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Chapter 3

How is educational research 'being framed'?

Governmentality, the (ac)counting of, and expertise in, educational research

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On 2 July 2005 in The Age newspaper (p. 1), a Professor of Education at Melbourne University was cited as arguing that educational research is irrelevant. This type of criticism is not new. The criticism of irrelevance of educational research as a field replicates similar charges made in the UK during the 1990s (e.g. Hargreaves 1996, Hillage et al. 1998, Tooley and Darby 1998) and in the USA (Coalition for Evidence-based Policy 2002). But such comments are, in 2005, receiving significant attention. The restructuring (and funding) of higher education is now the focus of significant debate in Australia as elsewhere. The context is that of declining (real) government expenditure in Australian higher education generally. Furthermore, who funds and benefits from research is now at issue, as there is a perceived need to harness knowledge production and transmission to better service the national interest. As stated in the Coalition’s policy Backing Australia’s Ability, universities are now central to knowledge production and dissemination in an ‘innovation economy’ (Nelson 2003).

In this chapter I argue that the debates over quality are indicative of wider shifts in the nature of educational governance generally (Marginson and Considine 2000), the role of universities within an informational society in particular (Delanty 2001), and the reconfiguring of power/knowledge in terms of the relations between the state, knowledge and expertise within advanced liberalism and global capitalism (Rose 1993). Current debates about quality and research are highly political, driven by neo-liberal ideologies about the role of education as a tool of the market; but also epistemological, as various policy moves are made on particular assumptions about the nature of knowledge production, its dissemination and legitimation in terms of what counts as valued knowledge, who decides what counts, and with what effects. This last point is most obvious when unpacking the ‘coincidences’ between two rapidly ‘travelling’ discourses – the discourse of evidence-based policy and practice, and the discourse of quality research assessment – and how they are being articulated in the Australian policy context.

My argument is structured around Yates’ (2005a, p. 3) delineations between three approaches to discussions about quality and impact in examining the development of the Research Quality Framework in Australia during 2005–7. In
the first section, I will ‘ask what agendas and experiences are being brought to a particular development; what are the situation, context, constraints that particular field of discussion is occupied with; what are the tacit as well as explicit terms of the agenda’ (p. 3). This requires analysing the changing national and international policiescapes of higher education in relation to the nation state and globalised economies and how universities are being remade to promote innovation and informational economies for global capitalism. Second, I will consider ‘quality’, and ‘impact’ as ‘events, texts and empirical objects of study’ (Yates 2005a, p. 3). I will do this by considering a particular ‘case’ of the research, policy and practice nexus –gender equity research – from the point of view of a systematic review, the preferred approach suggested by ‘evidence-based policy and practice’ (EPP) advocates. I then move into normative discussions about worthwhileness, the assessment process and criteria of quality. This means ‘elaborating and defending and assessing our own aspirations for the work we do; elaborating criteria of methodological quality...defending conceptions of appropriate relationships between research and a field of professional practice...[and] arguing about who or what should be appropriate to judge whether work has in fact been of quality or has an impact” (Yates 2005a, p. 3).

The Australian policiescape

The Australian Department of Education Science and Technology (DEST) established a consultative process during 2004–6 in order to produce a Research Quality Framework (RQF) by 2007. Informed by the Expert Advisory Group chaired by Sir Gareth Roberts, the reviewer of the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 2003, the policy debate echoes preceding and ongoing debates about the New Zealand Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) (introduced in 2004) and the RAE in the UK (introduced in 1985). The RQF will determine in Australia over the next decade what counts as quality research in terms of particular measures of impact on the field and on policy and practice, who gets funded for research in terms of who measures up against particular criteria of quality, and finally which universities count in terms of the measures mobilised to re-distribute both research funds and research training to the 38 Australian universities. This policy has significant implications for all Australian universities and academics, in terms of status hierarchies between universities and academics, the future research capacities and potential of individual universities, and the careers of academics as researchers and/or teachers.

But the quality debate needs to be located within wider debates about the rapidly changing nature of higher education as a result of the internationalisation of education, the rise of knowledge-based economies, the emergence of an international quality movement, decreased Australian federal government funding of universities, increased federal government intervention in higher education to direct teaching and research towards national priorities, and the desire by all governments to be seen to be efficient, effective and more accountable.
With regard to internationalisation and privatisation, quality assurance is now a key aspect of winning and retaining niche overseas and local student markets. The Australian University Quality Assurance Agency, created in 2002 in line with similar institutions in the UK and NZ, completed its first round of assessments in 2006. Its focus was on auditing the paper trail or processes assuring ‘quality’ of the Australian higher education system in general. But it is quality research that will be the key signifier in international ranking tables, differentiating between elite global universities and other universities within Australia. Research reputation will attract the ‘high flyer’ students and research funds. Embedded in current policies, therefore, is the tension. On the one hand, the government wishes to produce greater differential research funding between universities with the concentration of funding in fewer universities, a differentiation that the RQF will deliver. But on the other hand, due to decreased government funding of higher education, government policies encourage all universities to be more internationally competitive by creating a high quality Australian ‘brand’ of international education (Nelson 2003, Marginson 2006).

