

RESEARCH FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT: SWIMMING WITH THE SHARKS

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This presentation is in two parts. In this first part, Maurice Galton examines some recent examples of policy research in the United Kingdom, particularly those concerned with the 1988 Education Reform Act and the implementation of the National Curriculum. In the second part, John Williamson will examine the present situation in Australia to determine whether similar trends can be detected.

Introduction

Most commentators of the current education policy in the UK claim that it is driven by the ideology of the 'new right', which Ball (1990) describes as a mixture of 'hard line old humanists and cultural restorationists.' At primary school this ideology manifests itself in the demand for a return to traditional teaching with an emphasis on specialist subject teaching backed up with regular testing. Those defending the government's position, however, claim that its policy is research based and, indeed, during the last decade probably more research has been officially commissioned than at any time since the last major spate of curriculum reform during the late sixties. The difference, however, is that the researchers are now no longer in control of the reporting process. Instead a variety of methods are used by those commissioning projects to manipulate results in order to serve the prevailing ideology.

In these circumstances, there are those such as Hammersley and Scarth (1993), who argue that researchers are, therefore, unwise 'to accept invitations from a Government which smacks of an attitude towards professionalism in education and other fields which seems to have become all too common over the past decade....It is an attitude which exudes dogmatism.' (Hammersley and Scarth, 1993, p496). Other researchers have abandoned what they see to be an impossible situation.

For example, Maureen O'Connor in the Independent (7:7:94) quotes an un-named senior academic who plans to leave the country for a chair overseas because 'she no longer believed it possible to conduct research involving schools in an ethical and responsible way in England'. This academic's particular concern was not only that

research funding was increasingly dominated by Government agencies but that publication was also controlled. These problems have been exacerbated in recent years, given the Government's determination to force the pace of change in curriculum reform. This has meant that legislation is often enacted before evidence that innovation is likely to succeed has been collected. When the research subsequently shows that a few positive outcomes have materialised, and this has repeatedly happened with aspects of the National Curriculum, the Government finds itself under embarrassing pressure to undertake large-scale revisions.

O'Connor quotes one researcher, Ursula Clarke, who worked on the evaluation of the first National English Curriculum which has been the subject of considerable debate and controversy. O'Connor quotes Clarke

as saying that it was 'like working in a dark, ever receding tunnel ... trust, integrity and academic freedom, none of these seem to be of any consequence'. This represents a considerable change from the situation described by Mortimore (1991) concerning his research on school effectiveness, which was undertaken during the mid nineteen eighties. Mortimore's main concern at the time was the tendency of the press to sensationalise and distort controversial findings.

Exercising Control

There are a number of ways in which this control is exercised. First, bids for new projects are often restricted to a favoured few. Second, bids have to be made within a tight specification and third, publication rights become the exclusive property of the commissioning body. The drawing up of the specification is particularly crucial, since it can be designed to prevent key issues from even being examined. For example, in the first wave of assessment reform, the then Schools Examination and Assessment Council (SEAC) asked for tenders to evaluate the three alternative pilot versions of Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs). However, bidders were informed that all observational studies were excluded on the grounds that they would interfere with normal classroom practice. This effectively prevented any attempt to estimate the validity or the reliability of the tests items. It was some two years later before private research, some sponsored by the teacher associations was able to establish fundamental weaknesses in test construction (see for example Abbott et al, 1994).

Direct evidence for this form of control is hard to come by because researchers appear reluctant to go public to express their dissatisfaction. However, a number of instances have been collected by BERA, the British Educational Research Association, which has opened a 'help line' for academics worried by the contractual constraints and interference in their work. (O'Connor, 7:7:94) Delay in publication is the most frequent complaint. Contracts specify that sponsors must respond to submissions within thirty days. In practice this can mean

little more than a letter raising a few procedural points. Officials representing Ministers' views can use this tactic to delay publication indefinitely. Two key reports on reading, for example, have been with the sponsors for over twelve months.

Coping with such problems presents researchers with a number of dilemmas when seeking government funding or when joining review bodies.

