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The Europeanisation of Educational Research

Being the first presidential address of the European Educational Research Association, this would seem to be an appropriate occasion on which to reflect on the state of educational research in Europe, and to consider trends in its further development, and the prospects for a greater level of European collaboration that organisations like EERA were established to pursue. Such considerations, however, are not made easy by the lack of detailed comparisons of educational research across Europe, by the existence of different educational systems to which research refers, and by the cultural and linguistic diversity that renders any analysis of educational trends in Europe both intriguing and complicated. However, some recent overviews of European educational research (see Stoney, Johnson & Gallacher, 1995; Calderhead, 1994) together with reviews of the state of educational research within particular European countries (see, for instance, Husén & Postlethwaite, 1994) provide a basis for identifying some of the common characteristics of educational research, researchers' mutual difficulties, and their shared aspirations. In particular, my talk will focus on four questions which seem to be pertinent in many European countries today:

- Why should we promote educational research?
- Why is educational research not well supported at present?
- Why should we look towards European collaboration in educational research?
- How might we resolve some of the shared difficulties that educational researchers in Europe face at the current time?

Why should we promote educational research?

One of the interesting features of educational research in Europe is the different ways in which it is perceived in different countries. In some Scandinavian countries, it seems to be comparatively well-funded and educational researchers generally play a significant role in educational policy-making. Marklund (1995), for example, suggests that Sweden has had a tradition of funding educational research at a high level although he suggests that it has declined substantially over the past twenty years. Ekholm (1994) describes

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how Scandinavian researchers have been quite influential in steering curricular or organisational reforms in schools in recent years. In some Eastern European countries, educational researchers are also playing key roles in helping to design new educational systems that are built on democratic principles, drawing on the experiences of systems in the West as in the case of Slovenia for instance (Piciga and Razdevsek-Pucko, 1994). In several European countries, however, educational research is neither well-funded nor highly regarded. The recent OECD (1995) study on Educational Research and Development, which focuses on several European countries together with Australia, New Zealand and the United States, refers to the *"crisis of confidence" in the value of the knowledge base produced by researchers* (p19) and also suggests that *finance for educational R & D is variable between countries but marginal as a proportion of the amount spent on either education or research as a whole* (p47).

According to OECD statistics, expenditure on educational research and development commonly amounts to a small fraction of one per cent of a country's GDP. Several recent overviews of research have also commented on the apparently low status of educational research and its lack of regard by practitioners and policy-makers whom one might expect to be its users. A recent example in the UK is David Hargreaves' report to the Teacher Training Agency on teaching as a research-based profession (Hargreaves, 1996), although Husén & Kogan (1984) make similar arguments based on a more international and comprehensive view of research. Given this widespread doubt about the utility of educational research, what arguments can be offered in its defence? Why should we try to promote educational research? What value does educational research have? At least four types of justifications might be made in support of current educational research efforts.

The first is *financial.* EC statistics reveal that between 4 and 8% of a country's Gross Domestic Product is spent on education in most European countries, or between 3 and 5% if higher education is excluded (European Commission. 1996). Although such statistics may provide an unreliable basis for comparison in that they are often calculated on a slightly different basis in different countries, they clearly and consistently, and not surprisingly, demonstrate that education is a significant consumer of national wealth - often coming only after health, social security, and in one or two countries, defence, in terms of size of public expenditure. This lends a strong argument for educational research in terms of its role in maintaining accountability and efficiency. With such large sums of public funding being devoted to education, one might reasonably argue that we need evidence of what is happening in education. We should understand how our educational institutions function, we should evaluate educational processes, examine the pros and cons of alternative educational approaches and trial and evaluate new ones, if we are to ensure that public funds are well invested. Another aspect to this financial

argument is that many of the greatest financial burdens on national health and social security budgets are also closely tied to educational factors. In Western societies, a high proportion of health expenditure is frequently attributed to poor diet, smoking, drug and alcohol abuse - areas where potentially effective educational programmes might help to alleviate the problems. Similarly, the costs of unemployment, of crime, of family support might arguably be reduced if schools were more effective in preparing young people for the responsibilities of citizenship and equipping them with the skills required in employment and adult life. Although these are ambitious aims, research and development that leads to such improvements in education, could obviously have substantial consequences for a national economy as well as the overall quality of life.

