# 1

# Educational Research and the Practical Judgement of Policy-Makers

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## THE CONTEXT: WHAT EVIDENCE?

This publication arises in a context in which policy-makers and educational researchers are increasingly vocal in their demands that educational policy and practice should be informed by high quality research. In some renderings in the USA and the UK this has been translated into the language of 'evidence-based' policy and practice and in both countries this in turn has led to 'systematic reviews' of educational research aimed at sifting what is regarded as research which can reliably inform us 'what works' from that which is less deserving of attention. In the United States following the re-authorisation in 2001 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act ('No Child Left Behind') only such research as compares with the medical double blind randomised controlled trials has been seen in government circles to be deserving of attention in terms of policy formation. Not quite so restrictively, the 'systematic reviews' favoured by UK government and carried out under the auspices of the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information Coordinating Centre (EPPI Centre: www.eppi.ioe.ac.uk) at the London Institute of Education have nevertheless—'systematically', one might say—excluded whole swathes of educational research from their consideration. These exclusions were especially significant in terms of research which indicated what policy should be as distinct from how a particular determined policy might be implemented or delivered, but they also put beyond the frame of consideration, for example, much research based on individual case studies or narratives, let alone philosophical work or critical theory.

However, as Whitty pointed out in his Presidential address to the 2005 BERA conference:

> Even research that is centrally concerned with improving practice and supporting teachers ... 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 (published in Whitty 2006, p. 162).

In a context of increasing diversification, segmentation and hybridisation of educational research, the major ESRC-sponsored Teaching and Learning Research Programme in the UK invited philosophical consideration of what might more widely be regarded as the epistemological bases of educational policy (though we were not entirely comfortable with the foundationalism implied by the language of 'bases': see Smith and also Elliott and Lukeš in this volume). The central question was: what sort of research can and should inform such policy? What confidence can we have in different kinds of research as a basis for such policy?

The editors of this volume can share with the 'evidence-based practice' movement a concern that policy should in some sense be informed by research rather than, for example, rumour, prejudice or unexamined assumptions and we can also share the hope that such research should be good quality research. The trouble is that 'quality' can be—and is—easily and even unintentionally defined in a way that excludes many of the varied intellectual sources which can and do contribute to educational understanding.

In fairness, as the sources and methodologies which educational researchers have drawn on have become more and more diverse (a pattern echoed across the social sciences more generally) they have presented something of a challenge to anyone faced with judgements of quality. When he was editor of the American Educational Research Association journal *Educational Researcher*, Donmoyer wrote an article—almost a plea for help—under the title 'Educational Research in an Era of Paradigm Proliferation: What's a Journal Editor to Do?' (Donmoyer, 1996) in which he described the field of educational research in these terms: 'Ours is a field characterised by paradigm proliferation and, consequently, the sort of field in which there is little consensus about what research and scholarship are and what research reporting and scholarship should look like' (Donmoyer, 1996, p. 19).

The authors of the chapters in this volume tend to view the richness of the intellectual traditions which can contribute to educational understanding as a source of fascination rather than frustration, as a cause for celebration rather than despondency. At least, with Elliott Eisner (and this was in his presidential address to the American Educational Research Association) we hold that 'If there are different ways to understand the world, and if there are different forms that make such understanding possible, then it would seem to follow that any comprehensive effort to understand the processes and outcomes of schooling would profit from a pluralistic rather than a monolithic approach to research' (Eisner, 1993,

p. 8). Thus we set off with the supposition that the intellectual resources which could and should inform policy might be rather more diverse in character than the evidence-based practice movement seemed to suppose—or at least we wanted to test this belief through closer analysis and argumentation. So we are asking: can we derive useful insight from small scale case studies and biography as well as large population studies, from practitioner action research as well as academic institutional research, from philosophical and literary work as well as from empirical evidence? If so, how, more specifically, do these forms of enquiry relate to and inform policy?