To illustrate the problem of 'swimming with the sharks' three case histories will now be presented.

Case one: Losing Intellectual Property Rights

A particular case concerns appointment to review bodies. Although these are generally representative, the present forums are largely constituted on Government recommendation. Teacher members are selected because Ministers have visited schools and seen practice they approve of. Academic members are selected either because their views are known to be reasonably disposed to intended policy or because their previous research has produced useful findings. The author, for example, was selected as a member of the Interim Primary Committee charged with the task of reviewing primary practice and making recommendations about the development of the National Curriculum. Galton (1994) describes how, after a years deliberations, the committee was abruptly informed that the report was urgently needed by the then Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker. It would therefore be drafted by Council officials and sent to the Department of Education without the committee having an opportunity to see the draft. After protests, the then

Chief Executive of the National Curriculum Council, Duncan Graham, agreed that three members of the committee could examine the draft and consult with other members by telephone over the weekend. The report, when it finally emerged, reflected very little of the Interim Primary Committee's work. When concern was expressed by a committee member, about having to accept responsibility for a report with such little intellectual content, he was informed that the report was the Council's and the committee had no responsibility for its content. A similar case is described by Phillips (1992) concerning the History curriculum.

When those involved in drawing up the History National Curriculum referred to the report as theirs, they were told.

'Neither the working group nor the NCC can usurp statutory Ministerial responsibilities and decide for themselves the content of the National Curriculum.'

(Phillips, 1992, p253)

In none of these cases, however, has anyone resigned, although subsequently many of those involved have protested at the way that the reports have been used. Perhaps the most eminent critic has been Professor Paul Black who was the main architect of the new assessment

procedures. Complaining of Ministerial interference he told the 1992 annual meeting of the British Association that 'the current ideas are based on a prejudice rather than evidence and are set fair to do serious harm to children's education'. The Government's response was brief. According to the Guardian newspaper the Minister for State, Baroness Blatch's, only comment was that 'it was a pity that Professor Black was out of touch' (The Guardian, 26:8:92). Nearly all academics who have been involved in one way or another with National Curriculum Developments or research reviews have made similar comments although none have resigned in protest at the time.

Case Two: Misrepresenting the evidence

In a number of cases, Ministerial documents have quoted earlier research studies in support of policy decisions. This research was published in books or journals and, therefore, freely available. One example concerned research on the curriculum of small rural primary schools at the University of Leicester. The report (Galton et al, 1991), specifically endorsed the arrangement known as clustering where five or six small schools came together to share expertise and resources. However, the report did not specifically recommend that schools should form federations with one Headteacher in charge of the five or six schools. The Leicester research tended to favour a collegial approach where the existing Headteachers rotated as Chair of the cluster. But the Government wanted federations so that small schools could more readily obtain Grant Maintained Status and opt out of local education authority control. To promote this policy they had to modify the 1988 Education Act to allow groups, rather than individual schools, to opt out. In the White Paper arguing for this change the Leicester research was cited in support of federations. The research team did not publicly dispute the interpretation in the Ministerial document.

Case Three: Carrying out an "Independent" Research Review

In 1992 the Department of Education commissioned an 'independent' review of research on primary teaching, to be known as the 'Three Wise Men's' report. Ministers wished to know 'Why the (National Curriculum) Council had not sorted out the way teachers' taught?' (The Guardian, 13:10:92) The catalyst for this enquiry was the publication in May 1991 of the Twelfth and Final Report of the Primary Needs Independent

Evaluation Project (Alexander, 1991). Ministers focused on the general conclusion that for an estimated expenditure of £13.75 million, over a five year period from 1985-90, the evaluators failed to find significant shifts in practice or in outcome. Even more worrying for a Government pledged to raise standards was the finding that 'reading scores at 7+ and 9+ from 1983-89 showed no evidence that the injection of the extra staff and money into Leeds primary schools, especially

those in the inner city, had a positive impact on children's reading ability' (Alexander, 1991, p136).

