

Educational Research Policymaking and Practice

Martyn Hammersley



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Introduction

This book focuses on a perennial issue: the relationship between educational research and policymaking or practice. Announcements of the failure of research to perform its proper function for these activities have occurred frequently over the past century, often leading to attempts at improving the situation.¹ However, for the most part, responses to each new crisis have failed to draw on earlier ones. And, perhaps as a result, the discussions have not always distinguished clearly between the various types of question that must be addressed: factual questions about the roles that research *has actually played*, theoretical questions about the roles that it *can* play, and value questions about the roles that it *ought to* play. Against this background, my aim in this book is to contribute to a deeper analysis of the relationship between research and policymaking or practice, particularly as regards what it is possible for educational research to contribute, and what the implications of answers to this question are for its justification and organisation.

While the issue addressed here is a perennial one, and while I have drawn on a wide range of previous work, my thinking was stimulated in large part by what has been happening to educational research in England and Wales in the past decade. In particular, it has been subjected to increasing public criticism for failing to support evidence-based practice and policymaking. And there have been moves to subject it to greater external and central control, designed to remedy the problem. In the first part of this Introduction I will sketch these developments, since references to them occur in subsequent chapters, and because they embody views – about how research can be (and ought to be) useful to policymakers and practitioners – that are the focus for my discussion. In the final part of the Introduction I will outline the argument of each chapter.

The current crisis in educational research

Recent criticism of educational research in England and Wales probably needs to be understood against the background of longer-term changes in the nature of professional education for teachers (both pre- and in-service); of changing patterns in social research funding; and of the growth of demands for, and attempts to establish, 'transparent accountability' in the public sector generally.

Teacher education

To a large extent, the expansion of educational research in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s was a result of the shift towards educating teachers in universities, rather than in training colleges. With this move, the academic component of teacher education was expanded, with some disciplines coming to be treated as foundational, notably the philosophy, psychology, sociology, and history of education. What informed this shift away from more practical forms of teacher preparation was a commitment to the goal of making teaching a full profession; in the sense of an occupation that could only be entered by university graduates who had been inducted into the ways of thinking and bodies of academic knowledge relevant to educational practice. However, for a variety of reasons, in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s both teachers and teacher education came under increasing public criticism. This was closely related to the collapse of the previous broad political consensus about education, a collapse that had begun in the early 1970s. This was stimulated initially by the influence of 1960s leftist radicalism, but more strongly shaped by the subsequent resurgence of right-wing ideas (crowned by the political triumph of Thatcherism in the 1980s). As a result, there were moves to shift teacher education away from the academic model, regarded by many critics as too theoretical and political, back towards a more practical form of preparation, this time based primarily in schools.²

One component of these developments was that in the late 1960s and early 1970s educational research had come to be strongly infused by radical ideas: anarchism and Marxism initially, feminism and anti-racism later. To a large extent, this arose from a change within the sociology of education (announced as 'the new sociology of education'), and its spreading influence was facilitated by the success of that subdiscipline in challenging its main competitors – the philosophy and the psychology of education. These radical ideas had a considerable effect on the professional education of teachers in the 1970s, though this was not as great as right-wing critics later claimed. Subsequently, the shift to the Right in the external political climate led to a waning in influence of the sociology of education, and to growth in other areas of educational research – notably curriculum studies, educational administration and management, school effectiveness, and policy studies. However, in this process the

influence of the methodological and theoretical legacy of the new sociology – which was mainly qualitative in methodological terms and social constructionist in theoretical commitment – continued to spread across the field of educational research (see Hammersley 1996).

