

Educational researchers doing research on educational policy: Heroes, puppets, partners, or...?¹

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ABSTRACT

Ethical problems encountered when doing contracted research for the English Government.

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Introduction

Evaluation of government policy initiatives is presented in reports, in a narrative which straightforwardly tells of objectives, processes and conclusions. Later discussion of such reports may be written up for the academic community where more nuanced tales are told, for instance, of advice given to support the implementation and development of a policy initiative or, alternatively, of the way policy has failed to use research, or has used it selectively. It is apparent that the relationship between researchers and policy makers is a complex one. On both sides, careers, credibility and cash are at stake, as well as professional identities. As remarked in the introduction to this symposium, in informal settings further tales abound about the tensions in the relationship between researchers and policy makers. These informal stories tend to be told only within a community, so the ones we know are those of educational researchers and of consultant economists.

It will be argued that it is essential for researchers to understand their relationship with policymakers if they are to act with what Aristotle identified as *phronesis* or practical wisdom (Aristotle, 1980). In order to do this, it is necessary to reflect on experience. It will be further argued that the representation of that experience is itself at issue. Practical knowledge is not only situated and contextual. It is also provisional, perspectival and with dependent on the form of the narrative (Stronach and McLure, 1997).

The discussion will take as its starting point a series of articles that have appeared in recent issues of the *British Educational Research Journal* (Brown et al, 2003; Torrance, 2003; Beard, 2003; Wyse, 2003; Lather, 2004; Saunders, 2005). The stories of research told in these articles are also stories of the researchers' identities: identities with strong value positions attached. In some accounts researchers appear at equal partners with policy makers. In others they struggle against becoming mere tools of the system, browbeaten by the powerful funders. Sometimes they are heroes -- maybe tragic heroes -- defending their principles against the odds. This presentation tells contrasting insider stories of an evaluation carried out for the DfES of the Intensifying Support Project. It will focus particularly on the most recent part of the evaluation, completed earlier this year.

The Intensifying Support Project (ISP) is designed to offer a package of support and professional development to primary schools that have made little progress in raising standards since the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. The programme works in partnership with the LEA and the school. It is based on the cycle of audit and setting targets, action and review. It is designed to support

schools to establish self-sustaining systems. The paper will outline the process and recommendations that were made. This outline will then be developed by telling three contrasting but tenable narratives of that process. These will be:

- an exemplary story of the way the good relationship between evaluators and policy makers made a difference to the roll out and implementation of the pilot;
- an heroic story of how the researchers stood their ground in the face of pressure;
- an exploitation story of how the researchers become tools of a system which jealously guards research funding.

In the concluding part of the paper each of the authors draws conclusions about how the relationship of educational researchers with policymakers has been illuminated. Suggestions are also made about how this new understanding might make it more fruitful for all concerned.

Just stick to the facts

In the pilot round of the ISP, thirteen LEAs with a relatively high proportion of schools in the lowest attaining category on a national scale were identified (May 2002). They were invited to join a project to pilot a programme of more intensive support for some of these schools. On 9 June 2003, an invitation was sent out to Nottingham Trent University, among others, to bid to the Primary National Strategy through the Centre for School Standards in CfBT to carry out an evaluation of the pilot. In July 2003, Nottingham Trent University along with some others, was invited to present its bid. It was successful and it was appointed to undertake the work in July. The first meeting with the ISP-PNS team was on August 6. The evaluation involved an in-depth examination of the pilot areas, using data from all LEAs but focusing mostly on three LEAs. The evaluation showed that: (DfES, 2006):

- The great majority of schools involved in the ISP valued the programme. They perceived that the project had supported them in improving the learning, teaching and assessment of children's progress and that it had also supported them in raising standards as measured both by end of Key Stage tests and by teacher assessment within schools.
- The attainment of pupils, as measured by Key Stage results, increased more in pilot schools than in the control group. The 2004 national test results, show an increase at both KS1 and KS2

In October 2003, plans for an extension of the project to 76 further LEAs were initiated. The DfES Standards Site (2006) says:

The extension (2004-5) has been able to build on the ISP pilot ... with a very clear view of the mechanism that most effectively supports schools to move forward with the programme.

