'Evidence based policy'
What evidence? What basis? Whose policy?

In the context of demand for 'evidence based' educational policy and practice, this project examines some of the ways in which the increasingly diverse intellectual resources of the educational research community might inform policy. It challenges simplistic but influential models of the relationship between research and policy, and narrowly defined notions of what might count as research. and it investigates ways in which diverse forms of educational enquiry may contribute to the practical judgement of policy.

- Research does not logically or psychologically provide a basis or starting point for policy.

  ➡ Re-frame political and educational expectations of the research/policy relationship in favour of more realistic and sophisticated models of how policy is developed.

- Values, normativity and ideology are *legitimately* central to policy making.

  ➡ There is a role for research in refining, critiquing, and developing these elements within a structure of intelligent argumentation.

- Policy can and should be informed by the full range of intellectual resources available in the research community and not just a narrowly empiricist selection.

  ➡ Influence development of ways in which the high quality work of scholarship can inform policy – and work to remove current restrictions on what is admitted.

- There is no simple algorithm for translating research into policy: 'Impact' depends on social practices which bring political, democratic and research voices together in a shared conversation and process of mutual influence.

  ➡ Create conversational communities around central policy issues as a vehicle for mutual information and influence, and not necessarily for decision-making or even agreed understanding.

The research

This is a very small-scale project rooted, uniquely for TLRP, in philosophical analysis and argumentation and based on the writing, development and critiquing of a set of papers written for publication. This briefing will indicate some of the issues and arguments addressed in the papers, which are all accessible in the publications indicated below. Unless otherwise indicated, page references are to the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Sup 1 vol 42.

Some generic themes

Pring and Oancea begin by reviewing the developments around evidence based practice and systematic reviews, rehearse some of the criticism to which they have been exposed, and discuss the nature of educational research more generally. They recognise particularly the different kinds of evidence which are related to different kinds of research questions and the consequent limitations of general research-based solutions to generalised problems. David Bridges and Michael Watts then consider 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 is required for any formulation of educational policy. Their paper draws attention, in particular, to the inescapably normative character of such formulation and discusses the role of research in the context of such normativity.

Different forms of research

The other papers all look at some specific forms of research with a view to examining what sort of contribution they might make to educational policy. Paul Smeyers considers the ways in which *large population 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 evidence which can inform policy. But as Smeyers demonstrates, the derivation of policy from such evidence and the inferences involved have their own complexities.

Two discussions of qualitative research methods focus on individual cases or a small number of cases. John Elliott and Dominik Lukeš discuss the ways in which *case study* can inform policy. 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 paper by Lorraine Foreman Peck and Jane Murray. They analyse, in particular, the relationships which different conceptions of action research have to policy.

Part of our contention is that policy must be informed by *philosophical work*, and James Conroy, Robert Davis and Penny Enslin explore this relationship in more detail in a paper which also examines the notion of confidence itself as an epistemological principle.

Finally, we wanted to open the debate to consideration of some even more difficult bedfellows for educational policy. Richard Smith considers the place of *non-modernist enquiry* and the import of 'the romantic' in reflections upon dispositions that inflect themselves into the educational policy arena under the cloak of empirical truth.

These papers do not cover all of the diverse forms that are taken by contemporary educational research. They do, however, make the case that the best and most effective educational policy making depends upon a wide range range of intellectual resources.

A 'basis' for policy?

They also make it clear that the relationship between some of these resources and policy formulation is neither straightforward nor uniform. The notion of research providing a basis for policy is especially problematic. It suggests that the process begins with research which then points to the required policy. But policy is an ongoing process, 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 presuppositions, experience and values they wish to realise, and ideas for the future. Research may arouse interest, provoke debate, confirm prejudice, give new insight, or challenge pre-existing beliefs but it will rarely be the first consideration in the development of policy, it will never stand alone and it will rarely 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 picture of the relationship between research and policy raises 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 research shows that doing P is positively correlated with A, it follows that P is what you need to do. So provided you have your educational and political goals sorted out, all you need is to slot in the appropriate research findings to extract your policy.

Elliott and Lukeš draw on Nussbaum's (1990) *Science of Measurement* to identify this kind of 'scientistic' conception of practical reason characterised by a concern to maximise a single instrumental value varying only in quantity, and that is common to all alternatives. As Elliott and Lukeš argue, however, 'Streamlined rational judgement is often, and almost always in the context of policymaking, a convenient fiction, a ritual of justification' (p.110).

From information to understanding

A number of the contributors to the current project point to more subtle processes at work in the interaction of research with policy. Not all research is orientated towards solutions to educational questions or problems. 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; 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 of the interface between research and practice as 'a continuing conversation between the general and the universal' (p. 111). It may help you to understand the complexity of the problem (Conroy et al) or reveal the stark reality of the choices facing you (see in particular, Griffiths and Macleod).

By extension, you get a different perspective on research if you move from looking to it for 'information', perhaps in the form of 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 which are tentative rather than advanced with certainty has radical implications for the relationship between research and policy (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'. Griffiths and Macleod employ Aristotelian distinctions to suggest that it is the practical knowledge reflected in how one lives as a citizen and a human being (*praxis*), and knowledge informed by practical

wisdom (*phronesis*) on which policy makers need to rely rather than upon simply technical information. It is this sort of knowledge which can be informed by biography and autobiography (Griffiths and Macleod), individual case studies (Elliott and Luke_) and locally applied action research (Foreman Peck and Murray). Smith takes the argument about the kind of knowledge that is needed in a 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' (p. 186).

Generalised solutions?

