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Educational Research and Policymaking: findings from some transitional countries

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ABSTRACT   This paper explores the debate about the relationship between educational research and educational policymaking and practice. It considers why the translation of research into practice appears to be limited, and the policy implications that arise from these limitations. In this epistemic setting, aspects of the organisation of educational research in some western countries, and the contrasting position in some transitional countries, are considered. Demands on educational research in both settings, it is argued, are based partly on misunderstandings of what it can achieve. It is important to reach a clearer understanding of the possibilities if the benefits that are available from research are to be realised.

The Context of Educational Research and Policy, and the Limits of Research

The connections between educational research and educational policymaking, and ultimately practice, have in recent years been examined in various national and trans-national contexts. A common theme of these studies has been the apparent failure of educational research to influence policy effectively. Policymakers have responded by claiming that the research findings presented to them have been inconclusive or otherwise unhelpful. In return, researchers have argued that their findings have been ignored or distorted. This debate has continued in Europe and the USA for some years, and shows no sign of abating (Husen, 1984; Rist, 1998; Hammersley, 2002).

This paper critically explores some of the explanations that have been advanced for the apparently poor articulation between educational research and policymaking, and proposed solutions to these differences; and goes on to ask if the situation of educational research and policymaking in the transitional countries might throw any light on the matter.

Several explanations of the roots of these differences have been put forward. One is that simply not enough research of the right sort has been done, if national education budgets are compared with the funds available for educational research. A variant on this idea is that research has been conducted in too diffuse a fashion. This has meant that findings have not been replicated, and thus built into accepted theories; or, alternatively, rejected (Husen, 1984). That is to say, the model of theory building in the natural sciences has not been followed.

Writing in this journal, Oakley has developed this line of thinking, arguing that more emphasis is needed on systematic reviews of educational research, which synthesise findings from a range of sources that meet certain methodological criteria. Drawing on review methods developed in medicine, this 'knowledge management' approach is, she believes, an effective means of ensuring that research will lead on to evidence-based policymaking and practice (Oakley, 2003). We may note that this view implies that there should be, and can be, a direct, causative linkage from research inputs to policy outcomes.

Another explanation of the lack of impact is that researchers become narrowly specialised, concentrating on 'arguments over terminology, [with] too much emphasis on methodology and not enough on substance' (Watson, 2001, p. 27). As a result, they are unable to place their findings in the broader political or organisational contexts in which policymakers work. A similar argument is that the academic and political/bureaucratic worlds each have a distinctive ethos, to the extent that exchanges between them can become fraught with misunderstandings (Husen, 1984). A recent report by the UK's Audit Commission on the use of research by government departments continued this theme, arguing that research users and providers too often were conceptually distant from one another, with research reports as a result being inaccessible (Comptroller & Auditor General, 2003).

These explanations all imply, firstly, the existence of a fairly direct input/process/output model of policymaking, and, secondly, a belief that the apparent breakdown in the working of this model can be repaired, given sufficient care and money. But some larger epistemological questions challenge these assumptions. It now seems clear to many observers that, at least in education, a linear model—of research being translated via policy into practical applications to improve the educational 'production process'—does not apply. A positivist, 'engineering' approach may be unsound in an educational setting: 'the kind of knowledge produced by natural scientists is not available to social and educational researchers' (Hammersley, 2002, p. 19). Moreover, even if the 'right' kind of knowledge was available, its application via the policy process would be far from straightforward: political scientists have shown how the policy process everywhere is multidimensional, with policy outcomes that are hard to predict, regardless of the methodological or other qualities of the inputs (Hague et al., 1998, offer a summary of recent work).

Matters may not even be particularly clear-cut in the natural sciences: the link between research, policy (or strategy), and practice has been identified as problematic in this domain too. For example, the perceived failure of UK industry to exploit scientific innovations led to changes in research policies during the 1980s. In particular, the UK national research councils began to allocate the bulk of their funds to research themes and programmes, to which individual proposals had to conform, reversing the traditional approach of providing funding in response to researchers' requests (Kogan & Hanney, 2000, p. 113).

