

Research Communities, The White Paper Chase and a New Research Ecumenism

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ABSTRACT *The period when the British Educational Research Association (BERA) was founded was one in which there was an increasing recognition amongst the research community that a wind of change had stirred up the settled traditions of educational research. It was a time which celebrated the promise of alternative paradigms for research. Ten or so years on we are entering another era where the emphasis is not on the reconceptualisation of what research is but on how it is organised. I think one can discern at least two factors, not wholly separate from each other, that will increasingly influence how a substantial part of research will be organised. These two factors are the changes which have taken place in the composition of the research community and the direction of current Government policy concerning the school system. I aim to show how these are leading to a fruitful form of collaborative research at local level which should be encouraged and supported not least by BERA.*

The Research Community

Of late there have been some interesting changes in the range of people involved in educational research. Up until fairly recently most educational researchers would have been located in the education and social science faculties of universities and polytechnics and in the small number of national research institutes such as the NFER. Although this is still the case at least three other groups have emerged which could reasonably be regarded as part of a larger research community.

Perhaps it may surprise you to know that I would include Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) as one of those groups. Of course it could be said that HMI, because of their inspection activities, have always been exponents of that branch of research known as evaluation. I think that the case for regarding Inspectors as a rather special kind of educational researcher, at least for part of their job, is supported by some significant changes in their method of working since the mid 1970s. First there is the way they have carried out the series of major surveys on various sectors of the education service starting with the Primary survey (HMI, 1978), followed by the Secondary one (HMI, 1979), and concluding most recently with the Middle Schools 8-12 survey (HMI, 1985). These surveys have involved teams of Inspectors using structured checklists, observational schedules, and the back up of sophisticated statistical analyses-in fact a range of methodological paraphernalia comparable to that of the conventional researcher-in addition to the traditional HMI approach based on informed professional judgement. The reports of these surveys must be regarded as substantial and authoritative contributions to our understanding of schools and I think to the research literature generally.

A second major development has been the introduction in the last couple of years of inspections of whole LEAs. These are attempts to evaluate the full range of an LEA's education provision and represent in conventional research terms multi-site evaluations of complex proportions. They require the resolution of many difficult methodological issues including the sampling of institutions and the programmes and activities within them, the standardisation of judgements amongst the dozens of Inspectors involved, and the analysis of the resultant data base obtained. These activities and those associated with the more familiar inspections of individual institutions represent in my view a distinctive and largely unrecognised approach to case study methods.

A second group of emergent researchers are teachers. In the past teachers' involvement in research was limited very often to being the *objects* of research rather than the *doers* of it. There are at least two major developments which have changed that situation. One is the Teacher as Researcher movement which owes much to the personal influence and writings of the late Lawrence Stenhouse and the talented team that he assembled at the University of East Anglia in the late 60s and early 70s (Stenhouse, 1975). The use of the term 'movement' here is not to be taken to imply the existence of a single coherent organisation. Basically the movement unites teachers who are committed to the disciplined analysis of their own classroom activities with the aim of increasing their professional expertise. The practice is methodologically eclectic and may be regarded as a form classroom action research (Nixon, 1981). The second development relevant here is the growth of post-graduate opportunities for the study of Education, particularly represented by masters degree courses in universities and polytechnics. The number of teachers who have completed such courses, either through full-time secondment or on a part-time basis, is now many times greater than was the case only ten years ago. Most of these courses have a dissertation requirement that can include the carrying out of a piece of empirical research. The result is that we now have a significant minority of teachers in our schools who have had the experience of doing research and, for a period of time at least, of being part of the research community.

My third group are those employed within the Education Departments of LEAs. In the past relatively few LEAs have employed staff primarily as researchers. The ILEA is still the only education authority which, through its Research and Statistics Branch, has a substantial number of full-time researchers. In other LEAs a range of staff may have a partial commitment to research within some wider developmental, planning or advisory role. Typically then, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, LEAs have in the past had a somewhat undeveloped role in relationship to research. That situation is changing—one manifestation of this is the emergence over the last two years of a Local Education Authorities Research Group (LEARG).

