

THE SERA LECTURE 2003: WHAT IS AND WHAT MIGHT BE? TLRP STRATEGIES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION: THREAT OR OPPORTUNITY?

Quite an impression was caused when, in the early days of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme, educational researchers were characterised as ‘drinking in the last chance saloon’. This comment reflected the concern, certainly among some high-level decision makers in England, that educational research was a ‘weak and irrelevant’ field, and needed to be ‘shaken up’. Sadly, the sense of deficiency has not entirely gone away and the threat to impose further control, at least in England, remains. However, it would be naïve and inaccurate to pretend that such thoughts have not also crossed the minds, from time to time, of some in Scotland. Recent amalgamations among Scottish higher education institutions and the outcome of the last research assessment exercise have also stimulated some very serious thinking about these issues.

On the other hand, governments in each part of the UK are increasingly aware that their education policies don’t always have the effects they hope for, and their aspirations are sometimes unfulfilled. In such circumstances, it may be that educational researchers might just have something to offer after all – particularly in the context of the contemporary commitment to ‘evidence-informed policy-making’. Building on enlightened self-interest, another possibility therefore is that the resources directed to educational research could steadily increase, though with such growth being mainly use-directed and applied. In Scotland, there are additional grounds for optimism. SEED’s initiation of a new Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS), to be taken forward by a consortium of universities, is a considerable vote of confidence. This has been built on through AERS’ adoption of a constructive, collegial and inclusive approach to capacity building, which sees the big picture beyond inter-institutional rivalries. SERA itself seems in excellent shape, if one can take a doubling of attendance at the Annual Conference as an indicator. Nor is it any mean feat for Scottish researchers to have been so successful in TLRP’s funding competitions, with a third of projects now based in, or co-directed from, Scotland. Meanwhile, beyond the research community, the Chartered Teacher Scheme will generate a significant increase in the number of teachers engaging with educational research in one form or another. Indeed, it may provide an important access point for educational researchers to tap into the growing ‘can do’ confidence in Scottish schools, which the Leader in TES Scotland identified on the very date on which this SERA Lecture was delivered. As the Leader put it: ‘in many schools (there is) a dynamism and curiosity about the way pupils learn and how they should be taught that has probably never been present before’ (28th November 2003).

It is possible then, that we are seeing the conditions for a new renaissance in the field of educational research in Scotland? Is there a possible way forward towards trust and collaboration? Well perhaps. TLRP seeks to contribute in this context and, from a respectful and non-intrusive position, will do all it can to support Scottish researchers, policy-makers and practitioners working together for the benefit of Scottish learners.

TLRP is the largest independent, coordinated research initiative in education that the UK has ever known. The rhetoric is strong, and the Programme’s projects and activities are intended: ‘to lead to significant improvements in outcomes for learners at all ages and stages in all sectors and contexts of education and training,

including informal learning settings, throughout the United Kingdom' (Phase III Specification).

Even with the commitment of some £26m, this is an extremely bold aim. Just to add to the challenge, there are also goals concerning multi-disciplinary working, broadening methodologies, deepening research capacity and the transformation and impact of new knowledge.

How is TLRP setting about achieving such goals? In this paper¹, I consider the contextual origins of the Programme, and then move to consider some epistemological, substantive, theoretical, engagement and processual issues on which the Programme is working. In conclusion, I review the Programme's strategies as a form of activism, designed to improve the respect in which educational research is viewed and the contribution which it can make to our societies.

WHERE DOES THE TLRP COME FROM? CONTEXT

A simple, technical answer to the question of TLRP's origins is that, in 1997, the funding council for English universities decided that a special research programme on teaching and learning in education would be valuable – and after a while appointed ESRC to manage it. Commissioning began in 1999, and Phase I Networks were funded from 2000. Other funders joined in, and the Programme grew and developed. It now boasts three phases and is resourced until the end of 2008.

A more politically-aware answer would be that TLRP was a follow-through from the enormous changes in public education that characterised the 1980s and 1990s. The development by successive Conservative and New Labour governments in England of national systems for curriculum, assessment, inspection, performance management, teacher training, etc. was researched, analysed and critiqued by an annoyingly independent academic community. And yet this 'irritant' was itself fractured into a multiplicity of groups, tribes and territories and, when it could be understood, was perceived to have an indulgent sense of the relationship between evidence and argument, with value commitments often providing a bridge. A feeling in high places that 'something should be done' was given added impetus by critics such as Hargreaves, Tooley and Hillage. In this climate, TLRP was established under the initial leadership of Charles Desforges, of the University of Exeter, and John Kanefsky, a former manager from the coal mining industry. Focused on the practical issue of pedagogy, framed by the structure of a Programme and incorporating a strategy for improving methodological 'rigour', it was seen by some in the academic world as a framework to challenge and control educational research.