Nottingham Trent University were asked to extend their evaluation of the pilot, in order to discover whether the programme had been sustained in the schools in the pilot scheme, and to compare the current views of extension schools with the views that had been expressed by the pilot schools. The following extract from the executive summary give an indication of the kinds of overall findings and recommendations in this second report (DfES, 2006):

Sustainability and impact: the pilot schools

The assessment cycle developed by the ISP programme has become embedded in school practice. The ISP supported teachers in becoming skilled in the areas of target setting, target getting and in developing an understanding of how 'standards' relate to classroom practice. These features are now an everyday part of school life.

The ISP has supported schools in building capacity for improving children's learning and so improving attainment.

...

Impact: the extension schools

Extension schools are overwhelmingly positive about the ISP but remain generally less positive than the pilot schools. The survey of the extension schools took place less than a year after they had begun the programme. When the pilot schools were at this stage they were also less positive.

The ISP has supported schools in building capacity for improving children's learning and so improving attainment.

...

The evaluation has raised a number of questions which should be addressed as ISP develops further:

the relationship between the fall in average marks and the simultaneous rise in the numbers of pupils attaining Level 4

the degree of flexibility that can be built in to the programme without losing its impact.

...

These recommendations have been quoted so fully here because the rest of this paper will take its examples from the extended (2006) -- rather than on the earlier (2004) -- evaluation.

Beyond the bare facts

This account, sticking to the bare facts as it does, leaves a lot out. In particular, it leaves out the processes by which it was decided that these were the bare facts. This is a serious gap if we are to understand something of the way that research (including research-based evaluation) speaks to and of policy. In the case of educational research it is essential that both researchers and policymakers understand this relationship. Put simply, those researchers who are seeking to make a difference to the education of young people and adults in their country need to know what to do for the best.

The conflation of knowledge with information, with bare facts, is a mistake. The amassing of accurate information is characteristic of only one kind of knowledge. Aristotle's tripartite distinction of different kinds of knowledge is useful here. Aristotle drew a distinction between *episteme*, usually translated as theoretical knowledge, on the one hand, and any knowledge that might have a practical import on the other.

He then drew a second distinction between two kinds of practical activity. The first, *poiesis*, is productive and has to do with making. The second, *praxis*, has to do with how one lives as a citizen and human being and has no outcome separable from its practice. *Poiesis* requires the technical knowledge possessed by an expert. Aristotle calls this kind of knowledge, *techne*. Joseph Dunne has carried out the careful and scholarly analysis of Aristotle's theorisation in relation to education. His characterisation of *techne* is helpful (Dunne, 1993: 9):

Techne then is the kind of knowledge possessed by an expert maker: it gives him a clear conception of the why and wherefore, the how and with-what of the making process and enables him, through the capacity to offer a rational account of it, to preside over his activity with secure mastery.

Praxis, on the other hand, requires personal wisdom and understanding. Aristotle calls this kind of knowledge, *phronesis*. It is possessed by a *phronimos*, a person possessed of wisdom and understanding. The point is well summarised by Dunne. He explains that (1993: 10):

[*praxis*] is conduct in a public space with others in which a person, without ulterior purpose and with a view to no object detachable from himself, acts in such a way as to realise excellences that he has come to appreciate in his community as constitutive of a worthwhile way of life. ... *praxis* required for its regulation a kind of knowledge that was more personal and experiential, more supple and less formulable, than the knowledge conferred by *techne*.

Researchers need to act with practical wisdom. *Phronesis* comes through experience and through reflection on experience. To quote Dunne again (Dunne, 1993: 293):

For *phronesis* does not ascend to a level of abstraction or generality that leaves experience behind. It arises from experience and *returns into experience*. ... And the more experience is reconstructed in this way, the more sensitive and insightful *phronesis* becomes – or, rather, than more the experienter becomes a *phronemos*.

