Democratisation and Pragmatism in Educational Research

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It is a matter of great pride to me to be the first representative of a public sector institution to become the President of the British Educational Research Association. It is also fitting that I should deliver my address in Scotland for it was eight years ago that BERA's first annual conference was held in Stirling. My only regrets are that you are unlikely to get a contribution worthy of the occasion and that my message is so little advanced from the same identification of problems that existed in 1974. Indeed, it could be argued that the clock has gone steadily backwards and the attacks on educational research, education and teacher education in the name of financial necessity have caused regression, if not to the mean, at least to the miserly. Worse, Ted Wragg said much of what I wanted to say both last year at Crewe and Alsager and in his recent book (Wragg, 1982b), which means that last year's conference was addressed by the equivalent of a Train Grande Vitesse (the TGV) whereas all I can offer is the oratorical equivalent of the Advanced Passenger Train (the APT). It might be all right on the straight, but disarrays its passengers totally on the slightest curve and takes much longer to get there. My concern, however, remains with the haphazard and inadequate impact of educational research, not on policy, not on curriculum development (problematic as that is) (Nisbet & Broadfoot, 1980, pp. 25-40), but on teachers and teaching. To continue the analogy, the TGV requires a special track; the APT is supposed to be able to run on normal rails. Separation of research from experience is likely to weaken its impact and over-sophisticated techniques do not leave teachers very comfortable. Ted Wragg discussed this issue in noting the lack of realism in expecting teachers to apply theory to practice directly and immediately (Wragg, 1982a, p. 3). He saw it as a much more leisurely process, as with the great switch off that blacked out the whole of New York one evening and played havoc with the State's demographic trends. One anxious elevator superintendent was heard to call down the lift shaft "Are there any pregnant women down there?" to which he got the reply, "Not yet."

I suspect that, similarly, we are naive to expect educational research to have such direct impact on providing data for policy decision and curriculum development, until we have done more work one stage back in providing data for getting those data. Conceptualisation (if not conception) must precede delivery. I believe we will only get such data if we can initiate action on the third of his prerequisites for increasing the

significance of the contribution of educational research, namely: "More direct involvement of teachers and others in the educational service" (Wragg, 1982a, pp. 5-6), especially on a collaborative basis. I am confident that this has to be done at the action level to open up the research process, to democratise it and to combat its elitism which plays into the hands of the political nasties, who at present are so busy destroying our educational system. There are three trends which make this action difficult and which need to be combatted if educational research is to have impact. These are the specialist trend, the elitist trend and the mystification trend. They seem to me to be contrary to the original objective of BERA, namely, "to encourage the pursuit of educational research and its applications for both the improvement of educational practice and for the general benefit of the community" (BERA Constitution, 1981, Article 2), and they fly in the face of such evidence we have of effective intervention in the teacher education process, not least because the customers don't like it. The three trends can be exemplified in almost every discussion of the theory/practice relationship and are heightened in performance areas, such as teaching. The search for a coherent relationship is, however, bedevilled by the scholarly traditions of British higher education, which elevate the theoretical above the practical and are confounded by those assumptions about the functions of British schools that include the cooling out and warming up of students through a selective, separation process (Hopper, 1973, pp. 29-32). This latter, it has been alleged, requires a suspension of disbelief on the part of clever pupils if they are to succeed (Keddie, 1971, pp. 149-156). This reinforces the *specialist* trend based on major forces that commend separation, which is inexorably linked with the others that value that separation as part of a social selection system, the *elitist* trend. Since this latter also includes the award of high status to abstraction, the third trend is to play down concerns for relevance and application, the *mystification* trend (see the Radical Statistics Education Group, 1982). These three trends seem to imply that the separation of theory from practice is functional to the needs and practices of educational institutions. Moreover, it appears that the more advanced the institution is, the greater the temptation becomes to undertake research that is divorced from practice. At the same time, in professional education, an essential performance area, the consumers have reacted against these trends. For example, the concerns for professional knowledge in BEds and PGCEs seem to me to be a direct response to student demands; the alignment of in-service courses with school-based and school-centred needs reflects the development of a significant partnership between teachers and trainers; and the impetus of the 'teacher-as-researcher' movement (Stenhouse, 1975, pp. 142-165), together with the emergence of alternative research paradigms, has been a direct reaction to counter teachers' suspicions of much of the data generated by educational research in an excessively positivistic tradition. The tension between this counteraction, and the trends I have outlined, posits a potential Hegelian dialectic for the future, but it will only lead to a new synthesis if it is accessible to all the partners in the educational process and, in particular, such theory as is generated by educational research is consistent with the experience of practitioners and, furthermore, motivates them to incorporate it into their action systems. Unlike Ted Wragg I do not fear paralysis if I consciously seek to apply research findings to my own activity (he sounds like President Reagan refusing to disclose the colour of his favourite jelly beans to psychological researchers). I feel that the application of research to one's own experience and activity is the only ultimate test of the sense of those research findings. Where the

two are consistent, the learning is the sounder; where there is dissonance there are motives for changing behaviour and seeking further evidence. Unlike the centipede that could walk perfectly happily until asked how he managed his hundred legs, I aim to be like the centipedes in Lazarsfeld & Rosenberg's story, who, as a result of the question, reached the heights of the Centipede Bolshoi Ballet Company and scored more goals for John Bond than Dennis Tueart (Lazarsfeld & Rosenberg, 1965, Introduction).