This new policy was, then, founded on the notion that a clear link exists between scientific research and improved industrial strategies and practice. The influential 1987 report from the Advisory Board for the Research Councils, 'A Strategy for the Science Base', offered this linkage as 'the primary justification for public support of the science base' (Advisory Board for the Research Councils, 1987, p. 24). Pursuing this thinking, the report went on to lay the foundations for the present policy of increasing selectivity in UK university research funding. The consequences of this assumption were criticised by natural scientists in similar terms to those that have been used in recent educational debates. Complaints about fashion affecting research funding, about dirigiste approaches with unrealistic expectations as to outcomes, about short-termism, and about the demand that only narrow problems be presented for investigation, were made by influential scientists and by the Royal Society during the 1980s and 1990s (Kogan & Hanney, 2000,

p. 115). The difficulty in establishing an appropriate research/policy/practice nexus is a problem, then, that extends beyond the social sciences—something that would not surprise those who point to what they consider to be the normative basis of science in general (Fuller, 2000).

The research/policy/practice problem has been approached in the education field using methods which attempt to take more account of the distinctiveness of education's social nature. One such has been the problem-solving model, which seeks comprehensively to understand a particular educational problem and then to find the missing knowledge that will allow it to be solved (Husen, 1984). This, though, is no more than a variation on the natural science model, with the underlying assumption that every problem has an attainable solution. But in most social arenas, conflicting goals or values can be identified almost as soon as 'solutions' to problems are explored, and research findings can generally offer little guidance in settling such conflicts. Indeed, it must be possible that research may actually exacerbate them (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

Alternatively, Husen suggests that an interactive model of educational research, creating a dialogue with 'back-and-forth exchanges between researchers and policymakers', may be a better way forward (Husen, 1984, p. 14). This idea accepts that causation here may not be one-directional, and thus seems close to being a forerunner of the now-influential concept of 'mode 2 knowledge production'. The proponents of this concept suggest that in certain fields there is a continuing interchange between suppliers and users of research, with the new knowledge itself being produced in the context of its application and therefore being applicable almost by definition (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994). This idea has implications for the organisation of research in universities and other sites of knowledge production, as it calls for greater institutional permeability, flexibility and partnership-building. The organisational implications of 'mode 2' point in turn towards the changes identified as the basis for the 'entrepreneurial university' (Clark, 1998), with strengthened central management, an expanded 'developmental periphery', and other features. Thus, theoretical questions about the relationship of research and practice may point towards significant changes in institutional organisation and management.

Other writers, however, have argued that it is mistaken to believe that social research can ever be applied in a 'technical' way, however sophisticated the process, to solve practical social problems. To a far greater extent than applies to most workers in natural science or technology, the practitioner in social arenas has to consider a variety of goals, often contested or conflicting, and a range of uncertainties when deciding on a course of action. Thus, research relating to one of these goals or actions will inevitably be of limited practical value, although this is not to say that it will be useless (Rist, 1998). This complexity is reflected in the problems encountered when evaluating the impact of a particular social policy decision, as a causal relationship between intervention and outcome can rarely be satisfactorily demonstrated (Pawson & Tilley, 1997, p. 54).

These complications created by contested or conflicting values and goals appear to be set aside in Oakley's proposed use of systematic reviews of research to bridge the research/policy divide. But as she makes clear, the process of systematic review itself has to start by setting out the theoretical and ideological stall of the reviewers. Thus, those conducting the review of research into Gender and Education 'disagreed with "positivist assumptions" and the suggestion of "fixed" criteria of quality' in preparing their synthesis (Oakley, 2003). It seems unlikely that a selection of research findings consistent with these kinds of theoretical and ideological assumptions is going to be regarded as useful by policymakers or practitioners holding quite different perspectives. Once the theoretical and ideological foundations of inputs to evidence-based policymaking in social contexts are exposed, it may become hard to distinguish them from policy-based evidence.

A yet more radical critique of approaches of this kind argues that human society is not characterised by regular structures, and that attempts to derive broad theoretical understandings and then to apply them in particular cases are bound to fail (Hammersley, 2002, p. 51). For Hammersley, what educational research may, though, achieve is an illumination for policy-makers and practitioners of the contexts in which they work and the actions they undertake. It follows from this and other critiques of 'engineering' approaches that it is important for both policymakers and researchers to have realistic expectations about what social research can offer.

Can Research be Made More Effective?

I have noted the complexities arising when we consider the aims of educational research, the interpretation of its conclusions, and their possible application to policy and practice. These considerations have led to the suggestion of the 'research broker', who can explain the significance of research findings to policymakers, and of policy to researchers. A skilled policy analyst, understanding research methodologies and tools, but also being versed in the local political and organisational context, might undertake this role. Trow argues that the effectiveness of the application of educational research in the USA is partly due to the widespread employment of policy analysts in governments there (Trow, 1984). One wonders, however, about what this seemingly common-sense approach conceals: might not the relationship give the appearance of 'working' because the policy analyst is the means of ensuring that policy-based evidence is indeed what enters the policy process, having considerably filtered out all the politically 'unhelpful' findings?