Understanding experience is not a simple matter. An account of an experience is not a mirror of its reality (Rorty, 1979). Rather, a plethora of narratives can be told about any event. However, the only way we can understand our worlds, in this case our educational research worlds, is through articulating our own stories and through hearing the stories of the multiplicity of others who act and work with us in educational research settings. Forming these stories is not a simple task. Elliot Eisner suggests that the question, "What is it like to be here?" (Eisner, 1991, p. 72) is nontrivial. As Doris Lessing reminds us, truth is elusive

How little I have managed to say of the truth, how little I have caught of all that complexity; how can this small neat thing be true when what I experienced was so rough and apparently formless and unshaped (Lessing 2002, p. 13)

Lesley Saunders has memorably shown how what is missing from an account can be rendered in a different genre. Dissatisfied with what she was able to say about an evaluation in the official report, she gave an account of some of the (Saunders, 2003, p. 177):

thoughts and experiences "left over" which needed a different -- less ostensibly neutral, more personal and perhaps playfully engaged -- form of expression.

The result was a poem self-consciously reminiscent of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, beginning (Saunders, 2003, p. 177):

O Muse! relate (for you can tell alone,
 Merchants have short memories, Ministers none)
 Relate, who most, who least accrues Respect;
 Whose Fortunes doubly, whose are triply deck'd;
 What forms Corruption, what Ambition took,
 How Innocence doz'd, and Truth forbore to look,

It is not always necessary to change the genre in order to tell two different stories about the same thing. Stronach and McLure's (1997) 'Jack in two boxes' is one striking example. Using the same research evidence about Jack, a headteacher, they constructed two very different life histories for him, both amply evidenced by the research data.

Three ways of telling

To tell only one story about a series of events is to give a very partial account. Accordingly, we tell our story of the processes of this particular piece of research-based evaluation in three different ways. They are presented in three columns to indicate that none of them is to be taken as definitive or privileged with respect to the others. (It may be the case that one of them is to be preferred. We have not investigated this possibility and it is not relevant to our purpose here.) For the sake of anonymity and confidentiality we have used the forms ISP-PNS for the research contractors, and M/T/P to refer to us. This convention should *not* be taken to indicate that people we worked with in ISP or in PNS are homogeneous in their values and attitudes, any more than we are.

Heroes	Partners	Puppets
<p>'There was a lot of aggro over one slide. We really had to stand our ground over the marks versus levels issue. All very interesting.' (Email from M/T/P to SMT at NTU about final presentation of report.)</p> <p>Towards the end of the presentation to the ISP/PNS team at the DfES the team at the DfES asked us to remove the recommendation. To be honest it was something we had been expecting and had prepared for. We had agreed that we resist the request if it came. The offending recommendation concerned the finding that 'Over the four years 2002 to 2005 the average mark for English fell, at a time when the average percentage of pupils achieving Level 4 at KS2 rose,' and the hypotheses we suggested to explain this.</p>	<p>From the beginning, we had close discussions with the key people in ISP-PNS. These discussions were conducted in a spirit of openness, increasingly so as the evaluation continued. Both sides were operating Chatham house rules, or so it seemed to us. This allowed us to see the real constraints they were operating under -- and vice versa. This meant we could all be realistic about what we did and suggested. For instance, here is a typical note from a M/T/P Journal after a meeting between the two sides: 'However, they want something related to whether the focus is basically on key stage two or cross-school. So we can add that in'</p> <p>We were not only given opportunities to make informal contacts with all the</p>	<p>The direction of our research was steered from the beginning. The original invitation to bid required us to do most of our research in the three Authorities where things appeared to be going well. There was very little funding available to follow up the range of experience in other Authorities, though we tried to do so. We were conscious of some cynicism among ISP consultants when we said which three authorities we had been steered towards. There was a general feeling of 'no surprises there'. We noticed for ourselves how ISP admired much of the practice in these Authorities. Our pilot stage used a different set of Authorities. Here again we were steered. When we explained which once we were going to use, we were strongly advised to drop one</p>