## THE CONTRIBUTIONS

This volume begins with a chapter by Alis Oancea and Richard Pring on 'The Importance of Being Thorough: On Systematic Accumulation of "What Works" in Educational Research', which reviews the developments around 'evidence-based practice' and 'systematic reviews', rehearses some of the criticism to which they have been exposed, and discusses the nature of research more generally. It recognises, more particularly, the different kinds of evidence that are related to different kinds of research questions and the consequent limitations of general research-based solutions to generalised problems.

The second chapter, 'The Epistemological Bases of Educational Research and Policy' by David Bridges and Michael Watts, considers whether there are any *general* principles one can advance as to what sort of evidence can and should inform educational policy. This invites a closer inspection of the kind of information and understanding which are required for any formulation of educational policy. It draws attention in particular to the inescapably normative character of such formulation and discusses the role of research in the context of such normativity.

We then proceed to look at some specific forms of research with a view to examining what sort of contribution they might or might not make to educational policy. The first of these chapters focuses on one of the longest established forms of educational enquiry and perhaps one of the least controversial—large population studies. In 'On the Epistemological Basis of Large-Scale Population Studies and Their Use' Paul Smeyers considers the ways in which such studies might inform policy and provides particular insight into the interpretation of causality in such research. We wanted to include in the suite of discussions at least one example of quantitative research methods, because these are often assumed to be relatively unproblematic as evidence which can inform policy, but, as Smeyers demonstrates, the derivation of policy from such evidence and the inferences involved have their own complexities.

We then move to two discussions of qualitative research methods focusing on individual cases or a small number of cases. John Elliott and Dominic Lukeš discuss the ways in which case study can inform policy in 'Epistemology as Ethics in Research and Policy: Under What Terms

Might Case Studies Yield Useful Knowledge to Policy-Makers', while Morwenna Griffiths and Gale Macleod consider the particular issues relating to 'Stories and Personal Narratives'.

Some of the same issues are raised in connection with practitioner and action research, which is the focus of a chapter by Lorraine Foreman-Peck and Jane Murray 'Action Research and Policy: Epistemological Considerations'. This chapter analyses, in particular, the different relationships which different conceptions of action research have with policy.

It would be part of our contention that policy must inescapably be informed by philosophical considerations and James Conroy, Robert Davis and Penny Enslin explore this relationship in more detail in 'Philosophy as a Basis for Policy And Practice: What Confidence Can We Have in Philosophical Analysis and Argument?'—a chapter that also explores in some detail the notion of confidence itself as an epistemological principle. Finally, we wanted to open the debate to consideration of some even more difficult bedfellows to educational policy and this is what Richard Smith contributes in his chapter 'Proteus Rising: Re-Imagining Educational Research' which considers the place of 'non-modernist' enquiry and 'the romantic turn' in the educational policy arena.

These chapter do not of course cover all of the diverse forms that are taken by contemporary educational research. They do, however, make a case in favour of the contribution to educational policy which can be made by a wider rather than a narrower range of intellectual resources. They also make it clear that the relationship between some of these resources and policy formulation is not necessarily a straightforward one and is not necessarily the same in all cases.

## WHAT BASIS? HOW RESEARCH MIGHT RELATE TO POLICY

There is a widespread assumption that research provides an 'evidential basis' for policy or, more acceptably perhaps, that research 'informs' policy. The notion of research providing a *basis* for policy is especially problematic in so far as it suggests that the process begins with research which then points to the required policy. This is an empirically and logically unsound view of the nature of policy and its construction. Policy is an ongoing process: it is not a vacuum waiting to be filled. It has a history and a contemporary social political context. It is there before the research comes along: it is not waiting for research to bring it into existence. Equally, policy-makers are not empty vessels: they come with prejudice, experience, values they wish to realise and ideas for the future. Sometimes they may be unsure what to do and be looking for advice, but even then research has to engage with socio/historical systems and with people, in which and in whom belief, understanding and experience are already deeply embedded. Research may arouse interest, provoke debate, confirm prejudice, give new insight, challenge pre-existing beliefs but it

will never stand alone in its informing of policy and will rarely even be the predominant informing resource, simply because there is already so much 'information' of one sort or another embodied in policy systems and in policy-makers themselves.

