Chapter 2
Snake oil or hard struggle? Research to address the reality of social injustice in education

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Abstract In recent years two particular tendencies have coincided to bring about new approaches in educational research. These tendencies may raise questions about the rigour and validity of the research. The two tendencies to be considered in this chapter are: (1) the increasing 'commercialisation' of educational research, through the influence of both profit making and not for profit organisations, all of whom are competing for resources within a limited 'market' and, (2) the growth of 'teacher research' as an important aspect of teacher professionalism. The chapter focuses mainly on England and draws on work undertaken on a range of projects over recent years, most notably on 'Closing the Gap – Test and Learn', a nationwide attempt to involve hundreds of schoolteachers in forms of quasi-experimental research. The argument developed in the chapter is that, in the pursuit of social justice in and through education, the engagement of teachers in school-based research is a very positive development. However such engagement needs to be tempered by careful deployment of research methods, an avoidance of a search for 'easy answers' and a healthy dose of critical scepticism.

Introduction

Snake oil: a substance with no real medicinal value sold as a remedy for all diseases

The face of educational research has been changing dramatically in recent years. There has been a temptation to look for panaceas, for easy answers, that will cure all the deficiencies of the education system. Over this period, two particular tendencies have coincided to bring about new approaches which may sometimes be questionable in terms of their rigour and validity.

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The two tendencies to be considered are: firstly, the increasing 'commercialisation' of educational research, through the influence of both profit making and not for profit organisations, all of whom are competing for resources within a limited 'market' and, secondly, the growth of 'teacher research' as an important aspect of teacher professionalism.

In this chapter I consider these two tendencies, especially as they have developed in England, and consider their impact on the nature and quality of educational research. I then demonstrate how they have coalesced under the umbrella of 'evidence-based teaching'. I draw on a large-scale government funded project which was based on many of the popular ideas in educational research during the second decade of this century, not least on the idea of 'closing the gap', that is, seeking to reduce the differences in attainment between school students that reflect their socioeconomic position.

Moving towards the conclusion I consider how the fields of policy, practice and research may relate to each other in productive and constructive ways that both maintain the rigour and validity of the research as well as providing teachers with a high degree of agency, as part of their professionalism.

The commercialisation of educational research

It is widely assumed that a central purpose of conducting research in education is the improvement of provision (Menter 2017), that is, contributing to the public good. This of course begs a question – what is meant by improvement in education? – and the answer to this rests very largely on what the purposes of education itself are seen to be. In other words this is a question of values. In recent years it has become a commonplace, in line with popular notions of meritocracy, to suggest that a prime purpose of education is to improve the life chances of school students (see Chapter 1, Ross 2021a). In particular the consistent patterns of relative high and low achievement associated statistically with economic over- and under-privilege are at the heart of the attempt to ensure that educational provision provides fair and 'equal' opportunity for all learners.

This is not a straightforward proposition because in a society such as Britain (and in many others), where inequality is deeply entrenched, and where many of the wealthiest families pay for their children to receive a better-resourced private education, it is highly unlikely that even an education system of the highest quality can overcome these inequalities. As Basil Bernstein said many years ago, 'education cannot compensate for society' (Bernstein 1970, p. 344).

Nevertheless, educationists and educational researchers continue to strive for a more just and fairer education system and politicians of all persuasions as well as policy-makers continue to espouse the best quality of education for all learners. The continuing persistence of educational inequality has been a preoccupation of educational researchers at least since the second half of the twentieth century and the struggle for social justice in and through education continues to feature in the

educational literature of the twenty-first century (e.g. Smyth and Wrigley 2013; Ball 2017; Parker et al. 2017; Brown and Wisby 2020).

One of the major changes that has occurred during recent decades in this long narrative, is the increasing availability of education data. While examination and test results have always featured in the debates about relative attainment, we have seen an explosion in the use of numerical data. Digital technologies have facilitated the creation of comparisons, through the construction of league tables and hence, measurable outcomes of education have become a central feature of these debates, whether at international, national or local level (Mansell 2007; Biesta 2010; Sahlberg 2011). This has been evident not least in politicians' apparent preoccupation with the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results every few years and, in England, national test and exam results were used as a key indicator of a school's success or failure by the inspection agency Ofsted. The latter results were and continue to be used as a basis for closing or amalgamating schools or for enforcing schools to leave their local authority and become 'academies', under the control of independent trusts – and such approaches have been favoured by governments of both main political parties.

