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QUALITY AND IMPACT IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

*Some Lessons from England under New Labour*¹

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this chapter is the experience of educational research in England over the past ten years under the New Labour government. We will show how New Labour's approach, in the context of then prime minister Tony Blair's top three priorities of 'education, education, education', has had mixed implications for educational research to say the least. While the field has benefited from increased funding, researchers have come under growing pressure to produce policy-relevant research. To date this has been counter-balanced by the way in which research in higher education generally has been assessed and funded through the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which has rewarded research that meets traditional social science criteria and therefore provided some continued support for basic research. It is partly on this basis that academics have warmed to this once much maligned exercise. However, in line with the government's wider demand for policy-relevant research, with every successive RAE has come a greater push for recognition of applied and interdisciplinary research and assessment of the impact of research. Thus we are seeing a growing tension between the assessment and funding of research and the concerns of the educational research community to maintain a broad programme of educational research.

At the same time, the government's parallel emphasis on evidence-based practice in education has had consequences for the schools workforce. There have been numerous critiques of this 'what works' approach (see Whitty, 2006), particularly with regard to the way in which it has eroded democracy within education, in relation to both the professional judgement of teachers and the voice of wider stakeholders. This 'technocratic' as opposed to 'democratic' control of education itself raises questions about how the government has sought to utilise educational research: for example, many of us would argue for teachers' need for broader knowledge than 'what works'. But there is a further emerging dimension to this debate as New Labour has sought to once again transform public sector governance, this time to give a greater voice to public service users, in this case parents and students. As we will show, this development in particular highlights the requirement for a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between research, policy and practice – and one which needs to be reflected in quality assessment and funding mechanisms.

Of course, elements of the particular political programme represented by New Labour have by no means been restricted to the UK. We shall therefore note in passing related developments in other countries, especially Australia, New Zealand and the US. In such circumstances, we want to consider what might be the best response from the educational research community in supporting our research field and promoting the appropriate funding and application of our work. We shall also consider the role that research associations like the British Educational Research Association and Australian Association for Research in Education can serve.

In terms of the structure of the chapter, we will expand on the two tensions outlined above – that between the government’s drive for research that is policy-relevant and other frameworks’ emphasis on traditional social science criteria, and that between the technocratic and democratic control of education. This will be in order to make the case for a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between educational research, policy and practice and the assessment and funding of that research. This, we will argue, must be underpinned by a relatively broad understanding of policy-relevance in research as well as the continued support of basic research. In the final section we will look at the role of the national research associations in representing our community to this end and the growing need for those associations to work together on shared concerns.

NEW LABOUR AND EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY

Tony Blair’s New Labour government came to power in 1997 claiming to herald a new approach to government, that of the ‘third way’. Billed as a creative partnership between neo-liberal capitalism and social democracy, the particular version of the third way, promoted by New Labour and Blair personally, stressed the need for a pragmatic approach and the desire to shape policy and practice in line with ‘what works’ (see, for example, Lawton, 2005).

Although use of the term ‘third way’ has largely disappeared, the proclaimed emphasis on evidence-based policy has been a constant under New Labour. One manifestation of this approach is the Policy Hub (see www.policyhub.gov.uk), a website hosted by the Cabinet Office which aims to improve policy making and delivery across government. This has been accompanied by a number of reports from the Cabinet Office’s Performance and Information Unit about joining-up and ‘wiring-up’ policy making (e.g. Performance and Innovation Unit [PIU], 2001). As we have indicated elsewhere (Whitty, 2006) there are serious questions as to whether the government has been successful in its professed aim to deliver evidence-based policy. As one national press commentary on New Labour’s record on education noted at the beginning of Gordon Brown’s term of office as prime minister:

It is ironic to reflect that, 10 years after coming into office and promising to govern on the basis of ‘what works’, the government should still have so little idea of what really does (Russell, 2007).

But our focus here is not on whether New Labour has consistently based its