But when it comes to defining quality research, how is quality understood? Quality is defined in the Preferred Option of the Australian Expert Advisory Group in two ways: as impact on the field, where quality is judged by citations, quality of journal, theoretical framework, conceptual clarity, methodological rigour etc.; and impact on policy and/or practice as judged by qualified users (Expert Advisory Group 2005). Whereas impact on a discipline is to be judged by peers through a range of ‘measurable’ proxies (e.g. citations and impact factor of journals) that tend to favour the sciences, how to measure impact on policy and practice is more difficult – who are the users, how does research translate into practice, and how can effect be measured? The latter is a major issue for professional fields such as education.

Educational researchers are precariously caught between a rock and a hard place by contradictory policy pressures. On the one hand, the research quantum measures utilised during the 1990s to fund research increased expectations of Australian researchers to be internationally recognised as judged by their respective disciplinary field (peer esteem) and quantity of inputs (research funds) and outputs (publications). As with the UK RAE, old hierarchies of what counts as quality were recreated as universities focused on the production of knowledge for peers and within specialist fields in international peer refereed journals usually inaccessible and incomprehensible to practitioners or policymakers (Morley 2003, Blackmore 2005). On the other hand, as stated in the opening paragraph, since 1996 considerable pressure has been put on educational researchers in the UK, USA and Australia to better inform policy and practice. Criticisms shared across nation states have been that educational research is supply rather than demand driven, lacks coherence as a body of work, is oriented towards research colleagues rather than policymakers or practitioners, and is generally inaccessible in terms of both language and location. In the USA, the No Child Left Behind legislation prescribes scientific research within a particular narrow frame of large-
scale randomised control trial (RCT) methodologies (Lather 2003). Education as a professional field is expected to inform professional practice in an ongoing manner. Impact is here equated to immediate use value. These competing agendas about impact mean that politicians and practitioners can blame educational researchers simultaneously for failing to meet the performance indicators in terms of research funds, publications and citations, and failing to inform policy and practice, while researchers seek to do both with less time and funding. Thus educational researchers are 'framed' as being irrelevant and inadequate.

The apparent inaccessibility of research to policymakers and practitioners, paradoxically, justifies a further mechanism in order for research to inform practice and policy. It is no coincidence that a discourse promoting evidence-based policy and practice (EPP) is currently also being foregrounded. EPP appears to resolve the tension between impact as measured by citations, and impact on policy and practice as EPP advocates claim that systematic reviews can synthesise the evidence for consumption by different audiences. The EPP approach is premised on a particular empiricist view of research that favours large-scale random controlled studies on the basis that it is on the one hand more valid, credible, generalisable and measurable, and on other hand, identifies 'what works' premised upon a particularly linear and instrumental relationship between research, policy and practice (Blackmore 2002). These claims are welcome within a political climate in which politicians and practitioners seek simple and immediate solutions to complex problems.

Various versions of what counts as evidence-based policy and practice have been promoted in education by some academics and governments (Lather 2003). The notion of evidence-based practice and policy (EPP) is a new constant in Australian education policy discourses and texts e.g. evidence-based leadership, evidence-based school reviews (Blackmore 2002). The chair of an Australian federal government report on literacy, while citing his own research extensively to advocate that phonics be required in teacher education, also claims the report is 'evidence based' (Rowe 2005; The Age 11 December, pp. 1, 12). The EPP discourse within global and local education policy communities takes on significant credibility in the context of the quality research debate given its claims. The proponents of EPP argue that there is need for a more cumulative, rigorous and focused approach to the production of evidence to inform both educational policy and practice (e.g. Hargreaves 1996, Hillage et al. 1998). The assumption inherent in much of the argument is that evidence-based research of a particular type derived from the medical model dominant in the health sciences and large epidemiological studies, is of a higher quality than other forms of research (e.g. qualitative research based on case studies).

In defining this nexus between quality and impact based on types of research and their application, not only are instrumentalist assumptions about the nature of 'useful' knowledge made, who produces it and for what purpose (cf. Blackmore 2002), but naive assumptions are also made as to the relationship between the fields of educational research, policy and practice (Kirst 2000, Levin 2006).
Even existing performance-based funding based on ‘de facto’ measures (e.g. research income and publications) do not incorporate much of what educational researchers do. In contrast, Yates (2005b, p. 15) argues research is ‘an activity that is defined by most people as a practice with technical/methodological parameters (it investigates something appropriately and systematically) and also substantive parameters (it makes contributions to knowledge)’. That is, the theory/practice divide is not as evident as is claimed by critics when research is defined more broadly and is inclusive of a range of different types of research and different types of researchers. Policymakers still tend to view a model of linear ‘dissemination from experts’ to practitioners, whereas many educational researchers see knowledge building within the field as complex, two-way and polyvocal, in which practitioners also have a voice. The dissemination process is itself diffuse, and always mediated through publications but also through consultation and advocacy or what Yeatman (1999) refers to as policy activism. This latter perspective sees a more dialogical process between research, policy and practice. Current debates need to be understood within wider shifts in the nature of knowledge, new governmentalities and universities and the re-framing of educational research.

