The politics of educational research

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In this short talk it would not be appropriate for me to try and summanse the history of educational research, nor even to bring up to date John Nisbet's (1974) admirable 'State of the Art' address to the Inaugural Meeting of BERA. Nor will I attempt a systematic analysis of the field, such as my predecessor, William Taylor, produced in 1973, as a book called *Research Perspectives in Education.* I want to concentrate on the politics aspect of educational research, and although this should involve looking at how we got to the point we are now, I will have to leave all that out today. I will also have to confine myself to England and Wales, although I found that the Nisbet and Broadfoot (1980) account of the 'North American scene' very illuminating (in fact the whole of that book *The Impact of Research on Policy and Practice in Education* is extremely perceptive. An example, by the way, of a piece of research initiated and funded by SSRC).

Today, then, t must concentrate on the politics of educational research in England and Wales, and even so only provide a rough sketch map, and possibly indicate a few areas of special concern.

I must begin by making a few obvious points about the polittcs of educational research. By 'politics' I mean, of course, the study of power - in this context control or influence over research activities. Clearly, politics in this sense is not limited to party politics, although part of the story is that since 1979 party politics in education generally, and in research in particular, has been more noticeabte.

My second obvious point refers to the cliche 'power is where the money is, all the rest is theatre'. Like most generalisations this is only partly true: if it were completely true all we could discuss today would be how to improve our acting! What is certainly true is that a good deal of money for educational research comes directly or indirectly from government: the DES, the SSRC (soon to be called - for political reasons - The Economic and Social Research Council!), the DHSS, thp. Health Education Council and many more. Perhaps we should not forget the UGC with some money already set aside for new blood posts specifically designed to enable the recruitment of good young researchers to university departments. We might also note in passing that a working party of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils has recommended that some UGC funds should be clearly earmarked for research, rather than being left to the universities to decide for themselves. We are told that this is an alternative to the suggestion that all notional research funds should be taken away from universities and channelled through research councils. When money comes from government there is always the danger of political pressure being exerted in one way or another.

Apart from direct party political pressure (which I will come to in a moment) it is by now generally acknowledged that there has been an increasing tendency over the last fifteen years or so for the DES to become more centralist- and more directive - in educational policy generally. As far as research was concerned, in 1970, Margaret Thatcher, then Secretary of State for Education, made her view known very clearly (and it was shared by some DES officials):

> "There was clearly only one direction that the Department's research policy could sensibly take. It had to move from a basis of patronage-the rather passive support of ideas which were essentially other people's, related to problems wnich 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, within a procedure and timetable which were relevant to its needs. Above all. it meant focusing much more on issues which offered a real possibility of yielding useable conclusions."
>
> (quoted by Nisbet, 1974)

I have suggested elsewhere (Lawton, 1980) that during this period the politics of the school curriculum might be seen as a shift from 'partnership to accountability'; the parallel example in educational research of 'patronage to commissioning' is even more clearly associated with the market ideology which later became so obvious. But meanwhile the Thatcher view was reinforced a year later when the Rothschild Report on Government Research and Development (1971) put the basis of commissioning very clearly:

> "The customer says what he wants; the contractor does it (if he can); and the customer pays."

As far as I know, no one has suggested the appropriateness of the metaphor of the massage parlour rather than the market for this new relationship!

To be fair. the move from patronage to commission-ing was not viewed with complete despair by the research community Vernon Ward (1973), for example, suggested that greater central control could result in research having more impact on the practitioners since it would be closely linked to central policy and central strategies for implementation.

Before getting involved in details of such policy changes, however, it may be worthwhile spending a little "me on the background to this centralist trend, which I have already said was general. not confined to research.

But why? There were a number of separate, but related causes, The general impression that DES officials were less powerful than civil servants in other departments slimulated them into greater controlling activities: they often did not even have basic informalion on what was happening in education. so if ministers were asked questions in the House. or as a result of EEC inquiries, no one knew the answer, The OECD Report on the DES in 1976. and the House of Commons Expenditure Committee Report of the same year. made explicit reference to the lack Of a policy-making role within the DES which the officials were only 100 aware of, The same year. 1976. saw not only the publication of the Yellow BOok. which was very critical of some aspects of the organisation of education, but also the arrival at the DES of Sir James Hamilton, rightly described by Stuart Maclure as 'an unrepentant centralist', (TES, 29 April. 1983).

