SCHOLARSHIP, RESEARCH AND THE EVIDENTIAL BASIS OF POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: The starting point for this paper is the ongoing debate about the relation between research and policy in education. Recent developments in England and Scotland are reviewed in the context of political and academic arguments about the nature and function of research activity. The defensiveness of the research community in the face of professional and political attacks is examined critically. A case study of the Higher Still programme is used to illustrate the complexity of the relationships between evidence, ideology, values and professional practice. It is argued that the research community needs to become more politically sophisticated and to advance a clearer vision of its social function in advanced democratic societies if its potential contribution to educational development is to be realised. The dangers of a retreat to a narrow empirical role are highlighted.

Keywords: research, scholarship, evidence-based policy, Higher Still

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with the relationship between scholarship, research, policy and practice in education. It is written against a background of political, professional and academic debate about the nature, quality and function of educational research, especially in the UK but also internationally. We seek to describe and explain that background, to explore definitional issues, to deconstruct some of the public pronouncements that have been made on the subject, and to interrogate what is emerging as the new orthodoxy – the notion of 'evidence-informed policy and practice' (see Davies, 1999).

2. SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH

The word 'scholarship' in our title requires explanation. It is an unfashionable word, despite its inclusion in RAE discourse. We will

argue, however, that retention of some senses of the word scholarship is important, particularly when there are strong pressures from government and elsewhere to restrict what counts as legitimate research in education. The scholar is committed to academic freedom (Russell, 1993), to unfettered intellectual enquiry, to thorough review of the evidence, to scepticism and a willingness to question orthodoxies. Moreover the scholar is resistant to the marketisation of research as a commodity (see Smyth and Hattam, 2000), even if it involves risk to personal advancement. We observe that while some writers would regard the terms 'scholarship' and 'research' as equivalent, a number have been careful to distinguish between them. Many, but not all, see research as the more inclusive term, using it to mean investigative activity intended to yield new knowledge and understanding. Meanwhile, with the increasing emphasis upon evidence-based policy initiatives, there is a growing tendency in public debate for 'knowledge', 'research' and 'evidence' to be used interchangeably (as noted by Levačić and Glatter, 2001).

The role of the scholar needs to be re-defined to take account of the shifts that have occurred in the positioning of government, universities, funding agencies and Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs). What is needed is a combination of traditional qualities of academic rigour with a recognition of the changed character of the social, economic and educational landscape. The scholar-researcher, we will suggest, has an important function as a public intellectual with responsibility to contribute to debates on matters of public policy. That contribution will take account of the agendas and priorities of government but will not be determined by them. It will form part of wider democratic discourse about the social function of education and the values which it should embody. In this sense, scholarship has to move out of the study into the public arena where evidence, knowledge and values constitute contested terrain. The scholar–researcher has to be prepared to get his or her hands dirty.

3. CHANGING CONTEXT, CHANGING DISCOURSE

In his Presidential Address to BERA's Annual Conference in 1999 ('Does Educational Research Matter?') Peter Mortimore strongly re-affirmed the role of academics, urging us 'to do what we have been trained to do:

• ask difficult questions;
• demand evidence, rather than anecdote, for answers;

- generate, through our research, new knowledge;
- formulate new theories; and
- speak up for what is right.' (Mortimore, 2000)

Interestingly, he invokes elements of both research and scholarship in characterising the activities of academics. 'The location of our work, *poised between* a world of practical activity and a world of scholarly analysis and reflection, provides considerable scope for creating new knowledge about learning' (Mortimore, 2000, emphasis added). In advocating resistance to attempts to control research, he concludes that academics have much to learn, not only about new developments in our own field, but about *working in a political context.* He is more than hinting that to do so goes beyond simply writing for different audiences. And the context for these remarks is of course the increasingly centralised control of research, a trend which has led others to reconsider what academics should do in their work, whether by way of scholarship or research.

The UK Research Assessment Exercises have incorporated scholarship as part of research. In the documentation for RAE 2001, research *includes* scholarship, the latter defined to be 'the creation, development and maintenance of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines, in forms such as dictionaries, scholarly editions, catalogues and contributions to major research databases' (RAE 5/99, paragraph 1.11). Explicitly the RAE 2001 Education Panel accepts that 'a great deal of research in education is intended to shape policy and practice'; '. . . that research can fulfil an important function by offering independent criticism of policy or practice' (RAE 5/99, paragraph 3.59.3). UK academics will certainly submit 'scholarly editions' and empirically-based research texts alike as items of output in 2001. The RAE panel recognises that the quality of research 'will often be demonstrated through its influence on other researchers working in the same field, or on policy makers and practitioners' (RAE 5/99, paragraph 3.59.3). Scholarship and research are firmly intertwined in the final sentence of paragraph 3.59.23: 'Reviews evaluating, synthesising and disseminating the research of others may be seen as an important part of research'.