<p>The argument from the PNS/ISP team was that this assertions was unsupported by the evidence. We argued that they seemed to accept all the positive findings which were based on the same evidence. Rather mischievously we offered to place a rider over all the data, but did point out that that would reduce the validity that could be attached to the overall positive tone.</p> <p>The discussion continued and we We held our ground and stubbornly resisted. At one point Tony suggested that we realized the reason that this point was contentious was not because it was less evidence based as the team were suggesting but because the team were nervous how this might play in the press. We did not want to remove it as we felt it was very important that ISP consultants explored the issue further. For us this was a matter of social justice.</p> <p>One member of the team assured us that even if the recommendation did not appear they would explore the issue. We left the room for a minute to discuss our response and quickly agreed we would remove it as we believed they would act on the recommendation. We agreed on the form of words that is quoted above: 'raised a number of questions which should be addressed further'. What was removed was the explicit nature of what those questions seemed to be.</p> <p>It was interesting that later in the day we were thanked for our integrity – it seemed as though this comment related to us not simply caving in to their requests. Although of course the outcome was the same.</p>	<p>key personnel in the 13 pilot authorities during their briefings, but we were encouraged to do so and given our expenses (e.g. travelling to London). We took these opportunities and trust was built up on both sides through these informal conversations. We were able to build on this when collecting data. For instance, during a conversation between the researchers, when we were wanting to extend the scope of our evaluation, one of us remarked: 'Some of those nice people [at the briefing] would talk to me about their job ... some of them were really, really nice.' We think these contacts helped with the dissemination too. And we saw how more notice was taken of our findings by the participants just because we were not faceless researchers.</p> <p>We regularly discussed the emerging results with the key people in ISP-PNS. Sometimes this was through semiformal meetings, but discussions also took place by e-mail and on the phone. For us this meant they were able to help us overcome -- or circumvent -- some practical and political difficulties. It also meant that they were able to act on our research long before the report came out. This was important to us, so we were happy to co-operate We also got a feeling for what kinds of evidence were powerful. Notes after one of our meetings said, for instance: 'She was wanting headlines, etc. ... we said we might be able to put it together ahead of... when the final report is due. The [verbatim] comments [from respondents] appear to be powerful again as they had been before.'</p>	<p>of them. When we asked for reasons as to why we were steered in some directions from the beginning no reasons were forthcoming.</p> <p>We were startled to find that messages were being given about the success of the programme even before our evaluation had started. The conversation between us records: 'The minute he stood up he was saying, "Of course it has been successful. Don't let anybody tell you anything else. It has been absolutely successful." ... and then he started talking about the way that the new structures would be [in the rollout] ...so then the whole lot shifted into "Of course it's successful.' It was clear that more than one evaluation was going on. Much later on, we were told informally that internal evaluations had caused concern. One of our journals records: 'Apparently there is a bit of panic because in some areas ... hasn't worked. In other areas... [it has]. She couldn't give us a bit of paper yet because it is still embargoed.' Similarly, we were very startled to hear as we were presenting our final report that the Prime Minister's research unit had carried out their own research which overlapped with ours. We were not given any details about the methods or conclusions. We found out only while writing this paper that a number of evaluations had been carried out overlapping with ours. None of them include details of method. Nowhere on the website has indicated that ours is independent (DfES, 2006).</p> <p>There was very strong pressure put on us to remove one of our conclusions, or at least to tone it down or to</p>
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<p>There were plenty of hints given about the possibilities of future funding, the regard for our university within the Department, and discussions about the possibility to publicising the report more or less widely depending on what the conclusions were.</p> <p>A similar situation had arisen with the previous report. It too had been extraordinarily positive about the pilot, and gave evidence that it had been much welcomed in the schools (despite a bumpy start). We were told that the team was keen to publicise the report widely. However they were unhappy with our presentation of head teachers' perceptions about SATs and their relationship to 'standards'. Again we refused to take out the offending passages. We noticed that far from publicising the report, it was published very quietly indeed on a little noticed website in 2005. It has since disappeared. However we are sure that the contentious parts of our reports were the ones most noticed! So there is at least a possibility that we may not just be tragic heroes.</p>	<p>Some of the results of our research were available to the ISP-PNS team long before the final report was ready, so they were in time to make a difference to the roll out from the pilot. We think it is also making a difference to the development of that roll out. Indeed as far as the design of the rollout was concerned, the final report was irrelevant because it came out after critical decisions had been made. It was especially interesting that even though parts of the report were deemed too hot for wide publication, it was clear the report was being acted on. Relationships were good enough that they were keen to explain to us just how, rather than retreating behind official lines. An e-mail from ISP-PNS to M/P/T is one example: 'We will pursue the issue of ... to try and understand whether this is significant and will follow up the areas for development highlighted.' No doubt, we will be in contact with them next academic year, formally or informally.</p>	<p>make it less prominent in the report. We found this extraordinary: both our evaluations were very positive indeed, as can be seen earlier in this paper. We ourselves were surprised a positive they were. The pressure was very strong and in the end, we agreed to a compromise form of words in both reports where ISP-PNS and the PNS were uncomfortable with our findings. An example is given in this e-mail from M/T/P to ISP-PNS: 'I hope this is now okay. I've taken out the two recommendations and inserted a sentence at the beginning of the data section explaining ...'. The offending finding was reworded to sound more innocuous, and as an 'issue to be addressed'.</p> <p>We found it 'interesting' that only some statistics were made available to us as had been promised. We certainly noticed that were statistics showed the possibility of a negative story, the reaction was defensive to the point of denial, rather than a determination to investigate possible problems.</p> <p>We wonder if we were expected to conform even more. Both our evaluations were published very quietly indeed on the Web. In both cases we had been told there would be publicity but none was forthcoming. We do not know what has happened as a result of our work. We wonder if our mild rebellion made any difference at all, except to annoy our funders.</p>
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Recent discussions in the literature