This sort of picture of the relationship between research and policy raises, then, the question of the nature of the 'informing': how does research inform, enter or otherwise engage with policy or policy-makers?

The evidence-based policy movement seems almost to presuppose an algorithm which will generate policy decisions: *If* A is what you want to achieve *and if* research shows R1, R2 and R3 to be the case, and *if furthermore* research shows that doing P is positively correlated with A, *then* it follows that P is what you need to do. So provided you have your educational/political goals sorted out, all you need is to slot in the appropriate research findings—the right information—to extract your policy. Elliott and Lukeš draw on Nussbaum's (1990) 'Science of Measurement' to identify this kind of 'scientific' conception of practical reason characterised by a concern to maximise a single instrumental value varying only in quantity that is common to all alternatives. As Elliott and Lukeš argue in their chapter, however, 'Streamlined rational judgement is often, and almost always in the context of policymaking, a convenient fiction, a ritual of justification'. 'Human beings continually elude systems. If rational persons did agree, they would assent to the same rational systems. However, they do not' (Griffiths and Macleod, this volume).

A number of the contributors to this volume point to more subtle processes at work in the interaction of research and policy. First, there is the observation that not all research is orientated towards solutions to educational questions or problems (albeit that this may be a source of irritation to impatient and solution-focused policy-makers). Research may show that you have problems you had not even thought about; it may critique your policy rather than tell you how to succeed with it (even if it is 'action' research as Foreman-Peck and Murray point out); it may help you see what you are dealing with in its historical or social context, perhaps even *sub specie aeternitatis* (Elliott and Lukeš write in their contribution to this volume of the interface between research and practice as 'a continuing conversation between the general and the universal'); it may help you understand the complexity of the problem (Conroy *et al.*); it may reveal the stark reality of the choices facing you (see on all this, in particular, Griffiths and Macleod's contribution to this volume).

Secondly, and by extension, you get a different perspective on research if you move from looking to it for 'information', scores, numbers or facts to looking for different kinds of cognitive objectives. The simple shift, which Hammersley (2002) proposed, towards looking for *understanding* rather than seeking solutions, and towards making claims that are tentative rather than advancing them with evangelical certainty, has quite radical implications for the research/policy relationship (see chapters by Griffiths and Macleod and by Smith). Elliott and Lukeš write of 'retrospective generalisations' and summaries of judgement' which 'allow people to

anticipate rather than straightforwardly predict possible events' (this volume); Griffiths and Macleod employ Aristotelian distinctions to suggest that it is *praxis* (crudely, the practical knowledge reflected in how one lives as a citizen and a human being, but also a knowledge informed by *phronesis* or practical wisdom) on which policy-makers need to rely rather than on the one hand *sophia* and *episteme* or on the other *techne*. It is this sort of knowledge which can be informed by auto/biography (Griffiths and Macleod), individual case studies (Elliott and Lukeš) and locally applied action research (Foreman-Peck and Murray). Smith takes the argument about the kind of knowledge that is needed in a different, therapeutic (in the Wittgensteinian sense) or, as he suggests, a Romantic direction: 'Instead of knowing the world we might be attuned to it, sensitive to it. We might resonate with it, share its rhythms—the way we might with the natural world if we opened ourselves to it instead of approaching it as scientists' (Smith, this volume).

Thirdly, several of the chapters in this volume emphasise the point that research has a role in informing the practical wisdom, judgement or *phronesis* of policy-makers (who, we suggested earlier, are not exactly without all sorts of pre-existent understanding of their own), but cannot substitute for it. Smeyers argues that large-scale population studies may correct particular explanations which are generally given and which may turn out not to be correct, but much more will need to be said when applying these insights in a policy context. Elliott and Lukeš explicitly argue that single case portrayals have a particular contribution to make 'in a policy context that leaves cultural space for *phronesis* as a mode of practical reasoning' though they add that 'Stenhouse's conception of case study fits a context in which space for *phronesis* cannot be presumed but needs to be opened up' (Elliott and Lukeš, this volume).