However, at the same time as data have become increasingly important in judging success we have also seen other processes at work, affecting the approaches taken in educational research. The impact of neoliberalism on education in England has affected research as well as schooling itself. Much has been written about the marketisation of schooling in England since the 1980s (e.g. Ball et al. 1995; Gewirtz et al. 1995; Gewirtz 2002; Hutchings, Chapter 3, 2021a) and we have also seen the increasing marginalisation of local education authorities (LEAs). Very often the functions previously undertaken by LEAs, including aspects of professional development and overseeing new assessment arrangements, for example, have been taken on by educational trusts, by educational consultants and by a range of organisations with varying degrees of philanthropic or commercial motivations. Stephen Ball has monitored and reported these developments consistently over many years and has depicted the complex networks of governance that are a feature of these new arrangements (Ball 2012; Ball and Junemann 2012).

These new arrangements typically feature a process of offering contracts for work to be undertaken. Thus, calls are usually put out for 'open tendering' and interested parties assemble a 'bid' submitted to the awarding body, often the Government's Department for Education. Bids are then evaluated against a set of criteria and the contract is then awarded to the preferred bidder. While such processes are not new, they have certainly become far more common than they were and apply as much to the commissioning of research as to the provision of other education services, such as professional development and teacher performance assessment.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the majority of educational research was carried out by academic staff working in university departments of education, or departments of sociology or psychology. But a significant element of the work was also undertaken by one or two long-established not for profit agencies such as the National Foundation for Educational Research. These players continue

to be active in this 'contract culture' that has developed, but there are now many additional players on the scene including market research organisations, and a range of 'not for profit' bodies, such as The Educational Development Trust (formerly known as CfBT, the Centre for British Teachers), or the Sutton Trust (see below), or private companies such as the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education.

The overall impact of these changes, I would suggest, has been to commercialise educational research. The contract culture has been increasingly competitive and while it may be said to have ensured an adherence to the principle of achieving good value for money, it has also led to a narrowing of the scope of educational research. There is still some research activity that operates outside of this contract culture and may be seen to be more knowledge driven than policy driven. Some of this utilises funding received from the Higher Education Funding Council for England awarded according to the outcomes of the Research Excellence Framework. Other research is funded by UK Research Councils, notably the Economic and Social Research Council, but educational researchers have not been among the most successful in securing such funding in what itself is a very competitive arena.

In spite of this, it was during this period, the early twenty-first century, that we experienced what was then the largest ever programme of educational research in the UK, The Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). This programme attracted over £35 million of funding (much of it from the governments of the UK) and supported a wide range of projects, many of which were independent of government priorities. The TLRP also had a significant research capacity building element, designed to ensure a broad range of educational research skills were developed across the country. Most of this work was undertaken by university based academic staff. Another concern of TLRP was to maximise engagement and impact of the research with and on 'users' (Rickinson et al. 2011; see also Saunders 2007).

This then is the backdrop against which I turn now to discuss more recent developments in education research and the search for 'solutions' to the continuing patterns of inequality in education.

The growth of teacher research

The relationships between educational practice and educational research were explored early in the twentieth century by, among others, John Dewey. His work in laboratory schools in the USA sought to explore how teaching might be improved through systematic enquiry and also laid some of the foundations for what would be called 'reflective practice' in later years (see Pring 2014).

In the UK, during the 1970s, the work of Lawrence Stenhouse became very influential, not least through his coining of the idea of 'teacher as researcher' (Stenhouse 1975). This concept was developed at a time when teachers in England had considerable responsibility for shaping the curriculum which they taught, indeed Stenhouse saw teachers very much as curriculum developers. For a short while in England and

the rest of the UK, educational action research flourished, with teachers being encouraged to work in cyclical fashion, planning, implementing, evaluating and revising (see for example, Elliot 1991).