Those, such as myself, who subscribe to the 'sociological imagination' might perceive things in yet another way. Social institutions emerge, ebb and flow at the interface of history and biography, and both individual agency and the constraints of social structure are real. We 'make' history, but not in conditions of our own choosing.

The historical moment for UK educational researchers is specific, and those working in the field were certainly on the back foot when TLRP was set up. Whilst some of the challenges made reflected a lack of understanding, others hit home. Without doubt, there was room for improvement in the rigour, accessibility and relevance of educational research. Indeed, I would still argue that, if we wish to maintain independence and respect, then we have to attend to these issues. If the academy wishes to claim a significant role in contributing to decision-making in our democracy, then the status of our knowledge has to be justified.

In any event, as things have unfolded, my perspective as the present Director is that TLRP should now be seen as an incredible *opportunity*, rather than as a threat. In partnership with sympathetic users of educational research, with support from multiple funders, managed by an independent agency and populated by academics from Education and other social sciences, it affords many opportunities for 'active

mediation' in which external pressures are adapted and shaped whilst preserving core commitments.

What then are these 'core commitments'? In a Newsletter of September 2002, I suggested:

'Our mission is to conduct research to enhance a broad range of learning outcomes of relevance to individuals, educational institutions, workplaces and our society as a whole. Our work will contribute to individual opportunity, economic productivity and social cohesion, and to the new foundations of evidence-informed policy and practice in education.'

Of course such statements reflect the kind of remorseless optimism from which I am known to suffer, but they also draw on a long-standing and culturally embedded form of Enlightenment commitment. We are, it seems to me, still basically in the business of trying to apply reason to complex social issues in order to 'improve' our society. This is a moral imperative – and is much more important than responding to insubstantial squabble or critique. There is a bigger job to be attempted. We make our contribution to the future, and we do it in the present. We cannot choose where we start from.

CAN OUR KNOWLEDGE BE RELIED UPON? EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Demands that educational research should demonstrate 'What Works?' have been made regularly in recent years, and TLRP is clearly in the firing line of this expectation. At one level of course, 'What works?' is a simplistic and dangerously naive rhetoric. However, the call cannot be set aside quite that easily, for underlying it, is serious dissatisfaction with the focus, quality and relevance of educational research.

'What Works?' implies a singular focus on practical utility. This is an immediate challenge to the diversity of paradigms and perspectives to be found in the academic field of education. This diversity is maintained by people with highly developed, specialist understandings, skills and commitments, and provides rich insights from different perspectives. There are valuable intellectual resources there, often with long evolutionary histories, which it would be foolish to ignore. Having said that, it is also understandable that those involved in building national education systems hope that research efforts will engage constructively with their goals and problems. I see this as an issue of balance and degree – but we must certainly defend diversity, within TLRP and beyond, as a source of challenge, innovation and possible change.

'What Works?' also demands categoric solutions, but the reality is that all knowledge is provisional in any field of science. Indeed, scientific processes are predicated on that assumption. Those who might, even rhetorically, imply that educational research can prescribe simple 'solutions' to major educational problems thus have to be guided to a more realistic position. Education is hugely complex, and the reality is that there are difficulties in identifying, understanding, relating, measuring, analysing, theorising and reporting the multiplicity of variables that affect teaching and learning. This is one of the reasons why diverse perspectives have evolved. What researchers can and should do though, is to work systematically towards reducing that complexity and towards specifying degrees of likelihood in the relationships between variables. This is the attraction of conceptual analyses and of notions such as 'fuzzy generalisation'. In my view, such contributions are as valuable as those of the economist predicting future economic growth, the political scientist anticipating electoral outcomes or even the weather forecaster. In each case, there is no certainty, but expert opinion is offered based on careful examination of available evidence.