Nisbet, in his careful analysis of the decade of Scottish research between 1984 and 1993 (Nisbet, 1995) also subscribes to RAE definitions; research incorporates scholarship for the most part. Only where he reviews unfunded research, does he find it impossible to draw a boundary between them. For Nisbet, difficulties arise where research is funded. Academics then enter a partnership in which 'ownership is negotiated' (p. 76). But as

- research became more relevant (which implies that academics work within the established system);
- research adopted a wider sense of responsibility (that is, became more responsive to other people's priorities); and
- researchers became more involved in policy issues (in contrast to the more 'distanced' stance of older styles of research),

the inevitable consequence was a shift of power to the centre, to government, the source of funding. This prominent feature of educational research in the past decade has been documented by others (e.g. Griffiths, 1998; Levačić and Glatter, 2001; Mortimore, 2000; Ozga, 2000). Associated with it has been the rise in quantitative, evidence-based research, despite the recognition paid (by researchers) to the success of qualitative research. A recent Scottish Minister for Education, Sam Galbraith, pushed matters to an extreme in his expressed desire to see educational research conducted more on a medical model, akin to drug-testing (*Scotsman*, 22 March 2000). Mr Galbraith's position will be considered more fully below.

In a recent article, Nisbet cites Bridges (1998) to the effect that the Research Assessment Exercises have, in practice, become a major extension of central power and control, universities and academics subscribing to the requirements of research selectivity (Nisbet, 2000). Levačić and Glatter are quick to remind us of the potential that evidence-informed policy and practice has for misuse by *all* of the stakeholders in research (Levačić and Glatter, 2001). Might a researcher's insufficiently validated work be disseminated prematurely by eager journalists? Might policy makers be selective with research in the interests of supporting policy, as we noted happened with Harlen and Malcolm's critical review of research on ability grouping within and between classes in relation to the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department's (SOEID's) 1996 report *Achievement for All* (Bryce and Humes, 1999, p. 45)?

The relationship between research and scholarship can be reversed to make scholarship the more inclusive term. Iram and John Siraj-Blatchford have recently argued that educational research represents a distinct form of academic scholarship. Good research activity should be imbued with the qualities of careful scholarship: '. . . without scholarship, research becomes mere "abstracted empiricism"' (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 1997, p. 243). For essentially methodological reasons they argue that committed educational researchers would 'intervene in whatever areas of scholarship and professional influences they find open to

them. They would accept whatever opportunities arise to encourage change' (ibid. p. 244 and cf. Ball, 1994).

Griffiths, citing the Siraj-Blatchfords' paper, believes that research and scholarship are essential to the interests of social justice; they contribute to improvements in public life and, even though what constitutes improvement is always uncertain, the struggle for it must continue (Griffiths, 1998, p. 83). Ozga too maintains a strong defence of policy research in education. She believes that research-based practice is a necessary pre-condition of a healthy profession; research, especially policy research, is a fundamental right and responsibility for teachers. Teachers' capacity to research or to engage with it contributes to their professional identity and views to the contrary (by some current policy makers) are wrong. Like others, Ozga is fearful of the control of research by policy makers. 'Research on policy has been redefined as research for policy' (Ozga, 2000, p. 129).

Writing from an Australian perspective, Smyth and Hattam defend and re-define the place for academic writing, denigrating the ever-increasing specialisations ('academics as intellectuals [tend] to write themselves up textual culs-de-sac', Smyth and Hattam, 2000, p. 158) while the gap between policy development and educators' knowledge continues to widen. Academics should contribute vigorously to critical discourse about government policy. Closing the gap is more important than developing particular educational fads. They acknowledge the increasing 'commercialisation of academic work' and the 'quasi-firm' mentality where individuals must group together and groups chase grants for research. Their analysis leads them to conclude that academics have no option but to compete in the increasingly commercialised market-place, but they want greater attention paid to the dissemination of policy-related findings and more emphasis upon the public interest implications of research. The metaphor they play with is the 'intellectual as hustler' and they want us all 'to compete in the market while simultaneously researching against it' (Smyth and Hattam, 2000, p. 171). The ethical basis of this position is perhaps questionable.

Competition, in the UK context, is certainly fierce. A recent example would be Phase II of the ESRC Learning and Teaching Programme. Bids were encouraged from collaborating university partners for slices of the £8 million available. Ninety-five bids were submitted seeking funds in excess of £62 million. Thirty of the 95 were short-listed in the expectation that about 10 to 15 research contracts would be awarded. Assuming two or three partner institutions per bid, on average, this means that the vast majority of the UK's

leading educational researchers (and the vast majority of its universities) vied with each other, only a handful succeeding in winning grants from this new programme.