Such approaches were somewhat abruptly curtailed in the late 1980s when the government in England and Wales imposed a National Curriculum and a national assessment system for the first time, through the Education Reform Act of 1988. The subsequent decade saw an increasing prescription not only of what was to be taught but also, most notably through the National Literacy Strategy and the National Numeracy Strategy (1997–2011), how teachers should be teaching (see Chitty and Simon 1993; Helsby 1999; Osborn et al. 2000). For example, in the teaching of reading, particular approaches involving 'phonics' were required and students were to be tested for their understanding of these approaches. One effect of such changes was to severely reduce the autonomy of teachers and their agency in making professional decisions, other than within a very limited sphere.

In England matters came to something of a head in 2010 when the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, sought to intervene in initial teacher education through reducing the role and responsibility of higher education institutions with a strong drive towards school-based teacher education (DfE 2010a). In Gove's view, the best place for teachers to learn to teach was 'on-the-job', that is observing and learning in an apprenticeship style from experienced teachers. Educational research and theory had little place in Gove's mind in the preparation of beginning teachers. Gove also castigated the education research community, describing it as part of 'The Blob' (Young 2014).

Turning our attention away from England for a moment, it is interesting to note that, at almost the same time in the north of the UK, the Scottish Government commissioned a review of teacher education undertaken by a former Chief Inspector, Graham Donaldson. When this review reported (Donaldson 2011), it presented a very different view of teaching and of teacher education. Indeed it called for more sustained and broader involvement of the universities in the preparation of teachers. One of the influences on Donaldson's report was a review of literature which he commissioned, on teacher education in the twenty-first century (Menter et al. 2010). This review suggested that four paradigms of the teacher could be discerned in the research and policy literature, as follows:

- The effective teacher: This model has emerged as the dominant one in much official government discourse, certainly across the developed world, over the last thirty years. The emphases are on technical accomplishment and on measurement. It is the model for an age of accountability and performativity – it corresponds well with Pasi Sahlberg's Global Education Reform Movement – the 'GERM' (Sahlberg 2011). Such an approach may be well aligned with a nationally prescribed curriculum and a national assessment system, which extends down to the earliest stages of schooling.
- The reflective teacher: The philosophical roots of the reflective teaching model may be found in the work of the American educator John Dewey (as mentioned above). Writing early in the twentieth century he developed an approach to teach-

ing which was based on teachers becoming active decision-makers. At the centre of this model is a cyclical approach to planning, making provision, acting, collecting data, analysing the data, evaluating and reflecting and then planning the next step. Built into such a model is a commitment to personal professional development through practice.

- The enquiring teacher: In the UK, the origins of the notion of 'teacher as researcher' is usually associated with the ground-breaking work of Lawrence Stenhouse (1975), who, argued that teachers should indeed take a research approach to their work. He described this as a form of curriculum development. In this model teachers are encouraged to undertake systematic enquiry in their own classrooms, develop their practice and share their insights with other professionals.
- The transformative teacher: The key defining feature of this paradigm is that it brings an 'activist' dimension into the approach to teaching. If the prevalent view of the teacher is someone whose contribution to society is to transmit knowledge and prepare pupils for the existing world, the view here is that teachers' responsibilities go beyond that. They should indeed be contributing to social change and be preparing their pupils to contribute to change in society. In aspiring to achieve greater social justice through education however, it is important to consider the influence of teachers' own beliefs and values which they bring to their work at whatever stage of their career they are at. (Menter et al. 2010, pp. 21–24)

In his subsequent report Donaldson advocated a model of teaching which incorporated all four of these paradigms, saying that teachers should be seen as:

> reflective, accomplished and enquiring professionals who have the capacity to engage fully with the complexities of education and to be key actors in shaping and leading educational change. (Donaldson 2011, p. 4)

It is extraordinary that two such different views of what teaching is should be promoted simultaneously in Scotland and England (see Hulme and Menter 2011). In retrospect we can see how very strongly a crude form of national populism has infected education policy in England, especially in relation to teaching (Childs and Menter 2013). While nationalism is also a key element of Scottish culture and politics, with continuing strong calls for independence from the UK, it appears to take a much less simplistic form than in England.