**Universities in a knowledge-based economy**

The wider issue here is about the changing role, function and idea of the university as the key site of knowledge production, dissemination and application (Barnett and Griffin 1999). It is about challenges to the foundations of knowledge and traditional notions of expertise (Brint 1994), and the changing policy process within the new governmentalities of the twenty-first century that focus on accountability, innovation and competition (Marginson and Considine 2000). A fundamental aspect of the twentieth century university has been as the primary producer of valued knowledge in the form of research and scholarship, regulated through particular methodological, professional and ethical practices as opposed to opinion or ideology, where legitimacy and expertise are based on claims of objectivity (Delanty 2001). The modern university has been idealised as providing critical intellectualism, professional education that imbues a sense of public service, and basic research that in the short term may be applied to problem solving and in the long term will advance the field of knowledge generally. Universities have been largely independent of government, part of the wider cultural field, in which academic freedom has been a central tenet. Knowledge production and modes of organisation within the university were based on the intrinsic more by its utilitarian value of knowledge within strongly bounded disciplinary fields, what Gibbons et al. (1994) refer to as Mode 1 Knowledge. The dominant pedagogic mode was that of expert knower to uninformed learner.

The claims for both objectivity in knowledge and independent governance of universities have been undermined during the latter decades of the twentieth century (Barnett and Griffin 1999, Delanty 2001). The basis of legitimacy for the
epistemological claims of one form of knowing over another have been contested by feminist, post-structuralist and cultural studies theorists. Gibbons et al. (1994) argue that there is also an epistemological shift, with the old theory/practice divides of the Enlightenment collapsing with a new focus on problem solving and inter-disciplinarity. At the same time, universities have been restructured by governments in order to capture and realign their core work of research and teaching to do the work of the state, as the state increasingly mediates global markets and the democratic demands of their populations for access to higher education (Marginson and Considine 2000, Marginson 2002). Education has become a business central to the nation states economic capacity to compete i.e. academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). This educational restructuring was produced by, and also produced, a shift from government to governance (Taylor et al. 1997). New modes of governmentality based on managerialism and marketisation have created a range of performativities based on outcomes, images, efficiencies and hierarchies. These performatives measures and audits (quality assurance, performance-based funding) simultaneously appropriate academic labour while alienating academics from their core academic work of teaching and research (Blackmore and Sachs 2007).

Universities are not only being challenged in their monopoly of valued knowledge by new knowledge communities (professional, community-based, social movements) but also by the privatisation of knowledge production with the rise of private sector research and consultancies increasingly utilised by government. As Gallagher (2001), a key education bureaucrat in Australia stated,

In the knowledge economy, the Academies and university researchers are losing their monopoly in knowledge production. Increasingly, the Academies and universities are becoming knowledge receivers and transformers of knowledge as well as generators of knowledge. In the world of scholarly information, a range of parties interact and form partnerships to develop, create and disseminate scholarly information via a range of national and international networks and publication vehicles. The parties include universities, industry, research organisations, academics, the Academies, researchers, students, librarians and publishers. All bring special interests and concerns to the issue. And all are part of the solution. Each of the parties I have listed above need to review its assumptions about its practice and change that practice if it is inhibiting a solution to knowledge management for the 21st century.

The quality research agenda is not only about production in universities, but also ‘embraces both producer and user communities’ (Dyson and Desforges 2002, p. 2).

At the same time, the new governmentalities of the performative state have focused on increased accountability of public institutions (and therefore control of the professions that have provided public sector expertise) by government through
the audit. The audit has come to replace former reciprocal social understandings that were based on rationalities of trust (Power 1999).

The constant demands for audit both witness to and contribute to the erosion of trust, and seek to establish new distanced relations of control between political centres of decision and ‘non-political’ procedures, devices and apparatuses...

(Rose 1993, p. 295)

Universities are therefore accountable to both government (and the public) for efficient use of research funds, and also to the market (users of research – industry, students, community). But these new accountabilities to government, institutional managers, as well as the market (students, practitioners, and the professions) are often not in alignment, as each stakeholder has different expectations and makes different judgements as to use value.

Meanwhile in Australia, government funding of public universities has drastically decreased, while the user pays and federal intervention on what is taught and researched has increased. Higher education has been vocationalised to meet the needs of the nation state and international capital. These trends have collectively shifted relations between academics (as professional experts and producers of professional labour), the nation state (their employer), and their clients (students, professions and industries), in ways that has devalued academic expertise. There are strong pressures for graduate attributes driven by professional organisations and international standards movements, while reputation (measured by student satisfaction scores) drives local and international markets. Current university reforms are reconstructing professionals as technicians judged by externally determined professional standards and moderated increasingly internationally rather than as advocates who have a commitment to public service and citizens within specific cultural contexts (Brint 1994). Academic expertise is under challenge.