There is said to be evidence that where educational researchers regularly move into and out of administrative work in government, as in Sweden, the impact of educational research improves (Kogan, 1984). It is suggested that the greater the degree of consensus between researchers and government agencies about social objectives—produced as a result of this kind of interchange—the greater the likelihood of successful implementation of research findings. But as the Nordic countries have for many years been characterised by a high degree of consensus about social ends and means (Bleiklie *et al.*, 2000), it may not have been the personnel movements that were the most significant factor. This approach may of course be a way of minimising the potential conflicts of goals and values between researchers and policymakers, noted earlier, although perhaps at the price of closing off certain areas of research and analysis.

If, then, these proposals for improving research/policy interactions appear flawed, how might we reach towards a deeper analysis? In a post-structuralist treatment, Ball attempts to reflect the multi-faceted nature of policymaking by emphasising policy discourses and policy texts in determining policy outcomes (Ball, 1994). In this view, discourses both transmit and produce power: they are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak . . . [they are] about what can be said, when, where and with what authority' (p. 21). Similarly, policy texts may take on meanings not intended by their authors, and influence practice in unforeseen ways. As Foucault observed, discourses based on such texts may become an object of study in themselves, with reinterpretations moving further away from original meanings: the text's 'unity is variable and relative' (Foucault, 1972, p. 23).

One does not, I think, have to be a card-carrying post-structuralist to accept that this thinking offers a more sophisticated representation of the policy process than the simple input/output models implied by some other accounts. Importantly, the post-structuralist position understands that inputs to the policy process, from whatever source, will not be 'objective' or politically neutral, and that policy outcomes will be unpredictable. This

account also suggests that improved plurality and connectivity in the policy process might have the effect of stimulating discourse dissemination, leading to new understandings.

We may note in passing that a discourse-based view of policymaking and practice has been a commonplace of historians and political scientists long before post-structuralists adopted it. In his classic study first published in 1945, Herbert Simon describes as the 'physiology' of an organisation the processes by which the organisation influences the decisions of each of its members, contrasting this with the 'anatomy' of its formal structure (Simon, 1965, p. 220). Were he writing today, Simon might refer to 'organisational discourses' as having the same effect.

Research, it is surely reasonable to suppose, as well as affecting policy discourses, is itself affected. A range of discourses, policy and otherwise, will provide the context within which researchers frame their proposals, and within which research funders give approvals (Fuller, 2000, p. 105). Equally, research findings can alter the nature of discourses, sometimes in ways which the researchers themselves did not expect. Studies in the 1980s about the connections between higher education and economic growth were probably influential in setting the policy direction towards higher education expansion (Kogan & Hanney, 2000, p. 209). Thus, research helped to generate a new, more instrumental, discourse on higher education, which would then have influenced the direction of future research work. Perhaps the distinction between evidence-based policy, and policy-based evidence, may not after all be so large.

Case studies confirm theoretical suggestions that the policy process is typically very messy: a range of actors and events influence it in unpredictable ways. Kogan's interviews with two former British education ministers, for example, show the range of pressures acting on educational policymakers (Kogan, 1971). Research has an opportunity to make an impact at various points: in forming the original policy proposal; in affecting the way the policy is implemented; in reviewing its impact; and in supporting proposals for policy change. But it is likely that it will be difficult definitively to link a particular stage in this political and managerial process with a particular piece of research: as the Audit Commission notes, this makes the evaluation of research work 'problematic' (Comptroller & Auditor General, 2003, p. 7). But this should not really surprise us: as Hammersley points out, policymakers and practitioners need more knowledge, and of different types, than research alone can supply (2002, p. 46). This is why the direct interaction that is sometimes suggested between, for example, evaluation studies of educational interventions and policymaking (Plewis & Preston, 2001, p. 10) rarely holds up in practice.

And when a policy is developed as a reflection of core political values, research and evaluation studies will have even less impact. As Anthony Crosland, one of the education ministers interviewed by Kogan, remarked about the suggested need for research on the introduction of comprehensive schools, 'It implied that research can tell you what your objectives ought to be. But it can't' (Kogan, 1971, p. 190).