The funding of social and educational research

The election of a Conservative government also brought moves to reduce the public funding for social research, and even led to questions being raised about whether it had any justification at all. In 1981 a review of the work of the Social Science Research Council, the main funding body for social science research in England and Wales, was ordered. It was widely believed at the time that the motive behind this review was to provide a justification for closing the organisation down. In the event, the review was broadly favourable (Rothschild 1982), and what happened instead was that there was a change of name, to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), and continued reduction in funding. Subsequently, there have been recurrent changes within the ESRC which have moved it more and more towards an emphasis on funding research directly relevant to current policy priorities. Early on, there was a shift to allocating a substantial proportion of funds via specific initiatives, rather than through the responsive funding mode that had previously been the norm. Furthermore, there have been increasing requirements that those bidding for funds involve potential ‘users’ and develop dissemination strategies designed to encourage ‘implementation’ of the findings.³

Closely related to these changes in the mode of operation of the ESRC has been the growing influence of ideas about the ‘knowledge economy’, the ‘socially distributed’ character of knowledge production and the need for ‘interactive’ social science (see Caswill and Shove 2000). An influential contribution to this line of argument was provided by an ex-chair of the ESRC, Douglas Hague. He argued that current economic development depends more and more on knowledge and information, and that this has very important implications for universities and for the researchers based in them. In particular, he suggests, they will find themselves in an increasingly competitive market for producing and distributing knowledge; and he argues that, to survive, they will have to reform themselves so that they can operate in ways that are closer to those of commercial knowledge businesses, and/or to form alliances with these businesses (see Hague 1991). More recently, along similar lines, Gibbons et al. have argued that an important change is taking place in the organisation of research across a whole range of fields, away from more traditional, disciplinary forms towards ones that involve interdisciplinary teams tackling practical problems, and working at the sites where those problems arise rather than in universities (Gibbons et al. 1994).

Moves towards 'transparent' accountability in the public sector

The third important background factor has been attempts to apply 'transparent accountability' to many parts of the public sector in Britain in recent years. This form of accountability is central to the 'new public management' that has become so influential within government circles across many Western societies (see Ferlie et al. 1996). It requires that publicly funded activities be accountable through the monitoring of performance, in the same way that private enterprises are believed to be accountable to investors in terms of sales, profits and dividends. The assumption is that private enterprise is naturally more efficient and effective than state organisation, an idea made more influential by the collapse of East European economies in the 1980s. So, the goal of the new public management is to introduce forms of organisation within the public sector that approximate to the 'discipline of the market'.

One element of this is the establishment of quasi-markets, but equally important is the provision of information about institutional performance. In neo-classical economic theory, on which the new managerialism partly relies, markets are seen as generating information – about relative costs, about the relative quality of goods and services etc. – on the basis of which consumers act in ways that reward efficient producers and penalise inefficient ones. Investors, in turn, respond according to the market performance of different firms, investing in successful ones, dis-investing from unsuccessful ones. Analogously, from the point of view of the new public management, the publication of league tables and of the results of audits and inspections provides information about the performance of particular units or policies which can be used by those who fund the public sector, both government and citizens generally, to judge its effectiveness and efficiency.⁴

In relation to research there has been a gradual move towards trying to implement this kind of 'transparent' accountability. The introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise can be seen as an early step, plus the already mentioned shift within the ESRC towards greater emphasis on the role of users, the introduction of procedures designed to test whether projects have met their objectives, and attempts to measure the 'impact' of funded research.

However, it is important to stress that social research has a dual relationship to this new form of accountability. Not only are there demands for research itself to be made more 'accountable', like other activities, but it is seen by governments as able to generate information about the effectiveness and efficiency of policies and institutions. In other words, it is regarded as a major tool in promoting 'accountability' and 'modernisation' across the public sector and beyond. And, of course, this view of its function has significant implications for the *kind* of research that is

believed to be of value. Above all, this is research which tells us 'what works', 'what works best' or 'what works most efficiently'.⁵