The stage was set for a centralist push: the economic difficulties of the 1970s reinforced the trend. At a time of financial problems. additional control is given to those with the power to decide what to cut. Therewas also a tendency then to favour the kind of expenditure where results could be seen as value for money, as Thatcher and Rothschild so clearly put it

To return to the specific question of educational research, we would have to Include in the list of reasons for centralism the apparent failure of educational research, Failure to ask the right questions; failure to produce intelligible answers; failure to convince teachers that research findings should be implemented, even when answers had been obtained. The research literature is full of examples of such criticism, but let me just remind you of a few to support the failure poinl of view. before putting the opposing arguments,

First. let me quote Sir William Pyle. Hamilton's predecessor. as Parliamentary Secretary at the DES:

"I have to say, of course. that the great thing about research is Ihat a part of il is rubbish and another part (I will not be specific about the proportions) leads nowhere and is really indifferent. It is. I am afraid. exceptional to find a piece of research that really hits the nail on the had and tells you pretty clearly what is wrong or what is happening. or what should be done ... People say they have done some research when they really mean that they have stopped to think for three minutes"
    (Pyle. 1976. quoted in Nisbet & Broadfoot. p2)

Grossly unfair. It may be; but a view quite widely held. not only by DES officials. but by teachers and by teacher politicians, I will say more about teachers later,

A less extreme view. much more sympathetic to the researchers. but still somewhat critical, came from the HMI Brian Kay (1979):

"If the research confirms our own views it is deemed to be stating the obVIOUSand therefore not necessary. If it goes against that prejudice, we prefer to trust common sense, rather than research especially because the latter is usually expressed with the provisos inevitable in a field as inexact as social science,"

Where results were published, the message that got across to the public was often anti-educational: for example. the pessimistic views that schools make no difference, which arose out of some research on environmental influences on education; similarly the revival of hereditarian points of view.

There are. of course. answers to most of these criticism of research. or even the alleged failure of research. I will return to some of those points later when I deal with strategies for the future, But perhaps I could allow myself one reference to the American scene (from Nisbet and Broadfoot. 1980) which is at once a critical comment with an implicit suggestion for development. The context is the metaphor of dialogue - the supposed dialogue between educational researchers and teachers:

"There is no army of educational practitioners expectantly waiting to hear what the fundamental researchers have to say. nor is there a corresponding group of researchers. The truth IS that most practitioners do not turn directly to researchers for advice. nor do most researchers offer it. The two groups talk more among themselves than they do to each other - and so they should if they are to do justice to their respective tasks."
    (NCER, 1977. quoted by Nisbet & Broadtoot)

A final reason for the increase in centralism was the election to government of the Right Wing Conservative administration in 1979.In theory. a Tory Government might have been expected to reverse the trend to centralism: Conservatives have traditionally been in favour of tocal control of education and in the past have distributed centralism (see John White on Lord Eustace Percy, etc.). Butthat would be to misunderstand. or at least to over-simplify. the dominant Conservative ideology of the present government. In some respects. the present administration wishes to revert to 19th century laissez-tare in education and other aspects of welfare This has been admirably documented by Richard Pring (1983) in his paper on *Privatisation in Education*. But where privatisation is not possible. the tendency will be to revert to the market ideology and demand value for money. Research will *tend* to be a low priority unless it can be seen to be 'delivering the goods'. Not lust a switch from patronage to commissioning, therefore. but commissioning of a very limited kind. Last year's review of the SSRC confirmed this tendency. Traditonally there had been

a fairly clear difference between DES research projects and SSRC educational research board types of research - SSRC money being deliberately devoted to a 'more basic and intellectually innovating role' (ERB, 1973). This will no longer be the case.

How can we prevent, or at least modify, this depressing restriction on research? Some, for example, Aaron (1978) in USA, have argued that educational research tends to be a conservative influence. How can we retain some breadth in educational research given the kinds of difficulties I have outlined? What strategies might be possible?

