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Really useful knowledge? Evidence-informed practice, research for the real world (1)

James Avis

'Education today exists within a particular social universe - the social universe of capital.' (Rikowski, 2001, p1)

This article touches on three main issues that bear upon educational research: its socio-economic context, dominant critiques and finally, comments on evidence-informed practice and research. It is important to consider these issues as we now increasingly encounter calls for research that addresses the real world and contributes towards raising educational standards.

Context

The success of our children at school is crucial to the economic health and social cohesion of the country as well as to their own life chances and personal fulfilment . . .

To prosper in the 21st century's competitive global economy, Britain must transform the knowledge and skills of its population. (DfES, 2001, p5)

The claim that economic success requires a high achieving education system has been rehearsed so often that it has become a mantra recited *ad nauseam*. Global economic conditions and the pursuit of economic competitiveness demand an effective education system that delivers value-added waged labour. Michael Rustin writes in relation to New Labour that 'Getting competitive is the name of the game' (1998, p7). These notions lead to a transformed understanding of the role of the welfare state. The welfare state and the services it provides, rather than being seen as a measure of a good society, one in which the economy provides for the well being of its citizens, has been reconfigured so that this relation is reversed. The welfare state, civil society and education, if not to be a drain on the economy, must serve economic needs and contribute to national competitiveness in global markets (Du Gay, 2000). Within such a project education plays a pivotal role and it is within such a context that we can make sense of the concern with 'what works' as well as the critiques directed against educational research.

Educational research

I want to do two things in this section: firstly comment on the impatience with academic education research and secondly the concern with 'what works'. These two

themes sit together reflecting in part the successes of the new Right as well as the economising of social relations. Geoff Mulgan writes:

Many of the left's best brains went to university in the 1960s and 1970s and into a culture in which refereed journals are the main forum of discussion and critique is considered more high brow than advocacy. . . . The result is that although there are many eloquent critics when you ask them how they would want things to be done differently, they stutter, and mumble, and are soon reduced to silence. (Mulgan 1998, p16)

Mulgan's comment may be thought to be irrelevant in a discussion of educational research but rests with a politics of derision, and also echoes New Labour's concern with the pursuit of 'what works'. Thatcherism derided educational professionals for their self interest, New Labour criticises public sector workers for their resistance to modernisation and David Blunkett in his ESRC speech expressed his frustration with social science researchers.

But often in practice we have felt frustrated by a tendency for research either to address issues other than those directly relevant to the political and policy debate or, in a seemingly perverse way, to set out the collective evidence that will prove a policy wrong rather than genuinely seeking to evaluate it or interpret its impact. (Blunkett, 1999, p36)

Several points can be made about these arguments. There is a clear impatience with academicism, a need to align research to policy goals, an implicit interest in evidence, as well as with 'what works'. There is an affinity between these ideas and recent critiques of education research. Toole and Darby's (1998) Ofsted study, for example, suggested a great deal of research lacked rigour and was tainted by partisanship. From a slightly different position the Hillgate (1998) DfEE study claimed much educational research was too small scale and therefore would be unable to provide generalisable findings, or to advance the cumulative development of knowledge. In addition academic research, it was claimed, was often presented in a manner that was inaccessible to non-academic audiences and failed to offer an interpretation of the significance of its findings for policy makers or practitioners.

These critiques raise a number of issues about education research and imply that good research has a number of clearly definable features which, if addressed rigorously, will lead to effective research. This can easily lead to a technicisation that reduces research to a set of procedures and can be glimpsed in Toole and Darby's list of criteria used to judge empirical research.

- Does the research involve triangulation in order to establish its trustworthiness?
- Does the research avoid sampling bias?
- Does the research use primary sources in the literature review?
- Does the research avoid partisanship in the way it is carried out, and the interpretation of the data? (Tooley and Darby, 1998, p11)

These critiques resonate with the suggestion that education research should address the real world, engage with practice and contribute towards raising educational standards. It is here that the move towards evidence-informed practice and a reawakened interest in the teacher researcher becomes pivotal.