The Government responded by inviting Professor Alexander, along with the now Chief Executive of the National Curriculum, Christopher Woodhead and Jim Rose, Her Majesty's Senior Primary Inspector, to produce a report summarising existing research on teaching in primary schools (Alexander et al 1992). Speed was the essence. The authors were given one month to carry out the review and the report was then rushed out by the Government in typescript for a press conference two weeks before it was available for distribution to schools. Simon (1993) describes this press conference where education correspondents were given fifteen minutes to read the report which consisted of at least twenty thousand words. According to one reporter, they were told by the then Secretary of State, Kenneth Clarke (now Chancellor of the Exchequer) 'Don't bother to read the document. You will find the bullet points made in my press release.' All this argues Simon was 'symptomatic of the level and character of current Ministerial behaviour' (Simon, 1993, p13).

At the press conference, Professor Alexander attempted to balance the largely negative comments contained in Clarke's bullet points. Typical of these were,

'Too much topic teaching amounts to little more than aimless superficial copying from books and offers pupils negative opportunities for progression from one year to the next.'

'There is the persistent and damaging belief that pupils should never be told things, only ask questions. There is also a belief that teachers must never point out when a pupil is wrong.' (Alexander et al., 1992 paras 68 and 104)

Alexander's attempt to suggest that the National Curriculum, with its frequent changes and curriculum overload, was partly responsible for a hiatus in standards was pilloried in the media. He was labelled an 'unwise man' for allegedly going back on his report. Melonie Phillips, again in The Guardian, suggested that his motives were dishonourable in that he had upset his peers in the educational world and lacked the courage to put his head above the parapet and keep it there (The Guardian, 14:2:92 p20). In the report there are considerable variations in the quality of different sections which were obviously drafted by different members of the team.. For example, the scholarly analysis of the development of primary practice sits uneasily with a later section criticising 'the persistent and damaging beliefs of teachers who would never tell pupils anything', a myth first voiced in the late sixties by the Black Paper writers and shown to be untrue in subsequent research, such as the ORACLE studies (Galton et al, 1980). Alexander, as in the other cases cited, did not dissent from such

statements at the report's publication. Defending his position he argued that the report was merely a discussion paper and that, therefore, the views expressed were not necessarily intended to represent a consensus but to be a starting point for further debate.

General Discussion

Hammersley's and Scarth's (1993) argument that researchers should, on no account, 'swim with these government sharks' appears to have little support. Most researcher, when faced with a hostile government, appear to feel they can minimise the damage and that if they were to decline the invitation 'someone worse might take the job'. Such motives would appear to have swayed Professor Paul Black when agreeing to chair the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT). Here the challenge was to come up with forms of 'authentic' assessment that would remove the threat by Mrs. Thatcher's to introduce simple pencil and paper tests reminiscent of the old 'Eleven Plus'.

There are, however, stronger reasons for compliance. External research funding is an essential ingredient for any University Department wishing to remain more than a mere teaching institution. Apart from Industry and the Research Councils the main sources of funding come from the Government appointed quangos. In education such bodies include the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), an amalgamation of the National Curriculum Council (NCC) and (SEAC), and the National Council for Educational Technology (NCET). The Department for Education has direct input into decisions regarding the granting of such contracts and the drawing up of the specifications. To protest too vigorously at one's treatment runs the risk of eliminating one's institution from the list of potential bidders.

There is now an even further threat to the researcher's independence. Up to now money was available from the University Funding Council as part of its Selectivity Exercise. But the sums for education have now been transferred to the new Training Agency which is responsible for all teacher training, including INSET. These funds are substantial and are now under the direct control of a Government quango which is responsible directly to the Department for Education. It would be a brave Head of a Faculty who would wish to challenge decisions of this body publicly.

Thus the situation is now that, from this year, the major part of funding for research in education rests with Government quangos, either direct or indirectly. Any Department wishing to maintain its research profile will need to bid for these funds. The recommendation made by Hammersley and Scarth not to participate in Government sponsored research seems no longer a tenable option. Not to participate when invited will be to risk future exclusion from the bidding. Under

these circumstances there seems little alternative but to remain in the water and hope that the shark eats up someone else!

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