It was largely the attack on education departments in universities in England, which had been a key resource for educational research (as described above in the section on commercialisation of research), which led the British Educational Research Association (BERA) to establish an enquiry into the relationship between teaching and research. The main report that emerged from this enquiry (BERA-RSA 2014) identified a range of evidence which indicated that 'high performing education systems' were associated with an enquiry-oriented approach to teaching. The report called for teachers to engage with research and to be given the skills to have the capacity to engage in research. These two essential elements together constituted 'research literacy' as defined in the report.

A report into Initial Teacher Training (ITT) (*sic*), commissioned by the English government and led by Sir Andrew Carter, which was published in 2015 (Carter 2015), acknowledged the importance of evidence in teaching and made some reference to elements of the BERA-RSA report (see Mutton et al. 2017). It also led to the establishment of a working group to determine the 'content' of ITT programmes in England, which in turn led to a new statement in 2019 (DfE 2019a, see below).

Meanwhile in the university departments of education there were continuing tensions. Not only had teacher education become increasingly diverse and complex in the nature of provision, with numerous different entry routes, some based on trainees being employed rather than being students (Whiting et al. 2018; Sorensen 2019). Inspection of those teacher education programmes for which the universities were responsible continued to cause considerable anxiety. These inspections were carried out by the national agency, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Simultaneously, these university departments were also doing their best to demonstrate their own research prowess in order to make strong submissions to the Research Excellence Framework, the assessment system determining the research resources to be allocated to universities from central government funds. This 'double whammy' for education departments in universities was not unique but certainly created considerable tension and stress for many of those working in them (see Menter et al. 2012).

It is paradoxical that at the same time as these moves in England to 'detheorise' teaching and to increase performativity measures both in schools and in universities, there should have been a move to bring evidence to bear in policy and in practice, the movement to which we now turn.

The attraction of 'evidence-based teaching'

During the 1990s, especially after the election of a New Labour government in 1997, we saw social and public policy increasingly being connected with 'evidence'. Often, though not always, this was to be evidence drawn from research. A new kind of Enlightenment-informed rationalism appeared to be influencing policy making. This was perhaps something of a reaction to the strongly ideologically driven policies that had developed under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her successors (1979–1997). Under New Labour, a 'Third Way' (Giddens 1998) was being sought that was neither full marketisation, nor full public ownership and control. It was indeed a form of New Public Management (Newman and Clarke 1997).

Frequently the approach was underpinned by what became known as a 'what works' stance. The purpose of research under this mantra was to inform and improve public services across the UK. This was most clearly set out in publications by a team based in Scotland led by Sandra Nutley, a university-based social scientist. Their first book was entitled *What Works? Evidence-based policy and practice in public services* (Davies et al. 2000). Subsequently they published *Using Evidence: How research can inform public services* (Nutley et al. 2008). In each volume they

sought to demonstrate how research can shape policy and practice across the full range of public services, including education. They suggested:

> Researchers, as well as other stakeholders, often despair that clear findings are sometimes *not* heeded when decisions are made about the direction and delivery of public services. Indeed, policy and practice decisions sometimes seem to fly in the face of what is considered to be the best available evidence about 'what works'. (Nutley et al. 2008, p. 1)

They also claimed that increased use of research could be seen to increase 'impact', another keyword to emerge early in this century, as the research community sought to sustain and defend their resourcing.

Not surprisingly, education policymakers were among those who were strongly attracted to the idea of focusing research on 'what works'. Given the long struggle of education research to reduce inequality and to lead to improved attainment (see above) the attraction of finding approaches that lead to success is obvious. However, it was not long before some concerns were expressed about the emphasis on 'fixing' educational problems.

Gert Biesta wrote a cogent critique in an article called 'Why "what works" won't work'. He argued that there was a problem with the search for simple solutions:

> The problem with evidence-based education, … is not only that it is not sufficiently aware of the role of norms and values in educational decision making; the problem is that it also limits the opportunities for educational professionals to exert their judgment about what is educationally desirable in particular situations. This is one instance in which the democratic deficit in evidence-based education becomes visible. (Biesta 2007, p. 20)