The Organisation of Educational Research and Policymaking: some western models

The structure and organisation of educational research will naturally reflect the wider arrangements for advanced study and research in the country concerned. In western countries, such arrangements tend to be pluralistic, with a range of competing organisations seeking to undertake educational research. In these cases, public agencies often act as commissioning bodies, buying the research services they need using quality/price considerations as selection criteria. In other words, there is a market-oriented approach. This diversity and competitiveness, with multiple funders and providers, is seen as contributing

crucially to the strength of US research (Clark, 1995). A UNESCO study concluded that there was an international trend in this market-oriented direction, with more publicly funded educational research being commissioned through consultancies and contracts. This allowed universities and non-state organisations to compete with national research agencies, where these existed (Rokicka, 1999).

A competitive market for the production and distribution of knowledge has become a more important feature of western societies over the last few decades. It is often seen as an important aspect of the knowledge economy, in which knowledge becomes increasingly socially distributed and the traditional boundaries between knowledge producers and users break down (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994). As in any market, a plurality of buyers and sellers is likely to make for a more dynamic environment than where either a monopoly or a monopsony exists. The present relatively centralised nature of UK education, making central government through its various agencies the dominant purchaser of educational research, is therefore likely to be a brake on research dynamism, especially when research suppliers are generally small, with weak market power (Pring, 2002).

In the UK, most funding from public sources for social and economic research is directed towards a number of what the government considers to be key policy areas, where there are potential research users. This user-oriented approach has certain problems, though, even if it is accepted that some kind of direct link exists between research and policy and practice. Fundamental research, by definition, is produced without knowing who its users, if any, might be, and what they might do with it. An exclusive focus on current policy issues means that work on theoretical matters, or on replicating previous research, is less likely to take place, which means that the quality of findings needed to underpin later policies becomes weaker. The balance between the central direction of research and curiosity-driven research is a difficult one to strike, of course. It has been a contested issue in the UK since at least the 1971 Rothschild Report on Government R&D, which introduced the client/contractor relationship into public research funding and paved the way for the current broad understandings about research and public policy (Kogan & Hanney, 2000, p. 161). (Although this particular policy discourse might be traced back much further, to the 1918 Haldane Report on the Machinery of Government (Clarke, 1971, p. 91).)

Even so, the evidence seems to suggest that a market-led approach to research funding will become more widespread in Western countries (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, p. 209). But where, as in the UK, there is a dominant governmental role in research purchasing, then its effectiveness may be weakened. A single (or at least, a limited) set of ideologies and theoretical assumptions must lead to a limited set of understandings, thereby adding to the problematic nature of the linkage between research, policy and practice. Although resulting from different causes, this 'single model' approach somewhat resembles the situation in the transitional states. Can their experiences cast light on the research/policy/practice issue more broadly?

The Organisation of Educational Research and Policymaking: the transitional countries

The transitional post-communist states present a contrast to the picture outlined above—although I suggest that the contrast may not be as stark as it first appears. But there are both epistemological and organisational differences.

The epistemological differences show most clearly in the generally unspoken (as it seems so obvious) assumption in these countries that psychological research offers a clear route to the production of educational solutions. Hammersley (2002, p. 41) identifies the

foundations of this belief when he delineates the Marxist tradition in educational research, which stresses the connection between theory and practice, and that answers to practical social problems can be found through scientific research. This tradition has fundamentally influenced researchers and policymakers in all fields throughout the former socialist bloc. The Soviet belief, for example, 'that the state of pedagogical art allowed for the reliable prediction of [students'] abilities' rested on faith in the accuracy of psychological findings, and in the relevance of these to educational performance (Soltys, 1997, p. 65). This belief in turn depended on a positivist parallel with the way in which research in physics, say, might help to solve technological problems.

This attitude was, I suggest, reinforced by the Soviet method of organising research of all kinds into specialist institutes, normally responsible to the national Academy of Sciences or to the relevant industrial agency, rather than to the Ministry of Education, which dealt with the teaching-oriented universities. This instrumental approach became the usual form of organisation throughout the socialist states, leading to empires of research institutes expanding into ever-more specialist areas (Kerr, 1990). This compartmentalisation discouraged interdisciplinary work and any wider conception of research, the focus being on producing findings related to 'actually existing' problems in defined fields (Soltys, 1997, p. 64).

Many organisational forms for research which developed under communism persist today in the transitional states. There is usually a state educational research organisation: these were established in communist times for educational control purposes, but now some have taken on different roles. In the Czech Republic, the Research Institute for Education, as an agency for social control in the communist period, designed curricula and approved textbooks for use nationally. Since 1989, it has reduced in size, has a much smaller state budget, and competes with education research units in universities for state research contracts (Kotasek, 1999).