On this point, educational researchers do have to be alert. Challenges to demonstrate the 'warrant' of findings are not inappropriate. Colleagues in TLRP's

Research Capacity Building Network (RCBN) have had some important things to say on these matters, and we all have a responsibility to understand the strengths of the work of others. A danger of too much insularity within *any* particular academic tribe or territory is that the sub-field becomes self-referential, complacent, closed and defensive. If TLRP is to succeed, then we must support each other in exploring across boundaries and in working towards increasingly sophisticated, and demonstrably accurate, evidence-based, understandings of educational processes.

Whatever educational researchers achieve, my view remains that this knowledge will always be provisional and contextually circumscribed. This is where the relationship with user practitioners and policy-makers comes in. Judgements about the relevance and application of research are matters for these professionals as they confront an inevitable range of contextually-specific dilemmas. A respectful division of labour is necessary – though, of course, there can be very helpful movement between the two roles. In respect of teachers, this posture in relation to research is what I have tried to support in my work on reflective teaching (www.RTweb.info). A key argument is that researchers provide an array of findings and analyses but, however carefully honed such resources are, they require professional judgement about application by those who understand the specifics of context, learner characteristics, educational objectives.

To fulfil our role in this, TLRP's educational researchers have to commit to openly struggling to improve the quality of the knowledge that they produced, to progressively seek more secure analyses and to work towards evidence-informed policy and practice – even if we know that we will never achieve certainty or 'truth'.

WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO DISCOVER? SUBSTANTIVE AND THEMATIC ISSUES

The first Programme Newsletter of September 2000 announced 'Research to Raise Achievement'. It declared:

'Our objective is to support the teaching and learning community in improving the achievement of learners, across a wide range of contexts, by providing evidence from high quality research and ensuring it has impact on practice.'

The substantive focus of TLRP is explicitly on *teaching and learning*, and this is important to note, for discussions of methodological and paradigmatic issues sometimes seem to sweep us into much wider concerns.

By 2002, two other subtle developments could be discerned. First, the latest Programme investments (Phase III) had been targeted at 'broadly defined learning outcomes', rather than at 'achievement' per se. In part, this reflected adjustment in relation to a new focus on post-compulsory education, but there was also increasing recognition that narrow forms of attainment, say in basic skills, also require consideration of the more holistic, dispositional issues that are associated with lifelong learning.

Second, the emphasis on 'practice' was now matched by a parallel interest in 'policy'. In part, this came from the expressed interest of research users within government agencies, from whom support for the Programme has been strong. In part, it came from researchers and practitioners who know that local practices are significantly influenced by policy frameworks, particularly in strongly centralised systems.

The consequences of these two developments subtly re-orientated the Programme. On the one hand, the substantive focus widened, legitimating and requiring appropriate consideration of contextual factors. On the other, the Programme began to have a role not just in 'taking' policy-determined problems for study, but also in providing evaluation and critique of policy. The benefit of increasing levels of partnership with policy-makers is that independent analysis, when evidence-based and constructively presented, may be taken seriously as a contribution, rather than parried or rubbished as a threat.

The Programme now has 30 large-scale project or network investments, and a number of associated fellowships and other activities. In total, there are over 50 specific investments. Foci in schools sectors include: consulting students; inclusion; science education; literacy and numeracy; thinking skills; learning to learn; classroom group work; and home-school learning. In post-compulsory sectors, the Programme has projects on: learning in further education, in undergraduate courses and in postgraduate employment; problem-based learning; workplace incentives; and life-long learning².

Each of these projects has its own substantive focus and involves some of the best UK specialists in the relevant field – including many from Scotland. Most of the projects are larger than has previously been usual in educational research and many use sophisticated designs. In each substantive field, we thus expect important findings to emerge, with strong warrants, which should justify them being taken very seriously by practitioners, policy-makers and the public generally. There are already signs of this happening with the results of Phase I Networks.

The Programme Team is a small group of mainly part-time academics who have been appointed to support project colleagues in maximising the quality and impact of their work in its own terms. In this respect, the team will be offering various services and forms of support – not least, critical friendship.

Additionally however, the Programme Team is charged with adding value to project investments. A major vehicle for this is through the establishment of cross-Programme Thematic Groups. Each group engages with a cluster of themes associated with a particular Programme aim. Initially therefore, we have Thematic Groups working in the broad areas of: learning outcomes; life-course; synergy; capacity; transformation and impact, and additionally in relation to ICT.

Thematic Groups are able to range widely within their areas, and to draw on academics and users from both inside and outside the Programme, as well as welcoming inputs via web-based discussion facilities. In due course this programme will be broadened further, perhaps through an open thematic seminar competition.

