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Research article

Thomas Coram: the life and times of a research unit at the Institute of Education (London)

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Abstract

For nearly 50 years, the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) has been integral to the IOE (Institute of Education), UCL's Faculty of Education and Society (University College London, UK). This article is written from the perspectives of four researchers who have served in the TCRU's formative years and over its lifetime. It chronicles the TCRU's history and meaning, situating these reflections within the wider and much changed context of academia, politics and society. It begins with an overview of the TCRU's origins as a dedicated government-funded research unit in 1973, the rationale and aims of its founder and first director, Jack Tizard, and the TCRU's subsequent evolution, and its work in the fields of childhood, families and children's services. This is followed by a consideration of some important features of the TCRU, which have created its distinct identity, for example multidisciplinary, working with mixed methods, international collaborations, a

convivial and collegiate environment and a continuing capacity to generate new ideas and directions for research. The article also reflects on some of the challenges faced by the TCRU and how it has responded to them. The article concludes by considering whether there is still a place today for a dedicated, university-based social research unit with a long-term and strategic orientation.

Keywords policy-relevant; social research; methodological pluralism; multidisciplinary; children; families; children's services

Introduction

For nearly 50 years, the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) has been an integral part of the IOE (Institute of Education), UCL's Faculty of Education and Society (University College London, UK). For most of this time, it has served as a centre for research into the lives of children, young people and their families, and into the services and other policies provided for them. This article is written from the perspectives of four researchers, three of whom are officially retired. The four of us have served in the TCRU both in our own formative years as researchers and in the TCRU's formative years and over its whole lifetime. We reflect on the TCRU's story, situating these reflections within the wider and much changed context of academia, politics and society. Our methodology is, consequently, largely that of the memoir: 'Memoir is used by auto-ethnographers to record their memories of lived experience. Auto-ethnography is memoir refracted through the researching, enquiring, conceptualising mind' (Scott, 2014: 760).

Mostly the memoir relies on our own recollections, but we have also shared the text with others who were there, to check if their recollections were consistent with ours. In addition, we have consulted the archives of the IOE which includes correspondence relating to the history of the TCRU. Although this was helpful, the TCRU's archive was not assembled with a systematic history in mind, so it sometimes lacks key information. For example, preserved memos might refer to conversations which were not recorded.

Telling this 50-year story, in which we and current and past colleagues are all implicated, has been a tall order. In doing so, we have been highly selective, for example focusing on the founding logic of the TCRU. We have avoided (in the main) naming the TCRU's protagonists, and we have not attempted to be methodologically systematic in doing justice to the whole of the TCRU's history. To do so was beyond our resources and would have lengthened the article considerably. We also wish to stress that our narrative, like any other, is produced from particular viewpoints building on the past, connecting events into a meaningful sequence for our readers (Riessman, 2008) and looking towards the uncertainties of the future.

The starting point is an overview of the TCRU's history, including its origins in 1973 as a government-funded, dedicated research unit, the aims of its founder and first director, Jack Tizard, and the subsequent evolution of the TCRU and its work. This will be followed by a consideration of some important features of the TCRU that created its distinct identity, for example multidisciplinary, a convivial and collegiate environment, and a continuing capacity to generate new directions for research. As well as such strengths, we also discuss some of the challenges that the TCRU has faced and how it has responded to them, including changing political, institutional and employment landscapes. For the story of the TCRU is one of the entanglement of the interests and commitments of its members with these wider landscapes and the research agendas they have generated.

Given the considerable social and academic changes since the TCRU first opened its doors in 1973, the article will conclude by considering whether there is still a place today for a dedicated, university-based social research unit undertaking sustained basic research and digging deep into its areas of concern. Does Jack Tizard's original vision for his new TCRU in 1973 still have relevance today? Or has it been overtaken by events, and long consigned to a past that is a different country?