Mounting criticism of educational research and government intervention

These broad developments over the last few decades of the twentieth century – in policies towards teacher education, in the funding of social research, and in public sector accountability – are the background against which recent attempts to reform educational research can be understood. It is difficult to identify precisely when these attempts began. As early as 1991, a working party was set up by the ESRC to review research in education and to set priorities for it (see Rudduck and McIntyre 1998:8–9 and *passim*). However, the main trigger seems to have been the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) annual lecture given by David Hargreaves in 1996. Hargreaves was well known as an educational researcher, but had also been Chief Inspector of Schools for the Inner London Education Authority. Moreover, he had been in the forefront of criticism of university-based initial teacher education. When he gave the TTA lecture he was professor of education at the University of Cambridge. In this lecture, he repeated some of the criticisms he had made of the sociology of education many years earlier (see, for example, Hargreaves 1981), generalising these to educational research as a whole, and focusing in particular on what he saw as its failure to serve the education system. In this he drew an analogy with the situation in the health service, where a movement towards 'evidence-based medicine' had recently emerged. This movement had been primarily concerned with facilitating and encouraging medical practitioners to draw more on the findings of relevant research. By contrast, Hargreaves argued that while teachers did not make much use of educational research, the blame did not lie with them but with researchers. He argued that, for the most part, the latter had not been doing the kind of research which was necessary to serve evidence-based practice. Furthermore, he proposed that some of the money currently allocated to universities for educational research should be transferred to the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), to facilitate analysis of the reports of school inspectors.

Hargreaves' lecture reinforced the commitment of the TTA to the concept of teaching as a research-based profession. And this organisation began a funding programme to enable more teachers to carry out small research projects and to disseminate their findings to colleagues. The idea was that such research would be more practically focused than most academic educational research, and would thereby have a much more direct and beneficial impact on practice.⁶

Hargreaves' critique generated a great deal of attention, both within the educational research community and outside. Most significantly, it

led to the setting up of two investigations into educational research, one sponsored by OFSTED and the other by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). Furthermore, while these investigations were under way, the controversy was kept on the boil by media commentary, such as criticism of papers given at the British Educational Research Association annual conference in the *Spectator* (McKinstry 1997). This announced that the research reported at the conference simply 'indulged the ideological whims of academics' rather than 'studying possible improvements in teaching', 'which is what educational researchers are paid for' (ibid.:24–5). There was also a book review in the *New Statesman* by Chris Woodhead, Chief Inspector of Schools and head of OFSTED, in which he dismissed the value of much recent sociology of education. The headline of this read: 'Academia gone to seed: once upon a time, educational research helped teachers and illuminated how children learn. Today's academics produce little more than badly written dross.' In the course of this review, Woodhead referred back to Hargreaves' TTA lecture and also quoted from the report of the OFSTED-sponsored investigation, which was at that time still unpublished (Woodhead 1998).

The Tooley report eventually appeared just before the DfEE-funded Hillage report (Tooley 1998; Hillage et al. 1998). James Tooley was research fellow in the School of Education, University of Manchester, and later professor of education at the University of Newcastle; but he was also Director of Education at a right-wing think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs. In his report, Tooley examined a sample of recent articles in four education journals, and came to the conclusion that a substantial proportion of them suffered from serious methodological defects, though he also concluded that most of them could be judged educationally relevant in a broad sense, and he warned against generalising from his sample. As head of OFSTED, the sponsoring agency, Woodhead wrote a brief introduction to this report, in which he declared that much educational research 'is, on this analysis, at best no more than an irrelevance and a distraction', and in the press release for the report (which was headed 'Majority of academic educational research is second-rate') he suggested that 'considerable sums of public money are being pumped into research of dubious quality and little value'.⁷

The DfEE report, produced by researchers in the Institute for Employment Studies at the University of Sussex, also raised questions about the quality and, especially, the usefulness of educational research. It suggested (following Hargreaves) that an independent forum should be set up – on which researchers, representatives of government agencies, members of funding bodies, and teachers should be represented – to determine 'national strategy' in educational research. Building on this, in the accompanying press release the DfEE declared that 'public money is wasted on poor educational research, which is too often irrelevant to teaching practice or inaccessible to teachers'; and the Department promised a 'fundamental shake-up of the educational research establishment'

(*Times Higher Educational Supplement* [hereafter *THES*] 28 August 1998).⁸

These two critical reports on educational research were followed by a government initiative designed to remedy the problems identified. In the words of Charles Clarke, then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the DfEE, the aim was to 'resurrect educational research in order to raise standards' (Clarke 1998:2), a comment which implies a rather negative view about the health of this field of enquiry, to say the least. In the course of outlining the Government's proposed remedies, Clarke makes clear the conception of educational research which lies behind the proposed reforms. He declares that educational research is important because 'it can identify the most effective approaches which will contribute to raising standards at all levels [of the education system]' (Clarke 1998:2). This was to be achieved by: the promotion of 'centres of excellence', in other words funding particular institutions for specific areas of research; the encouragement of 'longitudinal studies, literature reviews, replications and, where appropriate, randomly controlled trials'; the development of an information centre collating and reviewing the findings of educational research in a way that is accessible to users; and increased user involvement in setting priorities for educational research, and indeed in the 'entire process'.