Of course, projects will always remain the primary ‘engine rooms’ of the Programme. However, thematic Groups are essential devices for taking stock of cross-Programme achievements, relating ideas and making connections, drawing on other expertise, broadening debate, and building meta-analyses. At this point, we cannot quite predict how such themes will develop, but they do have the potential to be very significant. We expect the number of Thematic Groups to expand over the next five years it is expected that this work will be formalised through a new ‘Phase IV’ funding competition.

As the Programme matures, ‘Responsive Task Groups’ are also being established to enable, where possible, more rapid and flexible contributions to contemporary issues in the public domain to be made.

CAN WE INFLUENCE FUTURE THINKING? THEORETICAL GOALS

As indicated above, the substantive focus of each project is specific and, through Thematic Groups, we will have provision to search across projects, to draw in additional ideas and expertise and to add value. Theoretical development is thus a very likely outcome in relation to each project, and also as a product of thematic development. TLRP will strongly support such work.

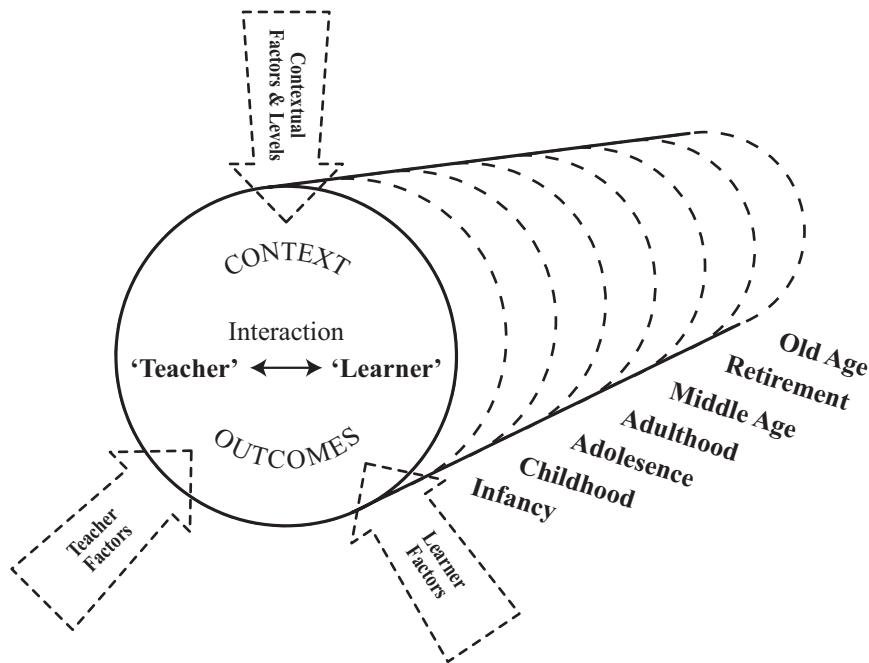
Additionally however, the design of the Programme presents a unique opportunity to attempt to construct a meta-analysis of teaching and learning through the life-course – a challenge which is of particular interest to some, including myself. This arises because of the spread of projects which are expected, in due course, to cover most sectors and contexts of formal education and adult learning. In addition to pedagogic issues generally, there are also some recurring foci in terms of the content of learning, with literacy, numeracy and various representations of learning

disposition being particularly prominent. The issues of inclusion, exclusion and opportunities to learn are also well represented, and we have some interesting projects on transitions between educational sectors.

It thus becomes possible, conceptually at least, to begin to map the project portfolio as a whole (see the Figure 1 below). All projects, at their heart, are concerned with interaction between some form of teacher and learner. This occurs in particular contexts and has particular learning outcomes. A variety of factors influence such teachers, learners and contexts.

At a level of considerable simplicity, this model can be applied at successive stages of the life-course, from infancy to childhood, adolescence, youth, adulthood, middle age, retirement and old age. Learning is necessary and takes place, to a greater or lesser extent, at all stages of life. The Programme thus provides a significant opportunity to look developmentally at the ways in which learners adjust to successive contexts.

Figure 1: Learning through the life-course



But why might this matter? I offer two arguments here. First, I would suggest that recent UK education policy has been imbalanced. It has been driven by a desire to challenge educational accountabilities and to improve ‘standards’, but has lacked any really secure appreciation of how learning actually occurs. The result has been a succession of requirements, measurements, targets, inspections and initiatives at each level of the system. Analytically, much provision is underpinned by a ‘delivery’ model of teaching and learning which, though it has its own logic, also has some serious limitations.