This making sense of research in personal, experiential terms seems to me to point the way forward. In personal terms, I have tried to realise a close relationship between my own systematic enquiry as research activity and my experience as a teacher, administrator and participant in curriculum development and validation. When I questioned the impact of my own research on my own practice, I identified a very real gap. I further found that whereas I had learnt to live in an action world, my theoretical concerns not only lagged behind the action, but tended to emphasise the compartmentalisation. Moreover, the economies of effort necessary to cope with the intensity of the action world that comprises higher education and teacher education today deny most individuals the luxury of such specialist compartmentalisation. When it became increasingly clear how long it had taken me to establish both disciplinary competence and the capacity to make relevant connections between my personal theory and my practice, I realised how difficult it was to shortcut this process for my students. It leads me to conclude that the assumptions, the traditions and the expectations built into British higher education are themselves wrong, or at least dysfunctional to the tasks of training teachers and advancing professional knowledge in cognate areas.

In as far as educational research, atypical as it may be (Dooley, Graham & Whitfield *et al.,* 1981, p. 75), serves to perpetuate these traditions, it compounds the felony. Unless research serves to combine theory in practice in ways that make sense of the user's experience, it is unlikely to help teachers reflect on their performance in order to improve their understanding. Janet Powney and I have developed this argument in some detail (Chambers & Powney, 1982, pp. 133-139), in reference to school-based research. We concluded that there is a political dimension in research activity that determines priorities without reference to educational and academic goals. Reference to experience, collaborative approaches and exploration of the functions and definitions of research made it increasingly clear that a very fundamental re-appraisal of educational research was needed. It was not enough to give teachers 'access to our minds' (Eggleston, 1979, p. 12) but to share with them their perceived enquiry needs. In seeking democracy, we were introducing an element of pragmatism, that challenged definitions of what constituted research and queried research's capacity to justify itself solely on policy grounds. In this respect it is clear that the DES is not just anagrammatically backward when compared with the SED. The SED's *Interim Report on Research* (Scottish Education Department, 1982, p. 3), considering the Munn and Dunning Reports, for example, justified research that 'increases understanding' irrespective of the decision-making process; whereas the DES's *Current Educational Research Projects* (Department of Education and Science, January 1982, Preamble), stresses that it commissions only 'policy-related projects'. Our concern was to establish research policy that motivated teachers to incorporate a research dimension into their professional roles. We saw this as a policy decision that gave

priority to research focusing on practical problems experienced by teachers and that was justified when teachers could see what was in it for them.

BERA's commitment to interdisciplinary enquiry, to applied research and to working with teachers is, I suggest, consistent with my reaction to the specialist, elitist and mystification trends I have identified and deplored. If they are fought for as policy within the institutions that commit themselves to educational research, we are more likely to have a teaching profession in touch with educational research as a professional activity and equipped to participate when appropriate in its procedures. They will then be armoured against the political nasties, able to resist the colourful press reports on the glamour projects and capable of improving both their own teaching and our capacity to get theory-producing data out of it. It is a long time since educational research was like Lord Avon's barometer stuck on FINE when it was pouring outside, but it is still not a very sensitive meter. His reaction then should guide ours now. He hurled it out of the window shouting, "There you damn fool - go out and see for yourself." Our priorities must be to get out with the action and see for ourselves. I realise the dangers of this approach. Experience not tendered by reflection can lead to anecdote, not the systematic evaluation of practice. Rigour and excellence need not create elitism and mystification. Nor must we neglect the excellent research traditions and developed techniques that already exist. What must be resisted is the exclusive aspects of those traditions that reduces access by practitioners, substitutes idealism for practicality and introduces barriers between the different professional agents. I began by referring to advanced railway systems. I conclude with reference to the present inter-city systems. The 125 High Speed Trains (HSTS) that ferry people from Scotland and Yorkshire to King's Cross have improved the journey time without needing separate lines like the TGVS, nor doing violence to the passengers like the APTS. Educational research needs to be that realistic and that accessible. The HSTs provided the knowledge and experience on which the TGV and APT engineers and designers were able to build. Educational research needs a similar common foundation. It needs to be both pragmatic and democratic so that its impact on teachers need no longer remain problematic.

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