The second argument in support of the importance of educational research concerns *the nature of educational development.* Education is constantly changing, adapting to suit the demands of a changing society. New ideas are introduced, new curricula emerge and new expectations for educational institutions are developed. Education is evolutionary and the monitoring and evaluation of change and the understanding of the complexities of the change process are an important part of managing education. Research and evaluation therefore have significant intrinsic roles to play in educational improvement.

The third concerns *social and moral reasons.* Education has a wider remit than simply equipping students with the accepted knowledge of the day. Education is about preparing the next generation for responsible citizenship. In complex Western societies, we cannot take it for granted that society will simply reproduce itself, and schools are obviously an important agency within the process of societal reproduction. Recent claims, such as those of Michael Rutter (1995), that a continuous disinvestment in the social, family and educational structures that support youth are leading to growing levels of severe psychological disturbance amongst adolescents are profound and far-reaching in their implications. They raise many questions about the roles and rights of adolescents in society, and about the potential alienation of youth and its social consequences. They also raise questions about how we should prepare and support successive generations and the functions and responsibilities we should assign to our educational institutions in this process. Such questions are complex and require extensive exploration and research.

And fourthly, there is an *academic argument.* Education is a significant part of our life. Virtually everyone goes to school. Virtually everyone expects to be influenced in some way by our educational systems, and the efficient functioning of our society depends upon them. We should therefore investigate education and attempt to improve our understanding of it simply because it is there and it matters.

Now, in the present company, I imagine there is probably considerable sympathy for all of those arguments, and indeed you might well have several other justifications that you can readily think of to add to this list. But if these arguments, which are by no means new, are really persuasive, why is educational research not much more widely supported?

Where are the governments that wish to invest in educational research so that their funds are spent strategically, informed by a sound understanding of educational systems and practices, and systematically monitored for their effectiveness? Where are the local authorities or education agencies keen to use research to monitor and manage the processes of educational development and innovation? Where are the charitable foundations and the socially-responsible multi-national companies who wish to support research that sheds new light on the contribution of education to individual achievement, social stability and personal well-being? Where are the university vice chancellors who want to invest in centres of excellence of educational research to further our understanding of teaching and learning, cultural reproduction, and the effects of policies and practices in education?

Significant support for educational research seems to be fairly thin on the ground! There is a strange and distinct contrast between the potential that can readily be attributed to educational research and the actual value that appears to be placed upon it by funders and users. Given these grand justifications for educational research, is it conceivable that we, as researchers, could construct a general research agenda for education as impressive as the mapping of the human genome or the exploration of Mars, and where the outcomes would promise to be just as relevant and important to the structure and functioning of our present and future society? As a group of educational researchers we might believe that it is, but when it comes to persuading those who hold the power and the purse-strings, there seems to be an extremely large credibility gap. So what has gone wrong?

Why is educational research not well supported at present?

Overviews of the state of educational research have tended to point to several reasons for its low level of support.

Poor quality: Educational research has frequently been perceived to be of generally low quality. Whilst this is not always the case, there are several factors that could well contribute overall to poor quality research. First of all, the *infrastructure* supporting educational research is weak. In most European countries, more than half of the educational research conducted is carried out by staff in universities, usually teacher training departments where the main function is the initial preparation of teachers. Many of these staff are on short-term contracts, and their main duties lie elsewhere. Those staff whose main contribution is research are also likely to be on short-term contracts. Even in dedicated educational research institutes (as opposed to teacher