Jack Tizard and the birth of a research unit

The Thomas Coram Research Unit was founded in 1973, the product of the vision and reputation of its first director, Professor Jack Tizard, and the backing of government. Born in New Zealand in 1919, orphaned at the age of five and growing up during the inter-war Great Depression, Jack Tizard went on to gain a first-class degree in 1940 and the award of the University of New Zealand's Senior Scholar in Philosophy, before five years spent in the field ambulance service during the Second World War. Having moved to the UK in 1945, he joined the Medical Research Council Social Psychiatry Unit at London's Institute of Psychiatry in 1948 where, for 16 years, he undertook research to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities. His early work demonstrated that they need not be detained in institutions and could learn skills enabling them to be employed. The culmination of this period was the groundbreaking Brooklands Project, an intervention that removed a group of children with severe learning disabilities from a harsh hospital environment and offered them instead an upbringing in a domestic environment. This was organised on developmental rather than custodial principles, similar to the care provided for children without disabilities who were unable to live with their parents. The project's evaluation showed clearly that this very different provision was both beneficial and feasible.

In 1964, Jack Tizard moved to the IOE as Professor of Child Development, and in 1971 he established the Child Development Research Unit. Two years later, he set up the TCRU, with the support of the then Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS), in premises in Bloomsbury's Brunswick Square rented from the Thomas Coram Foundation for Children (today's Coram, which is still in Brunswick Square). The TCRU's new offices overlooked the site of the Coram Foundling Hospital, an innovative institution initiated by an eighteenth-century sea captain, Thomas Coram, to save and improve the lives of London's abandoned children (McClure, 1981). Consequently, the TCRU took on the name Thomas Coram.

Influenced by his time in a medical research unit, Jack Tizard believed that a similar model of research was needed in the social sciences, where sustained work on strategic issues would enable an accumulation of expertise by a group of researchers, who would also benefit from insights gained from their respective fields. While committed to social research that was 'policy relevant', he contested the approach to policy-oriented research set out in 1971 in a report on the organisation and management of government research and development produced for the government by Lord Rothschild (1971). This drew a sharp distinction between basic and applied research, and advocated a 'customer-contractor' relationship between government and researchers for applied research.

Jack Tizard (1979) thought the customer-contractor relationship was neither appropriate nor feasible, given his view that 'customers' (that is, policymakers) often were not clear about what they wanted, and tended not to look beyond immediate concerns (see also B. Tizard, 2003). Work of this kind might, he conceded, be occasionally undertaken by a unit such as the TCRU, but overall, he was 'sceptical of the value of commissioning "projects" on a one-off basis in the belief that by doing so you are going to answer any but the most superficial questions' (J. Tizard, 1979: 248). Such contracted projects were unlikely, in his view, to be 'effective either in influencing policy or in leading to an accumulation of expertise in a particular field' (B. Tizard, 2003: 10).

Instead, he argued that the real 'value of experienced researchers is that they will raise questions that the policy makers have not thought of' (B. Tizard, 2003: 26), while the basic rationale for research units to be located in universities was 'to allow them to be concerned with strategic issues rather than immediate government concerns' (B. Tizard, 2003: 11). It was, he wrote:

very necessary that the [Thomas Coram Research] Unit should continue to undertake so-called basic, or strategic, research ... [otherwise] it will move from project to project without long term goals, and without giving consideration to theoretical issues or the development of methodologies which lend themselves to the empirical study of policy-related issues. (J. Tizard, 1979: 251)

From this perspective, he concluded that:

it is [not] the specific results of most enquiries which have, or should have, a decisive effect upon national policy. Rather, it is the experience, knowledge, and way of looking at problems which research workers have, which could be of most use to [government] departments centrally in their consideration of policy issues ... The best way to utilize what research workers

have to offer government may often be by calling upon them as experts or consultants rather than asking departments to commission specific pieces of research and then attempt to assimilate directly the results of a large number of disparate enquiries. (J. Tizard, 1979: 250)

A critical history of the relationship between the DHSS and research suggests that the DHSS also came to this view (Kogan et al., 1980).

