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Review Article
Evidence-based Policy: Rhetoric and Reality

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The drive in the late 1990s for an evidence-based approach to both policy and practice throughout public services has been encoded in a range of articles, operationalised in funded organisations, and implemented through government policy. This paper intends to review some of those articles, organizations and education policies to give an overview of the way in which the approach has been constructed and to make problematic some of the underlying assumptions.

An evidence-based approach to policy is ideological in that it supports particular beliefs and values compatible with the dominant cultural paradigms that define how people and society function. At present these are determined by definitions of effectiveness as a quantitative measure, professionalism as performativity, teaching as technicist delivery, research as randomized clinical trials, and 'credible' evidence as statistical meta-analysis. These paradigms will become taken for granted unless they are considered in relation to the alternatives of effectiveness as being determined by both qualitative and quantitative outcomes; professionalism as the freedom to engage critically in debates regarding practice; teaching as a reflexive, dialogic process; research as an eclectic activity, and evidence as being that which most appropriately answers the questions posed by research, be that words, numbers, or indeed images as debated in the on-line BERA debate concerning educational research (*www.bera.ac.uk*).

Strengthening the evidence base for decisions is generally seen as a positive move. It reflects a model which assumes that evidence, generated through research, should directly influence policy. Research is valued in relation to its impact on policy. The ubiquity of this model has been contested in the health service through an evaluation of the relationship of research evidence to policy. In education the main objections seem to centre on the argument that education is different from healthcare. This is an argument that Hargreaves (1998), Oakley (1999), and Davies (1999) have all countered in some depth, considering it an easily answered polemic. The more contentious debate seems to focus on the usefulness and relevance of educational research in providing the evidence base (see, for example, Hargreaves, 1996, 1997; Woodhead, 1998; Tooley and Darby, 1998; Hillage *et al.*, 1998; Clarke, 1998; Mortimore, 1999).

In the health service several studies have considered the impact of evidence in determining practice policies (use of resources by practitioners), service policies (resource allocation, pattern of services), and governance policies (organisational and financial structures) (see for example Rosen, 2000; Savoie, Kazanjian, and Bassett, 2000; Harries, Elliott, and Higgins, 1999; Raine, 1998; Howden-Chapman, 1996). The studies have shown that the evidence-based model has worked best for practice policy but the relation between research evidence and service policies is generally weak and the direct

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influence of research on governance policies has been negligible. Research has only a limited role in governance because these policies are driven more by ideology, economic theory, and political expediency than the need to improve clinical effectiveness (Black, 2001). This should give cause for the careful consideration of which policies can be most usefully based upon evidence, rather than the apparently unproblematic drive to adopt this approach in all areas of public policy, including policing, defence, and health: an impetus now being applied to other areas of social service including education. This has led to new highly visible initiatives being substantially funded to provide the sort of credible evidence that evidence-based policy requires, without the corresponding analysis of the appropriateness of such an approach.

The strength of support for the approach can be determined by the level of funding allocated to evidence-based initiatives. The Evidence Based Policy Fund was launched in response to the Cabinet Office report 'Adding It Up' published in January 2000 (www.hmtreasury.gov.uk/) It is intended as a fund to promote the supply of research and analysis and as a means of strengthening links between universities, research institutes, and government through the financing of applied research on the government's priority topics, which include: regional differences and national welfare; life trajectories, transitions, and outcomes**;** conflict and crisis management; and organisational options for outcome delivery – the latter encompassing ways of making partnerships between policy makers and users more productive, reflecting another aim of the evidence-based approach to policy. The budget is £3.9 million. In 1999 the Economic and Social Research Council decided to fund an initiative on Evidence Based Policy and Practice with a budget of £3 million (*www.evidencenetwork.org*). The new Center for Evidence Based Policy arising from this initiative acts as the hub for seven network nodes each focusing on a different area with the aim of acquiring access to major databases and original documents on social science research.

