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Research, Policy and Practice in Guidance: What Should the Relationship Be?

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Introduction

The NICEC Network met in October 2003 to discuss important issues arising from the second 'Cutting Edge' Conference earlier that year, and from the Guidance Council's consultation on the new National Guidance Research Forum (NGRF) being funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). We set ourselves two questions for consideration:

- what would a research agenda look like that was better linked to policy and practice?
- what can the research community do towards strengthening its links with policy and practice?

I and Sylvia Thomson (President of the NACGT and a NICEC Associate) were asked to lead off the discussion with short stimulus papers from researcher and practitioner perspectives, and this article is based on my presentation. From my point of view – as a researcher deeply involved in participant research with practitioners – the above questions cannot be answered without addressing a third, more fundamental issue: what should the relationship between research, policy and practice be, and what shape should it take? I review here the challenges as I see them. Throughout, I use the term 'career guidance' as shorthand for a range of practices relating also to careers education, career development, career management and other forms of 'career work'. I conclude by linking the ideas from that discussion to some strategic considerations for the future.

A researcher's perspective

The social science research community is still a diverse one, and no individual could credibly claim to present 'the' researchers' perspective. Debates about methodological approaches, the place of values in research, and ideologies, continue to rage in educational research, as can be seen from a glance through the pages of the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) newsletter, *Research Intelligence*. I write from a particular standpoint, one which is increasingly marginalised – but by no means unique – within that community.

It is marginal because my central interest is in career guidance, and that is a very small sub-field within educational and social science research, with apparently few champions within the current government or the research councils. It is also marginal because my perspective is a critical one, interested in problems of social inequality and purposes of social justice, particularly in relation to class and gender. I believe strongly that the academy should contain 'gadflies', to borrow Socrates' metaphor, to sting the conscience of any democratic society, and the task I undertake here is a deliberately catalytic and provocative one.

In thinking about how better to link research to policy and practice, we need to consider three re-framings of that question, which underpin the challenge in crucial ways:

1. what should the relationship between research, policy and practice be?

2. how can we preserve the independence and academic freedom of research, and why does that matter?
3. how can we preserve and value diversity in research – and why does that matter too?

What shape should the research-policy-practice relationship take?

How do we conceive of the relationship between research, policy and practice? To put it another way, how can knowledge and power speak to each other? (By knowledge, I refer here both to the theoretical and empirical knowledge generated by researchers and practitioner-researchers, but also to the practical knowledge, both explicit and tacit, of practitioners who may not be actively engaged in research themselves, and of service users.)

There are, I believe, two different and fundamentally incompatible ways of visualising that relationship. I use the term 'feedback loop' model as the one which seems to dominate all too often at present. It looks rather like this:
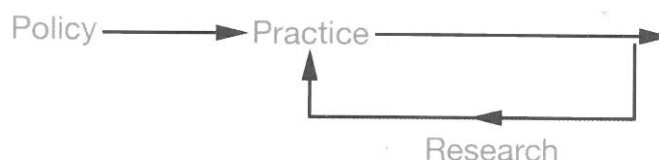
This is, as all illustrations are, an over-simplification, and a somewhat cynical one, though it depicts aspects of the relationship that many may recognise as true in their experience. Policy makers seize upon what look like

good ideas or popular innovations, and launch initiatives. Often this is done in a rush of fervour, without sound evidence, or without sufficient time to pilot innovations – a phenomenon that has been described as 'policy hysteria' (Stronach and Morris, 1994). Despite the frequent dismissal of theory as irrelevant to practice by policy-makers, every such initiative is inevitably based upon a tacit theory of some kind. They typically assume, for example, that if intervention x is carried out, then outcome y will ensue (Pawson, 2002). Practitioners are then expected to 'deliver' these initiatives rapidly, in ways that are increasingly prescribed from the bureaucratic centre. Research is used to evaluate practice, tell policy-makers 'what works', and ensure that practitioners continuously improve what they do. Stronach and Morris highlight the conformative aspect of such evaluation, pointing out the pressures to show not so much 'what works' as to demonstrate 'that it works'. There is also the possibility that findings which indicate flaws in policy will be generally ignored. Of course we need evaluation research, and of course practitioners need feedback, especially on new initiatives. But this model rarely allows feedback to extend all the way back to the start of the loop.

