

Reflections on being an educational researcher

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Synopsis: John Nisbet, Emeritus Professor, charts the impact of the politics of educational research on a lifetime of educational research.

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One of the few advantages of being old is that it is possible to see things better in perspective, to escape from the tyranny of the present moment. No one should be tied by the past either, but it is instructive to consider how attitudes to educational research have fluctuated over the past fifty years. My involvement in educational research actually stretches back to the 1930s, when as a schoolboy I acted as an enthusiastic amateur research assistant to my older brother, Stanley. As a postgraduate student after the end of World War 2, I was taught by scholars who did their PhDs in Germany at the beginning of the century, and my course of study in educational psychology included the 19th-century pioneers like Ebbinghaus and Meumann and their research on sensory discrimination and reaction times using kymographs and tachistoscopes. (What relevance to classroom practice, you may ask?) Thus in some sense I am one of the few surviving active researchers who can almost claim to cover all of the past century.

For the first half of the century in Britain, government distanced itself from educational research. When SCRE was established in 1928, the Scottish Education Department decided to have nothing to do with it. It was all very much an amateurish, spare-time activity. SCRE had only a part-time Director and a secretary, all its research being done by committees of University and college staff in their spare time. (And it produced a remarkable output of important research publications!) Even as late as 1960, the total budget of SCRE (in its 31st year) was £8,388, and that included all salaries, rent, furnishing, materials and travel - and from this it recorded a profit of £281. Influential reports pre-1950 (such as Hadow, Norwood and Spens) relied on the pronouncements of authoritative personalities and not on empirical evidence. Educational research was marginal, ignored by administrators, largely unknown to teachers (though the EIS had a research committee as early as 1916 and gave SCRE crucial support).

I was appointed in 1949 as an Assistant Lecturer (salary £400 a year, less than I had as a classroom teacher). There was no funding for research, except that it was an accepted part of academic life, and conditions then gave us plenty of time. In 1949, I had four hours teaching a week, teaching ended in May, and in June my Head of Department (there were only two of us in the Department!) would say, 'That's another session over, John - you'll see to the re-sits in September?' 'Yes, it's all in hand.' 'Well, have a good vacation, and I'll see you at the start of next session in October.' It all sounds casual, but it was what kept us in University life, even at a low salary. I was single, with no responsibilities, and with stimulating company. I read widely and talked and reflected and did the research I was interested in.

In January 1950, I received an invitation from the Assistant Secretary of the Scottish Education Department to come to Edinburgh for a talk. He said the SED was thinking of recruiting someone with research qualifications and offered me a job (probably trebling my salary, though we didn't mention money). I politely declined - one of these great, what ifs...? I had a bike, golf clubs and an ice axe - what more would anyone want? University life was like being a perpetual student, in a community where challenge and controversy were fun, and not seen as threatening.

In Scotland, educational researchers were marginal, rare, oddities, irrelevant. In England, educational research slowly came to be acknowledged. A 1948 report, *Standards in Reading*, marked the beginning of the use of surveys: it was the first to use sampling techniques. The 1954 report on *Early Leaving*, backed by a survey showing social class differentials, could be said to mark the coming of age of statistical surveys. But research really came into fashion in the 1960s: each of the big national reports of that time - Crowther, Newsom, Robbins and Plowden - was supported by a substantial research programme. Between 1964 and 1969, expenditure on educational research in Britain increased ten-fold. It was in that decade that research became an accepted element in government educational policy.

It was a thrilling time of non-stop effort, challenging, exciting and new. I was fortunate to be at the right stage, in 1963 a young new professor, soon appointed to the SSRC and the UGC Education Committee, working in Europe with OECD in Paris and UNESCO in Hamburg, Chairman of ERB in London, and of SCRE and SCOPE in Scotland, lunches with the Queen in Holyrood (yes!), awarded the OBE - and much more of the 'alphabet soup' as these institutions were called at the time - all integrating research into their development planning. There weren't many of us, and I came to know international scholars such as Bruner, Husen, Bloom (and Cyril Burt, too) and leading researchers in the UK - Vernon, Eysenck, Stenhouse, Halsey, Taylor (names probably not known to present-day researchers). I was fortunate in the colleagues who were appointed to our rapidly growing University Department of Education: they were exceptional, and seemed to manage fine (if not better) when I was away. I was also lucky with our postgraduate students - self-selected but highly motivated. Many moved on to senior posts in administration, and some became internationally famous researchers.

My PhD in 1952 was on 'The influence of family environment on intelligence', questioning the assumption that intelligence was inherited. Later publications ranged widely: secondary school selection, recruitment to teaching, frequency counts, student failure, bilingualism, gifted children... In 1959 I got my first research grant - £100 from the Aberdeen Endowments Trust for research on teaching machines (the start of IT, though our mechanical model never got past the prototype). New ideas abounded (Cuisenaire rods, the initial teaching alphabet): the field was wide open for a rich harvest to anyone prepared to work hard. And I did. The peak time was between 1965 and '75, when (in collaboration with colleagues) I wrote six books, five book chapters, 23 journal articles, and spent summers teaching in California, Australia, New Zealand, visited South Africa and started research projects in Norway and Netherlands, and edited the *British Journal of Educational Psychology*.