Fourthly, a number of the chapters share a suspicion of generalised solutions to educational problems and policy requirements which are supposed to be applied across what all the chapters regard as diverse, complex (Conroy *et al.*), unstable (Smith), unpredictable (Elliott and Lukeš), and messy particular contexts. (Griffiths and Macleod's discussion of Arendt on this is especially illuminating.) Action research in the UK was indeed posited on the need to test general curriculum prescriptions against the evidence of their effects on particular classrooms (Foreman-Peck and Murray). Elliott and Lukeš describe 'case-focussed reasoning' as 'a process which . . . unifies universal and situational understanding' and Griffiths and Macleod invoke sources which speak of 'the capacity to attend to context as well as idiosyncracy' (Fraser, 2004, p. 181) and which commend biographical methods on the grounds that they can help 'restore the relationship between policy and lived experience by moving between the micro- and macro-levels' (Frogget and Chamberlayne, 2004, p. 62).

All of these considerations contribute to a much more diverse and subtle picture of the ways in which research may inform policy than is suggested in the discourse of evidence-based policy. They are also a reminder of the mass of human experience and of research insight into that experience

which will be lost if we do not pay attention to the wider range of resources that the educational research community can offer. 'So much passes unnoticed and unremarked, and is betrayed' observes Richard Smith in a concluding paragraph to this volume, and he invokes Pieter Brueghel's painting *The Fall of Icarus*, reproduced on the cover of this book, and Auden's reflection on it as a metaphor for what we miss when, like Brueghel's ploughman, we are too narrowly focused on the immediate job in hand or, like the ship that passes by unseeing, we have 'somewhere to get to'.

**WHOSE POLICY?**

Bridges and Watts (in this volume) emphasise that policy is not just what is constructed at national level by politicians and ministries (still less, in the UK context is it simply what happens in London, given the jurisdiction over educational affairs which is held—in different ways—in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). It is legitimate to talk of policy at regional, local and school levels and even, by extension, at the level of the individual classroom, though it is more commonly applied to collective action. However, the discourse of 'evidence-based' policy is primarily a response to the demands of national ministries in a context (in England especially) in which power has been systematically sucked from local government and schools to centralised administrations.

   Some of the problems about connecting research with policy are the direct result of this centralising tendency. This point bears emphasising. There is irony in the way that, in many parts of the world, governments have increasingly arrogated power to themselves or to central agencies operating under their direction in the educational field, and then expressed surprise that educationists are not providing them with the 'research findings' they seek in order to re-connect with the education communities they want to command and have in many cases alienated. This centralising tendency forces those at the centre to seek generalised policy imperatives which are increasingly removed form the variety of social situations to which they are addressed—and it creates a greater social distance between researchers and the policy-makers. In smaller political units—Scotland would be an example—researchers and policy-makers (and teachers) have much more natural interaction, and those responsible for the direction and administration of education are much closer to the social settings on which their policies are to bear. To take a second example, in the English region of the East of England all the researchers involved with research into widening participation in higher education meet annually with policy-makers and practitioners in the field to review the latest research work, to assess their implications for policy and practice and to identify what else needs investigating. The point of this last example is that the people thus assembled have both the capacity to determine their own priorities for action (at least within a broad national framework) and the capacity to

commission and utilise locally applied research. Where policy is in the hands of central government neither opportunity is practically available.

Educational action research in a sense takes this logic one stage further. At least on one model (see Elliott, 2000 and Foreman-Peck and Murray in this volume) it brings the educational values and aspirations of the teacher ('policy' in a significant sense) and research together in the context in which those values and aspirations are to be realised. Where this is possible, as Bridges has argued elsewhere, it reaffirms the ownership by teachers of teaching and learning in their own classrooms, the integrity with which they can then carry out this teaching and their professionalism and responsibility in this task (Bridges, 2001). Again, the research/ policy gap and even the policy/practice gap are closed, by not being artificially brought into being in the first place, if you have the confidence or courage to locate them at the most local level.

