (Weiss, 1991)

This suggests that a diversity of research purposes and approaches within the field of education research needs to be encouraged, partly because we cannot know which will ultimately influence policy.

However, although research in the disciplines of education may impact upon policy, and policy oriented research may impact upon the disciplines, their core purposes are somewhat different. There needs to be a place for ‘blue skies’ research, which is significant in disciplinary terms but whose impact on policy is an unpredictable bonus that cannot reasonably be made a condition of funding. The education research community must continue to make this point in its relations with government and funding bodies.

As part of this, we need to ensure that we use appropriate quality criteria for each approach. In the UK, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is a crucial, perhaps even *the* crucial element in shaping the balance of the research that is carried out in universities. If we are to establish a truly mixed economy of research we must get the criteria right. The recent ESRC project in Oxford (Furlong & Oancea, 2005) has contributed to this process by suggesting quality criteria that can embrace different research approaches in advance of the next RAE in 2008. Only by having appropriate criteria can we begin to establish the value of different types of education research. This may even mean having diverging sets of criteria, although this is not so far the route that Furlong and Oancea have proposed. My own view is that we probably need to develop overlapping ones, with some core criteria applicable to all forms but others used in the evaluation of particular approaches.

On the matter of the RAE, it is interesting to look to Australia, which is currently in the process of introducing an equivalent—the Research Quality Framework—and where, consequently, these issues are particularly live. As one commentator there, Lyn Yates, points out, it is best for the education research community to help develop the criteria against which they will be assessed than have them applied by external bodies (Yates, 2005). In the UK context, it is gratifying to know that the Chief Executive of the ESRC, Ian Diamond, has committed it to working with the respective research communities in its efforts to benchmark quality across research outputs in the social sciences (Diamond, 2005b).

Concluding remarks

In thinking about the research–policy relationship and the points I have raised in this paper, I looked again at the stated aims of BERA. The current overarching aim of BERA is to sustain and promote a vital research culture in education. It seeks to achieve this by:

- encouraging an active community of educational researchers;
- promoting cooperation and discussion—with policy makers and practitioners, as well as national and international associations in education and related subject areas;
- encouraging and supporting debate about the quality, purpose, content and methodologies of educational research;
- developing and defending an independent research culture committed to open inquiry and the improvement of education; and
- enhancing the professional service it provides for its members—through communication, training and representation for educational researchers.

These are entirely worthy aims, but some of them are more relevant to some aspects of research than others—and the effect is often to present all education research as being of a kind and even speaking to the same audiences. So I do wonder whether there needs to be more clarity and public acknowledgement that education research is multifaceted. Much of the debate, and indeed this paper, has been about research that seeks to influence policy and practice. Sometimes the dispute is not about whether this is desirable but whether the research supports one policy approach or another. Indeed, some of the critics of New Labour’s engineering model are themselves in effect proposing an alternative engineering solution based on a different diagnosis of the engineering ‘problem’. Some people even suggest that *all* research should serve an emancipatory interest and that all researchers have a responsibility at least to reflect on the practical effects of their work. Gewirtz, for example, therefore rejects ‘any absolute distinction between analysis *of* and analysis *for* policy’ (2003, p. 12).

Although I have some sympathy with this position, I now think that it may be important, for both principled and tactical reasons, to make a distinction between studies *of* education and studies *for* education. We certainly need to reiterate the importance of basic research and scholarship and recognise that education researchers are not necessarily under an obligation to make their research explicitly useful, any more than researchers in many branches of the social and natural sciences. With the current focus of debate around the 2008 RAE on the need for quality criteria for applied and practice-related research and ways of assessing impact that go beyond citation counts, we should beware of going to the opposite extreme and disadvantaging research that follows traditional academic models. This would be ceding too much to those who argue that all research, or at least all publicly funded research, should be able to demonstrate practical utility.

One way of handling the distinction might be to use the terms ‘education research’ and ‘educational research’ more carefully. In this paper, I have so far used the broad

term education research to characterise the whole field; but it may be that within that field we should reserve the term *educational* research for work that is consciously geared towards improving policy and practice. In its early days, NERF used both terms in its title, depending on what document you read, but it now seems to have decided upon ‘educational research’, which may prove helpful in demarcating its responsibilities. I still have an open mind about whether self-consciously *educational* research needs an additional and new funding stream to put to bed altogether charges that there is insufficient policy- and practice-related research in our field. The Applied Educational Research Scheme¹⁶ in Scotland is an example of this.

A specific problem for us with my distinction between ‘education research’ as the broad term, and ‘educational research’ as the narrower field of work specifically geared to the improvement of policy and practice, is that it would mean that BERA, as the British *Educational* Research Association, would have to change its name or be perceived as only involved with the latter activity. So trying to make the distinction clearer would also involve BERA in a rebranding exercise which may not necessarily be the best way of spending our time and resources. But it is at least worth considering.

Whether or not we pursue this, I believe it is particularly important that universities defend an inclusive conception of education research. Although there are now many other players than higher education in our field, including private consultants and think tanks, universities in the UK are still well placed to foster this broad notion of education research, including—but not limited to—*educational* research. Even if it does not always seem that way, universities remain relatively free to pursue lines of enquiry that are marginalised in those state agencies that are more thoroughly embedded in an instrumentalist culture.

In January 1997, on the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Karl Mannheim, one of my predecessors as a professor of education at the Institute of Education, I cited with approval his assertion that educationists should resist the growing tendency ‘to discuss problems of organisation rather than ideas’ and ‘techniques rather than aims’ (Mannheim, 1951, p. 199, in Whitty, 1997). I also mentioned that Fred Clarke, the Director of the Institute who appointed him, justified the appointment of Mannheim, a social theorist, on the grounds that educational theories and policies that took no account of wider social forces were ‘not only blind but positively harmful’. Some of the developments under the New Labour Government that was elected later that year have made this even more important today, so I hope that, while BERA will respond constructively to legitimate criticisms of our field from government and others, it will also resist any pressure to restrict what counts as research in education.

Notes

1. <http://www.w-w-c.org/>
2. <http://www.tlrp.org/>
3. <http://www.gtce.org.uk/>
4. <http://www.nerf-uk.org/> (NERF was disbanded in March 2006)

5. <http://www.escalate.ac.uk/>
6. Appointed Secretary of State for Education and Skills in 2004.
7. For information on the RAE see <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/assessment/>
8. See <http://cee.lse.ac.uk/>
9. See <http://www.learningbenefits.net/>
10. See <http://www.nrdc.org.uk/>
11. The Assisted Places Scheme was introduced by the Conservative Government under the 1980 Education Act to provide public funding to enable academically able children from poor homes to attend the country's elite academically selective private schools. It was abolished by New Labour in 1997.
12. Reading Recovery is a school-based intervention designed to reduce literacy problems within an education system. It is an early intervention for children, giving those who have particular difficulties in reading and writing after their first year at primary school a period of intensive, individual help.
13. See <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/keystage3/>
14. See <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/consultations/education/atrc-00.asp>
15. Though note criticisms of similar provision to enable teachers to undertake research by the then Teacher Training Agency through its Teacher Research Grant pilot scheme—for example, the suggested poor quality of some of the projects undertaken through this scheme (Foster, 1999).
16. See <http://www.aers.ac.uk/aers/>

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