Under the welfare economy, universities were implicated in public policies that involved some state intervention against the market and for social justice and the common good. Now universities are central to knowledge-based capitalism, and the strong accountability upwards to the state and outwards to the market works against public expectations of universities as independent, and catering for public needs and interests. Academics are also accountable to their professional and international communities in terms of knowledge production. And these are based on different rules of the game in terms of advancing the field of study in fundamental as well as applied research. University dependence on the market changes this relationship, can compromise a university’s autonomy, and therefore that of its researchers. This is not to argue that professional autonomy be maintained at any cost, but to suggest that professional autonomy is an important aspect that protects the integrity of university-based research and also the capacity of the academic researcher to work independently in public policy. The issue
of independent research has now been highlighted by the abolition in 2005 of the ‘independent’ board overseeing the distribution of funds by the Australian Research Council, making the ARC panels directly responsible to a Minister of Education. He has in turn exercised a previously little-used authority to refuse to fund numerous (largely humanities and social science) applications judged as successful by an extensive national and international peer review process to which all ARC applications are subject. What does this say about independent peer review?

Barnett (1997) argues that what is missing in this process of technologising professional work and commodifying professional knowledge is another dimension of what it is to be a good professional practitioner, that of criticality. This value dimension informs professionals as to the wider debates about ethics, social justice and civic responsibility, about professing for and about their field of expertise (Clegg 2005). Current debates portray criticality and theory as if in opposition to professional practitioner knowledge and problem solving. Yet within education there is an emerging tradition of practitioner research that suggests educational research exemplifies Gibbon’s Mode 2 knowledge contrary to Mode 1 knowledge encouraged by the RQF (e.g. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2006). Researchers often partner with practitioners, and teachers undertake action research (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2006). What does quality mean for practitioner research (Furlong and Oancea 2006)?

Policy is similarly produced in many instances through an ongoing dialogue between researchers, practitioners and policymakers around theorising practice and practising theory (Blackmore 1992). Universities, but particularly professional faculties such as education, are therefore caught in this dilemma between developing critical professionals and being advocates or ‘professing’; and servicing the government, the economy and the labour market (Barnett 1997).

...the influx of students and the move to student centred learning has placed in juxtaposition the values of those academics who see university education as being about critical thinking and disciplinary study and the values of students, many of whom see university education as being about professional training and the acquisition of a credential which will assist in their chances of career advancement.

(Coaldrake and Stedman 1999, p. 3)

Finally, with the performative state, the nature of policy production, dissemination, and reception has itself altered, and therefore the capacity of research to inform policy in particular ways. Education is a field that is highly politicised and increasingly subjugated to other fields (economics). Politicians are susceptible to rapidly changing public opinion, and also create public opinion through careful media management e.g. market polling (Blackmore and Thorpe 2003). De facto policies are often made by politicians through the media (Lingard 2003). Governments are forced to make decisions within a volatile context, and
researchers do not have the same imperatives to draw definitive conclusions or tight policy recommendations, unless required under contractual arrangements. Research cannot provide the certainty in terms of the types of solutions that policymakers seek as research is contested within its own disciplinary boundaries (Levin 2006).

Education policy is often as much about maintaining legitimacy, about being seen to do something, providing a quick solution, rather than being informed by research. That is, policy has performative and symbolic dimensions. Research is often utilised to inform policies post hoc, to confirm decisions already made. And of course research in any field is contested within the discipline, as indicated in the literacy debates between phonics and whole language approaches (e.g. The Age, 11 December 2005, pp. 1, 12). Levin (2006) argues that the complexities that governments face in terms of resources, meeting electorates' contradictory demands, dealing with crises, time constraints, electoral promises and priorities, opposition parties and the media, personal experience of politicians etc, support a view that research can only at best expect to be one factor influencing policy decisions. In Bourdieu's (1990) terms, academics and researchers work within different fields, with different vocabularies, boundaries, rules, and practices, that sometimes overlap.

Policy (and how it is read, perceived and received) has become a performative technology of the new governmentality of advance liberalism (Rose 1993). The current research quality policy captures both the market and managerial aspects of performativity: being seen to offer a solution to a problem (the failure of research to inform policy and practice); being accountable in terms of promising greater efficiency and effectiveness through differentiated funding; through its normative capacity to change behaviours to direct research towards national priorities; and its allocative capacity to redistribute resources differentially to quality researchers and universities.