training institutions), staff are generally funded by specific research projects and in order to maintain their employment must move amongst a variety of different projects as the funding demands, often with little opportunity to build up specialist expertise. The generally *low level of training* of educational researchers is another factor possibly contributing to poor research. In university mathematics or natural science departments, it would be expected that staff will have completed a PhD, and carried out a few years post-doctoral research before being appointed as a member of academic staff, and they would then typically be given a substantial proportion of time in which to establish their research expertise. In the case of university education departments, however, staff are frequently recruited from teaching posts in schools; their research experience is limited, their teaching loads are high by comparison with other university departments, and completion of research training is often done in the lecturer's own time, and sometimes even at the lecturer's own expense; and frequently research effort does not receive the same weighting in the education lecturer's everyday workload. In such circumstances, it would not be surprising if the overall level of research expertise was poor, when compared with other, more established subject areas.

Inapplicability: Different interest groups have different expectations of educational research. It has frequently been pointed out that policy-makers, for example, expect educational research to highlight specific answers to educational problems. The relationship between research and policy is perceived as a linear one. Yet in reality the relationship between research and policy is probably much more interactive (Nisbet & Broadfoot, 1980). Research might provide certain perspectives, or highlight certain problems which help to clarify the policy issues, but in interaction with policy a new set of research questions might emerge for further exploration. Similarly, teachers and educational administrators might well expect research to offer solutions to particular educational difficulties that they face, when in fact educational researchers may see their role as being one of offering ways of understanding educational processes which need to be further elaborated by practitioners in relation to specific contexts. The mismatch of perceptions about the various functions of research might well act as a serious impediment to communication between researchers and research users, and may inevitably affect the application of research.

Inconsistency: Much educational research is being pursued by individuals or small groups, sometimes unaware of similar research being pursued elsewhere. The research lacks co-ordination, and because much research is relatively small-scale and pursued in a variety of different contexts, its conclusions are often contradictory. It is therefore not surprising that potential users of research might perceive it as lacking coherence and consistency.

Detachment: Educational research has often also been accused of being remote and detached from the realities of education, pursued by academics in their ivory towers who research and write for each other, rather than for any educational research users. Educational researchers have been accused of being more concerned with academic publishing for which they are more immediately rewarded in career terms, than with their impact on policy and practice, and for discussing their work with fellow academics rather than with those who face the tasks of educational decision-making. Critiques of educational research have raised issues of research reports being obsessed with jargon, being written for a researcher audience, and being unconcerned with the practitioner or policy-maker (see OECD, 1995).

Individualistic: Educational research has also been accused of being individualistic. Whereas research in the sciences is frequently pursued by research teams, or established research centres, in which expertise has been accumulated over a period of time, research in education is more frequently pursued by individuals working on their own. Furthermore, educational researchers tend to work within a particular mode of research and interact with other individuals following like-minded work. Consequently, there are different conceptions amongst researchers of what counts as legitimate research, and frequently some degree of intolerance of alternative approaches. Commentators on styles of educational research have frequently used the classification of positivist, phenomenological and critical science as a typology in which to classify fundamental beliefs about the nature of educational (or even more broadly, social science) research. Gibson (1986), for example, distinguishes these in terms of their focus of enquiry, their interests and their organisation of knowledge. He also acknowledges, however, that methodological and epistemological debates amongst researchers have sometimes appeared to have less to do with furthering an understanding of research than with asserting the superiority of a particular interest group. Interminable debates about the merits of qualitative and quantitative research, for example, still linger in several research areas, where the quantitative researchers emphasise the importance of sample size and the generalisability of findings, which in turn are dismissed by the qualitative researchers, who, defending their position, have, in some cases, pointed to the fact that several of the most influential educational theorists of our century - such as Piaget and Skinner - based their theorising on research with sample sizes as small as one! Such debates, however, rarely seem to be productive.

Why should we look towards European collaboration in educational research?