First, if something is inevitable we might as well make the best use of it. We should accept the centralist tendency of commissioning, but constanlly point out its limitation and be careful about the terms which are offered. No one can reasonably object to some research being put out on a contract basis, but we should continue to argue as forcefully as we can for some 'pure' research. Many writers in the past (for example, Taylor, 1974) have argued that our research base in education is already inadequately funded: if the base is not only to be reduced but is to be spent on one kind of research, this could be a recipe for disaster. We must say this frequently. What we need is a balance - not all of one kind of research. On the point of being careful about the terms of contract research, I did not mean that we should make sure the payment is adequate, but that the role of the researchers is defined in an acceptable way, We might do wel! to remember Barry Macdonald's(1976) three styles of evaluation research - bureaucratic, autocratic and democratic. It is no use accepting a 'bureaucratic' contract and then complain about being treated as a 'hired hack'. The role of the commissioned researchers is an extremely important issue which has not yet received enough attention,

Secondly, we should use non-government money (from Leverhulme, Rowntree and other funding bodies) more prudently - that is, for the kind of research that government wit! not fund.

Thirdly, some of the best research does not need funding: we should use our own lime and money and the time of students too on research not covered by 'contracts'.

Fourthly, and finally, we should devote more time and energy to the dissemination of successful research, and improving the image of research in that way.

Let me say a little more about each of these aspects of strategy, First, I have already said we should accept commissions - but carefully. We should use every opportunity to educate the DES. For example, there are clear signs that those contracted to the APU science testing at the University of Leeds and Chelsea in London, have succeeded to some extent in shifting the emphasis away from a narrow monitoring model to a more general teaching and lear:ling orientation. We should not assume that officials in the DES are ineducable. and we should take every opportunity to wean officials away from narrow and obselete views of research. We should try and convince the DES and other government agencies that there are few, if any, problems in education which are capable 01 'cook book' solutions. In a somewhat different context. Dockrell put the problem in this way:

"There is a risk that unsophisticated administrators wanting to obtain information which is directly relevant to immediate issues will try to restrict research to the provision of data, for they do not realise that the mere gathering of figures will not tell them what they want to know. Information is important but figures are not facts. Truth is elusive."

(w. B. Dockrell, 1980)

Dockrell makes a useful comparison between educational research and using opinion polls as predictors 01 election results. Whereas politicians, civil servants and the general public have learned to use polls and surveys with great caution and some sophistication (even popular newspapers now talk knowledgeably about a 2% margin of error etc.) the same kind of sophistication is noticeably lacking when research results are under discussion, particularly perhaps educational research,

My second point concerns the need to persuade research funders (including government bodies) that it would be extremely foolish to neglect pure research; concentrating on real, immediate problems can have its dangers. Ten years ago, John Nisbet retold Berlyne's story about the research problem of 1800 - how to improve the transport system. Relevant research would presumably have concentrated on breeding bigger and better horses. Fundamental research on steam engines would have sounded totally irrelevant. Berlyne's (1966) conclusion was that the best way of promoting research was 10 pick out good researchers and give them their freedom. There is no way of predicting what research will eventually be useful. The moral of the story is even more true today than in 1966 when Berlyne delivered his paper at OISE, or in 1973 when Nisbet retold it. But the need for us to argue the case very carefully is now more urgent and the context more difficult.

The third suggestion was that we should make sure that some of our research is anti-centralist: a counter-cyclical tendency is always healthy in education and in research, The role of the teacher should be, to some extent, to resist more passing fads and fashions and to concentrate on more enduring qualities even at ti1e risk of being out of favour. Similarly, educational researchers should avoid simply giving the paymasters the answers they appear to want. Forsyth and Dockrell (1979) have suggested an oscillation model of policy-making which would lend some support to this view.

The kind of research which we ought 10 spend our own time on, or for those of us who have students,

encourage our students to spend time on. might Include the following

1. The effects of cuts in a school over a period of a lew years. Perhaps reinforcing HMI surveys and reports. Detailed Information of a graphic kind should be sought. We can probably all think of examples of such schools. but what we need are carefully documented case studies.

2 The unintended consequences of the MSC intervention in schools by means of the technical and vocational educational initiative (TVEI for the 14 to 18 year age group) - the possible distortion of the curriculum. the eHect of untrained teachers, etc.

3. Case studies of successful examples of mixed ability teaching.

4. Successful examples of Mode II CSE examination work. and so on.

Many. of these examples involve case study techniques: one of the most urgent needs is 10 improve case study methodology. I am sure we *have* all come across sloppy work masquerading as illuminative evaluation. Dockrell concluded his 1980 paper by listing this as one of the two major problems:

> "The malaise within educational research arises from two sources. The official approach bearing gifts in the form of research contracts, but with Simplistic notions 01 what educational research can contribute to practice its truth value. Within research the broadening of the disciplinary basis of educational research and the rediscovery of more general use of techniques outside the psychometric traditions. have led to confusion about the contribution of a particular study to knowledge, truth value in a different sense."