As part of this government intervention, an Evidence for Policy and Practice: Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) was set up at the Institute of Education, University of London. This was charged with the task of coordinating the development of systematic reviews that would make research findings accessible to policymakers and practitioners. In addition, a National Educational Research Forum was established, designed to set priorities for the funding of educational research in a way that is more responsive to the needs of its 'users'. The intention was that these priorities would coordinate the decisions of all the relevant funding agencies, both public and private. In addition, an ESRC programme was established on 'teaching and learning' – funded in large part, it seems, from finance that would otherwise have gone directly to university education departments, this money now to be competed for on the basis of specific research proposals. Moreover, the framework of this programme laid great emphasis on research that has immediate practical payoff, being designed to support projects 'which will lead to significant improvements in the achievements of learners' (ESRC 2000).

In early 2000, in a speech to an ESRC gathering, the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment made clear that he saw these developments as a model for what was needed across social research generally. The title of his lecture – 'Influence or irrelevance?' – makes clear the options from his perspective. He asks: 'can the social science community have a major influence in improving government, or is it destined to be ever more detached and irrelevant to the real debates which affect people's life chances?' The Secretary of State then goes on to list what he calls 'our frustrations': that social research either 'addresses issues other than those

which are central and directly relevant to the political and policy debates' or addresses those issues in ways that do not take into account 'the reality of many people's lives' and/or are 'driven by ideology' (Blunkett 2000:12).⁹

There is a strong hint here about whom David Blunkett believes should be setting the research agenda. Clearly, it is not researchers. As he comments later in his speech: 'there is a widespread perception both within and beyond government that too much social science research is . . . too "supplier-driven"' (ibid.:15). Furthermore, it is evident from this speech that external control is taken to be desirable not just in relation to *what* is studied, but also as regards *how* it is studied. In particular, emphasis is to be placed on large-scale, interdisciplinary, quantitative studies.

Early in 2001, the National Educational Research Forum (NERF) produced a consultation paper. The aim of this was to generate a national strategy designed to coordinate educational research, so that it serves evidence-informed policymaking and practice more effectively. This strategy has several elements. One is to establish effective systems for summarising the results of research and making them available to users, along the lines of the Cochrane Collaboration in the field of health. The work of the EPPI Centre at the London Institute of Education and the international Campbell Collaboration are seen as tackling this. Another element is to set priorities for research and development in education, and to establish a mechanism to 'implement this priority-setting process on an ongoing basis' (NERF 2000:8). A further aim is to coordinate assessments of research proposals and research products by funders – and by other key gatekeepers in the field, such as journal editors – in terms of an agreed set of quality criteria. Furthermore, as an adjunct to this, the impact of particular research projects is to be assessed and lessons from this built into the quality criteria.¹⁰

These recent events in England and Wales raise, in the sharpest possible way, the issue of what relationship is feasible and desirable between research and policymaking or practice. Underlying most of the criticism of educational research, and even some of the responses to it, has been what I refer to in Chapter 3 as a one-worldist view: the idea that the two activities can and must be brought into a close relationship, so that the requirements of educational policymakers and practitioners determine the kind of research that is done, and the results of that research directly shape future policies and practice. The belief is that this will generate a progressive spiral of increasing standards, on both sides. However, the arguments in this book raises fundamental questions about such an assumption: about what research can offer, about what policy-making and practice require, about whether there can be frictionless relationships among these three activities, and about what conditions are required for educational research to flourish.