In our current situation, it is interesting to contemplate the potential contribution of European collaboration in educational research. As attendance at ECER conferences well demonstrates, there appears to be considerable inte-

rest in European collaboration, but what might such collaboration offer to researchers and to education?

Shared research problems: In the recent CIDREE survey of government-funded educational research in Europe, there was a high level of commonality in research institutes' current and anticipated future research themes. Research focusing on preparation for working life, assessment, curriculum, educational management and reform were, for example, widely regarded as high priorities throughout Europe (Stoney, Johnson & Gallacher, 1995). Educational policies and practices are becoming increasingly mobile across national boundaries, and as a result, research agendas appear to be becoming more uniform. Consequently, it is arguable that collaboration amongst European researchers may usefully channel resources as well as possibly lead to more substantial conclusions. International investigations of shared problems may also offer a useful diversity of perspectives or potential solutions.

Shared difficulties with respect to research: The theoretical and methodological difficulties that educational researchers face, and the difficulties of communicating with and involving the potential users of research, are widely experienced across Europe. Collaboration on such matters amongst a larger number of researchers might usefully focus energy, and lead to greater dialogue and productive experimentation.

Diverse Practices: Whilst there may be a fairly common research agenda and some common research tools, it is also important to remember that the historical and philosophical origins of educational research in different countries are diverse, and therefore there are many interesting contrasts to explore. Dieter Lenzen (1994), for example, in a recent review in the *EERA Bulletin,* well documents swings within German educational research between philosophical and empirical enquiry. Different traditions of educational research raise important epistemological and methodological issues that researchers can usefully address, and such comparisons may lead to new syntheses of research and new understandings.

Co-ordination of research: Within Europe as a whole there is a substantial amount of educational research activity, but perhaps partly because of language difficulties, and also because of the lack of any communication infrastructure, educational researchers are often unaware of research in other countries similar to their own. The development of various educational research networks in Europe is a relatively recent phenomenon, offering opportunities for the exchange of research procedures and findings as well as comparative educational studies. Similarly, several European abstracting journals and databases are beginning to help disseminate research findings, enabling researchers to draw more readily upon each other's work.

A voice for European educational research: A related concern is the under-representation of European research in the major international research

journals and in terms of the international impact of research, compared to North American work. The majority of the high-circulation educational research journals are published and edited in the United States. Those which rank in the top decile of the ISI citation index of educational research journals are all North American and the majority are published by the American Educational Research Association[2]. Even within the top quartile of the 91 journals listed, only one is not edited and published in North America. The journals of the various national educational research associations in Europe are not even included in the ISI citation index, and in several cases have little circulation outside of their country of origin. More effective channels for the voices of European educational researchers are clearly needed.

Finance: Several national reports on the state of educational research have noted that the amount of funding being provided is generally decreasing, though as the CIDREE report discovered there are a few specific areas of research in some countries where additional funds are being provided. Overall, however, the government funding of research appears to be being quite rapidly reduced, and it would appear that researchers need to be more proactive in their search for funding and to identify alternative sources. The Maastricht Treaty expresses a European commitment to research and development in education, and the European Commission may become an important source of funding to some well-organised European groups. There are also other sources of European funds aimed to develop research networks and co-ordinate expertise that are becoming increasingly available to researchers in designated areas. Well co-ordinated research groups may also find it easier to tap private foundations, which often seem to be keener to fund prestigious groups of researchers with a track record of working effectively, rather than supporting the lone researcher or lone institution.

Strengthening of research through staff development: The training and development of research staff in education requires investment and coordination. The sharing of expertise across Europe, the development of training programmes, the exchanges that occur in European conferences and meetings could all have a beneficial effect upon researchers' expertise and the subsequent quality of research. A proactive series of strategies in this area is needed, and may be more effective if drawing on a larger pool of research expertise.

2 Based on ISI journal citation statistics for 1994.

How might we resolve some of the shared difficulties that educational researchers in Europe face at the current time?

Turning to the final question of this paper, consideration of the common difficulties and concerns of educational researchers in Europe does point towards certain strategies in the further development of research.