Nevertheless, in spite of such critiques (see also Pring and Thomas 2004), it soon became apparent that evidence-based policies as well as a 'what works' approach were taking a strong hold in education in England. A large proportion of the government's education research budget was channelled via the Sutton Trust to an enterprise called The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). The initial grant from the DfE was for £125 million in 2011. The Sutton Trust is a philanthropic organisation concerned with improving access to higher education for disadvantaged groups, and more recently took its concerns into schooling provision. Commencing its work in 2011, the EEF commissioned and supported a large number of projects all designed to lead to improvements in educational outcomes especially for those learners categorised as disadvantaged. The EEF's purpose was set out originally as 'to improve performance in our most challenging schools. Those bidding for funds from the EEF will have to outline how their proposals will raise attainment' (DfE 2010b); this was more recently revised as 'to describe and demystify the professional practice of implementation – to document our knowledge of the steps that effective schools take to manage change well' (EEF 2018a, 2018b).

The EEF approach hitherto is perhaps best epitomised by their 'Teaching and Learning Toolkit' (EEF 2018a, 2018b), a guide to 'what works' in a range of packaged schemes which claim to lead to improvements in outcomes. This reports the results of evaluations of particular approaches to improve attainment under three headings: cost, evidence strength and impact. This of course enormously simplifies the results of the research undertaken but is seen by some headteachers and

policymakers (as well as by government and the EEF itself) as being very helpful to hard-pressed teachers and school leaders in making decisions about approaches to be taken in their classrooms and schools.

The EEF is particularly committed to research undertaken through Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs), an approach which has been strongly supported by politicians on both sides of the Atlantic, with many of them claiming that this is the only high-quality approach to educational research. When he was Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove commissioned a medical journalist and researcher, Ben Goldacre, to write a paper on how education could be improved through the use of RCTs. The paper *Building Evidence into Education,* was published in 2013 and argued that teachers were being led astray by research approaches of dubious quality and that what had so clearly worked in medical research should obviously be applied in education (resonating with the earlier work of David Hargreaves; see Ross, Chapter 1, 2021a):

> Where they are feasible, randomised trials are generally the most reliable tool we have for finding out which of two interventions works best. We simply take a group of children, or schools (or patients, or people); we split them into two groups at random; we give one intervention to one group, and the other intervention to the other group; then we measure how each group is doing, to see if one intervention achieved its supposed outcome any better. (Goldacre 2013, p. 8)

Within a very short period therefore, RCTs became the dominant approach in educational research that was backed by the Government. Few other forms of research were supported, other than by independent sources, including the ESRC and some charitable organisations.

But there has been a longstanding antipathy towards the use of RCTs in education. A range of arguments against them has been articulated including ethical concerns (these are 'myths' according to Goldacre), practical concerns and political concerns (Cartwright and Hardie 2012). In his sustained attack on the dominance of RCTs in some settings around the world, Trevor Gale concludes that:

> RCTs offer governments and schools the prospect of more precise instruments to engineer their populations into forms of human capital, which will enable them to claim a controlling stake in a knowledge economy and thus retain disproportionate positions of global power…. RCTs can never deliver on this precision because they operate on a false premise: that the social world is the same as the physical world. (Gale 2018, p. 220)

However, also during the second decade of the twenty-first century, there was an interesting development in teacher research, with a 'grassroots' movement encouraging teacher enquiry, including the use of RCTs and other 'experimental' methods (Churches and Dommett 2016). A range of so-called 'teachmeets' were held in many parts of the country and an organisation called ResearchEd (https://researched.org.uk/) was established under the leadership of Tom Bennett, a teacher himself, who became an authoritative voice for the government in the management of pupil behaviour. There was some uncertainty in the initial phases of these developments about the extent to which the research being undertaken could be described as rigorous and of high quality. However, for teachers themselves the emphasis was very

clearly on improving practice, indeed on identifying 'what works'. In some of the activities, university researchers were also involved, but by no means in all of them.

Another development in this period which may be seen as supportive of the teacher research movement was the creation of so-called Teaching Schools (https://tscouncil.org.uk/). Schools could apply individually or collectively for this designation and if they were successful were expected to develop six strands of innovation, one of which was a research strand (the six were subsequently reduced to three – and research did not survive this cull!). In addition, the creation of The Chartered College of Teaching in 2017 (https://tscouncil.org.uk/), which effectively moved into the space created by Gove's abolition, early during his tenure, of the General Teaching Council for England. From its inception, the College, led by Dame Alison Peacock, was a strong advocate for the use of evidence in teaching and a supporter of teacher research.