What emerges from all of these analyses is the clear imperative for scholar-researchers to range *beyond* the narrow role defined for research in the customer-contractor (Rothschild) model. Policymakers might well control research through their hold upon funding but committed scholar-researchers should be determined to interrogate policy from conception to implementation. The obligation upon them is not to relinquish questions of purpose, meaning and value even when attempts are made to constrain them to comment upon means/ends relationships. In reality, and for a variety of reasons, research-based contributions to policy and practice in the UK form a patchwork (no doubt, as elsewhere in Europe) and relatively few individuals see an overall pattern. Importantly, the ideological sources of policy have a wider base than the education system itself, making it difficult for researchers, practitioners and politicians to share and value the same ideas, to talk the same language, to grasp more of the whole and to shape progress. Bearing in mind that individual researchers and scholars properly desire to have impact, to make a difference, to what extent can educational policy making, as a whole, be evidence-based? How can scholarship and research underpin the action and change associated with policy development in national circumstances? In order to gain leverage on these questions we need to look more closely at the background to the current debate, and at some particular examples of the policy/research/practice interface.

4. THE RESEARCH COMMUNITY ON THE DEFENSIVE

Within the UK, the debate about the nature, quality and function of educational research has been going on for a number of years (see Ruddock and McIntyre, 1998; Edwards, 2000). It was given particular stimulus by David Hargreaves' 1996 Teacher Training Agency Lecture ('Teaching as a research-based profession: possibilities and prospects'), by the Ofsted-commissioned Tooley Report (*Educational Research: a critique*) of 1998, and by the DfEE-commissioned Hillage Report (*Excellence in Research in Schools*), also of 1998. These contributions and the reactions they prompted are well documented (e.g. in successive issues of *Research Intelligence*, the Newsletter of the British Educational Research Association) and it is not our intention to detail them here. We do, however, want to pick out a few key features for, taken together, they have had a significant influence

in shaping the subsequent agenda for research and in political attitudes towards the research community.

Hargreaves criticised much educational research on the following grounds:

- it does not make a serious contribution to fundamental theory or knowledge;
- it compares unfavourably to research in medicine;
- it is largely irrelevant to practice and does not involve practitioners and users sufficiently in decisions about what to investigate;
- it is uncoordinated with any preceding or follow-up research.

(Hargreaves, 1996)

He called for the establishment of a National Forum to direct educational research with the aim of enhancing its relevance and quality, a recommendation that was subsequently acted upon, as will be noted below.

The Tooley Report used Hargreaves' criticisms to develop criteria for the assessment of a sample of research publications. In all, 264 articles in leading academic journals were reviewed and a detailed study of a sub-sample of 41 articles was undertaken. One of the main conclusions was that there was evidence of partisanship in the conduct, presentation and argument of a significant number of the articles considered. Other areas of concern related to problems of methodology, the quality of non-empirical research and the lack of a clear focus in many studies. Doubts were also raised about the adequacy of the academic refereeing process (Tooley and Darby, 1998).

The Hillage Report was particularly concerned with the impact of research on policy and practice. It concluded that the decisions of policy makers and practitioners are insufficiently informed by research. However, it also concluded that where research does address issues that are relevant to policy and classroom practice, it tends to

- be small scale and fails to generate findings that are reliable and generalisable;
- be insufficiently based on existing knowledge and therefore capable of advancing understanding;
- be presented in a form that that is largely inaccessible to a non-academic audience;
- lack interpretation for policy makers and practitioners.

(Hillage *et al.*, 1998)

An important qualification on these findings was that the Hillage Report acknowledged that research was only one of the influences

on policy formation and classroom practice and that the impact was often indirect rather than direct. Despite this, the report recommended a commitment to evidence-based policy development and approaches to the delivery of education.

Ozga (2000, chapter 2) has drawn attention to some of the contradictions in this position. She challenges the view which brings 'policy, teachers and research together in a seamless web of enlightened practice, in which research appears to drive the action'. She questions whether teachers will, in fact, become more effective when they are offered clear prescriptions by researchers, within a 'rational' policy framework to which teachers, researchers and policy makers all contribute. She suggests that Hillage, Tooley and Hargreaves are best regarded as 'part of an overarching project to reform the education profession'. That project, if successful, would lead to a severe restriction of what counts as worthwhile research and would be 'a significant blow to the development of engaged, informed professionals'. Issues of professional engagement have also surfaced in recent debates in Scotland about the relation between policy, research and practice.

5. AN EPISODE IN GOVERNMENT HOSTILITY TO EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Not all researchers are located in universities and colleges; some are based in research organisations like the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER); a few are in local authorities and schools; and an increasing number are private individuals or organisations. The last has of course followed from past and present government's desire to award research contracts on the basis of competitive tendering, though it should be noted that the number of approved 'priority' topics identified by SEED has rarely exceeded eight per annum. The table below illustrates the pattern of Scottish government-funded research in education. Drawing upon data contained in the annual registers of research funding by the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED) (SOEID in pre-devolution days), the figures show the percentages of projects conducted in HEIs/TEIs, privately and by SCRE.