With relation specifically to education there is the Evidence Informed Policy and Practice in Education Initiative funded by the DfES and coordinated by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI Centre) (*http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk*). This has a funding of £1.9 million, and a director Ann Oakley, who has moved from being a staunch champion of qualitative ways of knowing to an advocate for quantitative methods. In her book *Experiments in Knowing* she has traced not only the history of the so-called paradigm wars but also the story of her epiphany in which she became a convert to what she calls experimental ways of knowing. The title is an interesting play on 'Women's Ways of Knowing' (Belenky *et al.*, 1986) which had such an impact on the social sciences when it was first published. Oakley's analysis of the impact of gender on method in the social sciences highlights what she believes to be the need to dissolve the false boundaries between ways of knowing and to re-evaluate the experimental, or interventionist methods of the 1960s, in a move to allow social scientists to make a valid contribution to policy and to 'protect the public from the damaging effects of professional and other forms of arrogance' (Oakley, 2000: 323).

In medicine such evidence-based ways of knowing draw on the resources of the Cochrane Collaboration, an international network of healthcare researchers who are carrying out reviews of medical research. In addition one of the Cochrane Collaboration groups has produced a database called SPECTR (Social, Psychological, Educational and Criminological Trials Register) looking at 10,500 controlled trials of interventions in these fields. Oakley argues that this is evidence that such an approach is feasible (Oakley,

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1999) and appropriate to the social sciences (Oakley, 2000). The new collaboration for systematic research synthesis in the social science and policy fields is called the Campbell Collaboration. The EPPI Centre, as one of the Campbell Collaborators, intends to replicate the approach of the US to systematic review, evaluation, and synthesis of current research and provide a centralized resource for those who wish to undertake or use the results of systematic reviews of research. The aims of the initiative are to:

- provide high-quality, relevant reviews of research that are accessible to teachers, policy makers, students, parents, governors and others with an interest in education;
- support collaboration that develops systematic review methodology for educational research and helps ensure the use of review findings;
- ensure a research process that is open to scrutiny, criticism, and development;
- develop a research process that values and takes steps to encourage participation, at all stages, by anyone with an interest in education.

This approach, it is believed, will counter the criticisms of the contribution, or lack of it, to policy made by social science research. In a recent monograph 'Evidence-informed policy and practice: challenges for social science', Oakley (2001) has engaged with the contentious issue of what the terms 'evidence-based' and 'evidence-informed' mean and moreover what their use signifies for methodological practices in the social sciences. Her historically based critique of social policy, particularly education, is a precursor to an argument for a systematic review, evaluation, and synthesis of currently available research. This would replace the 'selective, opinionated and discursive rampages' that are the current reviews undertaken in social science. At the same time she abjures those engaged in scholarship to put their ideological, methodological, and disciplinary 'posturing' on one side to produce valid and reliable knowledge. Such knowledge is defined as that produced by meta-analysis of systematic reviews and by controlled experiments based on the randomized clinical trials (RCT) model, these produce 'credible' evidence. Research using other methods, such as case studies, produce evidence that rates much lower in the hierarchy of credibility. Judgements about the credibility of evidence are based on systematic reviews of outcomes and the statistical meta-analysis of the aggregation of several research studies.

Education has produced few studies that used RCTs, mainly because of the perceived complexity of the context of teaching. In response to this conceptualisation much educational research has attempted to understand this complexity through an examination of the individual and collective narratives of those engaged in the process. Therefore for teaching to adopt an evidence-based approach, such as that strongly advocated by Davies (1999), it requires 'high-quality systematic reviews and appraisals of educational research' in order to produce the 'credible' evidence required for changes in practice. Davies advocates carefully designed and executed research which is designed to be cumulative to produce a database suitable for meta-analysis. There needs, he argues, to be a change in the culture of education so that teachers, as a part of their professional practice, draw on research to inform their pedagogy. This is a view shared by the government in their recent continuing professional development (CPD) policy documents where 'high quality professional development will be based on current research and inspection evidence; (DfEE, 2001a: 1:6h. www.teachnet.gov.uk). The planning of which providers will let the school or individual have, 'where relevant, the research an

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inspection evidence which will be informing their input' (ibid. 2:9c); and 'the contents of the development activity should be informed by recent, relevant research and/or inspection evidence' (ibid. 4:12e). In addition the government has clearly stated its intention to '[carry] out good quality research and evaluation into professional development opportunities and their impact on teaching and learning, so we can build up evidence of what works' (DfEE, 2001b: F). It is interesting that the government use of 'research' evidence seems to equate it, or at least give it equal status with, 'inspection' evidence.