In turn, educational researchers, as teachers, have significant experience of how funding and policy shapes a field of practice, and in turn how institutional practices mediate shifting relationships between individual academics and teachers, their work and their employment conditions. Education professionals were marginalised from policy production during the 1990s with the rise of neo-liberal reforms of marketisation and new managerialism and increased executive power (Blackmore and Sachs 2007). The relationship between government, public bureaucracies, unions and the professions has altered significantly, ending 'licensed autonomy and public service professionalism' (Seddon 1997, p. 230). Whereas public professionals saw advocacy as an aspect of their collective aspirations and responsibility, the technologisation and commodification of technical expertise in the late 1990s, has undermined this aspect of professional practice, at least in theory. Furthermore, the boundaries have blurred between producer/user with increased partnerships, doing and commercialising research, as markets infuse the daily practice of research.
Thus the relationship between government and educational researchers is a difficult, contested and troubled one, in which any prescriptive policy is treated with caution by researchers and where advocacy by researchers (e.g. for social justice) is increasingly less acceptable to policymakers. Levin (2006) goes on to suggest that popular commonsense views of science tend to prevail; therefore education needs to have a veneer of science to gain public credibility. Moves within government and within the research community towards evidence-based policy and practice (EPP) are therefore well received. As Levin (2006, p. 153) argues,

Some governments or agencies have given a prominent role to research units; while others have dramatically reduced their importance. Where functions of research and use of evidence to support policy are institutionalised there is more potential for research to be available when needed and in an appropriate form. In so far as research has public credibility it will also tend to have more cachet with politicians...

Thus EPPI with its focus on systematic reviews is funded by the UK government, and a Best Evidence Synthesis Unit sits within the NZ educational bureaucracy. The relationship between research, policy and practice, always fraught, is discursively re-articulating earlier depoliticised paradigms of the research–policy relationship. And with the restructuring of education as a field incorporated into economics, policymakers shape what research is done (through funding), how it is done (criteria for funding) and whether or not it is utilised (in policy) (Lingard 2003). Quality research policies can therefore be seen as a mechanism by which the state manages academic capitalism by changing behaviours towards particular types of research that is of immediate value to government (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). So while the discourse is about ‘useful knowledge production’, ‘performativity is both an epistemological condition and, when it comes to the relations between higher education and the state, a political project’ (Cowen 1996, p. 252).

(Ac)counting of educational research

Education as a field therefore sits uncomfortably, in the epistemological uncertainties and risk management, economically driven politics of post-industrial societies in global economies. Most academics and Vice Chancellors see the bottom line of the RQF as creating a more differentiated hierarchy between universities that will allow for more efficient distribution of limited research funds and students through research concentration (see DEST 2000 for responses to RQF from AVCC, Australian Councils for Deans of Education, Australian Association for Research in Education). Any hierarchy between research-intensive, teaching and research, and teaching-intensive universities, and any reassertion of old knowledge hierarchies will impact detrimentally on education, a multidisciplinary field rather than a discipline with its institutional base located primarily in the
non-research-intensive universities (Lingard and Blackmore 1997). The quality research agenda therefore serves a particular function in a political context where there is an emphasis, as in the UK and Australia, on ‘what works’ and a desire to change behaviours of educational researchers more towards policy service rather than policy critique or advocacy (Atkinson 2000, Blackmore 2002).

Evidence of past successes no longer protects educational research as a field. For example, the Federal Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs Impact of Educational Research on Policy and Practice Report (DETYA 2000), highlighted the distinctiveness of the field in terms of the nature of educational research and its diffused model of knowledge production and dissemination, but also its quality in terms of its significant impact on the disciplinary field as well as policy and practice, as did earlier reviews (McGaw 1992, 1997). Through five separate, rigorous and methodologically distinctive studies, the Impact Report considered both measures of impact: impact on the field of research (a bibliometric analysis and statistical and content analysis of publications); and impact on policy and practice (through backward concept mapping analyses on research impact on policy and another on teacher use of research to inform their practice).

The Impact Report indicated that Australian educational research was over-represented in international journals, but that citation rates were low (in part because many educational journals, particularly Australian ones, books and book chapters are not included in citation indexes); that Australian research had significant impact on policy in particular areas (e.g. gender equity reform, critical literacy); and that teachers (exemplary teachers in particular) utilised recent research in their daily practice. Overall, the report was more favourable across a range of criteria than expected. The teacher ‘knowledge in action’ study (McMenamin et al. 2001) indicated that teachers utilised a wide range of resources informed by research directly and indirectly, although exemplary teachers used new concepts more explicitly; and new concepts were disseminated through multiple modes e.g. professional development, policy, colleagues.

The current discourse around quality is therefore as much about new modes of governance seeking to change the nature of the field of educational research rather than recognising the current characteristics of the field. First, the federal educational policymakers felt that educational research did not fit their preferred model of research concentration (modelled on the sciences). Instead, the Impact Report indicated that it was diffuse, identifying an unevenness of educational research in Australia (in part due to its geography), and the lack of research concentration due to a more widely distributed nature of educational research locations. There was still a large number of research-inactive educational academics utilising a limited range of methodologies.