> (Dockrell, 1980)

The final part of the strategy for making research more *effective,* despite current political difficulties, concerns the research community as a power base. At the moment, I would suggest. despite the existence of SERA, the educational research community is ill-defined, disorganised, lacking in any coherence and power. In lacUar from having any power it has almost no influence. A succession of writers have bemoaned this facl: for example, (UCET. 1971, Taylor, 1973. Glennester and Hoyle. 1973, Nisbet, 1974). Some had hoped that the ERB within SSRC would somehow act as a co-ordinating body in a hmlted way; others have been concerned for something much Wider. What I would suggest is rather different. and is concerned specifically with the mobilisation of the educational research community political as well as intellectually But how?

First, there are those within the central authority who are, or should be, part of the research community. DES directly employs a number of researchers. who are isolated, whose work is often unpublished. Should we not do more to bring them In from the cold?

An even more obvious group at the centre are HMI, many of whom have had research training, most of whom practise the ancient illuminative art of evaluation by inspection. We should certainly regard them as part of the research community rather than as mere inspectors or Elizabeth House bureaucrats. The recent decision to publish HMI reports may be extremely important: occasionally HMI may need to appeal to the research community! I *have* elsewhere suggested that there are important ideological differences between HMI, DES and Conservative politicians: part of the HMI professionalism certainly Includes an enlightened attitude to educational research. Encouraging HMI to consider themselves as part of educational research community might even increase the interesting productive tension which already exrsts between some HMI and some factions Within the DES who, if you accept my analysis, would find themselves more ideologically committed to bureaucratic centralism rather than professionalism.

Second, there are other groups who should not only be members of the research community, but should be much more dynamically involved. For example, the NFER has seldom been *given* the prominence it ~eserves as a major contracting body Over the years It has produced some excellent examples of research, yet it is better known as a test producing agency. Similarly, the Schools Council is better known as a curriculum development agency than as a centre for educational research, despite Ihe quality of some of its work. (Incidentally, to what extent has the research community been involved in any way With the proposed changes and probable extinction of the Council? It is well known that within an LEA however much the numbers of pupils are declining and however bad a school might appear to be, it is almost impossible to close it Without a public campaign to protest against it. What sort of public campaign greeted the news that the Schools Council was to be closed, despite the advice of the Trenaman Report?).

Most important of all, more teachers should see themselves as part of the educational research community. One view of 'the teacher as researcher' would see all teachers as part of Ihe research community automatically. That might be unrealistic, but we should certainly see more teachers being involved In research as part of the professionalisation of teaching. One aspect of the politics of educational research which I have not yet mentioned is the trend towards 'self-evaluation of schools'. This has resulted in what has been described as 'evaluation as punishment'. and I notice that one of the papers for trus Conference is entitled 'Evaluation as Oppression'. Sut it is certainly true that more teachers than ever before are involved in 'research' of this kind often stimulated by LEA guidelines which wer~ prompted by the DES circulars which followed the Green Paper (1977). and *The School Curriculum* (1981). Two things are necessary If we are to see

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more teachers as part of the research community: first, teachers must be glven more lime (and opportunities for in-service education) in order to equip themselves as researchers; second, the educational researchers themselves must make much greater effort to communicate with their practitioner colleagues Teachers still complain about the jargon, the Incromprehensibility, and the irrelevance 01 much that is published as educational research. This invotvement of teachers woutd be very important any way. but If the educational research community is to develop politically as well as intellectually, much greater Involvement by teachers and teacher organisations is essenlial.

What of the role of BERA in all this? As I understand it, BERA was founded partly to meet the neeo to bring together educational researchers of all kinds toform a community. What I am suggesting is the need for the community to be much more politically aware and alive. It may not be a question of how many battalions has the Pope, but how many MPs can be mustered to ask awkward questions in the House on behalf of the research community? Above all, is there a means of organising the research community to become a lobby on important issues? Mary Whitehouse has more political clout - much more!

William Taylor (1973) started his book by listing three conditions for successful educational research: adequate resources, appropnate structures, and a sympathetic polillcal, social and educational climate. On each of those three we are probably in a worse position now than we were ten years ago

The moral IS clear. It IS not enough to do good research; you must improve your pubtic and professional Image, and above all develop an organisation with political influence.

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