To speak of these three groups (HMI, teachers, LEA staff) and the other two (academic staff and professional researchers) as a community is to exaggerate the links which exist between them. Rather they constitute a set of relatively independent communities each of which are themselves loose constellations of individuals. In my view the conduct, quality and impact of educational research would very likely be improved if closer links leading to more active collaboration were established between the groups.

Events are I think moving in that direction and in a way which suggests that the natural location of such collaboration is that of the LEA. Much of educational research at the present

time inevitably takes place anyway within the bailiwick of the LEA. This is because educational research is pre-eminently the study of the maintained sector. Such workers as Geoffrey Walford who research the independent school sector are very much in the minority (Walford, 1985). In most LEAs then there will generally be a good deal of individual research underway in their schools, colleges and other educational institutions. This will be carried out by a whole variety of people from individual teachers to researchers associated with major national projects. The degree of involvement of the LEA in much of this research may be very slight and limited simply to agreeing that researchers may approach institutions with a view to seeking their participation. The extent to which this collective body of research activity relates to LEA concerns may be largely fortuitous.

LEAs need to have a research policy. It is probably the case that very few do. A provisional policy might indicate the specific areas of special interest to the LEA on which research would be welcomed and encouraged. Such a policy could be circulated to local and other researchers. This would not necessarily imply that the LEA would provide funds for research-although that might be feasible for some topics. The purpose of circulating the policy would be to see whether the LEA's research interests coincided with those of researchers already involved in particular investigations or about to be so. Clearly where there was a correspondence of interest the LEA would be able to offer appropriate facilities to the researchers, e.g. access to schools. The existence of a policy would also help an authority in responding, one way or another, to the many unsolicited requests that it receives from individuals and agencies to conduct research within its institutions.

The extent to which an LEA is able to articulate a research policy is dependent on how clearly its general policies are expressed concerning the development of its institutions, services and programmes. Thus an LEA which has a policy on the coordination of provision for the 'under fives' and is considering its possible implementation in a particular area, might well decide that research on parental views would be useful. An approach could therefore be made perhaps to the local university or polytechnic to see whether a member of staff or a student might undertake an appropriate survey.

The White Paper 'Better Schools': some implications for research

Although LEAs have a wide range of organisational, administrative, and financial policies governing their many activities, those concerned with more specifically educational matters, e.g. the school curriculum, have often at best been implicit in general procedures and ways of working rather than explicitly stated. That position is likely to change-and it is the present Government's intention that it should so do. The recent White Paper 'Better Schools' (White Paper, 1985) sets out clearly the Government's concern to raise educational standards. This is to be effected inter alia by requiring LEAs (and schools) to identify priorities and formulate specific policies in a range of areas including the curriculum, in-service education, and deployment of the teacher force.

Assuming that the Government's policies, as outlined in the White Paper, are implemented successfully as intended, they are likely to have two consequences relevant to research. First by making LEAs define more precisely the nature of their activities they will be more able, as already indicated, to specify areas where research would be helpful. Secondly some of the enabling strategies referred to in the White Paper would help to define possible areas of collaborative research within the LEA context.

The establishment and implementation of curricular policies is an example of one of the intended strategies. The Government believes that the present curricula of many schools are inadequate for preparing pupils for their future adult life and also exhibit an unacceptable level of variation from school to school and from area to area. The White Paper stresses the need to secure a broad agreement about the objectives and content of the school curriculum. The Government intends therefore, after consultation, to issue statements of policy supported by more general discussion papers from Her Majesty's Inspectors. This concern to achieve greater curricular clarity and agreement is consistent with the movement within the DES, discernible from the mid 1970s and increasingly apparent following the change of Government in 1979, towards a more dirigiste and centralist role (Lawton, 1980, 1984). It is envisaged that the objectives will have practical effect by becoming the basis of curricular policies of the Secretaries of State, the LEAs and the schools. It is intended that the objectives will be applied with differences of emphasis and balance to reflect local circumstances and local judgement.