A recent report by the OECD (2002) on educational research in England suggests a more sophisticated model would have less emphasis simply on planning and implementation:
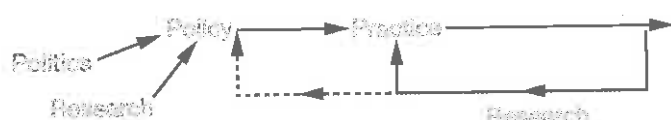
When policy does draw on research before initiating change, this is often in response to a lead taken by practitioners, who have already seized upon theoretical developments in their field and used them to transform models of practice. We can look back at the history of career guidance and see, for example, how the ideas of Donald Super or Carl Rogers – thinking 'outside the box' – influenced the practice of career guidance, and how these new ideas and practices in turn influenced policy. The loop would look very different if it mapped these developments.

Even if the feedback loop were to extend back to evaluate policy itself more often (as in the dotted line above), we are still confronted with a fairly linear cycle which presents an impoverished notion of informing and sharing knowledge. If such a model is seen as the sole or predominant relationship between research, policy and practice, this creates a number of dangers:

- practice becomes distorted, because it becomes focused only on what can be easily measured, and only in terms of the outcomes desired by policy-makers

- practitioners can become de-skilled and de-professionalised as practice becomes prescribed in simplistic and reductionist ways
- the knowledge-power axis becomes the preserve of researchers and policy-makers, and the deep but often tacit knowledge of practitioners, earned through their lived experiences, becomes silenced by dismissal as 'vested interest' or 'refusal to modernise' – as does the knowledge of service-users (Hodkinson and Smith, 2004)
- the relationship between research and practice can become tense and corrupted – audit and evaluation can become games that people learn to play and subvert (Strathern, 1997)
- research is too often done 'on' rather than 'in' practice, treating practitioners as the objects of research rather than as collaborators in it (Bloomer and James, 2003)
- research can become limited to the reactive rather than the proactive, questions which are uncomfortable for policy-makers cannot be asked, thinking cannot be done 'outside the box'
- 'what works?' becomes the worst of all possible research questions when it becomes the only research question that is legitimated
- policy-makers can easily switch tack when individuals move on, newcomers want to make their own mark, or economic pressures assert themselves, leaving both research and practice at once stranded and chasing the coat-tails of a new agenda
- there is accordingly very little support for longitudinal rather than short-term studies
- when knowledge tries to speak to power, it is often impossible to make itself heard above the noise of politics (Pawson, 2003)

A prime example of proactive research related to guidance for lifelong learning, that has provided important evidence but been ignored by policy-makers, is the work of Phil Hodkinson and the late Martin Bloomer (eg. Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999). Building on Hodkinson's theory of careership, they carried out a study for the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA – now replaced by the Learning and Skills Development Agency) on retention and drop-out in FE. Their evidence revealed the complexity of students' learning careers and their decisions to drop out, and the wide range of both positive and negative factors involved. Despite this evidence, the funding régime of FE has become entirely based on absolute but abstract measures of auditing attendance and retention which are nothing short of senseless. Just a week before the NICEC Network meeting at which we were discussing these issues, Park Lane College in Leeds – arguably one of the very best FE colleges in this country in its quality of provision and success in widening participation – had been forced to announce 90 staff redundancies in the face of a £4 million claw-back from the Learning and Skills Council, thanks to this auditing system, with enormous negative

implications for teaching, for learning, and for students' future careers. One of the hardest hit areas of the college may be the career guidance unit, even though the last two years have seen them swamped with unprecedented student demand from young people who received little or no guidance at school, because they were not in the priority group for *Connexions*.

There is an alternative model for the relationship between research policy and practice, which may help to avoid these dangers. It is one based on 'responsible research' as 'an engaged social science', and is founded on mutually informing dialogues (Edwards, 2002a, b). Reciprocity in listening to and communicating with others offers a very different shape for this relationship:
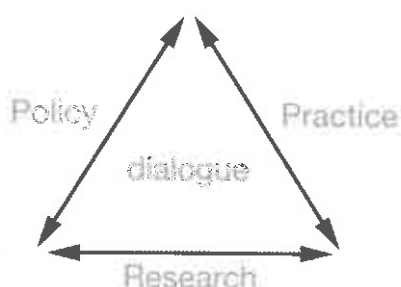
Once again, I would emphasise that 'practice' refers both to practitioners and to users of guidance. This allows us to pose a whole set of other research questions 'outside the box', above and beyond simply 'what works?'. We can also ask:

- what *happens*?
- how do initiatives work *differently* in different contexts?
- what are the *unintended* as well as intended consequences?