Collaboration with educational decision-makers: As several authors on the relationship between educational research and policy have noted, educational research is not the only basis on which policy is drafted - values and ideologies are inevitably involved - nevertheless, research is a valuable component of any rational policy formulation. It is the case, however, that in many European countries, research has a relatively minor role to play, and the research that is pursued tends to be driven by policy rather than the other way round. Because certain policies exist and have been implemented (the introduction of self-managing schools, or the introduction of school based teacher training, for example) research centres around the policy. If research is to have a more vibrant and informative relationship with educational decision-making, and if research is to take on a more active role in setting the policy agenda rather than simply following it, several changes seem necessary. First of all, there is a need for researchers and educational decision-makers to meet and share perspectives; for educational researchers to appreciate better the aims of policy-makers and practitioners and the constraints in which they work, and for potential research-users to appreciate more fully the nature of research and how it can relate to policy and practice. Secondly, researchers may need to become more involved in the debate of alternative educational ideas and visions, which is as much the substance of educational decision-making as empirical evidence; that's not to say that researchers should confuse the objective and the subjective, or their well argued research conclusions and their own speculations about it, but they need to be able to interpret their research in alternative wider contexts, and consider the values, the possibilities and the missions that might relate to it, and we may need to create opportunities where policy-makers, teachers and researchers can contribute to the debate on educational ideas, policies and practices as well as educational research. It needs to be recognised that researchers may offer distinctive perspectives on educational issues. These are not the only perspectives of value, nor do they have exclusive or special relevance in educational decision-making, but their contribution may be in their challenge of the taken-for-granted, their highlighting of particular difficulties or their prevention of commonsense wisdom from reinventing the wheel.

Staff Development: The development of training for educational research needs much more explicit support throughout Europe. A career structure for educational researchers, with opportunities to develop expertise, is urgently needed. Post-graduate training and post-doctoral research opportunities are

undeveloped, and need to consider not just the thorough preparation of researchers in methodology, but also an increase in their awareness of how research might relate to different user groups. The generation of centres of excellence in particular areas of educational research or in types of research might also help to ensure the continuity of expertise and provide bases where specific knowledge and skills might be sought and disseminated.

Collaborative structures: The development of networks through which expertise can be shared, and research pursued jointly, will also help to strengthen the quality of educational research. Collaborative work and the exchange of alternative perspectives might additionally lead to a greater tolerance of different research approaches, and a reinforcing of an educational research ethos that explores new understandings rather than one that maintains entrenched positions.

Increased profile of educational research: Greater international collaboration, and improvements in the overall quality and useability of research might also strengthen the research culture and its image in the eyes of research users. By making the work of researchers more evident and better understood, the overall profile of research might also be improved. The nature of educational research and its contribution to educational debate, and to policy and practice, need to be more widely and persuasively disseminated to establish education nationally and internationally as an important field of enquiry.

Funding: The level of funding for educational research is, even in a few Scandinavian countries where it is comparatively well supported, quite low. The point has frequently been made that any commercial concern that devoted as small a proportion of its revenue to research and development as education does would probably go out of business. The need for research has to be demonstrated, and this can perhaps be done more powerfully and convincingly when the argument is made consistently, coherently and collectively and at an international level. Perhaps new sources of funding need also to be sought - the European Commission commitment in this area may present some new opportunities. New private foundations are constantly coming into existence, though we obviously cannot rely on a steady stream of millionaires with weak hearts and a strong social conscience! Governments will always be an essential source of funding. However, to conclude on a more optimistic note, the reasons most frequently cited for not funding educational research have focused on quality and lack of impact. Those obstacles may well be surmountable, as educational researchers further establish their field. There is positive action that can be taken to improve the credibility of educational research amongst funders, and to place it in a better position to secure the level of funding that is really needed, and that will enable it to serve the important role which those committed to furthering educational research believe it can.

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