The school system then is to conform to a rational planning model in which curricular goals are to be set nationally and transmitted down through the LEAs to schools and thence to individual teachers in policy statements of increasing specificity. Whether or not the school system should operate in this manner is a moot point, but the indications are that it does not at the moment (Wise, 1977). There is need for research here on the effectiveness of this kind of rational model. Do teachers in fact conceptualise their teaching in terms of the kind of hierarchy of influences which the model proposes? If they do, are such teachers more effective with their pupils than those who operate under different conceptual frameworks? Although studies of teaching behaviour have been a significant field of educational research during the last decade (e.g. Galton *et al.*), they have generally been carried out with little or no reference to the external influences of one kind or another operating on the teacher. Research studies are needed then of how curricular consensus can be achieved within schools and LEAs, how that process can be formally represented in useful policy statements, and how such statements can affect the actual behaviour of teachers and other educationists.

A second enabling strategy is one in which large scale curriculum development is supported by what Harland (1985) calls categorical funding. In essence this consists of encouraging LEAs to bid for allocations from central funds by submitting proposals, within defined guidelines and criteria, to mount local development programmes reflecting specific Government priorities. The Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative (TVEI) and the Lower Attaining Pupils' Programme (LAPP), administered by the MSC and DES respectively, are examples of this strategy. Both of these are seen as major vehicles for exploring the possibilities of establishing a more practical and relevant curriculum. This strategy of competitive funding has been developed further through the Education Support Grant (ESG) scheme to support work under priority headings which include the teaching of mathematics in school, science teaching as part of primary education and the improvement of the quality of education in urban primary schools (DES, 1984).

All of these schemes (TVEI, LAPP, ESG) are examples of a common strategy to ensure a greater degree of correspondence between curricular priorities at national and LEA levels. From a research perspective the strategy is of special interest since it offers a somewhat different approach to curriculum development. In the past, curriculum development has been mainly concerned with national projects of the School Council kind (Stenhouse, 1980) and

individual school based initiatives (Eggleston, 1980). Schemes like TVEI may be said to offer potentially the advantages of both types of development. Thus, although the schemes represent national initiatives, the curriculum development associated with them does not take place centrally but at the level of the individual LEA and its institutions. They offer to an LEA, through the provision of external funds, the possibility of adopting a concentrated attack on a major aspect of the curriculum which it would not otherwise find easy to do. Strings are attached of course, i.e. commitment to implementing certain general principles, and it will be interesting to know whether or not these cramp unduly the style of local curriculum developers.

The schemes provide opportunities for evaluating local programmes and testing specific curricular hypotheses. Both TVEI and LAPP are the subject of major externally funded evaluations by the NFER. In addition, activities have been established involving institutions of higher education in the evaluation of individual LEA programmes. Similar opportunities exist for the ESG scheme since one of the requirements is that proposals should indicate how projects will be evaluated. If we consider then the evaluation and research activity either already underway, or capable of being developed as more LEAs become involved in schemes of this kind, it represents a very substantial effort and one of the best opportunities ever of investigating systematically the process of curriculum change.

Complementary to the initiatives for transforming the curriculum outlined in the White Paper are others concerned with examinations and assessment, in-service education, and the management of the teacher force. Each of these will provide, and indeed already are providing, opportunities for research. Although the introduction of GCSE will generate a major research programme for the new Examination Boards, other researchers are likely to be attracted to such matters as the effect on teaching and learning of the new methods of assessment and the 'national criteria' on which individual syllabuses will be based. The Government's parallel development of Records of Achievement is already being supported by nine pilot schemes in individual LEAs or in LEA consortia. Each scheme will have its own internal evaluation and the project as a whole will also be the subject of a national evaluation.

The new approach to the funding of in-service education expected for 1987/88 is likely to require LEAs to develop more sophisticated methods of identifying teacher needs and to devote rather more attention to the evaluation of their programmes than is generally the case at the moment. The most contentious aspect of the section in the White Paper on the management of the teacher force is that of teacher appraisal. It is to be hoped that existing projects concerned with this issue and others which will certainly emerge in the near future not only draw on the considerable body of relevant research already at hand but are also associated with their own research and evaluation programmes.