Outline of the chapters

In the first chapter I look in detail at what, in England at least, has been the most influential recent critique of educational research: David Hargreaves' 1996 lecture to the TTA. I outline and assess the two key criticisms that Hargreaves makes of educational research: that it has failed to produce a cumulative body of knowledge; and that what it has generated is often of little use to teachers. While I accept that both these issues are important, and that some elements of Hargreaves' case are sound, I argue that much of his argument is based on fallacies. His criticism of the failure of educational research to be cumulative neglects the difficult methodological problems that such research faces. And his claim that educational research does not offer a valuable contribution to educational practice presupposes a narrowly instrumental conception of that relationship, one that seems unlikely to be generally applicable in the field of education. Indeed, there are respects in which it may not apply even to medicine, the major source for ideas about the role of research in evidence-based practice on which Hargreaves relies. I argue that his proposals for the radical reform of educational research, proposals which have shaped subsequent policy developments, are likely to be counterproductive. Far from improving the quality of educational research, they are more likely to damage it.¹¹

One influential way of thinking about the contribution that research can make to policymaking or practice is in terms of the contrast between what have come to be referred to as the engineering and enlightenment models. While current attempts to reform educational research seem to be based on the former, most researchers adopt the latter. Chapter 2 looks closely at the enlightenment model, suggesting that it can be interpreted in two quite different ways, and that the most convincing interpretation is a 'moderate', rather than a 'strong', form of it. The central part of the chapter examines the various limits on what research can offer policy-making and practice; and outlines the indeterminate relationship between research findings, evaluations and recommendations based on these, and desirable practical outcomes. One element of this is a challenge to the idea that well-executed research always has desirable, and never undesirable, consequences. My argument amounts to a deflationary account of the contribution that research can make to practice, compared with what is generally assumed; though I also outline the sorts of contribution that it *can* make. I conclude by considering the likely consequences of researchers adopting this moderate enlightenment model in defending their position. My argument is that researchers, funders, and users need to recognise and value the modest practical contribution that research offers, rather than assigning it a master role and then complaining that it has failed to live up to this.

Chapter 3, written with Roger Gomm, examines the idea that research, policymaking and practice represent different 'worlds', involving

distinctive orientations that differ from one another in unavoidable respects. The history of this idea is outlined, as well as some problems with it. These are addressed, and an attempt is made to develop the idea by drawing on the literature of phenomenological philosophy. Against this background, the various metaphors that have been employed to conceptualise the relationship between research and practice are examined: such as 'application', 'implementation', 'dissemination', and 'translation'. We conclude that the last of these is the most fruitful, because it takes account of the differences in orientation between research and other forms of practice. In the final section it is argued that educational policy making and practice also differ from one another in important respects, and that current attempts to reform educational research are part of a wider process in which the occupational world of teaching is being managerialised; and that the proposed reforms must be viewed in this wider context.

Chapter 4 focuses on the way in which qualitative enquiry has sometimes been singled out for particular attention in recent criticisms of educational research. This stems from the fact that, in Britain over the past two decades, it has become very popular among researchers; and it is indeed of uneven quality. However, the source of the criticism may be more fundamental. I argue that there is a conflict between the engineering model of the relationship between research and practice, which underpins current attempts to reform educational research, and the picture of social life generated by qualitative research, a picture that has much to commend it. The key elements of that picture are outlined, and they are contrasted with the functionalist conception of society which underlies the engineering and medical analogies. It is pointed out that such functionalism has long been subjected to cogent criticism within the sociological literature. At the same time, it is argued that some of the opposition to the engineering model, especially that influenced by critical theory and postmodernism, shares a similarly functionalist conception of society. Links are identified between qualitative researchers' ideas about the nature of society and the moderate enlightenment model.

Chapter 5 starts from a contrast between the idea that educational research needs to be subjected to external and central control if it is to serve policymaking and practice more effectively, and the proposal that diversity of approach within educational research should be tolerated or even celebrated. The latter position is sometimes justified on the grounds that 'difference' must be respected, and/or that educational research should represent marginalised voices. By contrast, here I question current attempts to increase central control over research by appealing to Michael Polanyi's conception of 'the republic of science'. His understanding of the nature of research communities is spelled out, along with the historical context in which it developed. I then examine the question of whether Polanyi's arguments against external and central control are applicable to educational research, given that it is a social, and applied, form of