Problems arise if we take seriously the desire to support lifelong learners with positive dispositions for the challenges of the 21st century - for content-crammed, over-assessed youngsters are actually at risk of being turned off learning for life. We therefore need alternative ways of thinking about teaching and learning, ways which are more informed by evidence of how people construct their identities as learners and how they create, appropriate, or reject, knowledge. We need, in other words, more attention to the learner passing through successive sectors of system – to the

educational experience as received, and its consequences. Taken as a whole, TLRP may well provide a vehicle for this type of analysis and provide an evidence-base for it. We might eventually, as a result, produce more secure educational policy, more fulfilled, confident and flexible learners (and teachers) and also, higher standards.

Such thinking could, of course, tap the developmental narratives of life which remain strong within popular culture, and thus make possible some exciting engagements with the media. A significant achievement of the Programme would thus be to have contributed to the development of more sophisticated ways of thinking about learning, teaching and the sequence of institutions that support them.

A second reason for suggesting that the Programme should consider a lifecourse meta-analysis relates to other developments. At the time TLRP finally reports, research on the human genome and in the field of neuro-science is likely to be even more prominent than it is today. Irrespective of the qualified findings and analyses that we may expect from researchers in these fields, there is a considerable risk that such work will be interpreted as demonstrating fixed characteristics and abilities. It is therefore extremely important that the work being done in these fields is complemented by clear and accessible accounts of social and educational factors in human development – of agency, adaption and growth.

WILL ANYONE REALLY TAKE ANY NOTICE? USER ENGAGEMENT

Practitioners, policy-makers and the public are quite used to making decisions without significant reference to educational research. In preference, they often draw on folk-theory, hunch or intuition. Indeed, it seems that everyone's personal educational experience, in a sense, warrants their educational opinions in later life.

However, this is clearly a weak position and there is wide-spread acceptance of the idea that policy and practice should be, at least, 'evidence-informed'. The modernist rationality of our times thus still holds the door open for educational researchers - but, at the same time, there is a ready relapse to hunch or pragmatism if research findings or recommendations jar.

Researchers thus have a very difficult job in both communicating and disseminating findings to maximise impact. To be convincing, to claim authority, we have to demonstrate both the relevance and quality of our work. As Charles Desforges often argued, we must try to operate in Pasteur's quadrant - to provide use-inspired, basic, high-quality research.

This is the rationale for the authentic engagement of research users at every stage of the research process, from the conceptualisation of key research issues onwards. Relevance and validity should be enhanced thereby, though technical matters of research design, data collection and analysis will of course draw on the unique expertise of research teams. At the point of evaluation of the work and consideration of its application, the goodwill and expertise of user partners is again essential. At best, projects need user 'champions' who, having participated in or advised on the work throughout, can lend credibility to the outcomes and offer promotional infrastructures for dissemination.

One way of expressing this is to say that we should aim to transform research knowledge into accessible forms, to present it in ways that enables users to appropriate it, and then to 'give it away'. We cannot sustain it alone. New knowledge must thus become owned by others, promoted by others and, in due course, incorporated into the routine practices and common-sense thinking of others.

For that, we need partnerships and user engagement at every stage. In particular, projects should have strong user engagement in local sites of research to enhance relevance, authenticity and validity, combined with strong links and alliances with national organisations offering high-leverage systems of dissemination and mechanisms for maximising impact. The latter may, in my opinion, helpfully include both governmental *and* more independent agencies.

HOW MIGHT WE ACHIEVE THESE THINGS? PROCESSES

If it 'takes a village to raise a child', then it takes an educational community, and more, to create a programme like TLRP and to make it successful. To achieve the goals of TLRP, I believe that we have to work together more effectively and build ever-stronger alliances.

Working together starts with respect. The Programme Team have begun to more strongly affirm the contributions of all the individuals involved in TLRP, without whom nothing will develop at all. For example, the September 2002 Newsletter contained profiles of some colleagues and reports on project activities, and other editions will offer more in due course. We will continue to emphasise the positive, to respect different academic positions and to work to avoid counter-productive confrontations. At the same time, we need, at every level and in every forum, to find ways of managing challenging discussions, for we must not gloss serious issues and points of difference. Rather, we need to face them, analyse them and talk them through.