Although the White Paper is replete with research possibilities for individual aspects of policy, it should also be said that the rational planning model which underpins the White Paper as a *whole* is also eminently researchable. Rarely has that model been made so explicit in a major Government document on education. Never before perhaps has there been such apparent agreement, not only amongst politicians but also amongst educationists, that the model is appropriate. Although the school system is essentially 'bureaucratic' in the Weberian sense and therefore 'rational' there may nevertheless be limits on how far rationalisation can proceed without the process becoming dysfunctional. Indeed, Wise (1977) looking at the American scene argues that the trend is so pronounced that it should be

characterised as the hyperrationalisation of education and that paradigms other than the dominant rational one are needed to explain the process of schooling. Whether the policy implications of the White Paper merit the pathological description of hyperrationalisation remains to be seen. What is important is that researchers somewhere should be looking critically at the implementation of that policy over the next few years.

Particularly important to my argument here is that the programmes of evaluation and research associated with the various initiatives outlined in the White Paper will be conducted within a local context and will inevitably involve close collaboration between LEA and academic researchers. Teachers will be involved not only as participants within the programmes but also potentially as researchers and evaluators. Collaboration may in certain circumstances involve other agencies like the NFER as external evaluators. Since HMI are also watching these developments keenly, collaboration could, therefore, potentially embrace all groups of the research community.

Collaborative Research in LEAs

I anticipate then that LEAs, as a result of their involvement in implementing the White Paper initiatives and their consequent and growing sense of being at the sharp end of a policy and priority driven education service, will be seeking to develop a closer working relationship with researchers, particularly those based in nearby institutions of higher education and with whom they already have well established links through perhaps the provision of in-service education. That relationship may involve officers and advisers in commissioning research using perhaps LEA funds or those made available through various Government initiatives. It is worth stressing however that good research may also be done with little or no direct funding. Perhaps one of the unfortunate effects of the present system of organising research is the tendency for it to be dominated by the pursuit of prestigious research grants from external funding bodies such as the ESRC. Much useful research can be done by academics in fulfilling their 'contractual' commitment to research not only as individuals but also, and this appears to be rare, as a team on a common unfunded project. Given the increasing difficulties of securing research grants from the conventional funding agencies the kind of collaboration with LEAs which I have suggested would also seem to be good sense for academic researchers.

Collaboration can also be achieved in a very cost effective manner through the potential represented by teachers on secondment. I suspect that my own LEA is not exceptional in being more concerned than perhaps formerly with using the secondment programme, at least in part, to research issues of special local interest. Such an opportunity is also provided by the Teacher Fellowship scheme (DES, 1983) which allows experienced teachers to work in a university or polytechnic on a study or enquiry-research in the broadest sense-of significance not only to the individuals concerned but to their schools and LEAs. At its best the Fellowship scheme focuses the different expertise and perspective of teacher, academic supervisor, headteacher perhaps, and LEA officer or adviser, on to a real practical issue or problem. Although the 'teacher as researcher' notion is increasingly recognised as providing a distinctive contribution to educational research, it has been concerned in the main with improving the individual teacher's own classroom practice. Up until fairly recently perhaps there has been slower recognition of the complementary notion of teacher as researcher *for* the LEA.

The greater involvement of LEAs in research of the kind I have advocated may also do much in tackling the enduring and vexed issues of dissemination and impact. Only a small proportion of practitioners have regular access to the traditional mechanisms for the dissemination of research findings i.e. academic journals, books, specialist conferences. Making the LEA the locale and target for at least a substantial part of research activity has several advantages in this respect. The LEA provides a tangible and coherent entity within which 'policymakers', 'practitioners', 'teachers' and the other groups to which researchers usually implicitly offer their results are not anonymous generalised creations vaguely 'out there' but identifiable real human beings who are accessible. Depending on the nature of the research the appropriate audience may be a relatively small number of individuals who can be easily assembled to consider the findings. For example a study done on pastoral care in secondary schools may only need to be disseminated to a small specialist audience of several dozen people (assistant heads perhaps) for the results to be considered by those able to act on them. In some cases the prime dissemination audience may consist of one person. To engage a Chief Education Officer in considering a piece of research may on occasions be enough!