More critically, we can ask a very important set of questions that is all too often ignored:

- what does 'it works' mean?
- what are the *hidden* consequences?
- what interests, purposes and values underpin the judgement that 'it works'?

Many of these questions are addressed (albeit often by stealth) by researchers conducting evaluation studies, but our space to do so is becoming more limited by current policy approaches, and 'warning shots' are sometimes fired across our bows, particularly in respect of the final question in this list. David Blunkett, when Secretary of State for Education and Employment, paradoxically claimed that the government is open-minded and welcoming towards research, but warned the Economic and Social Research Council that researchers had to become more 'street-wise' – that is to say, keep their findings in line with common sense – if they were to retain any credibility (Blunkett, 2000).

This, however, raises the question of what is meant by 'common sense', which is not necessarily the same thing as 'current government policy'. One person's common sense may appear ludicrous to another – many practitioners from different professional backgrounds are no doubt experiencing this within *Connexions* at the moment. Moreover, critical researchers would argue that some significant amount of research at least must go beyond the superficial appearances of social realities to *disrupt* common-sense understandings and taken-for-granted assumptions. Without this, as the French sociologist Bourdieu (1992) notes, thinking may no longer be our instrument for expanding knowledge. Instead, we are condemned to become the instruments of the problem we claim to be thinking about. This caution leads directly to my second question about academic freedom.

The need for academic freedom

What a dialogue-based model both allows and challenges us to pursue is the need (alongside other kinds of study) for 'blue skies' research: proactive research – sometimes more purely theoretical – that is genuinely and fruitfully independent. 'Theoretical' does not, in my opinion, mean 'irrelevant' to policy-makers and practitioners, though it may be troubling or even troublesome. There is sometimes nothing so useful as a good idea. Better understandings rather than guidelines for good practice can be effective bases for reflective practitioners to enhance what they do.

All too often, however, those in or close to government have defined 'blue skies' research simply as thinking the unthinkable in terms of the modernisation/privatisation/rationing of public services such as career guidance, education and healthcare. Theoretical research in particular has been ridiculed, and researchers have been posed with a stark choice between 'influence or irrelevance' (see again Blunkett, 2000). Critical researchers are dismissed as mere 'ideologues'. The link between policy and (legitimate) research is becoming drawn ever tighter. Some of the country's leading social scientists – people like Martyn Hammersley and Ray Pawson – are arguing that we are in danger of losing the capacity for genuine 'blue skies' research, including the capacity to be constructively critical of policy and practice when necessary.

This capacity requires academic freedom, and academic freedom has to be funded, or it faces a modern-day draught of hemlock. It is worth the use of public funds – and the risk that a small amount of research may possibly be 'zany' or 'irrelevant' – because it is a cornerstone of a democratic society that can make its rulers, as well as its researchers and practitioners, accountable to its citizens. We need gadflies as much as Socrates' Athenian democracy did, but there are considerable fears in the broader educational research community that the gadflies are being swatted by the increasing difficulty in gaining

funding to do such research. 'Policy influence' and 'practical relevance' are highly subjective and value-laden concepts in themselves, and other agendas are likely to get erased (Hodkinson, 2004).

A prime example is the government's social exclusion agenda. Many researchers in education and the social sciences have argued that this has obscured the agenda on social *inequality* (eg. Byrne, 1999, Levitas, 1996, Silver, 1994). It is ironical that we have to go back to the early 1990s and the previous Conservative administration to find DfEE-commissioned research on career guidance and institutional racism (as we now term it post-Macpherson) (see Wrench and Qureshi, 1996, Wrench and Hassan, 1996). The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) had to commission a report (Rolfe, 1999) on the widespread failure of careers services to address gender inequality in the late 1990s in the absence of government interest in this topic. This pointed to the 'refocusing' agenda and the Connexions policy as having considerably worsened that situation. The work of leading experts on class and other inequalities have been completely ignored, such as Stephen Ball, Diane Reay and others' critique of policies to widen participation in higher education (eg. Ball *et al.*, 2002), and of the assumptions about transition to HE which underpin those policies. Much (though not all) of this kind of research draws on qualitative data to present in-depth evidence of the complexity of social interventions and the social lives into which they reach. This leads us to my third question, about diversity in research.