TLRP's capacity building initiative is also moving forward. Based around a revitalised work plan and the leadership of Gareth Rees, RCBN is offering an excellent range of activities and services to support researchers of teaching and learning. It has a stimulating journal and a very useful website. However, further participation from the education community as a whole is necessary if we are to make a significant difference to the levels and types of expertise available within our field. TLRP will be collaborating with ESRC's new research capacity building provision, and with AERS in Scotland, to try to further enhance provision in due course. It is hoped that this initiative will engage a sustainable consortium of learned societies and other agencies with a direct, long-term interest in the issue, who will commission training and support from UK and international experts.

Working together also requires infrastructures for facilitation and communication. The creation of a five-person (but 2.9 fte), spatially distributed Directors' Team with wide ranging expertise has significantly enhanced the Programme's capacity to engage with researchers and users in different sectors. Mary James, Alan Brown, Kathryn Ecclestone and John Siraj-Blatchford are excellent colleagues to work with. Acting as 'critical friends' to project colleagues is crucial, as is active liaison with sectoral research users. Additionally, the Programme Office led by Lynne Blanchfield and Suzanne Fletcher is building a communication infrastructure and integrated data-base which will be robust enough to bear the weight of more inter-Programme, user and media activity and much else. The website is part of this too with its diary, discussion facilities and provision for working papers, etc, clustered around projects, themes and Programme aims. So also are the internal Bulletins designed to keep project colleagues informed of developments elsewhere in the Programme. The Programme has a long-standing Communication and Impact strategy and has recently negotiated a range of expectations about outputs. These include partnerships with Taylor & Francis for book and journal publications and with the British Education Index regarding 'gray literature'. The Programme Office aims to provide an increasing range of services, with badging resources, basic website support, registration of research outputs, impact and media advice, selective event administration, etc.

Synergies within, across and beyond the Programme are also being strongly encouraged. Supplementary funding now exists for inter-project meetings, impact activities with users and for capacity building work. TLRP funds seven individual researchers as Career Development Associates or Research Training Fellows, enhancing the projects to which they are attached.

TLRP also enormously values international enrichment, and has already benefited from its links to the National Science Foundation in the USA. It is particularly active with programme-to-programme liaison within the European Research Area, for whom TLRP has developed a 'LinKS' website (Learning in Knowledge Societies) to share information on projects. In Spring 2004 TLRP will be leading a consortium

bid to the European Commission to establish 'EDRES' – an ERA-NET to be made up initially of six countries. Provision will be made for others to join in due course. Discussions are also underway with colleagues in other parts of the world where similar initiatives exist.

TLRP also has excellent links with a very wide range of user organisations, both at Programme and project levels. Over the next few years, the Programme will continue to develop strategic alliances and on coordinating activities to maximise mutual benefits. For example, there are some significant synergies with the issues being considered by the National Education Research Forum in England, TLRP is represented on the Educational Research Advisory Group of the National Assembly for Wales and is cooperating closely with colleagues from the Scottish and Northern Irish Executives. Additionally, there are very important relationships with user organisations in each educational sector. These provide support for project work and help enormously in dissemination activity.

We are delighted to have this positive support from government departments and agencies, in each part of the post-devolution UK, for whom our academic independence is understood and valued. For example, in England, the Chair of the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills launched our Phase III showcase event in Westminster; Lewis Macdonald, Scottish Deputy Minister of Enterprise and Lifelong Learning spoke at our recent conference in Edinburgh; Jane Davidson, Welsh Minister of Education is to launch our forthcoming Showcase event in Cardiff; and, subject to the outcome of the Northern Ireland elections, we are expecting ministerial representation at a similar event in Belfast. TLRP intends to contribute regularly to the work of the devolved governments, opposition parties and parliamentary scrutinising bodies over the next few years. We will protect our academic independence, and be mindful too that changes of government (in each part of the UK as well as nationally) are perfectly possible before TLRP ends. TLRP is also developing much closer and more systematic links to the media and providing support to key researchers in working constructively with journalists.

CONCLUSION

So what does this add up to? In a sense, TLRP's emergent strategies can be seen as an attempt to develop for educational researchers the elements of professional 'activism' which Judyth Sachs recently called for in respect of teachers and teaching. As she put it in a keynote at BERA's 2003 conference:

An activist teaching profession is an educated and politically astute one. The will to achieve this is lying dormant in many of us, and now is the time to work towards its development and realisation in systematic and collective ways. (2003: 3)

Sachs set out five 'foundations' for such activity:

- Social capital
- Engagement
- Collective action
- Transformative politics
- Strategic positioning.