Second, the research that was done did not readily answer the questions being asked by politicians and therefore was deemed irrelevant. There was no coherent body of educational research knowledge that provided readymade and consistent answers for policymakers with any certainty. PhD students were seen to be given too much leeway in choosing topics, and not to be working in research teams
How is educational research ‘being framed’? (as in the science model of research). As with reports in the UK (e.g. Hillage et al. 1998, Gorard 2001, BERA 2001, Furlong and White 2001, and McIntyre and McIntyre 2000 as synthesised in Dyson and Desforges 2002), the system was seen to produce numerous small-scale qualitative research reports that lacked some coherence and few large-scale quantitative reports which were replicable and could inform policy.

Third, there was much enthusiasm for practitioner research with some concern about quality. There was concern by government about the lack of cumulative research effort and the absence of attempts to replicate, test and build systematically on previous research (Hillage et al. 1998). What the Impact Report identifies, as Davies (2003, p. 111) argues in the English case, is that the perceived gap between research and practice is not because teachers do not undertake or utilise contemporary research but that the culture of teaching in general does not encourage utilising research i.e. it is a systemic issue not a research/policy/practice issue (see also Blackmore 2002, Atkinson 2000). To encourage professional learning based on research, and especially teacher practitioner research, would require significant government investment in teacher professional development.

Fourth, what it also indicated was that most teachers were unaware that they were utilising contemporary research in their daily work. This is because of the nature of professional learning in schools. The Impact Report showed how impact is diffuse and implicitly embedded in a range of professional and school practices. Yet notions of multiple intelligences and multi-literacies were commonplace in classrooms, ideas disseminated through conferences, texts, workshops, professional development, and by collegial interaction with those teachers who were undertaking post-graduate research. The report also recognised that teachers in reading research without a sound theoretical and conceptual framework were more likely to interpret research differently than is intended.

An updated study (the Impact Report considered 1992~8) based on the same mixed methodologies would perhaps reveal the ongoing impact of Australian research; for example, on the Middle Years Research and Development Project (MYRAD), science education (e.g. Science in Schools) in Victoria, and learner-centred pedagogy (e.g. Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Research Study, QSRLS) (Hayes et al. 2006). Each of these research projects developed out of different conceptualisations, theoretical frameworks, methodologies ranging from school effectiveness and improvement, to constructivism, and critical sociology. In each instance, the curriculum reforms arising from this research were framed within wider theoretical debates amongst the different communities of researchers, policymakers and practitioners about the nature of curriculum and pedagogy in post-industrial knowledge-based economies. The capacity of educational research to inform policy and practice in these examples also cannot be disentangled from other reforms, both bottom up and top down, that are concerned about developing new ways of organising schools and new forms of teacher leadership in schools (Thomson and Blackmore 2005, Lingard et al. 2003). In each instance where there was significant impact on practices in schools, there was a temporary convergence
between the political agendas of government and the research agendas of some academics. Other research projects have since developed from these (e.g. Middle Years Research and Development Project and Science in Schools projects in Victoria that now inform an extended project; and in Singapore the QSRLS study is being re-contextualised and enhanced). This research is ongoing with long-term effects on teacher practice.

Paradoxically, the measures of impact within the field of these particular innovations will be limited to publications in international refereed journals. Key books that are most accessible to teachers and principals do not count in research audits or citation indexes (e.g. books from the QSLRS such as Lingard et al. 2003, Hayes et al. 2006). In the Australian RQF, the current preferred option put forward by the Expert Advisory Committee is that the evidence presented (e.g. four articles) will not actually be read, but judged according to proxy indicators (e.g. citations). Yet it is widely acknowledged that education, as humanities generally, have few of their prestigious journals included in citation indexes. And books and book chapters are not in citation indexes. Furthermore, recent ‘mock audits’ undertaken within some Australian universities indicate that education gains higher ratings when articles are actually read.

Impact, as is relevance, is therefore a complex issue to define, identify and track, and least of all measure. As Davies (2003, pp. 110–11) comments: relevance depends on questions asked, and in what context and to what practical ends... research that is apparently more generalisable, cumulative, and based on highly representative samples for some purposes may be of little value to those with different practice needs and in quite different contexts from those in which the research took place. There is no such thing as context free evidence.

As the Education sub-panel (2005) of the English RAE argued in a position paper, research can be of high quality, address an important and significant issue within the field, but still have little immediate impact on policy and practice. Indeed, that has been the case for much innovation. And for those who research in and on policy, relevance and wide dissemination alone do not ensure utilisation or impact as intended, as take-up is dependent on the particular context – upon issues of context and capacity, as in the case of teachers, and inclination and political will, as in the case of politicians.