It is evident that as the proportion conducted privately has increased between 1994 and 1999 (10% to 29%), the proportion conducted by university/college staff has reduced (a little) and that conducted by SCRE has dropped markedly (29% to 15% in six years). Admittedly this takes no account of size/cost of projects but it does show that an increasing number of researchers contracted by

Table 1: The proportion of research projects funded by the Scottish Office (and now the Scottish Executive) conducted by universities, by private organisations and by SCRE across the years 1994–1999.
[Original data from SOEID/SEED Annual Registers of Research]

Year	HEIs' / TEIs' involvement in projects		Private organisations' involvement in projects		SCRE's involvement in projects		Projects conducted jointly	
	Totals	%	Totals	%	Totals	%	Totals	%
1994	35/60	58%	6/60	10%	17/60	28%	12/60	20%
1995	31/50	62%	5/50	10%	13/50	26%	4/50	8%
1996	30/52	58%	5/52	10%	18/52	35%	8/52	15%
1997	31/59	53%	8/59	14%	14/59	24%	9/59	15%
1998	44/76	58%	11/76	14%	13/76	17%	10/76	13%
1999	32/59	54%	17/59	29%	9/59	15%	8/59	14%

Note: The total percentages for each year do not add up to 100 because they include inter-institutional collaborations across the categories.

central government are not located in institutions where scholarship, research and teaching take place. Private researchers may be bound to report their findings to funding bodies in the now familiar, tight timescale; they have no duty to disseminate these findings to students and to teachers, nor to participate at conferences where new knowledge can be quickly shared (nor to submit to RAE). SCRE has never had teaching commitments like universities and colleges; the presence of its researchers at conferences (like SERA) has always been conspicuous, however, and it has proudly championed the idea of teacher-researchers and done much to bring them about in Scotland. Against this background the recent government decision to require SCRE to compete in the market on exactly the same basis as private organisations is not surprising, though some of its possible consequences may be judged regrettable.

In March 2000 SEED announced that SCRE should become self-funding by 2003. This means an end to financial support and the 'special relationship' that has existed for many years between SCRE and government. An HMI assessor was immediately withdrawn from the SCRE board.

SCRE was founded in 1928 with the support of the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) and the local authorities, despite hostility from the then Scottish Education Department (SED). It has always operated within a public service ethos providing independent advice, supporting teachers, disseminating research findings and strengthening the knowledge-base of educational practice. Valerie Wilson, the current Director of SCRE (and, ironically, a former Senior Research Officer within SEED), has argued that SCRE links research and practice by supporting the continuing professional development of teachers in three direct ways:

- by acting as an independent source of information, drawing not only on research conducted by SCRE itself;
- by providing training in research skills to enable teachers to undertake research within their own schools and classrooms;
- by serving as a forum for teachers to exchange experiences and ideas within a supportive research context.

These activities, claims Dr Wilson, contribute to the development of teaching as a research-based profession (Wilson, 2000).

SEED's decision was communicated to SCRE with no prior warning or consultation. It provoked a strong reaction from a wide range of interests – teachers, members of the research community, academics. Ronald Smith, General Secretary of the EIS, wrote in a letter to his members (2 May, 2000):

> Scottish Education needs an independent research facility. It needs a body which can at times carry out research with conclusions that are uncomfortable to government. Without such independent research, most of the information on the work of schools which will inform Ministerial decisions will be collated by government itself. The biggest single source of information to inform Ministers and drive the process of educational change is likely to be HMI. (Smith, 2000)

A distinguished group of holders of the SCRE Fellowship also attacked the decision in a letter published in *The Herald* and *The Scotsman* (both 4 April, 2000) and reprinted in the SCRE *Newsletter* (Spring, 2000). The signatories included Professor Sally Brown of Stirling University and Professor Donald McIntyre of Cambridge University. They posed the question: 'Do those in SEED who have decided to end the link with SCRE realise the full implications of their decision for the infrastructure of educational research in Scotland?' They identified constructive partnerships with teachers, the EIS, local authorities and central government as the crucial factor in SCRE's contribution. These would be lost if the proposal went ahead. They also drew attention to the irony of both the manner and the substance of the decision when set against the open and democratic aspirations of the new Scottish Parliament. Taking a similar line, an editorial in the *Educational Journal* (Issue 32, March, 2000, p. 5) described the decision as 'the exact opposite of what devolution was supposed to be about'. One commentator went so far as to suggest that a 'north-south divide is emerging. Scotland seems bent on leaving supply of wider educational research to the demands of the market place, while in England the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) has announced new investment in a national strategy for research. This is based on a review which noted that too much research was small scale and that "actions and decisions of policy-makers and practitioners were insufficiently informed by research".' (Young, 2000, p. 2)

The SCRE decision needs to be set against the background of public statements by the then Minister for Education and Children, Sam Galbraith, and a history of suspicion towards research by senior officials. In an interview in *The Scotsman* (22 March 2000), Mr Galbraith was reported as saying:

> One of the things that surprised me when I came into education was how little science there is done and what little there is, is not what I would call science. I appreciate the difference between

social sciences and other sciences . . . but I often feel this is used as an excuse for second-rate science.

My message to researchers is to sharpen up on the scientific methods that they use and to make sure that they drop the value judgements within them.