Our concerns about the relationship between researchers and policymakers are nothing new. There is an extensive literature reaching back decades investigating and pronouncing on this difficult relationship (Edwards, 2000; Furlong and Oancea,

2005. Whitty (2006) is the most recent of a long line of BERA presidential addresses addressing the issue. Sanderson quotes a waspish remark by Keynes (2002, p 6):

There is nothing a politician like so little as to be well-informed; it makes decision-making so complex and difficult.

Policymakers express a similar exasperation with researchers: their timescales, their lack of understanding of political constraints, their tendency to speak to each other in academic language and their tendency to raise ever more problems (Sanderson, 2002; Levin, 2001, 2004; Willinsky, 2003). Presidential addresses to this conference over the years have returned to the issue again and again.

Tony Edwards, writing in the Oxford Review of Education suggests that 'educational researchers have been invited to join the improvement of policy and practice (Edwards 2000, p299). He quotes David Blunkett, then the Minister of State for Education saying,

We need to be able to rely on ... social scientists to tell us what works and why and what policy initiatives are likely to be most effective. (ibid, 299)

Whilst exposing the Minister as an unreconstructed positivist, this suggests that the invitation to researchers to become engaged in policy development was clearly made. It is certainly the case that Education Researchers accepted this invitation whilst trying to heed Tony Edwards' warning that any engagement with government should take account of the tension between the government need to be told 'what works and why' and the researchers unwritten code to 'question fundamental assumptions and orthodoxies'. (ibid, 306) Here is evidence of the different stories to be told within such research.

Furlong and Oancea unpick this tension further. In an ESRC funded project they strived to achieve 'conceptual clarity' around 'applied and practice-based educational research' (Furlong and Oancea 2005). In particular they draw on the idea of Aristotelian practical wisdom both in the diagnosis and in the conclusions they draw. Both Edwards, and Furlong and Oancea focus on what should and can be expected of educational researchers in relation to making a difference through policy, widely conceived.