**What counts as evidence?**

It is therefore understandable that there is significant concern within the educational research community internationally about the trend towards privileging certain types of research as more credible by dominant discourses about evidence-based policy and practice at a time when what counts as quality is also under scrutiny (e.g. Atkinson 2000, MacLure 2005, Torrance 2004). Privileging of particular
models of research as a gold standard e.g. No Child Left Behind’s prescription of RCT reproduces hierarchies negating the epistemological pluralism of the 1980s and 1990s (Lather 2003). Blair’s policy focus on ‘research that works’ has been institutionalised with the establishment of the National Educational Research Forum (NERF) to develop a national research and development strategy for education, as well as the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) which undertakes systematic reviews. The NERF argued there is a need for research capacity building because there is a lack of sufficient scale and quality in terms of priority issues and what can be used to inform policy and practice (Dyson and Desforges 2002). This is about developing a research system, based on particular technologies. In the Australian context, educational researchers feel particularly vulnerable, with the focus on science and technological solutions to the neglect of the social sciences and humanities in the national research priorities (Bullen et al. 2004).

Many argue that EPP, and the systematic review in particular, is premised upon large epidemiological studies in health, utilising meta analysis and other statistical methods. While these can inform clinical practice they have less applicability to education because education is unlike health care and medicine – ‘its activities, processes, and outcomes are complex and culturally, or contextually, specific’ (Dyson and Desforges 2002, p.1) i.e. causation and measurement problems are different. MacDonald states that systematic reviews (2000, p. 131)

entail a series of techniques for minimising bias and error, primarily though the use of protocols which state, prior to the review being undertaken, what the criteria will be to guide the review, search strategies, inclusion and exclusion criteria, standards of methodological adequacy, the precise definition of the intervention in question, unbiased estimation of aggregate effects and so on.

Quality, in the terms of systematic reviewers who undertake a secondary review process of available research, is defined by EPPI, for example, in terms of the clarity of methodology in both the primary research and also the secondary review process; transparency in terms of inclusions and exclusions in that review process; and certainty of outcomes in terms of findings (MacLure 2005, reprinted as Chapter 4 of this book). Key features of systematic reviews according to Evans and Benefield (2001, p. 529) are as synthesised here:

an explicit research question to be addressed; transparency of methods used for searching for studies; exhaustive searches for published and unpublished studies; clear criteria for assessing the quality of the studies (both qualitative and quantitative); clear criteria for including or excluding studies based on the scope of the review and quality assessment; joint reviewing to reduce bias; a clear statement of the findings of the review.
This ignores, according to MacLure (2005) other measures of quality: intertextual connectivity, critique, expertise, independence, tacit knowledge, chance ideas with new ideas, and dialogic interactions between the research ‘literature’ and ‘data’. Complex issues such as ethics, values, and professional practitioner knowledge are ignored. Such reviews, she argues, draw from narrow electronic databases which can be searched using keywords in titles and abstracts, again a mode of publication more typical of some fields than others where titles are more ‘playful’ (Zeller and Farmer 1999). Due to lack of time and cost, the most likely sources gleaned through a desk search (e.g. scholarly networks, reports, discussion papers, books) are not included. Even after this relatively standard approach to a literature review, the research question in systematic reviews is constantly re-focused to reduce the scope. None of the literature tends to be read and reviewed until after the database is subjected to a second phase of meeting inclusion/exclusion criteria of quality. The EPPI protocol for example, considers criteria such as reporting research findings directly, description of intervention, how developed and evaluated; study design and methodology; pre- and post-intervention data; equivalent control group; reports against all outcome measures; and identifying key causal relations. This is the ‘experimental model’ more typical of psychological research based on particular definitions of reliability, rigour, validity and replicability (MacLure 2005, p. 3). There is little recognition that these are criteria or issues that are not valid for other forms of research that are equally valuable in terms of their explanatory power e.g. case study research. As a consequence of this protocol, as MacLure (2005) points out, the number of studies that are ultimately read and reviewed is usually small (e.g. between 10 and 20). Such approaches are applicable to only certain types of research questions (Evans and Benefield 2001, p. 540).

In turn, the lack of studies emerging from such a process is then used to argue that the quality of educational research generally is questionable, rather than the criteria as to what counts as quality evidence or the research question is too narrow or the techniques (software analysis of abstracts only) are limited. Torrance (2004) points out that systematic reviews focus in particular upon the notion of reducing bias or researcher subjectivity, and reducing the role of professional expertise. MacLure argues these approaches are ‘backward looking’ in a way that construes research knowledge as static, transparent and compliant within disciplinary boundaries. It assumes that evidence can be extracted intact from the texts in which it is embedded, and synthesised in a form that is impervious to ambiguities of context, reads interpretations of writers’ arguments (i.e. bias). Most of all, systematic review degrades the central acts of reviewing; namely, reading and writing, and the unreliable intellectual acts that these support, such as interpretation, argument and analysis (2005, p. 2).

The question to be asked therefore is whether, given all this, systematic reviews do less rather than more than a ‘narrative’ literature review which engages with
debates in the field, identifies and explores conceptual and methodological issues, addresses context, points to uncertainty and ambiguity in findings, while making useful but qualified suggestions about what works (Hammersley 2001).