He also claimed to have conducted research into research: 'I went through research papers and was singularly unimpressed. I saw statements you would never see in a scientific test . . . [The writers] drew conclusions which were not based on the research'. He was particularly critical of a paper produced by the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES) at Edinburgh University on the subject of school league tables. This provoked a defence by Professor David Raffe, Director of CES, in which he stated:

I agree that our research is informed by values. For 27 years this centre has been committed to offering independent critical comment on educational issues, regardless of political convenience or ideology. (Letters, *Scotsman Education*, 29 March 2000, p. 2)

It was not the first time CES had been the object of political attack. In the 1980s, under a different political administration, it had come under similar pressure (see McPherson, 1984). The explanation can perhaps be found in a frank comment by a retired Chief Inspector, Ian Morris, who was in charge of the Research and Intelligence Unit of the (then) SED in the 1980s, and who contributed to the public debate following the decision to withdraw funding from SCRE:

SEED has never been keen on educational research . . .If it has to pay lip service to research then it wishes to choose a group to conduct research which may be in line with its value system, yet the Minister advises eschewing value judgements, although making them with his every utterance. (Letter, *The Herald*, 27 March 2000, p. 14)

The criticisms of research expressed by the Minister were probably influenced by the views of the current Senior Chief Inspector of Schools, Douglas Osler, who 'has been known to express publicly his scepticism about the effectiveness of much educational research' (*TESS*, 24 March 2000, p. 1). Moreover, in an interview Osler has claimed that the Inspectorate is better-informed than researchers: 'The HMI is a national body with a greater body of information on education than any number of research projects could collect' (Morrice, 1999, p. 2).

These exchanges raise a number of interesting issues about the

relationships between politicians, officials, researchers and the wider educational community. We have made our own small contribution to this debate by publishing in 1999 a booklet entitled 'Policy Development in Scottish Education' which was designed to inform the thinking of Members of the new Scottish Parliament. Our starting point was that 'Effective social policies, whether in education or other fields, require decision makers to be well informed about the issues, to have access to evidence based on properly-conducted research, and to be responsive to the critical analysis of individuals and groups representing legitimate interests' (Bryce and Humes, 1999). Interestingly our booklet was well received by those MSPs who read it, by Directors of Education, by academics and teachers – but not by the Inspectorate who perhaps perceived it as a potential threat to their own role as policy advisers to Ministers. With regard to Mr Galbraith's expressed desire that educational research should be more like medical research – a view presumably influenced by his career as a neurosurgeon prior to moving into politics – he would seem to have been unaware of the increasing value placed upon qualitative research methodologies in relation to clinical practice. Medical research is by no means confined to that associated with clinical trials. Barbour (1999), for example, discusses how the evidence base of medicine and health can be broadened by the inclusion of qualitative research findings, Or, to cite another recent reference from medicine, Smith and Bornat (1999) give an indication of how oral history or biographically-based approaches may be used in health care to further diagnosis and to educate practitioners and patients. In any case, sociologists like Friedson (1971) long ago refuted the idea that clinicians work directly from scientific (medical) research findings. He argued that doctors rely upon their own clinical experience, and assume personal, virtually individual, responsibility for the way they manage their cases. Medical research does have an influence but 'the burden of proof is placed on the particular rather than on the general' (Friedson cited in Eraut, 1994, p. 53).

6. EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICY AND PRACTICE

It is instructive to compare the recent Scottish experience with what has been happening in England and Wales in the wake of Hargreaves, Tooley and Hillage. David Blunkett, Education Minister for England and Wales, is on record as valuing 'ready access to lessons learnt from high quality research'. He has also referred positively to 'knowledge-based policy making' and 'good, well-founded evidence

for key issues'. Even more boldly, he has called for 'blue-skies research which thinks the unthinkable' (DfEE, 1999; DfEE, 2000). These statements, taken at face value, seem to represent a move forward from the negativity associated with the three earlier reports.

A National Educational Research Forum was established in the Spring of 2000 under the Chairmanship of Sir Michael Peckham: its remit is to 'develop a strategy for educational research, shape its direction, guide the coordination of its support and conduct, and promote its practical application'. The Forum convened five subgroups to look at priorities, the quality of educational research, building research capacity, research funding and impact on policy and practice. Interim reports from these groups helped to shape the content of a consultation paper on 'Research and Development for Education' issued in November/December 2000 (NERF, 2000).

Another practical expression of Blunkett's commitment to the value of research has been the setting-up of government-funded specialist research centres, of which a total of six are planned. One of the main beneficiaries has been the London Institute of Education which, in the words of its own press office, 'will play a major role' through three centres – the Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning, the Centre for the Economics of Education and the Centre for Evidence-Informed Policy and Practice in Education. In July 2000 the *Times Higher Education Supplement* reported that the last of these would receive £1.9 million over five years. The aims of the centre are to:

- make research more accessible
- provide training programmes for researchers
- maintain databases of educational literature
- review existing research before new projects are started.