The focus of Jack Tizard's new TCRU was the health, welfare and education of children and their families, and the services and institutions provided for them. It aimed to adopt rigorous scientific methodology and to conduct policy-oriented research. In addition to a director, deputy director and six researchers, the DHSS funded a dedicated unit administrator, five secretaries – and a full-time statistician, 'to ensure high quality statistical advice and help would be available for all staff at all stages of research – design, execution and analysis' (B. Tizard, 2003: 14). Four years after the TCRU opened, a full-time computer programmer was added.

The TCRU initially undertook work on preschool services, funded by the DHSS; on young children's play and on residential nurseries, led by Barbara Tizard, funded by the then Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and Barnardo's; as well as on a programme of research funded by the DHSS on children with disabilities, led by Deputy Director Chris Kiernan. The TCRU was, in effect, awarded government funding to undertake strategic research; the initial preschool project, the TCRU's largest, was a clear example, embodying Jack Tizard's approach. Like the earlier Brooklands Project, it would demonstrate and evaluate the feasibility of an innovative approach to an important problem. Faced by preschool services that, in Jack Tizard's view, were insufficient to meet needs and dysfunctional in organisation, his 'proposal was simple but breathtakingly audacious' (B. Tizard, 2003: 13) – to set up two children's centres in different areas of London, as demonstration projects that would integrate education and care, along with a range of other services, such as child health, offering free provision for all children from birth to 5 years of age who lived within pram-pushing distance of the centres.

Jack Tizard (1975: n.p.) set out the forward-looking thinking underlying this project in a report to the DHSS chief scientist:

The project is both descriptive and quasi-experimental ... It is evident that society would be obliged to provide much more in the way of services for young children than we were planning ... It seemed important to explore the feasibility of piloting new types of service before public demand led to rapid expansion of services on traditional lines which might be functionally less satisfactory.

He added that four other considerations had influenced his thinking: the dysfunctional split between social and educational services for young children; the need to get beyond public provision limited to 'priority' groups; the importance of a strong paediatric health element in a 'comprehensive' service; and the value of this free and comprehensive demonstration project for providing 'pointers to future demand for services' (J. Tizard, 1975: n.p.). Sadly, governments of the day ignored this foresight and the subsequent demonstration of feasibility; when public demand did lead to rapid expansion of early childhood services in the 1990s, it was indeed on traditional and less satisfactory lines. By the time the Labour government rediscovered children's centres in the 2000s, it was as a supplement to a still dysfunctional system, rather than forming a universal, free and coherent system of public early childhood provision.

A brief history of the TCRU's research following the death of Jack Tizard

By 1979, the TCRU was thriving, and had expanded to 17 projects and 42 academic staff. But then Jack Tizard died, aged just 60. After an interim period, the TCRU's continuance was assured, and Barbara Tizard, Jack's widow, took over as director from 1980 to 1990. Barbara Tizard was an eminent psychologist and had been active in the TCRU since its inception. She described herself as 'a lifelong rebel', for whom it was natural 'to challenge received ideas' (B. Tizard, 2010: 275). This led her to undertake research that, for example, questioned the early theories of John Bowlby that deprivation of maternal care in the first two years led to 'affectionless psychopathy'. Her study of babies in Barnardo's nurseries burgeoned into a longitudinal study of adoption and influenced thinking on social policy as well as on transracial

adoption. Later, her research contested commonly held beliefs that working-class mothers failed to stimulate children, reporting a relative paucity of talk at nursery school among 4-year-old girls and a rich learning environment in the home.

The TCRU continued to thrive under Barbara Tizard's leadership, benefiting from further Department of Health rolling contracts; indeed, by 1982–3, the TCRU's 13 projects accounted for some 45 per cent of the IOE's total external research funding (Aldrich and Woodin, 2021).