Consider the following example. One of the research sub-fields named by the *Impact Report* in Australia as successfully informing policy and practice was that of gender equity research. Yet a systematic review of this subfield would exclude most studies as they did not fit the experimental paradigm. Ironically, while feminists tend to state their values upfront as advocates for gender equity, this form of ‘transparency’ is viewed as bias and transparency is sought where values are not considered within the methodology. Furthermore, there is an assumption about how knowledge is produced and disseminated out of existing research.

Gender equity research arose out of a social movement of the 1970s seeking to promote social change and equity for women and girls through education. The policy process was driven by feminist networks working with/against government amongst policymakers (located in equity units in the bureaucracies), practitioners and researchers. The policy process was bottom-up and top-down (Blackmore 1999, 1992). It was highly contested within government and schools, and amongst feminists, as to appropriate strategies. But gender equity practices derived from this research have now become part of the daily practice of schools and educational organisations and embedded in most curriculum documents. Gender equity for girls was also good for boys, being pedagogically sound and inclusive, and indeed has been adopted but not recognised as feminist informed research (Kenway *et al.* 1998).

Research did make a difference to how gender was theorised, and its influences can be tracked over time through various policy shifts in focus from women and girls and rights (liberal feminism) in the 1970s; to the celebration of difference (cultural feminism) in the 1980s; to gender identity (post-structuralism) and the social relations of gender (and therefore masculinity) in the 1990s. The current policy focus on masculinities and under-achievement is by contrast driven by a narrow conceptualisation of gender that ignores class, racial and linguistic difference and indeed most gender equity research undertaken over the preceding twenty years. But it fits nicely with trends in accountability and outcomes-based education and feminist backlash politics of neo-conservative governments (Lingard 2003).

Finally, ‘evidence’ or policy did not in themselves change teacher and school practices. There was significant resistance; and legal and normative organisational frames had to be brought to bear. The capacity to institutionalise gender equity reform required multiple approaches: legalistic (equal opportunity legislation), managerialist (e.g. women’s budgets and gender audits); accountability for outcomes (e.g. numbers of women in various levels of organisations); but also policy advocacy and activism by researchers and practitioners. Much of the knowledge was not only the result of an accumulated body of evidence, but also arose out of contestation between different ontological and epistemological perspectives as well as from the lived experience of women as teachers and researchers. So would
the research field of gender equity for girls have emerged through a systematic review of existing research in 1975? Probably not. But the evidence of impact of gender equity research in 2001 did emerge in the *Impact Report.*

The notion of evidence-based policy is premised upon particular assumptions about the nature of production of knowledge and of research and also of a particular relationship between research and policy – that is, that research is a cumulative process; that research is not contested on political (ideological) grounds; and that research is not about the nature of society, the role of education, or issues of equity and social justice. Furthermore, there is the assumption that policy (and its processes of production, dissemination and reception) is somehow value free, and not value driven and normative, without critique or dissent (Davies 2003).

**How policy ‘frames’ research**

Thus the discourse of failure and irrelevance of educational research is not itself based upon ‘evidence’. The current push for evidence-based research has an inadequate understanding of the nature of educational research or policy production and also a naïve view of the relationship between research and policy. What the educational research community fears is that the privileging of particular models of research will obliterate important research agendas, agendas arising from more marginalised groups, from stakeholders as well as practitioners. How educational research is counted and ‘accounted for’ needs to take into account a wider set of responsibilities to the public, to practitioners and to policymakers that are neglected or rejected by this new orthodoxy. What concerns educational researchers is first, whether ‘critiques’ of educational policy will be funded by government as have critiques of educational research (e.g. Tooley and Darby 1998); second, whether governments will utilise a range of different forms of ‘evidence’ in their policy making, or, as in the case of Australia and the USA, refuse to move beyond a particular ideological position. Third, will governments be prepared to invest in educational research in the same way as they have in medical research and in a diversity of research? Finally, will the field as understood through the lens of evidence-based policy and practice allow for contestation over the purpose, value and substance of educational research – as more than policy service, but also a matter of critique and also advocacy?

Finally, as MacLure (2005) points out, the language of the systematic review, just as the RQF, are technologies disciplining academics through structures, levels, and taxonomies to institute new orders of importance and create new/reassert old hierarchies (Coaldrake and Stedman 1999). Many would argue that the survival of universities as publicly funded institutions is contingent on them remaining critical and independent. It is the professional and public utility value, the intellectual integrity of university-based research, that is perhaps its most credible commodity. What also characterises public policy on universities is government’s refusal to ‘accept that university education brings other public benefits which are impossible to quantify’ (Poole 1999, p. 29; Yates 2004). Universities are sites of
‘conflicting ideas and values that can be articulated and explored without threat to social cohesion’ (ibid.) and this is a fundamental function of a democracy. It will be the users of educational research who will be the final judge as they feel the impact of the contradictions between instrumental and democratic notions of intellectual work.

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