Romania offers a similar picture, where the Institute of Education Research performs various tasks which are thought best undertaken at arms-length from the Ministry of Education. The large amounts of international aid available in recent years for education projects have provided the Institute with a new, semi-independent funding stream, a common pattern throughout the region. Meanwhile, the universities have gained a substantial measure of autonomy, and are vigorously recreating their research capacities. This is leading to the beginnings of a competitive market among research providers, supported by a more flexible higher education funding regime (Korka, 2000, p. 68).

Both the Czech Republic and Romania therefore show systems in transition from pure state control to something approaching a mixed economy in educational research, with the possibility of wider epistemological standpoints developing.

Poland exhibits a wider variety of educational research sites, including central official institutes, university education faculties, and research centres in the higher schools of pedagogy (the teacher training institutions) (Janowski, 1999). Poland has the largest higher education system in East-Central Europe, with a diversity of resources, and it is notable that a pluralistic approach has developed, moving sharply away from the centralism of the communist system. This plurality is reflected in other aspects of Poland's educational life, resulting probably from the limited but important degree of independence which the universities were able to maintain under communist rule (Connelly, 1999).

But the development of educational research in Poland has not been without problems. There are said to be concerns by policymakers about the value of much academic educational research, which has led to studies being commissioned instead from private research organisations. Part of the problem is thought to be the lack of a tradition of academic research aimed at supporting the kind of decision-making now required. On the

other hand, it is argued that policymakers have been imprecise about their requirements, leading to mutual frustration (Janowski, 1999). These will by now be complaints familiar to the reader.

It seems likely that these difficulties reflect Poland's position as the first state in East-Central Europe to see the effective collapse of communist power. The passage of time, with the retained independence of the universities noted here, has allowed educational research to become quite plural. Researchers have tended to move away from factual and psychological studies towards the development of a critical pedagogy, drawing on post-modernism, critical theory and radical pedagogy, and thereby challenging current assumptions in Polish educational theory and practice (Janowski, 1999). This constitutes a startling change of style in regional terms, and it is perhaps not surprising that policymakers, long used to the certainties presented by Marxist-based research, have reacted negatively. Viewed from the UK, there are echoes here of the debates about the value of educational research following David Hargreaves' 1996 TTA lecture and David Blunkett's 2000 speech to the ESRC (Hammersley, 2002, p. 5).

In the sharpest contrast, educational research in the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan (where I have recently examined the position), continues to be viewed through the prism of Marxist positivism. Azerbaijan is probably fairly typical of non-Russian post-Soviet states in this respect. Psychology provides almost the entire intellectual basis of educational research: it is, believes a senior government education official, the 'interplay of scientific and educational frames [which allows the] constant perfecting of educational process' (Mustafayev, 2002, p. 14). Educational research is conducted by a fragmented system of state institutes and university pedagogic faculties. The small sizes of the educational research communities in these new states, allied with considerable intellectual isolation, means that new ideas have to struggle to take root.

A spectrum of educational research organisation and epistemology is therefore beginning to emerge among the transitional states. The more westernised states are adopting plural, market-oriented methods of organisation and trying out varying epistemic approaches. Those of the former Soviet Union, by contrast, tend to rely on state research organisations and continue to apply essentially Marxist research epistemologies.

Some Tentative Conclusions from the Transitional Countries

I have noted that generally in the transitional countries, the Marxist, positivist tradition suggests to policymakers and researchers that 'engineering' solutions may be found to social problems, if properly scientific methods are applied, interrogating the basic disciplines which must provide the underlying explanations to these problems: 'if only an extra effort were made, these scientific rules could be grasped' (Schopflin, 2000, p. 104). This approach, as it was applied in the Soviet Union, might be seen as taking Taylorism from the factory production line and applying it in social contexts (Soltys, 1997, p. 62). Might not, though, the approach of the typical western government be all that different, even if presented in different ideological clothing?

The strength of the Marxist tradition, developed over three-quarters of a century, first within the Soviet Union and then more widely in the socialist bloc, means that, as I have noted, educational research in most transitional states remains as a branch of psychology. This was the only appropriately scientific discipline-experimental and quantitative-which appeared relevant. Psychology became an important branch of Soviet academic work, and the prestige of researchers such as Leontyev, Luria and Vygotsky helped to consolidate its grip on education policy. It fitted well with the wider Soviet emphasis on scientific and technological advancement.