Preserving and valuing diversity in research

The idea of the NGRF has followed on from the establishment of the National Educational Research Forum (NERF). However, the objectives and approach of the NERF have been hotly contested in the educational research community, with fears that narrow interpretations of 'setting priorities relevant to policy and practice' might potentially counteract the declared purpose of also stimulating debate and thinking. All too often, the need for 'robust research' is used as shorthand for standardising the criteria for judging the quality of research, and consequently for restricting research funding only to certain methodological approaches. BERA as an organisation has fiercely opposed the imposition (official or de facto) of such criteria, arguing that consensus can never be achieved, and that over-arching criteria can only be established to identify aspects of flawed research. Beyond this, each paradigm must be judged according to its own internal criteria.

The NERF, as well as the newly founded 'EPPI-Centre', are seen by some as promoting an implicit hierarchy of methods around the mantra of 'evidence-based practice'. That hierarchy places randomised controlled trials (RCT) and other experimental models, including the medical models of Cochrane/Campbell-style systematic review, at the pinnacle. Qualitative research and interpretative methods, which are much closer to practice, and often use participative or action research methods to involve practitioners and service users, come somewhere near the bottom of this 'pyramid'. It is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain funding for any research which does not incorporate a significant element of quantitative methods, and I have recently heard qualitative evidence dismissed as offering 'no evidence, only anecdote', and as 'ethnodrama'.

Of all communities in the social sciences, the guidance community should beware of this trend. There is a strong argument that medical models are inappropriate for understanding the complexity of social interventions like career guidance. Our traditions of research have always relied on the use of different methods to answer different questions. We need large-scale quantitative surveys, including longitudinal data, to answer certain questions. These include critical questions addressed by researchers like Ken Roberts and David Byrne, such as: what are the underlying patterns of career trajectories, what is the opportunity structure, and what is the impact of social structures on career? Qualitative data can never tell us these things.

We also, however, need the sort of small-scale but in-depth interpretative and narrative work that has been championed by researchers like Audrey Collin, Phil Hodkinson, Bill Law, and Richard Young. These tell us answers to different questions. They tell us the 'how' and the 'why', rather than just the 'what'. They allow us to see the significance of individual experiences which become invisible in the averaging-out of large-scale data to show trends, but they also allow us to generalise in non-statistical ways, for even small volumes of qualitative data still allow for the possibility of offering well-constructed explanations of experiences that resonate broadly and can be applied to other situations. They are just as vital as statistical surveys in the world of guidance, where our interpersonal work with clients, including their perceptions of themselves and their worlds, and our ability to enter that frame of reference, all form a crucial part of our practical and ethical tradition.

This is an important point, for a defensive reaction to the imposition of methodological hierarchy might be to compromise: to say, 'fine, let's go for larger qualitative samples' (though this approach is usually seen as 'too expensive' to be funded anyway), or 'let's use mixed methods'. But if we need different methods to answer different questions, enlarging samples and mixing methods doesn't help; it may only hinder clarity. The inquiry should drive the methods, rather than methods driving inquiry. The fundamental assumption of those who privilege RCT and systematic review is that *the data can speak for themselves*. But however rigorously the facts have been obtained, this is never true, and least of all in the social sciences. All inquiries apply subjective judgements and interpretation to their data;

only some do so more transparently than others. The nub of good research lies in its interpretation of the data and *the explanations it offers*. What research tells us about knowledge is that knowledge itself is only ever provisional. The crucial leaps in knowledge that humanity has achieved – including in the physical sciences, like quantum mechanics for example – have predominantly been leaps of the *imagination*, of theory, rather than the discovery of a whole new body of data.

All of this is itself of nought but academic interest of course, unless guidance is treated by those who do fund more independent research (like the research councils) as a priority. I conclude by returning to the subject of our discussion at the NICEC Network.

How can research be better linked to policy and to practice?

There is a danger that the current mantra of 'evidence-based practice' is obscuring some other important approaches that we need alongside it (Hodkinson and Smith, 2004). In particular, it has led a 'discourse of derision' in relation to critical research addressing social inequalities (Edwards, 2002a). Yet, following Watts (1996), we might argue that such critical research is an essential element of a healthy research culture in the field of guidance. Guidance operates at the interface between personal lives and socio-economic structure, and is therefore a deeply political process, serving either to reinforce or reduce social inequalities.