Looking back, I wonder what my wife felt about all this. She was busy too, as a Lecturer in Zoology, involved in hockey and orienteering. At one stage I was spending two days a week in London, two days in Edinburgh, two days teaching in Aberdeen, one day golf (I kept a single-figure handicap for 25 years); doing my reading and preparation and marking in trains and in the 1st class lounge at Heathrow. There is a saying: get a job you like and you will never have to work another day in your life.

In the 50s and early 60s, educational research was mainly psychological, and we read our papers at conferences of the British Psychological Society. But by the '70s it was time for a separate organisation for education. Five of us, led by Ed Stones from Liverpool, set up the British Educational Research Association, and they asked me to be its first Chair. (At the same time, my brother Stanley in Glasgow was involved with the foundation of SERA; I tried to persuade him to bring the Scots into our UK organisation, but he said no.)

These were the halcyon years. But it was all about to change. In December 1970, Margaret Thatcher, then Minister for Education and Science, expressed horror that researchers were actually left free to decide on topics for research, and declared her intention that from now on her Department would make the decisions:

'It had to move from a basis of patronage — the rather passive support of ideas which were essentially other people's, related to problems which were often of other people's choosing, to a basis of commission. This meant the active initiation of work by the Department on problems of its own choosing, within a procedure and timetable which were relevant to its needs.'

The following year, the Rothschild Report produced the crude customer-contractor formula, defining the power relationship between client (the government department) and contractor (the researcher):

'The customer says what he wants; the contractor does it (if he can); and the customer pays.'

From then on, government control of funding of educational research increased steadily. Projects and programmes were put out to contract, and researchers put in bids.

Looking back now, I wonder at our naivety: we should have anticipated this. One of my main achievements was, when I was Chair of SCRE in the '70s, to work with Chief Inspector Ian Morris to get substantial government funding which enabled SCRE to build a team of full-time research staff. But in 1999, when this funding was abruptly terminated and SCRE folded, I felt that this may have been a 'Faustian bargain'. Looking back over the past half century, we can find satisfaction in the acceptance of research into policy and practice in education, but, like Faust, in the end we have had to submit to the mastery of those who have given us the resources and influence. The position of educational research has vastly strengthened since 1950, but at the cost of the autonomy which is crucial for long-term development.

At the risk of over-simplification, the story of educational research in the 20th century can be portrayed as a series of phases. Initially it was seen as primarily an academic activity with little immediate relevance. Then it was seen as the work of expert specialists to be used, where appropriate, by teachers and administrators. In the '60s, it was accepted as a discipline in its own right, with its distinctive procedures and literature. This led to the next phase, when it was brought into closer relationship with policy, as a necessary element in planning and evaluation.

At the same time, the teacher-researcher movement which initially aimed to support teachers in carrying out research studies themselves, has developed into something more fundamental: a view of research as a key element in a professional approach, a mode of working to be adopted by all in facing up to problems, whether in policy making or in school-based projects to pilot new curriculum initiatives. In summary, the role of researcher has moved from academic theorist in phase 1, through expert consultant in phase 2, to reflective practitioner in phase 3.

This broadened interpretation of research is the main achievement of the past twenty years: in a word, research has become accessible. Primary school children working on their projects speak of doing research, and we can only hope that they do not subsequently come to regard research as a remote and inaccessible style of working limited to a small elite of specialists. However, it would be wrong to impose a dimension of value on the three phases outlined above: they are essentially a dimension of involvement. All three approaches to researching have their place. There are still some who hold that the underlying contribution of the academic theorist is in the long term the most influential and the most important. Also, the need for specialist expertise and for research which is rigorous and highly skilled, must be acknowledged, for there is a danger of devaluing research if it is too lightly treated as something that anyone can do.

Research has become part of every professional role today, and in education one task of professional development is to weave a research element into the expertise of teachers, leading them to adopt at a personal level the self-questioning approach which leads to reflection and understanding, and from there into action.

On a personal note, I think my happiest role was as Chair of the Educational Research Board of the Social Science Research Council, which managed the major funding of educational research in Britain and awarded studentships (103 in its peak year) to promising youngsters, many of whom are now celebrated scholars. The ERB was a remarkable group to work with comprising Jack Wrigley, Ted Wragg, Toby Becher, Basil Bernstein, Sir Alec Clegg, Noel Entwistle and other leading researchers in their fields of educational technology, curriculum development, administration and so on. It was a real privilege to work with such a group, and to represent them on the Council of SSRC.

I had previously served on the ERB for some time as Vice-Chair and had hopes of being appointed Chair (which required the approval of the Secretary of State for Education, at that time Mrs Thatcher). But a rival (and more left wing) candidate for Chair was put forward and voted in. I was disappointed but accepted the defeat. Without my knowledge, one of the lay members of ERB, a personal friend of Mrs Thatcher, spoke to her, and Mrs Thatcher rejected the nomination and appointed me

in his place. Those who served in this role were customarily included in the Honours List at the end of their period of office. But in my case this did not happen. One can speculate on the reasons for this but I am content to think I might be one of the few to be blacklisted by both political parties! Later the Scottish Office, as a consolation, put me up for OBE, and by that time I was sufficiently insignificant that no one cared.