So, in summary, the move towards evidence-based practice in social policy developed considerable impetus under the New Labour Governments from 1997–2010 and continued in even more populist form under the Coalition Government from 2010. As we shall see, although Michael Gove had a dominant influence on the shape of these developments, the Liberal Democrat education minister David Laws, was also a key player, not least in the scheme that emerged in 2013, to be described in the next section.

The appeal of 'Closing the Gap'

In 2013 the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) awarded a contract to what was then called CfBT, to undertake a major project involving hundreds of Teaching Schools across England. The project was called *Closing the Gap: Test and Learn* and although led by CfBT/EDT, it was undertaken by a consortium of organisations, including the Universities of Durham and Oxford as well as the Centre for the Use of Research Evidence in Education (CUREE). The project itself is described in a research report (Churches 2016), but is also described and reviewed in considerable detail in an edited collection called *Mobilising Teacher Researchers: Challenging educational inequality* (Childs and Menter 2018).

The project brought together many of the trends that have been discussed in the previous sections of this chapter. The overall aim was focused on closing the socio-economic attainment gap, the project was designed to assess the effectiveness of a range of educational approaches ('proprietary initiatives'), each of which sought to improve attainment, the core methodology was to be RCTs, the participating schools were Teaching Schools and teacher researchers were to be at the heart of it all. All of these aspects combined to make this very much a project for the times. Looking at the genesis of the project it is clear that David Laws was very influential in its conception and that the rationale was very much in line with the Liberal Democrat Party commitment to improving educational life chances and using a research-based approach to find out what works (see Childs et al. 2018).

There were seven separate initiatives which were selected as being the most likely to lead to a closing of the gap. They were: 1stClass@Number; Achievement for All; Growth Mindsets; Inference Training; Numicon Intervention Programme; Research Lesson Study; and Response to Interventions: Breakthroughs in Literacy. Each of these initiatives offered particular approaches to teaching which were designed to improve student outcomes. Teachers adopting one of the schemes typically underwent a specific training programme in order to implement the particular approach.

Most of the 650 schools involved worked with one of these projects and sought to assess the extent to which the work led to improved outcomes for learners. Schools either undertook the intervention in the first year of the project or served to provide a control group in that year, then having the opportunity to implement the chosen programme during the second year (Churches et al. 2018). Given the considerable investment in the project by the NCTL, the actual outcomes in terms of improved attainment or indeed in 'closing the gap', may be seen as very disappointing. In many cases the existing practice in the Teaching Schools concerned appeared to be as effective as the particular interventions:

> Overall, Teaching Schools associated existing practice (the control conditions for all of the large-scale trials) appears to be at least equal to six of the top seven interventions…, but better than growth mindsets when used with an average group of pupils. (Churches et al. 2018, p. 50)

Richard Churches and his colleagues go on to suggest:

> Although finding that the majority of the interventions showed no effect greater than existing practice is useful, it is but a starting point for further investigation. The established practice in other fields (e.g. medicine) would be to undertake further trials in different circumstances to see if the benefits of these interventions are revealed in different contexts (for example, in struggling schools, with a more tightly defined group of students, or particular age groups). (Churches et al. 2018, p. 51)

It is interesting that not dissimilar results have emerged from much of the work undertaken on an RCT basis by the EEF (see for example postings on the website of the International Foundation for Effective Reading Instruction: http://www.iferi.org/iferi_forum/viewtopic.php?t=591).

However, even if the initiatives themselves did not seem to have a large effect on attainment, the project did achieve a considerable amount in terms of building research capacity in schools. In their analysis of how teachers and schools were engaging in and with research on this project Ann Childs and Nigel Fancourt found that:

> …some Teaching School Alliances were envisioning completely new structural arrangements for the educational research landscape, taking them well beyond their traditional role as research consumers. (Childs and Fancourt 2018, p. 155)

They suggest:

> …it is increasingly the case that schools and alliances are appointing a 'research lead', as the main lynch-pin for school-led projects… and it will be their endeavours which will determine the future shape of these forms of knowledge generation. (*ibid*., p. 156)

The experiences of the Closing the Gap project reveal that, while RCTs may have a role to play in educational research they do not necessarily lead to improved practice and secondly, that proprietary education products of the sort trialled in this project, may not lead to the kinds of outcomes that are hoped for (see Menter and Thompson 2018).