Since Barbara Tizard's retirement, there have been six directors: Harry McGurk (1990–5), Peter Aggleton (1995–2007), Ann Phoenix and Marjorie Smith (joint directors, 2007–14), Margaret O'Brien (2013–21) and, from 2021, Alison Koslowski. Each has brought their own research interests to the TCRU. In 1991, the TCRU moved from Brunswick Square to offices in two Georgian houses in Woburn Square, adjacent to the IOE's main building.

Over this period, the funding of the TCRU has fundamentally changed as the government departments with which it was involved restructured, renamed and changed policy direction. For many years, the TCRU's funding bedrock was government, first under the DHSS, then, from 1988, the Department of Health, its relationship facilitated by a Department of Health Research Liaison Officer. However, from the early 1990s, this bedrock began to crumble. First, the rolling contract system and 'core funding' under the Department of Health, from which the TCRU had benefited hugely since it had provided a modicum of security, came under review. Then, in March 1994, it came to an end, with the TCRU offered instead a five-year fixed-term contract, renewable for a further fixed term. Following the Labour government reassigning responsibility for non-paediatric children's services from health to education in 1998 (Lewis, 2003), funding was shared between the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment. Finally, in 2010, this support was ended altogether. This occurred in the context of political change from a Labour to a Conservative-led coalition government, bringing with it a marked change in policy, reflected by an immediate renaming of the commissioning department, from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007–10) to the narrower Department for Education (DfE), and the dropping of the former's ambitious policy agenda, *Every Child Matters*.

In these new conditions, the TCRU had to tender competitively for a new Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre (CWRC), which it won in collaboration with members of other research units in the IOE and two other universities. This brought four years of government funding at a substantially lower level than before. The work of the CWRC from 2010 to 2014 marked a radical break with the TCRU's previous work with government departments. The detailed tender included a range of suggested projects of medium length (one to three years), as well as provision for a responsive mode of short-term research to be initiated by the DfE, but to be designed and delivered by the CWRC. In the event, this 'rapid response' mode, building on previous more informal arrangements, proved a productive stream of work, drawing in numerous researchers from all the partner organisations to respond to government agendas. However, this short-term project work came to dominate the CWRC's activities, with the result that, despite the good work delivered, the new relationship with government did not support researcher careers or the sustained consideration of policy issues to do with children and families.

It is important to recognise that although government funding had been important to the TCRU, the TCRU also had a successful track record of gaining grants from a wide range of other funding bodies. As far back as 1980, Barbara Tizard secured eight years of substantial funding for the TCRU as a SSRC and then Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Designated Research Centre. From the late 1990s, the TCRU had several projects generously funded by the European Union (EU), including *Care Work in Europe* (2001–5), *Young People in Public Care: Pathways to Education in Europe* (2008–11) and *Families and Food in Hard Times* (2014–19). Another large and prestigious award by the ESRC, *Narratives of Varied Everyday Lives and Linked Approaches* (NOVELLA), was a node of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods (2011–14); it sought to make a step change in methodology through its use of narrative approaches linked with a range of other methods. Such projects employed several researchers within the TCRU and involved working with partners in other universities, both in the UK and abroad.

Despite such successes, by late 2013 it was clear that a more resilient and secure funding base was needed for the TCRU to survive as a research unit in an increasingly challenging research environment. These funding challenges drove its new director, Margaret O'Brien, working with the then Head of Quantitative Social Science (QSS), Jane Elliott, to diversify the TCRU's and the QSS's income sources through initiating an undergraduate degree programme. Supported by the ESRC/Nuffield Q-step initiative, two new undergraduate degrees, launched in 2016, were designed with specialist

modules. This new development bolstered the TCRU's financial position and offered an opportunity for revitalisation and renewal, enabling the recruitment of an outstanding group of early and mid-career staff, combining teaching and research, and through whom new funders have been added to the TCRU's portfolio, including the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the National Institute of Health Research and NordForsk.