Evidence-informed practice and the teacher researcher

The preceding arguments are not new and represent a return to those which called for teacher researchers in the post war period (see for example Stenhouse, 1975; Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Hammersley, 1993; Pring, 2000). At that time, Hammersley suggests conventional educational research was thought to be irrelevant to the practical concerns of teachers, being distanced from the classroom, undemocratic as well as exploitative (see Hammersley, 1993, p215). What is notable about these criticisms is that whilst there is an apparent similarity between these and those currently emphasised, the former were located in qualitatively different social conditions and were addressed to large scale projects that reified classroom processes. The call for teacher research was lodged within a framework which accepted teacher professionalism and viewed research as being embedded in this process. Such notions articulated to ideas about reflective practice, the complexity and specificity of classroom processes and the necessity for the democratisation of the research process. For some writers teacher research was to be underpinned by a commitment to an emancipatory practice and social justice located in the immediate concerns of teachers arising from their daily practice. However the current interest in the teacher researcher links it to evidence-informed policy and practice.

Evidence-informed profession:

Following the recommendations of the Hillgate report the National Educational Research Forum was established. One of its tasks:

... is to enable research to provide a sound, more comprehensive basis for high quality decision-making at na-

tional, local and classroom level to benefit learners, their families and wider society as well as practitioners, policy makers and researchers . . .

The forum is aware of the interest that exists among teachers in research and development, particularly the use of research to inform their professional practice. The task is to enable them to acquire the opportunities, confidence and capacity to participate in and enact the principles of evidence-informed practice. (NERF, 2001, p3)

In these and related moves we can see a re-inscription of what it is to be an education professional in which teaching becomes an evidence-informed practice: one that is attentive to research findings, able to draw upon large scale reviews of research that serve to summarise findings in a form that can be drawn upon by the profession and that can be used unequivocally to inform practice. Paradoxically this ideational framework also encourages teacher research, albeit that such research is unable by its very nature to have the scale that would enable ready generalisation.

There is something rather ahistoric and asocial taking place. The current context which calls for teacher research operates within a different framework to that of the earlier period. Rather than a model of research that derives from the immediacy of teacher practice there is a more top down approach, as in the case of Best Practice Research Scholarships with the DfES setting the terrain upon which research is to be conducted (See for example DfEE 2001a, b). In the current move to evidence-informed policy and practice, practitioners are to avail themselves of research findings and use these to inform practice. For other education researchers, research that is not construed as directed towards improving practice is effectively written off, having at best a limited value (see Tooley, 1999). These arguments lead to an instrumentalism and technicisation of research buttressed by the rhetorical claim that such research is related to the real world. Such a framework can easily slip towards an abstract empiricism that ignores the wider social structure and patterns of power that impinge upon education.

By way of conclusion

In my title I referred to 'really useful education'. Richard Johnson writes in relation to nineteenth century radical educators:

In opposition to mass schooling, radicals insisted that education was something that happened all the time and at all ages. It had a value only if the process was fully controlled by those who sought knowledge themselves - education could not, by definition, be a gift or an imposition.

If it was imposed, it was not education at all, but what Cobbett called, in an indispensable coinage,

'Heddekashun'. 'Really useful knowledge' was a knowledge of everyday circumstances, including a knowledge of why you were poor, why you were politically oppressed and why through the force of social circumstance, you were the kind of person you were, your character misshapen by a cruel competitive world. (Education Group, 1981, p37)

In this article I have located educational research in its socio economic context, have discussed evidence-informed practice and have pointed towards different historic understandings of the teacher researcher. Perhaps, if there is a conceit in my argument, it is that evidence-informed practice can only take us so far. It needs to be lodged within wider structures of power and if we are serious about emancipatory goals we should start by examining these processes that reproduce these patterns of power. The struggle is not about real world research but rather really useful research.

Notes:

1. This article draws upon 'Educational Research, the Teacher Researcher and Social Justice', in *Education and Social Justice* (2001) and my address to best practice researchers *Issues in Educational Research: Really Useful Knowledge - Research for the Real World*, the University of Wolverhampton, October 2001.

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