The debate about the relationship between policymakers and researchers is not just related to the different practical constraints faced by the two parties, as the previous discussion shows. It goes much deeper than that into methodology, epistemology and ideology, especially relating to the possibility of certainty -- for instance about 'what works'. A further concern is about the possibility of neutrality when working for government funders.

All of these issues have implications for the role of the identity of the researcher. In an Editorial for the *British Educational Research Journal*, Hustler and Stronach say (2003, p 148):

The audit culture is mocked, but obeyed... as educators and evaluators... our selves are inhabited by the audit culture.... have with the dystopian courage to aim for a different identity?

Also see Torrance (2003) and Wyse (2003). In the same vein, Lather (2004) attempts to disrupt some of the taken for granted understandings of the relationship between researcher and policymaker, by analysing them from contrasting perspectives including economic, Foucauldian, feminist and postcolonial. The

different perspectives imply different possibilities for the role and identity of the researcher.

More recent issues of the *British Educational Research Journal* show an increasing concern about the identity of the researcher. Different stories are told. Brown et al tell a story of unsung heroes speaking truth to power. Towards the end of their article, it appears a belated partnership has evolved between truth and power. Beard (2003) in his reply to Wyse, implies he sees himself as an independent partner unaffected by the power of the policymakers is researching. Hodkinson (2004) directly addresses the question of researcher identity and power. He argues that there is a way to resist some of the 'cultural imperatives' to join 'the current economies of performance and the related advance of post positivism' (p 22). It may be suggested that he is advocating a move from puppet to (heroic?) member of the resistance, building a community of practice which will help its members in painful and difficult decisions, but decisions which will ultimately overthrow current orthodoxies.

Some conclusions or So how do we see ourselves now.

It would be inappropriate to finish this paper with any form of fixed conclusions. It does seem appropriate to end with reflections from the evaluation team which summarise the learning that took place over the journey. We end the process not as heroes, puppets, or partners but as educational researchers who did a job and learnt something. We also hope that those we worked with during the process learnt something too.

We have presented these reflective comments in a table in order to indicate that none of these three points of view is prior or privileged.

Morwenna	Peter	Tony
<p>It is all too easy to cast oneself as hero. It may be especially easy to cast oneself as tragic hero. Alternatively for educational researchers there may be a special temptation to see themselves as having a critical understanding (Habermasian or Foucauldian, whatever) which somehow means they are bucking the system: playing a game knowingly and subverting it.</p> <p>Telling a number of different stories about the same set of events may be more useful. Such stories are more likely to contribute to an intelligent reflection on experience, noting the complexities of particular events, and, if published, standing a chance of contributing to wider</p>	<p>a rant about open government and the role of research as independent.</p>	<p>For me the most important conclusion relates to the process of the research. From the beginning we were clear that we would prioritise the qualitative data, using quantitative data to support the conclusions we were arriving at through the process of interviews and observations.</p> <p>I think this enabled the teachers, head teachers and LA advisors to see themselves in the data more clearly. I also think it supported us in seeing the process as <i>praxis</i>. As we carried out interviews the head teachers and the teachers were evaluating their own practice. This often led to moments of clarity in which those we were</p>

<p>understanding. Such stories are more modest, less ideological and less self-justifying. They are closer to the little stories needed for working for justice; they are further from the more ideological grand narratives which can obscure as much as they illuminate.</p> <p>If we educational researchers are to make a difference to educational practice at a policy level, we need to tell our little stories in the hope of gaining the (context-dependent, personal, ethical, difficult) practical wisdom needed for right conduct in a public space.</p>		<p>interviewing would suggest ways in which they could move forward – or things which they would do differently in the future</p> <p>The report itself, with its focus on verbatim reporting also allowed those we had interviewed to find themselves – although not literally – we disguised it too well for that. However this certainly suggests that the process supports claims for ‘face validity’ in the report.</p>
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