Although the TCRU has sustained a broad interest in the health, welfare and education of children and their families, and the services and institutions provided for them, its areas of work, as with its sources of funding, have been diverse and have evolved over time. For example, it has moved away from the intervention projects of the 1970s (not just involving children's centres, but also schools) and work with children with disabilities. Research focused on schools and schooling also faded, although schools remain a key resource in much of the TCRU's work. At the same time, new approaches to working with children and conceptualising childhood have developed. A notable and sustained example has been work on social pedagogy – a theory, practice and profession of working with children, young people and adults widespread in continental Europe but little known in the anglophone world. This groundbreaking work has supported a growing application of the approach in UK services, and has led to the TCRU having the UK's first Professor of Social Pedagogy. It has also furthered the TCRU's extensive research with looked-after children and care leavers. Both here, and in many other projects, the TCRU has become an international player, working cross-nationally, not only in Europe, but also beyond.

From the beginning, health was a major component of the TCRU's work. The Children's Centres project in the 1970s included a team of paediatricians and health visitors acting both as clinicians and researchers. They moved out to a hospital setting in the early 1980s, but research on health received a fresh injection when Ann Oakley was appointed in 1983 to be the TCRU's Deputy Director. Then, under Peter Aggleton's direction in the 1990s, the TCRU moved into the fields of HIV/AIDS and, more generally, sexualities, and sexual and reproductive health. In the 2000s, research on children's food practices, food poverty and school meals was added. Most recently, the expansion of staff following the introduction of degree courses has renewed a focus on health, for example in collaborative research with the UCL Institute of Child Health on children's health services and as part of the national Department of Health programme.

Similar evolutions have occurred elsewhere. From the TCRU's original interest in provision for children, other lines of enquiry have spun off. For instance, methods for listening to young children attending early childhood services, analyses of the workforce and enquiries into the issue of gender in that workforce have been dynamic themes. Evaluations of reforms in children's services, such as the 1989 Children's Act project and a cross-national study of the integration of responsibility for early childhood services in education are further examples. A wide range of work on employment, care and gender has continued from the early 1980s until now, including studies of working mothers (subsequently repositioned as 'working parents'), intergenerational relations in families, fatherhood, and the role of parenting leave policies in supporting family life and promoting gender equality, as well as more generally on parenting practices.

The TCRU's research is currently organised under three 'work streams'. The first two – 'Children and children's well-being: Services and practices' and 'Gender, families and work' – reflect long-established interests, although with particular research projects dealing with new-found subjects, for example, parenting cultures and families with young children in the COVID-19 pandemic, the experiences of young donor-conceiving adults, minority stress in same-sex parent families, and identities and health among lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. The third stream – 'Migration, mobility and diversity' – encompasses other, newer societal concerns, including the experiences of child and adult refugees and other migrant groups. Here is more evidence of the TCRU's continual evolution in response to changing times, while retaining a focus on children and families, a capacity also apparent in methodology that we consider in the next section.

Creating an identity

Generations generate cultures, subjectivities and action in response to the shared historical and social conditions they encounter. On first sight, the early years of the TCRU might seem unpromising. The 1971 Rothschild report had introduced a managerial and transactional tone to government-funded research, while 1979 brought to power a Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher not well disposed to

social science, as exemplified by Thatcher's insistence that the SSRC be renamed the ESRC in 1984. Yet in retrospect, the research environment to which the TCRU was then exposed appears relatively benign by today's standards. Albeit, at the time, research posts were low status compared with teaching posts, and researchers in the TCRU were mostly on temporary contracts tied to project funding, often leaving at the end of one contract.

From its inception, the TCRU was unusual as a centre for social science research in a number of ways (Brannen, 2021), with features that helped form the TCRU's distinctive identity. First, the TCRU enjoyed its own funding stream, with six-year rolling contracts from the DHSS that covered core posts and rental for accommodation. Furthermore, this came with a great deal of freedom to determine the content and direction of its research through negotiation with the DHSS.