It is difficult to identify causes and effects in the analysis of dysfunctional societies. Is a particular activity a result of the wider dysfunctionality around it, or is the activity a contributor to that dysfunctionality? Perhaps both may be true. In the case of education, psychological research supported Soviet-era policymakers' beliefs that, for example, young people could readily be classified into different occupational groups, and educated or trained accordingly (Soltys, 1997, p. 48). This fitted neatly with the needs of central planners to allocate labour both between occupations and between managerial, technical and manual levels in accordance with national industrial plans. The demands by the planning ministries for such selections to be made reinforced the key role of psychology in the education system, by creating demands for testing and assessment. The apparently scientific results of this work in turn helped to justify the bureaucratic faith in the planning process, so perpetuating the cycle (Schopflin, 2000, p. 99).

These approaches persist today in most transitional states, where the instinct remains among politicians and bureaucrats for central economic planning, including detailed control of student numbers by subjects of study. This tends to lead to the adoption of instrumental approaches to education, supported by, and supporting, the belief that research can solve what are viewed as technical difficulties in achieving a perfected education system. A recent work, for example, published within the former Soviet Union, and firmly in the Soviet tradition, presents psychological research to derive what are considered to be 14 fundamental laws governing pedagogy (Kazimov, 2002). This writer, a senior university professor, believes that his work means that there is really little more for educational researchers to do, other than of course to read his book.

This psychology-based approach means that research on a range of matters, such as classroom practice, or school organisation and management, or on wider social issues such as the social composition of school intakes, is neglected. Similarly, little research takes place on vocational or higher education issues. This is of course not the only reason why vocational and higher education systems throughout the region are typically of poor quality and inefficient, but the lack of any systematic consideration of how they are organised, how they operate, and to what purpose, may be a contributing factor. New organisational forms or changed approaches to teaching and learning are accordingly rarely researched, and any resulting proposals are, perhaps, even less likely to be implemented (Howse, 2001).

What conclusions about the nature and impact of educational research may we draw from these observations? I suggest that the narrowly instrumental approach to educational research in the Soviet bloc, carried forward into many of the transitional countries, has had a deleterious effect. I have presented earlier the view that the nature of professional practice means that individual pieces of research cannot offer explicit guidance in particular operational situations. What research may instead do is to provide 'a deeper understanding of the contexts in which action takes place, and of the action itself' (Hammersley, 2002, p. 38). The Marxist approach to research, by concentrating on the latter, has prevented the former: as I noted above, contextual topics and associated actions are rarely studied, and a wide range of organisational questions are therefore seldom raised.

This situation cannot be separated from the context in which the research takes place. In all the transitional countries, criticism of even details of organisational arrangements was until recently potentially risky, certainly in terms of one's job: in some places, it still is. Focusing attention on factual scientific investigation, supported by a weighty body of psychological work from politically approved scholars, was a much better idea. I have noted how in recent years a changed epistemological approach in Poland has brought criticism of the researchers concerned, even though Poland is one of the most westernised of the transitional countries. Change elsewhere will be even slower.

Conclusion

Both in the West and in the transitional countries, policymakers look to educational research to provide immediate answers to practical questions. Despite very different historical experiences, largely unspoken positivist assumptions underlie policymakers' expectations in both places: there is a shared misunderstanding about what educational research can do. Centralised control of research funding, justified in western and transitional countries either on grounds of efficiency or of realpolitik, leads to research with restricted theoretical perspectives.

Western policymakers and researchers might reflect on the large-scale, trans-national project, the results of which can be examined today across the former Soviet bloc, which attempted to drive educational policy and practice through a particular model of research. They might conclude that a different approach is needed, and that better understanding of the relationship between educational research, policy and practice will improve the chances of research having an impact on social change. While the contrasting market-oriented approach to research organisation and funding has many benefits, it should not be expected to deliver immediate improvements to practice, any more than the Marxist model did.

Today in the transitional countries, psychology-based research continues to be the preference for educational researchers who have been encouraged to see the natural science model as the only valid research epistemology. The need now is for them to break out of this mould and to adopt modes of research that challenge existing structures and processes, so providing understandings of contexts and actions. It is these understandings that are badly needed if the inflexible and inefficient structures that dominate the educational landscape in the transitional countries are to be reformed.

Educational researchers are challenged to explain to policymakers what they can and cannot offer. A more realistic attitude on the part of policymakers might help; as would a more reflexive approach by researchers, acknowledging the complexity of the policy process: researchers 'have to widen the frames of knowing *and* they have to engage with the widest range of audiences . . . research . . . becomes the art of the possible' (Barnett, 2000, p. 151).

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