Article:

Lally, P. (2014) Impact and research: approach to policy. Hillary Place Papers, 1 (1). 8.

https://doi.org/10.48785/100/207

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Impact and research: approach to policy

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Introduction

In this paper I examine the question of how educational research might reconnect with policy implementation in education. There is evidence in recent times of a growing gulf between significant pieces of educational research and their impact on policy. This paper identifies a politically constructed critique of education at the heart of the framing of current educational policy which is at odds with major pieces of educational research. This mismatch undermines the ability of such research to impact on policy. However I will also outline reasons for thinking this situation may not continue much longer.

The Gulf between Educational Research and Policy Practice

Fielding and Moss (2011) remind us how two recent substantial studies, the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander et al, 2010) and the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education (Pring et al., 2009), were ignored by the political process. This lack of engagement by politicians needs to be considered within a wider range of literature. Chitty (2009), Hodgson and Spours (2012) and Pring (2013) identify significant problems in English education and advocate solutions. Such solutions are not in tune with the Coalition government's policies. There is a struggle at the moment even to identify what the Opposition's education policies are. Such a vacuum would normally present an opportunity for this literature to have impact. However from the perspective of October 2013 there is little confidence that it will.

In the background research to my doctoral thesis I have examined the reasons behind this. My initial findings relate to the type of educational settlement established by the 1988 Education Reform Act. This settlement introduced a politically strong paradigm but an educationally weak framing of policy. The best way to examine this paradigm is to look at it through three levels:

- holistic set of interpretations at a system level

- conceptual understandings which frame how issues are discussed

- the underlying critique of problems.

These three levels reinforce each other.

In the 1980s the New Right identified falling standards, the need for increased parental choice and school autonomy as their critique of education. These ideas have now been established as the dominant political critique of education. Since 1988 policy makers have seen the problems and solutions in education through the prism of standards, choice and autonomy. Conceptual understandings developed from this. The language and behaviour of education policy began to focus on concepts such as excellence and diversity whereas

concepts such as universality or equality faded away. This is evidenced both in the titles and text of Government's education papers from 1990 onwards and the actual policies pursued.

This fixing of the critique and the conceptual understandings that flow from this establish a set of holistic understandings that frame the policy universe in terms which exclude most of the issues that are raised in educational research on policy. The reason for that is simple. We have an educational paradigm that from its origins is entirely political. Of the three elements of the critique "standards" is the only term which actually refers to the practice of education but it is unfocused and ill-defined. There is an assumption often made by Secretaries of State that it means going back to the rigour and format of earlier times. "Parental choice" and "school autonomy" relate to the mechanisms of a market led system of education which is only indirectly a critique of the practices and curriculum of education.

The Audience and the Reception of Ideas

There is a fine tradition within educational research of identifying the genuine issues that face education. The Nuffield Research, for example, explored in depth the question what do we expect of an educated 19 year old. It looked at the balance and organisation of the curriculum. The challenge with such research is its impact.

Fielding and Moss (2011) identify the change dynamic as a problem and direct us to the work of Unger (2001) and Wright (2010) to look at how we might build change mechanisms into our research. Unger raises the problem of both audience and its ability to receive ideas. Leading politicians of both parties have demonstrated their inability to hear educational critique which is not formed in their dominant set of understandings. However this does not mean that this is fixed for all time. Indeed as indicated here those set of understandings are themselves educationally weak.

There is a danger of insularity in both educational research and educational policy. For instance, I struggle in Gove's educational policy to find any reference to the changed economic circumstances arising from the 2007/2008 financial crash. The weakness in the current critique of education is the definition and purpose of the improved standards. This gives us an opportunity to address the issue of the overall rationale for education and ask questions about education's role within broader social and economic contexts.

Conclusion

I have attempted to outline the barriers that are presented to educational research in terms of policy terrain and the likely reception within a politically constructed set of conceptual understandings. This is not to argue that either this terrain is fixed or that educational research should abdicate its role in speaking truth to power. Indeed, on the contrary, I think

we are approaching a time when the current set of political conceptual understandings will falter. The present Government is testing them to the limit and in any event continuing economic and political circumstances will expose their inadequacy.

The challenge for us is to reflect on the problems of impact within our research, to sharpen the critique of current practice and to present a set of conceptual understandings better aligned to contemporary circumstances and the wider context. Research on educational policy needs to help us widen the scope of our understanding of education and its journeys. We need to restore education as a pathway to the future rather than be determined by a "curriculum of the dead" (Balls, 2011).

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