As a result, while some of the TCRU's research was of immediate policy relevance, much was wider than policymakers' concerns. For example, both the Children's Centre project of the 1970s and the Daycare study funded in 1982, a longitudinal project that focused from a gender equality perspective on the employment experiences of mothers with infants and those infants' experience of daycare, were generously funded by the DHSS, even though parental employment and the provision of supportive policies were not then on the government's policy agenda. Both projects led to important publications by members of the TCRU that explored the provision of early childhood services, in this and other countries, and to a long-term concern with policies supportive of working parents.

Furthermore, despite the fact that, in the 1970s, there was a divide in the social science community between what was known as basic and applied research, and the Rothschild report's enshrining of this division, the TCRU's relative freedom enabled it to straddle the divide. Rejecting the sharp distinction between basic and applied research, Jack Tizard (cited in B. Tizard, 2003: 26) argued that 'it is through a proper consideration of practical issues that social science is most likely to make theoretical advances during the present century'. This view came to be part of the legacy that he left the TCRU.

A second feature of the TCRU has been its history of, and belief in, multidisciplinary. Jack Tizard, although a distinguished psychologist and indeed a president of the British Psychological Society, has been described as 'less a psychologist, perhaps, than someone working on the boundaries of psychology, medicine, education and the social sciences' (B. Tizard, 1983: 5). He believed that research was more likely to flourish in settings that not only provided an intellectual critical mass of researchers and created some staff continuity, but also brought together different disciplinary perspectives. Over the years, the TCRU has retained a multidisciplinary character. While there has always been a strong presence of psychologists, they have worked alongside, at various times, doctors, sociologists, anthropologists, social workers, teachers, sociolegal scholars, statisticians and an economist.

Third, the TCRU started out geographically distant from the IOE, its university host some half a mile away from the TCRU's initial home. This gave the TCRU a degree of autonomy, particularly as its staff were exclusively funded to carry out research on a full-time basis and had limited (or no) teaching responsibilities. Furthermore, DHSS-funded research units such as the TCRU benefited from one recommendation of the Rothschild report that 'contractors' could spend about 10 per cent of their time on non-project work. This was implemented as an allowance for each researcher to spend 10 per cent of their time on non-project work, although Lord Rothschild had not intended that the 10 per cent would be equally distributed in this way. This time allocation was closely guarded, and it benefited researchers who elected to use that time running study groups, attending conferences, writing and participating in other activities.

Autonomy and research primacy had advantages, but also disadvantages. The TCRU had to be active in lobbying the IOE for better conditions for research staff. Two examples illustrate this struggle for improved conditions (B. Tizard, 2003). Contract research staff faced considerable challenges to maintain a continuous research career. In this respect, though, the IOE was ahead of the times in taking steps to recognise the importance of tackling the 'culture of impermanence' that Professor Basil Bernstein (Pro Director of Research for the IOE in the 1980s) characterised as a feature of research contexts and research contracts. In the 1980s, the IOE began to offer 'bridging grants' to its researchers, funding that covered short periods of time in between research projects – although repeatedly emphasising that 'bridging' was not a contract extension and researchers had to have realistic prospects of funding in view. The result helped in retaining the TCRU's researchers as a critical mass.

Subsequently, the issue received national attention. By 1995/6, there were 2,500 contract researchers in the social sciences in the UK, with more women at early career levels and fewer in senior grades (Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 1998). This trend was responded to but also intensified by national

changes negotiated by the then Association of University Teachers, which made universities responsible for providing opportunities for continuous employment for their staff. In 2002, under the Fixed-Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations, it became illegal to treat temporary workers less favourably than similar permanent staff. It also became mandatory that researchers could not be employed on continuous fixed-term contracts for more than four years. This offered better possibilities for capacity building and continuity for researchers on lower pay grades, and for taking the TCRU in different directions as more people applied for research money to pursue their own research interests. However, it also intensified the pressure on the more senior researchers to obtain grants that covered the costs of research salaries and made it difficult for them to have sufficient time to spend working on projects. Yet there is little sign nationally of universities employing their doctoral graduates (only 3.5 per cent in the UK), while the period of social and financial dependency of researchers on academics acting as principal investigators is getting longer (OECD, 2021).