Finally, several of the chapters link issues of the ownership of and participation in the processes of research and policy with the conditions under which a community may come to have confidence in the knowledge which is informing that policy. Pring and Oancea argue in their contribution to this volume that 'Reasonable policy and practice can arise only from a deliberation of these different sources of evidence [teachers, policy-makers, parents and pupils] and [their] logically different sorts of explanation—and, hence, in a context where this deliberation is democratised. By democratised we mean both that the different research and evidence voices are heard and that conclusions remain tentative and provisional, welcoming further dialogue and criticism'. Conroy, Davis and Enslin urge that 'philosophical analysis more widely conceived ought to be in permanent ongoing dialogue with the policy-making enterprise'. Smith reminds us in his contribution of Leavis' account of literary criticism as 'a collaborative and creative interplay. It creates a community and is inseparable from the process that creates and keeps alive a living culture' (Leavis, 1961, quoted in Matthews, 2004, p. 55). Elliott and Lukeš write of enquiry undertaken in 'the spirit of a conversation' which alerts participants to their prejudices. The reconstruction of such prejudices is, they suggest 'an alternative view of understanding itself', though it is one which seems at some distance from the kind of understanding required by systematic reviews.

It is a contemporary commonplace to imagine that if only researchers and policy-makers could simply talk to each other all would be well. Elliott and Lukeš warn, however, that the kind of conversation they describe,

> . . . does not automatically lead to a 'neater picture' of the situation nor does it necessarily produce a 'social good'. There is the danger of viewing 'disciplined conversation' as an elevated version of the folk theory on ideal policy: 'if only everyone talked to one another, the world would be a nicer place'. Academic conversation (just like any democratic dialectic process) is often contentious and not quite the genteel affair it tries to present itself as (Elliott and Lukeš, this volume).

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIS VOLUME

We hope that this volume gains particular strength and coherence from the way in which it has been developed. The authors worked collaboratively for twelve months, starting with a two-day seminar in the autumn of 2006 at which they presented outlines of possible essays and discussed them as a group. Authors then re-worked their plans in the light of this discussion and proceeded with the writing. A nucleus of the group presented their current thinking at the annual conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain in April 2007. The group then circulated their first drafts for detailed critical scrutiny at a two-day seminar in Cambridge in June 2007. This was also attended by two colleagues from outside philosophy of education: Lesley Saunders, Research Policy Advisor for the General Teaching Council (who has contributed a Preface to this collection) and Alan Brown, Associate Director of the Teaching and Learning Research programme. The essays were then further re-worked for presentation at the annual conferences of the British and European Educational Research Associations in September 2007 where they benefited from joint sessions between the Philosophy of Education and the Policy and Politics special interest groups.

This work was supported by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) and we are very grateful for this support. We hope that it will prove to be the prelude to subsequent ESRC supported work in philosophy of education. TLRP has also supported the development of philosophical resources for research capacity building, and these are freely available along with short versions of this set of chapters at www.tlrp.org/capacity.

The chapters in this volume issue from debate among the contributors and the wider educational research and policy community and will, we hope, contribute to on-going conversations. To this end they do not necessarily assume a detailed knowledge of the philosophical literature (though they offer signposts towards it and have extensive references), but are written in a way that will, we believe, reach out to colleagues in the wider educational policy and research communities as well as those in philosophy of education.

The *Journal of Philosophy of Education* has now published the following special issues on the theme of philosophy and educational research, which have been issued in book form:

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| Volume 35, Issue 3 | Michael McNamee and David Bridges (eds), *The Ethics of Educational Research* (2002) |
| Volume 40, Issues 2 and 4 | David Bridges and Richard Smith (eds), *Philosophy and Methodology of Educational Research* (2007) |
| Volume 42, Supplement 1 | David Bridges, Paul Smeyers and Richard Smith (eds), *Evidence-Based Education Policy* (2009) |

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