LEAs also have well established internal communication networks which can provide effective routes for the dissemination and discussion of research. These might include meetings of professional groups, the local INSET organisation, LEA committees and working parties and many others which offer, according to the topic, opportunities to bring researchers and their results face to face with relevant audiences. The use of these are likely to be more potent in their effects on practitioners than standard journal articles important though these are in the wider dissemination process and as contributions to scholarship. The LEA therefore might provide a missing link in that long desired chain uniting the activities of researchers to those of teachers and other practitioners.

In a paper to this Conference Professor Ed Stones, referring specifically to teacher education, argues that training institutions should become more self consciously research institutions (Stones, 1985). I would suggest that notion could be developed further in two ways. First training institutions should fulfil their research function in collaboration with neighbouring LEAs and secondly as well as including research on teaching it should also encompass other aspects of educational research. The planning of educational research jointly by appropriate LEA staff and those in faculties of education, and utilising the talents of teachers-particularly those on secondment-might yield research which in Stones' words is systemic in education rather than parasitic on it. This kind of collaboration would also provide a research counterpart to the partnership arrangements envisaged for initial teacher training by the White Paper 'Teaching Quality' (White Paper, 1983).

To make collaborative research possible requires someone in an LEA with a special remit for research. He or she would need to hold a senior position so as to be familiar with current policy issues and interests and have access to a wide range of LEA personnel. A broad knowledge of research methodology, the range of research being undertaken nationally and 'who's who' in the research community would also be essential requirements. In the past LEAs, in terms of research, have often provided little more than free markets for research entrepreneurs. A research co-ordinator, or perhaps the term 'broker' might be more appropriate, is needed to know who is in the market, to bring those in the market with particular interests together, to encourage others to come in whose research wares look interesting, and most importantly to bring researchers together with those concerned with educational practice and policy. Who might hold such a role? In my own authority it is filled

by an adviser with the special designation of 'research and evaluation'. It does make good sense to vest this responsibility within the advisory service of an LEA. Advisers are an LEA's main agents for innovation (Bolam, 1979; Wilcox, 1985). They have the specific responsibility of co-ordinating local in-service and curriculum development programmes. The co-ordination of an LEA's research programme represents then a natural complement to these functions (Wilcox, 1982). Advisers also have a wide network of contacts within and beyond their own LEAs and these include links with higher education and the research community generally.

In developing the notion of research collaboration at the LEA level it may seem that there is little opportunity for involving the first of the research groups which I identified-Her Majesty's Inspectors. But it should be noted that HMI are often involved as assessors to research projects and members of project steering committees. They also give advice on research proposals submitted to the DES for funding. In addition, HMI, I believe, have much to offer in terms of their research experience-the kind I attributed to them at the beginning of this talk. One current research concern which is common to HMI and other researchers can be expressed simply as, 'how do you judge a school?' This issue is expressed in different terms by the various groups with a stake in it. For HMI and perhaps LEAs, it is 'Inspection', for particular researchers it is 'School Effectiveness' and for those in schools 'Self Evaluation'.

Some HMI might demur at the suggestion that they are researchers for some of their time. I think, however, that in doing so they would either be expressing an unnecessary modesty or reflecting an inappropriate conception of what counts as research. They are, as I indicated earlier, the possessors of a range of techniques and ways of working which are essentially concerned with evaluation. They have an established tradition of working in this field from which perhaps conventional researchers could learn much. To take one example-HMI have considerable experience of working in teams and have developed procedures for combining their individual judgements into an agreed collective view. Knowledge of their methods would have considerable interest and value for researchers. I am aware that the question of whether or not HMI and LEA advisers might collaborate together on appropriate activities has been raised within the DES. If that were to occur its extension further to include academic researchers would present a very interesting prospect. How far, however, it would be feasible and allowable for HMI, given their special position within the education system, to share more openly their methods of working remains to be seen.