A further case of the TCRU's promotion of researcher interests concerned study leave. In the 1970s and 1980s researchers in the IOE had no entitlement to study leave, in contrast to academic (teaching) staff who were entitled to apply for one term of leave for every five years of service. In 1983, Basil Bernstein, supported by Barbara Tizard, by then the TCRU's Director, took up the case for study leave that had been proposed by some of the TCRU's research staff. In 1987, this was mentioned as an area of concern in the IOE's submission to the University Grants Committee, and it was discussed in two of the IOE's main committees. In 1990, a paid study leave scheme was extended to those research staff who had been in continuous employment in the TCRU for more than five years. It is perhaps not a coincidence that at this time, with the first Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) taking place in 1986, the quality of publications, especially those based on externally funded research, became central to the amount of funding that universities received and the processes by which university reputations were made. The TCRU made a major contribution to the IOE's RAE and later Research Excellence Framework (REF) submissions.

The TCRU's autonomy and physical separation from the IOE fostered a strong sense of collegial identity and commitment, somewhat detached from that of the IOE. That sense was forged not only by the TCRU's location, but also by its physical environment. For the first 18 years of its existence, in its Brunswick Square office, the TCRU occupied a horizontal physical space, with all staff housed on the first floor of a self-contained building, overlooking Coram Fields, a park and sports field restricted to children and young people and accompanying adults, and also one of the two children's centres that Jack Tizard had helped to establish. The layout of the office, including a meeting area into which the front door opened, fostered informal interaction and social relationships. (In those days, it was generally expected that staff would be office-based unless they were on fieldwork.) Staff, too, were expected to engage in a wide variety of collegiate activities in which researchers from different projects came together in weekly seminars, methodological discussions of project proposals, business meetings and interest groups. For several years, the TCRU produced its own series of publications. These activities developed intellectual, methodological and organisational skills, and assisted in creating a broad, collegial community of practice based on everyday social interaction.

That community was nurtured in other ways too. Meetings were run on democratic principles. There were also frequent opportunities for informal sociality (see Wilson, 2022). In the early years, there was a food co-op. A TCRU yoga class was instituted by Barbara Tizard that ran for many years. The TCRU's working day was punctuated by official tea breaks that everyone observed under the stern supervision of the formidable Lily Rocourt, who lived locally and not only served refreshments but also 'mothered and grumbled at all the staff' (B. Tizard, 2003: 15). At Christmas time, the staff engaged in the preparation of a celebratory TCRU meal, eaten together in the Coram Children's Centre on the ground floor.

All this made for a fourth feature of the TCRU's identity, as a congenial and stimulating place in which to work. This supportive social environment both enabled, and was in turn enabled by, a fifth feature. From the start, a strong style of team working and collaboration was established under Jack Tizard, who preferred flat organisational structures to hierarchies. This influenced the culture of the TCRU, where researchers were apprenticed in the craft of research by working alongside and learning from more experienced researchers, and so were encouraged to extend and develop their skills and experiment with different research practices, techniques and technologies (Brannen, 2021). The TCRU's experience demonstrates how 'research based on strong "communities of practice" helps weather upheavals in the wider university contexts that surround research' (Brannen, 2021: 35). This contrasts with the importance placed today on 'high-performing people' as the main prerequisite for excellent research (Manville et al.,

2015). The emphasis on collaboration was also supportive in promoting the careers of less experienced staff in an open and transparent way (O'Connor et al., 2020). But, as other reviews of productive research environments (Ajjawi et al., 2018; Bland and Ruffin, 1992; Harvey et al., 2002) suggest, these environments depend on a variety of interconnected characteristics, and no single factor is sufficient.