Thus government policy is attempting to shift the balance from those traditionally engaged in research located in the academy, towards the teacher as researcher, through initiatives such as the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) Teacher Research Grant Scheme in 1996, now extended as Best Practice Research Scholarships (BPRS) for which there is £12 million funding over three years for teachers '. . . to do sharply focused research into key areas of classroom practice' (DfEE, 2001b: B:20). Foster's (1999) evaluation of the research produced by the 1996 pilot scheme raised serious doubts about the quality of what was being produced and disseminated as research. Although many of the reports were relevant he felt that a minority could not be classed as research. In addition there were serious doubts about the validity of key findings, thus raising grave concerns about whether such an initiative does result in the production of 'high quality research' to 'add to the existing stock of knowledge available to teachers and the research community' (TTA, 1996a, 1996b, 1997). It does not seem that this approach to producing practitioner knowledge will achieve what Hargreaves argues for, 'to turn teachers' habitual classroom tinkerings into a much more trustworthy form of research evidence' (Hargreaves, 1998). Just to put emphasis on the role of research in teaching is not enough. Teachers have to be supported in undertaking research that meets the stringent criteria applied to that which comes out of the academy.

However, despite the seemingly wholehearted acceptance of the evidence-based policy development favoured by the government, directors of funded initiatives (Oakley, 1999, 2000, 2001), and members of the educational research community (Hargreaves, 1999) and of the academy (Davies, 1999), there are several issues that need to be considered. Firstly, that it would be more accurate to refer to an evidence-informed approach, as policy is determined according to more than research evidence alone, including financial, economic and strategic factors, and practitioner knowledge.

Secondly, research evidence may be dismissed as irrelevant if it does not match the preferred outcome.

> The government wants to hear about some evidence and not others. We have lots of research gathered together indicating that putting students into ability groups does not help results and can hurt students' self esteem, but the government says grouping is the way forward. (Ball in Plomin, 2001)

Thirdly, who should disseminate the research evidence into the policymaking forum? If it is civil servants then there are problems in their lack of experience in the field of education. For example the problems with BPRS were caused in part because no-one at policy level seemed to be aware of the implications of the timing of the request for bids in relation to the school term and the workload demands on teachers posed by SATs which were being undertaken at the same time as bids had to be prepared.

Fourthly, although evidence-based policy is predicated on the aim of increasing

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effectiveness there may be times when other demands – social, financial, or strategic – are the real drivers of the policy and so research evidence may be ignored. For example, research evidence shows that the government's school contracts policy is not effective but it is still in force in order to serve a strategic aim.

Fifthly, there may be a lack of consensus about the nature of the evidence provided by the research because of the complexity of the issue being researched, or because there is controversy over the methods used to gather the evidence or because the evidence is open to different interpretations. An example of this is the recent Hay McBer report into effective teaching commissioned by the DfEE for a reputed £4 million (Barnard, 2000; DfEE, 2000), over which there is controversy. The BERA methodological seminar on the Hay McBer Report concluded that:

> We cannot avoid the conclusion that the report *Research into Teacher Effectiveness* gives only limited insight into the complex and multi-varied work of teachers. It offers hypotheses that need to be tested and a framework that needs to be explored for missing structures, but it falls short of being an authoritative research-based account and may be misleading to anyone who treats it as such. (BERA, 2001)

Finally, policy makers themselves may differ in their interpretation and use of the evidence generated by research.

In conclusion, Coe, Fitz-Gibbon, and Tymms (2000) sum up the paradox of educational researchers faced with the drive for evidence-based policy – or indeed practice:

> if research is to influence practices or policies, this can only be justified on the basis of sound knowledge about their likely effects, i.e. it must be 'evidence-based'. Alternatively, if educational researchers are happy to refrain from giving advice to practitioners or policy makers, then they may be free to conduct whatever kind of research they choose. (Coe, Fitz-Gibbon, and Tymms, 2000: 2)

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