Rather than just evidence-based practice, how about some practice-based evidence, drawing on the knowledge and experience of practitioners and service users themselves, and conducting research 'in' not 'on' guidance? What about theory-based policy? It might help to acknowledge more openly that we do in fact have theory-based policies, and that policy-maker's theories need critiquing against other theories that might possibly be more appropriate bases for policy and practice. Hodkinson and Smith (2004) offer a powerful theoretical analysis, suggesting that the most constructive relationship between research, policy and practice is one that acknowledges the process as one of judgement-making through co-learning. They understand such learning as a social, situated, emotive and embodied practice (cf. Lave and Wenger, 1991, Beckett and Hager, 2002). Such approaches open up different ways of answering the questions we set ourselves at the NICEC Network meeting, and I offer some contentions in response to those questions here.

A research agenda that was better linked to policy and practice might:

- be located in a three-way relationship of dialogue rather than a one-way conformative relationship
- evaluate policy as well as practice
- defend and resource academic freedom to do 'blue skies' and critical research

- resist methodological hierarchies, and use different methods to answer different questions
- ask more complex questions than simply 'what works?'
- value practice-based knowledge
- do research in, not on, guidance
- be adequately funded, via both commissioning and independent sources such as research councils

Research would be better linked to policy if it were:

- More *loosely* linked with policy agenda-setting
- More *strongly* linked via reciprocal dialogue

Research would be better linked to practice if:

- it were more *strongly* linked, by conducting research in, not on, practice
- it were more *strongly* linked, by recognising professional and personal knowledge/experience
- it were more *strongly* linked, by policy-makers resourcing models of practice that encouraged practitioners to engage with research at various levels

Taking the dialogue forwards

What role should NICEC play in taking forward the relationship of dialogue between policy, practice and research? Brown and Ecclestone (2002) draw on the ideas of Lakatos to describe the features of a 'progressive' research programme, and the same ideas might be relevant to developing the strategic role of a network such as NICEC. They argue that a healthy programme (or network) should:

- bring together disparate individuals in diverse places working around a particular theme
- unite them in agreement about key questions, principles and values
- identify 'hard core' principles to defend against all-comers
- also identify 'expendable' issues on which a more pragmatic and contingent stance can be taken or negotiated
- willingly seek out and engage constructively with dissent, rivalry and even hostility, in order to avoid either compliance with or marginalisation from particular sectors (eg. policy-makers, practitioners and managers of careers education and guidance), and in order to prevent internal complacency and solipsism.

Without such agreement, contest and engagement, they suggest the tendency will be for the programme/network to wither. The publication of the OECD/EC/World Bank reviews of international guidance policies, along with the strong challenges faced by guidance in the UK at present, seem to offer a significant cusp of opportunity to promote a healthy network along these lines. To do so, however, we need to continue to place ourselves at the cutting edge

of policy, practice and research. In developing a long-term strategy for NICEC, we might usefully consider how we could progress these ideals through specific initiatives in all aspects of our work. In respect of its research dimension, these might include among other activities:

- developing our programme of seminars and network meetings, including by inviting those who dissent from or are hostile to our 'hard core' (one current example is Hayes', Ecclestone's and Furedi's warnings that guidance may become part of the process of 'therapising' education);
- discussions that identify gaps in knowledge or problems for practice that policy-makers may not prioritise, but which relate to our 'hard core' principles and values;
- proposals to obtain funding for research in these areas;
- 'think-tank' meetings and publications;
- seminar series, leading towards the publication of an edited collection of articles.

My intention in this paper has not been to privilege one form of research over another, but to assert the importance of diversity, and to suggest the danger of gaps developing in guidance research. I do not argue for qualitative research rather than quantitative methods, nor for 'blue skies' research as opposed to policy-initiated research, nor for theoretical research as 'better' than empirical research, nor for academic research versus practitioner research. We need to pursue – and respect – *all* these types of research. Adopting Lakatos' principles along with the goals of co-learning and judgement-making (Hodkinson and Smith, 2004) might offer us a useful starting point for deciding what research is most important and 'best' to pursue at any particular time.

Acknowledgement

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