Research policy and practice – a virtuous or a vicious circle?

The BERA-RSA report (2014), mentioned above, set out a rationale for the relationship between research and the practice of teaching. It also suggested the need for strong relationships between these two communities – research and practice – and the community of policy, that is politicians and policymakers. In the field of teacher education at least it has been the case that the relationship has not always been a constructive or positive one. In a review of teacher education research and its influence on policy, Ian Menter et al. (2019) found not only that teacher education is 'desperately under-researched' (p. 75) but that the use of evidence and data by the Department for Education were found by the National Audit Office to be 'lacking in several areas' (p. 75). Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that there are much more positive relationships between these three communities in other parts of the UK, especially perhaps in Scotland (Teacher Education Group 2016).

In his Presidential address to BERA in 2005, Geoff Whitty suggested the research community should not expect too much from policymakers – there are many influences on their decisions beyond the findings of researchers. Reflecting on this a few years later, writing with Emma Wisby, he urged again that there are many complexities in the research-policy relationship. They wrote:

> Research can influence policy (and practice) in different ways, but this will often be indirect and sometimes in ways that were not intended… Thus, research is best understood as a means of helping policymakers reconsider issues, think differently, reconceptualize what the problem is and challenge old assumptions… (Whitty with Wisby 2016, p. 16).

They also note that the role of intermediary bodies (such as some of the organisations involved in the 'Closing the Gap' scheme) can be significant. Certainly in the case of teacher education, work carried out for a three country comparative study of teachers' careers suggests that in England, some key actors (such as particular university Deans of Education or chief executive officers of non-governmental organisations) act as a kind of research broker for policy makers (see Helgetun and Menter 2020).

Certainly policymakers do not always appear to use research to inform policy, rather they sometimes seem to use it to construct support for policy decisions that have already been taken for ideological reasons (see, for an example of this, Menter 2016). More recently however, as mentioned above, we have seen the publication of a document setting out what should be covered in the curriculum of Initial Teacher Training in England (DfE 2019a). This work was carried out by a working group

appointed by the DfE, chaired by a prominent teacher education academic, Samantha Twiselton, with support from a range of other stakeholders, mostly directly involved in the practice of teacher education in some way or other. This work is notable, especially by comparison with other documents released by the Department for Education. First it has a fairly extensive list of research references which are properly and fully cited. Second, it claims to have been 'independently assessed and endorsed by the EEF' (DfE 2019a, p. 2). Quite what form this assessment and endorsement took is not clear.

Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter has tracked the sometimes tortuous relationship between the search for 'easy answers' in education and the reality of the complexity of educational processes. The ways in which such fashionable and changing nostrums have been promoted, used and misused in the pursuit of popular policies, is very similar to the notorious sales pitches for snake oil of earlier times.

The reality for educational researchers, policymakers and practitioners is much more likely to be that because of the complexity of educational processes and the complexity of the relationships between education and other aspects of society, the only way in which real and lasting improvements in educational policy and practice are going to benefit from researchers' efforts is through much closer relationships between the three communities, and these relationships will require a much greater degree of trust than has been visible over recent years (see Chapman and Ainscow 2019).

There have been, as noted, a number of positive developments that can be detected, such as the growing interest in and commitment to teacher research, among teachers themselves, as well as the emergence of new teachers' organisations of different kinds. However the continuing prevalence of populist (and nationalist) politics in western societies has made it increasingly difficult to have calm and detailed discussions between our communities, without them being hijacked by simplistic rhetoric from politicians and many sections of the media. The very notion of 'closing the gap' is an example of a slogan that can all too easily obscure deep and complex social inequality.

The argument developed in the chapter is that, in the pursuit of social justice in and through education, the engagement of teachers in school-based research is a very positive development. However, if educational research is meaningfully to contribute to the public good, then such engagement needs to be tempered by careful deployment of research methods, an avoidance of a search for 'easy answers' and a healthy dose of critical scepticism.

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