The emphasis on reviewing existing research is an important feature of the evidence-based approach. It tries to make educational research more cumulative in character – as in medicine and engineering – and avoid wasteful duplication of effort. Davies (2000) has offered a reasoned case in favour of an evidence-based approach to policy and practice in education. He suggests that it does not offer a 'panacea' but 'a set of principles' which enable researchers 'to plan, carry out, and publish studies that meet the highest standards of scientific research and evaluation, incorporating the methods of the social sciences, the natural sciences, and the humanistic and interpretive disciplines' (p. 109). Such a programme is in line with the recommendations of the Campbell Collaboration, an international group founded in 1999, with the aim of helping people, including policy makers, 'to make well-informed

decisions by preparing, maintaining and promoting access to systematic review of studies on the effects of social and educational policies and practices'.

On its web-site the Campbell Collaboration refers to 'concerns about the quality of evidence', echoing the critical views expressed by some academics and politicians. It also refers to the 'science of research synthesis' and the need to stimulate 'the empirical methodological research required to improve the validity, relevance and precision of systematic reviews'. At this point a degree of unease is perhaps justified. It is one thing to call for a carefully conducted review of the research evidence. It is another to claim that what is being undertaken is a science. As Edwards (2000, p. 6) has pointed out: '. . . in the applied social sciences, general theories developed on the "high ground" and according to scientific "standards of rigour" are unlikely to survive intact when brought to be applied in "messy, indeterminate situations" characterised by "uncertainty, uniqueness and value conflict" (quoting Schon, 1987, pp. 1–2)'. Furthermore, we know from the literature on policy making that even where the research evidence is clear – and often it is not – the various stages of the process (from conception through consultation, development and implementation) are often far from logical. Policy making is messy, involving political intrigue and compromise, subject to professional and bureaucratic self-interest, and beset with operational difficulties. As Stephen Ball says:

> Policies shift and change their meaning in the arenas of politics; representations change, key interpreters (secretaries of state, ministers, chairs of councils) change (sometimes the change in key actors is a deliberate tactic in changing the meaning of policy) . . . [Policies thus have] an interpretational and representational history. (Ball, 1994, p. 17)

This suggests that there is a risk of making extravagant over-rational claims for the evidence-informed approach to policy, notwithstanding the fact that 'evidence-informed' is less ambitious than 'evidence-based'. There are a number of questions that need to be addressed:

• Just how cumulative can research in the social sciences be?
• How does research evidence intersect with other policy pressures – coming from ideology, institutions, the professions, wider public discourse?
• If researchers buy into an 'evidence-informed' definition of their work, will it imply a restriction of their role, especially that part of their role which has hitherto involved criticism and interrogation?

- Is there a risk that too comfortable a relationship between researchers and government will in some senses be anti-democratic by limiting the scope for other voices?

There are no simple answers to these questions and understanding is not helped by recourse to oppositional accounts of the stances that might be taken – subjective/objective; qualitative/quantitative; interpretation/knowledge etc. Easy acceptance of these polarities leads to what Richard Pring has called the 'false dualism' of educational research (Pring, 2000a; 2000b). A better understanding of the forces at work might be gained by, for example, taking a recent policy, such as Higher Still in Scotland, and trying to evaluate:

- the extent to which it was informed by research evidence;
- the extent to which it was driven by political ideology;
- the extent to which it represented a response to professional concerns about the quality of education;
- the voices which were listened to and those which were ignored as the policy developed;
- the part played by Her Majesty's Inspectorate;
- the role of other agencies, including local authorities and the Higher Still Development Unit.

Opening up this territory would be likely to lead to greater understanding of the complexity of the relationship between research, policy and practice. The existing literature on educational policy making (eg. Ball, 1990; McPherson and Raab, 1988) suggests that ideology, bureaucratic systems and the networking of powerful individuals and groups have often been more potent influences in shaping policy outcomes than research evidence. This point is reinforced by the insights of writers who have focused on the difficulties of researching into the policy process itself (eg. Halpin and Troyna, 1994; Walford, 1994). What emerges from this work is a sense of the danger of over-stating the continuities and under-stating the discontinuities between research, policy and practice. The Higher Still example will serve to reinforce this part of the argument.

7. A CASE STUDY: HIGHER STILL

The introduction of Higher Still in Scotland provides an interesting illustration in relation to the possible and actual use of research evidence to inform policy. Certainly the report which led to Higher Still – the Howie Report – gathered research data (about staying-on rates, different systems of certification, etc) on which to base its

analysis and recommendations. But what emerged in practice departed in many respects from the report itself (largely because Howie's principal recommendation of effectively separating general and vocational tracks beyond S3 was roundly rejected by teachers and researchers alike) and, as development work proceeded, the emphasis switched to issues of management, staff training and course design. Higher Still was conceived as a complex suite of multi-level certification arrangements combining general and vocational qualifications and was bound to strain a workforce, despite assurances by government and senior developers that it could be achieved without an expansion of personnel. Groups working for the Higher Still Development Unit dwelt upon bringing about a system fix (not a sustained 're-education' of teachers). This led us to conclude, in an earlier article, that any serious debate about the nature and structure of knowledge appropriate to the upper-secondary school was abandoned in favour of a narrow, technical approach which was assessment-led: the result was a 'philosophical vacuum at the heart of Higher Still' (Bryce and Humes [eds], 1999, p. 111).