Summary and Implications

The burden of my remarks to you this evening has been to argue the advantages of bringing together the various groups that constitute the research community into a closer working relationship. This perhaps might be the beginning of what could be called an ecumenical research movement. I have suggested that this would be achieved most naturally at the LEA level in terms of potentially effective types of collaborative research associated with some of the policy initiatives summarised in the White Paper 'Better Schools'. In drawing the attention of researchers to the White Paper I am not necessarily recommending its educational virtues. I personally have some reservations-particularly about its underlying educational philosophy. This basically reflects the perceived primacy of scientific, technological and economic imperatives. Despite references to a balanced curriculum and the importance of developing individual talents there is an implicit relegation of the arts and the aesthetic side of education generally to a subordinate position. References to the

existential purposes of education-the pursuit of meaning and discovery of the self-are not to be found in current official documents on education. They are clearly *démodé* in the hardnosed world of the 80s.

However, whatever view we have of the individual merits of the White Paper it does have the advantage of being, in its own terms, a logically coherent package which is unequivocal about its intentions and how they are to be realised.

Generally speaking the more clearly the policies of education are expressed the easier it is to define a large part of the research agenda. Paradoxically perhaps one can have an inadequate-or even downright bad educational policy and still have good research flow from it. As they say 'It is an ill wind...'. I would, however, stress that collaborative research should not be defined solely by the framework of the White Paper. One development which I discern in schools at the present time is that some headteachers have moved on from the stage of conducting reviews of the organisation and surface structures of the curriculum to wanting to tackle seriously the nature of classroom process. This focuses on a concern about teaching methods which often conform to an etiolated version of the old didactic style. Although TVEI and LAPP will hopefully contribute to the development and evaluation of new approaches to teaching and learning, there is a need for more sustained research in this field representing as it does a common concern of those in schools, LEAs and in academic research.

The organisation of collaborative research of the kind I have outlined puts the LEA into a much more prominent position with respect to the initiation, planning and dissemination of research than has usually been the case in the past. I find it surprising that we have bemoaned for years the marginal role of educational research without apparently recognising, given the way our educational system is organised, that the LEA is a necessary key factor in the processes of dissemination and impact. If we really do take seriously the view that research should influence educational events more discernibly and predictably than it appears to at the moment, then the LEA must be a major partner in the research enterprise. What I have suggested is entirely feasible and many of the features I have described are already apparent here in Sheffield where the university, the polytechnic, the LEA and its schools have, I believe, the firm sense of being members of a collaborative community in which research is both carried out and applied and where theory and practice influence each other. I am also encouraged to note that several of the symposia at this Conference provide examples of research already underway on some of the policy initiatives mentioned and which moreover involve aspects of collaborative research.

I would not, however, wish to risk the possibility of my views being taken to imply an unjustifiable appropriation of the total research enterprise. There needs obviously to be a national perspective on educational research and research activities that transcend the immediate needs of individual LEAS. I would certainly not wish research to be trammelled by the perceived urgencies and priorities of policy makers of whatever kind. I think there needs to be, as in other disciplines, a balance between those two aspects of research which, for want of better brief titles, we can call the 'pure' and the 'applied'. What I have essentially drawn attention to is the neglect of the LEA in current conceptions of educational research both as a context for research and as a potentially important influence on its organisation and planning. I believe this neglect to be harmful to the cause of educational research and the ideas I have put forward should if implemented help to redress the situation.

There is widespread recognition of the importance of teachers' contributions to research. Their increasing involvement has done much to both demystify and humanise the notion of research. BERA has itself underscored the value of teachers as collaborators in research by extending membership to them. We need now to recognise more fully the contribution of the LEAs and seek to encourage the research traditions and activities within them. In particular there is a need to involve three key groups in LEAs more closely in the Association's activities-education officers, education advisers and educational psychologists. Perhaps we should be talking about 'advisers as researchers', 'education officers as researchers' and 'school psychologists as researchers'. As the first member of an LEA Education Department to hold the office of President of BERA I intend to discuss with the Executive Council ways in which the Association might give practical support to the realisation of effective collaborative research and the greater involvement of LEAs in the process.

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