Many of the papers share a suspicion of generalised solutions to educational problems and policy requirements, which are supposed to be applied across what diverse, complex (Conroy et al), unstable (Smith), unpredictable (Elliott and Lukes), situated, messy and 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 Lukes describe 'case-focussed reasoning' as 'a process which … unifies universal and situational understanding' (p.102) and Griffiths and Macleod 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.

References

Frogget, L. & Chamberlayne, P.(2004) Narratives of Social Enterprise: from Biography to Policy and Practice Critique, Qualitative Social Work, 3.1, pp 61-72.

Hammersley, M. (2002) *Educational Research, Policymaking and Practice*, London, Paul Chapman.

Nussbaum,M. (1990) 'The Science of Measurement' in *Love's knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford, OUP.

Major implications

- **Re-frame political and educational expectations of the research/policy relationship in terms of more realistic and sophisticated models of how policy is developed.**

This has implications both for the way in which policy makers might portray this relationship and for researchers' understanding of the ongoing processes through which policy is constructed and re-constructed. It invites a more open acknowledgement of the political and ideological elements of policy. This should lead to a clearer understanding of the interrelationship between different kinds of research and policy.

- **Acknowledge and address more directly the role of research in refining and developing the normative elements of policy.**

We should be more explicit about the educational and wider political values which frame policy and practice, and be more ready to subject these to careful scholarly, as well as democratic, scrutiny and criticism. The fact that ideology, normativity and educational values and principles are central to policy does not mean that scholarly endeavour has no work to do in these areas. The academy has enormous resources - in political science, social theory, ethics and philosophy - which can be brought to bear on this dimension of policy formation, and we should not be coy about using them.

- **Develop wider understanding of the ways in which high quality work drawn from the wider resources of the academy can inform policy – and remove current restrictions on what is admitted.**

This is the central message of the work we have been doing. It means acknowledging the diverse traditions of the social sciences and the arts and humanities. While these include ethnography, discourse analysis and critical theory as well as large population studies, and the double blind controlled experiments idolised by the 'What Works' movement, they also involve approaches derived from the humanities such as history including contemporary history, biography, autobiography, and even, as Elliott Eisner urged in his 1993 Presidential address to the American Educational Research Association, from the creative arts. There is every reason for discounting poor research of any kind, for example from systematic reviews, but no excuse for disqualifying high-quality work from any intellectual tradition. A more inclusive approach to educational research requires a better understanding of the ways in which different kinds of enquiry can inform thinking about educational policy. This is what we have attempted to illustrate, but clearly requires ongoing analysis and discussion.

Such understanding might in turn lead to a more subtle interplay between the reflective and the conceptual and the empirical, where the dynamism of educational practice and its relationship to policy is revealed. Researchers and those who commission research might spend a little more time at each stage of the process reflecting on whether policy recommendations have been arrived at too quickly and without understanding the trajectory of the problem in hand. This might enable us to spend rather more time on the diagnosis of a particular educational challenge before we jump to the prescription.

- **Create ongoing, permeable conversational communities, with policy, political, democratic and research voices, around central policy issues.**

These would not necessarily be a vehicle for decisions or even agreed understanding, but instead for mutual informing. The real insights of educational research are rarely captured satisfactorily in an executive summary. Proper communication and understanding is constructed through conversations through which we start to understand each other's language and meaning and the relationship between our different framing of educational principles, policy and practice. Such conversations should include national policy fora. Equally important, however, are all sorts of institutional, local, regional and international networks, to which national fora are intimately connected.

Further information

The papers issuing from this work were first published in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Supplement 1, Vol 42, August 2008.

These have been re-issued as: Bridges,D., Smeyers,P. & Smith, R.D. eds. (2009) *'Evidence based policy': what evidence? What basis? Whose policy?*, Oxford, Blackwell.

An abbreviated version of the papers is available on the TLRP (now BERA website of Resources for Research Capacity Building) at www.bera.ac.uk/educational-research-and-policy-epistemological-perspectives

The warrant

This work is unique in TLRP in consisting exclusively of philosophical analysis and argumentation, although it was set in the context of contemporary educational policy and research and debates about their relationship. Its warrant lies in the coherence, consecutiveness and consistency of its argument (or rather, arguments, since there were nine, semi-independent contributions). In philosophical work it is the argument – how you get to your conclusion – which is important, in some ways more important than the conclusion itself.

Such argument is, however, strengthened and refined by exposure to critique, and we built into our work five points at which the developing ideas were exposed to such critique:

November 2006 – at an initial internal seminar

April 2007 – at the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain annual conference

June 2007 – at a further internal seminar

September 2007 – at the British Educational Research Association annual conference

September 2007 – at the European Educational Research Association annual conference at a joint meeting of the Philosophy of Education and Politics and Policy Networks.

We benefited enormously from the participation in the process of Professor Lesley Saunders (then Senior Policy Adviser for Research at the General Teaching Council for England) and in June 2007 of Professor Alan Brown of TLRP.

It is in the nature of philosophical work that it is never closed, and we welcome further responses.

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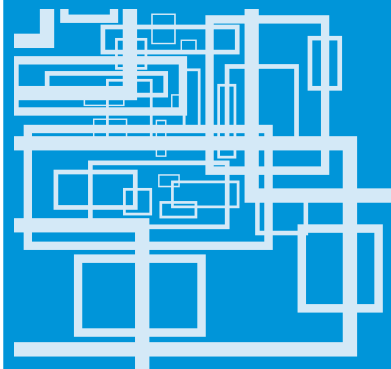
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