The people involved in the development work were, in the main, not researchers or academics but experienced practitioners and administrators. Furthermore, the many adjustments which took place as the programme advanced were consistent with Ball's account of the political processes which serve to modify, redirect and sometimes obstruct educational reform. There is, for example, a story to be told about the manoeuvering for position between the Higher Still Development Unit and the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum. What part did the Inspectorate play in this rivalry? As soon as questions of this sort are raised, the unsatisfactoriness of a straightforward 'rational' view of the relationship between research, policy and practice becomes apparent.

Running parallel with the institutional tensions, were discursive threads which said, confusingly, that Higher Still was both a natural development of what teachers were already doing (and therefore non-threatening) and a radical step in post-sixteen provision which would make Scotland the envy of other nations. The continuing resistance of teachers – further fuelled by the Scottish Qualifications Authority's (SQA) mishandling of the examination results in 2000 – and the slippage in the time-scale of implementation suggests that the discourse used to promote the reform lacked coherence. At the time of writing this paper, the SQA episode continues to rumble on with the reports of the enquiries into the reasons for and the consequences of what happened being subject to critical scrutiny (see

Paterson, 2000). Political in-fighting and recriminations abound in this sorry affair (with, at times, researchers enmeshed in the fray; Professor Lindsay Paterson of Edinburgh University claimed in the *Sunday Times* of 27 August 2000 that 'a minister [of the Scottish parliament] had made veiled threats against him to a third party' in reaction to his criticism of the role of Sam Galbraith on a television programme, BBC1's 'Failing the Test'). Perhaps the important thing to say at this juncture is that teachers had most certainly been vocal prior to and throughout the first year of implementation (1999--2000) about what they saw as weaknesses and difficulties with the new Higher Still courses; many said that they were not listened to as government acted to ensure its implementation (after two years of delays). The Headteacher of Banchory Academy, also a member of the Higher Still Strategy Group, Doug Marr, now admits that, with hindsight, the group contained insufficient teacher representation; that its early decisions underestimated the operational complexity of what it thought could be brought about; that a phased introduction of sub-Higher courses (rather than 'big bang') would have been better; that the 'interminable cycle of assessment and reassessment has tested the patience of teachers and students alike'; and that the submission of such internal assessment data to SQA would drown the IT and administrative system (*The Herald*, Tuesday 22 August 2000). Could more scholarly/research input during the years 1997–2000 have fared any better, or should we consider the difficulties to lie mainly in territory occupied by HMI, SQA officials and politicians?

Serious research into Higher Still is only now beginning with a major project funded, significantly, not by SEED but by ESRC. It is being carried out by CES in Edinburgh. This project will:

- examine the role of institutions in shaping the reform
- analyse the policy process
- compare developments in Scotland with those in England
- examine the emerging model of a unified system of post-compulsory education.

The research will involve surveys of all secondary schools, colleges and local authorities in Scotland, analysis of official data, case studies of six institutions and interviews with a range of people. This is an important study which should certainly help to inform future policy, but to imagine that it can, or will, be used in a direct or linear way is naive. The manner in which it is interpreted and mediated will depend on many factors, including the changing ideological climate, the key personnel involved at the point of interpretation, the institutional framework and the voices of various stakeholders. Even

the best research may not be listened to if there are powerful coun-tervailing forces at work. Researchers who are seduced by promises of becoming part of a network of experts whose advice is routinely sought by decision-makers may be disappointed by the outcome.

Whatever one's position on the place of evidence-informed poli-cy, it is important to recognise the inevitable power differential between policy-makers and researchers. Where policy and research interface, one group has the power to bring about change and the other is more or less impotent; politicians (at least those in office) have power in that they can make sure their intentions come to pass. At the very best, researchers can only have an influence on policy formulation and implementation. Cynics might suggest that their influence is correlated with the closeness of their findings to what politicians want to do. Politicians, to the extent that they seek research, look for policy justified by, rather than informed by, evi-dence. Political life being what it is means that ministers often assume portfolios which bear little, if any, relationship to their life experiences and carry priorities the details of which may not be to their own liking. Nevertheless they have to show ownership and commitment from day one, arguing the importance and coherence of what they stand for. And one should recognise that the ways in which policy is expressed must differ significantly from the ways in which researchers express their findings. 'The language of policy, unlike academic language, has to be vague and general both to be widely applicable and to command consensus or at least general sup-port' (Cronbach, 1980).