Social capital is developed through building networks, generating opportunities to work constructively together, maximising information flows, and evolving a sense of collective purpose and identity through respectful reciprocity. *Engagement* is crucially dependent on being included in what matters – not always easy given the uneven distribution of power and influence in educational affairs. However, it

is something which should certainly be worked on within our own organisations. *Collective action* is rooted in processes of democratic participation and in breaking down the isolation (and isolationism) which tends to be associated with diverse constituencies or inter-institutional competition. *Transformative politics*, for Sachs, is concerned with changing the beliefs, perspectives and opinions which are associated with social justice and equity. It not only challenges dominant interests but also the 'beliefs and practices that sustain power in everyday life'. Finally, *strategic positioning* is concerned with the long term, with being able to identify issues and opportunities in advance, with: 'anticipating and working for a desired future rather than always being on the back foot and reacting to a contested present' (p 14).

Whilst strongly supporting the overall thrust of this argument, I have two reservations. First, in her urgency to 'make a difference', Sachs rather glosses the need for reflexivity and collective responsibility. In the case of educational research, whilst some contemporary challenges have been misguided, others have been telling. The need for various forms of development in our field seems to me to be incontestable, and it is something which will be much more constructive if we take control of the process ourselves rather than watch others take independent action. Second, there is the more generic question of the role of the intellectual, of the academy, in a democracy. Whilst Sachs implies that political action should be direct, with the teacher (academic) as a values-driven 'activist', my view in respect of TLRP is a little more reserved. We all, of course, have political rights as citizens - and should use them fully, as I certainly do myself. However, TLRP sits within ESRC's portfolio and subscribes to its three core commitments - to quality, relevance and *independence*. This is crucial to the strategic positioning which will serve us best, and it is important therefore to play a 'straight bat' in entering political debates. TLRP's policy is thus to establish links with, and provide evidence to, all legitimate political parties in each part of the UK. Where we fail to do so, it will not be for want of trying - though resource constraints are real even in a large programme. We will then trust to the political process itself, supported by engaged research users.

Alongside the imperative of conducting high quality and relevant projects, we certainly have to build the social capital of education research. This rests on developing relationships and networks, and on sharing perspectives and building alliances with present and future stake-holders. To do this effectively requires an organisational infrastructure - which we are certainly beginning to construct. More significantly it requires goodwill and commitment from the participants in TLRP and from the education research community as a whole. Rather than engaging in a series of fragmented initiatives, through its work on teaching and learning, TLRP is trying to contribute to the broader development of educational research *per se* within the UK.

Is it realistic then, to expect that we can achieve TLRP's goals to enable significant improvements in outcomes for learners across the UK? A realist might doubt this, and yet, the world never does stay still and we can be absolutely sure that understandings about teaching and learning in the UK will change over the period of TLRP's existence. In my view, it is our job to make sure that these changes are as evidence-informed and socially constructive as possible. Whilst the main challenges may be academic, the overall purpose remains moral. I believe that those involved in TLRP will respond accordingly.

TLRP then is far from complacent. The only politically viable strategy is to move forward - to new forms of conceptualisation, new types of enquiry, new levels of expertise and new strategies for user engagement and research impact. This however, has to be achieved *with* colleagues within the field, and cannot be imposed *on* them. It must be founded on respect for existing expertise and on building a collective sense of purpose. We rely on the commitment of the UK's educational researchers working open-mindedly together to improve the quality of teaching and learning,

policy and practice. The most worthwhile stance, I would suggest, is one which recognises and respects the *complementary* roles and expertise of policy-makers, practitioners, researchers, the media and others.

In Scotland, as I indicated at the beginning of this paper, there seem to be some particular opportunities and genuine grounds for hope that collective development within the field will be possible. These initiatives are highly compatible with TLRP's aspirations and the Programme will do everything possible to support them where this would be both helpful and appropriate. Exciting times!

NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the TLRP Annual Conference, Cambridge, UK, in September 2002 and at the annual meeting of AERA in Chicago, April 2003. I am grateful to comments received from colleagues about it.
2. For more detailed information on TLRP, please see the Programme website at: www.TLRP.org

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