8. In Conclusion

Much of what we have reviewed in this article would suggest that dif-ferences between policy makers and researchers are marked, per-haps more marked than ever before, despite a convergence upon the significance of evidence as a basis for change. The crux is, of course, *whose* evidence and *what* is to be counted as evidence. At best, policy makers wish to confine the remits and influence of those researchers whom they choose to support; at worst they see no place for any of us at all in the advancement of education. Scholar-researchers, meanwhile, seek to extend their scope and influence, justifying that desire on methodological, social and even ethical grounds. Plainly, there is a serious conflict over values where researchers consider them to figure properly and inescapably in any dimension of education (or other social) policy. Policy makers, on the other hand, see values as not the business of researchers ('an

arrogance', according to one source cited by Nisbet, 1995, p. 75). Invariably, therefore, there is unlikely to be shared agreement as to what constitutes pertinent evidence for any particular initiative. And of course policy makers are a mixed group – politicians, civil servants, HMI, officials of NDPBs (like SQA) among others – and, in practice, the term would have to be extended to include task-group (or working group) members, given the ways in which change is brought about. This has considerable implications for teachers, for the power of such groups derives from their composition. Teacher representation in an implementation group legitimises decisions as 'workable'. Things come unstuck if those representatives misjudge things or, for whatever reason, fail to impress others, or are over-ruled (witness the 'SQA fiasco'), or succumb to a culture of deference.

In reality, policy-formulation and policy-implementation are blurred, overlapping activities; matters of important detail (of policy) are invoked at advanced stages of implementation. At one level, these reflect the complexities of life, associated say with major curriculum or examination reform; at another level, they might be called making things up 'on the hoof'. A more important observation is that, where there are problems, policy makers switch to the defensive, whereas researchers see problems as opportunities for further reflection and investigation. Few policy makers (if any) seek to encourage research evidence relevant to problems which must be tackled in the course of implementation. Threatened positions foreclose on further scrutiny; facts, worse still new facts, just get in the way of managerial imperatives and political credibility. In such a context, scholar-researchers have a difficult job to do. They can be so easily 'hustled' themselves. In this respect, we feel there has been a degree of political naivety in the enthusiasm with which some academics have embraced the idea of evidence-informed policy and practice. It can easily become another arm of control – all the more tempting because the discourse which justifies it (a discourse of partnership, relevance and responsiveness) has wide appeal to many stakeholders in education. No doubt some of those involved in such initiatives are alert to the dangers and, indeed, are confident that they can negotiate the tricky territory that has to be traversed in dealing with government departments. Equally, we recognise that the changed context in which educational researchers now have to operate makes the notion of an ideologically 'pure' stance untenable. Nonetheless, we find it hard to be pursuaded by the concept of the 'street-wise' academic (almost a contradiction in terms) who can outmanoeuvre – or at least hold his or her own with – the Whitehall mandarins or the agents of the Scottish Executive.

We are supportive of Ozga's view that research *into* policy should not be reduced to research *for* policy. This has certain consequences for the relationship between politicians, officials, researchers and teachers. By insisting on critical interrogation as an essential element in the researcher's function, the relationship will often be uneasy – certainly one of tension, and sometimes of conflict. While on occasion this may be uncomfortable for all concerned, it may be healthier for the educational system as a whole than a situation which encourages a narrow focus on practice in the name of partnership. Politicians tend to seek simple solutions to complex problems, 'quick fixes' that can be packaged and presented as easy to implement. Teachers tend to be impatient of the conceptual questions which interest researchers and want to know what the 'pay off' will be at the level of practice. There are occasions when both of these tendencies should be resisted. Equally, of course, the inclination of some researchers to seek over-subtle explanations of the results of their investigations should be subject to challenge.

There are wider democratic issues at stake here. Policy communities need to be intellectually engaged, challenging and innovative if they are to serve civic society in a constructive way. They should be characterised by vigorous debate, creative thinking and robust questioning of orthodox practices. Part of their function is to counter political attempts to use particular forms of discourse to constrain and control educational thinking: such attempts can lead to the closing off of worthwhile policy options and the defining of the role of teachers in ways that are socially and professionally damaging. 'Evidence-informed policy and practice' is itself a discursive formation that merits close inspection. Why has it emerged now? What are the alternatives? Whose interests does it really serve? These are important questions but we would not claim to have definitive answers to them. Our own thinking on where researchers should go from here is still developing. However, our current position is perhaps best summed up in the following propositions:–

- We are concerned about political definitions of what counts as valid research. The coinage scholar-researcher signals the importance of retaining intellectual independence within the changing context of academic work.
- We are keen that research should reflect the concerns of teachers and inform practice but we are cautious about the new orthodoxy – 'evidence-informed policy and practice'. Narrowly interpreted, it could represent a form of intellectual control that

would be professionally damaging to researchers and unlikely to lead to genuine improvements in practice.

- The research community needs to become more politically sophisticated in its dealings with politicians and officials. This will involve a greater willingness to engage in public dialogue and communicating more effectively with all the stakeholders in education.

- We support the idea of conducting more systematic reviews of existing research as a preliminary to undertaking new research. However, we are sceptical about this being a 'science' in any developed sense and concerned about the possible restriction it might imply in the role of researchers.

- The contribution of educational researchers needs to be seen as part of a wider debate about the social function of policy communities in advanced democracies. Much of the territory which they inhabit involves contested values; this can be seen as a strength rather than a limitation.

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