Sixth, as already illustrated, the TCRU has resisted stasis, and proved capable of evolution. This process has been energised by the large number of researchers who have spent time working at the TCRU, bringing earlier interests and perspectives with them; by the different interests of the TCRU's directors; by the plethora of changes to the IOE and government departments and funding councils; and by the ever-changing world in which the TCRU finds itself. The evolution is reflected not only in the TCRU's fields of enquiry (as discussed above), but also and equally importantly in its methods of working; not surprisingly, methodology has been a current running through the TCRU's work, since it has always had to devise new and better ways of addressing its evolving research agenda.

Jack Tizard's own methodological interests included 'work with an epidemiological basis, longitudinal studies, comparisons between institutions using standardised observations, work that was statistically irreproachable ... and experimental trials' (B. Tizard, 2003: 54). Indeed, a particular style of research characterised the TCRU's work until the early 1980s: studies with moderate to large-scale samples, employing interview and observation methods and analysis methods that relied primarily on the quantification of the data – perhaps largely due to the dominance of psychology among its founding staff (Brannen, 2021). However, in particular from the 1980s, and partly under the influence of sociologists who joined the TCRU in that decade, notably Professor Ann Oakley (1983–90), who went on to found the Social Science Research Unit (now in the same department), the TCRU's work began to embrace other methodologies, including qualitative methods, mixed- and multi-methods, ethnography, secondary analysis of large data sets, comparative international studies, the MOSAIC approach for listening to young children, and narrative approaches for studying everyday family practices. The strength of the TCRU's methodological work is reflected in the co-founder of the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* being a long-serving researcher at the TCRU, and an early champion of mixed methods in the UK.

This capacity to evolve has been underscored by a commitment to issues of social justice and to addressing inequalities. Jack Tizard's original interest in children's centres was driven by his belief in young children and their families being entitled to universal and free early childhood services, which for him should be as much a part of the welfare state as health services and schooling. Commitment to gender equality has been evident not only in the Children's Centre project, but in many subsequent projects engaging with parental employment, men working in nurseries, care work, fathers and parenting leave, and on sexualities. Concern for children's and young people's participation and well-being has underlain many projects, as has a willingness to confront racism.

During the 1970s, both Jack and Barbara Tizard were active in the 'race and IQ' controversy within psychology. Jack was one of the first to become suspicious that Cyril Burt had faked his data on IQ, and he suggested that the co-workers that Burt had claimed he worked with on his twin studies did not exist (Joynton, 1989). In the same decade, Barbara and Jack Tizard took public issue with the view, propagated by the American psychologist Arthur Jensen, that Black people were genetically intellectually inferior to White people; 'Jack abhorred the racist implications of [Jensen's] study, but he also considered that Jensen's arguments were faulty' (B. Tizard, 2003: 23). This interest in racialised equality was also evident in Barbara Tizard's large ESRC-funded longitudinal project on the transition to primary school for Black and White children in London, inspired in part by the Rampton Inquiry (the interim report of which was published in 1981), a high-level, independent inquiry into 'the causes of the underachievement of children of West Indian origin in maintained schools and the remedial action required' (Rampton, 1981: 1). This research helped to establish the TCRU's reputation for research on racialisations, racisms and social identities, issues that have continued to be central to much of its work. The analyses and findings (B. Tizard et al., 2017) also gave rise to more policy-relevant research on the difficulties children face with managing playtime (conducted in the IOE's neighbouring Department of Psychology and Human Development).

All these features that gave the TCRU its distinctive identity were first formed in its early years, in what, in retrospect, from the perspectives of the authors, seem like less fraught times, not least in terms of funding. Other conditions have also changed radically from the 1990s. The TCRU's life spans the IT transformation of virtual working. Together with the move to Woburn Square, which brought about a very different physical environment, with the TCRU now split between two adjoining tall and narrow

eighteenth-century town houses that create a vertical instead of a horizontal space, some of the old daily forms of sociality were lost. The move also led to greater integration and interaction with the now nearby IOE, which itself seems to have gone through a continual process of restructuring that has proved demanding for the TCRU at various times.

Contextual changes and future directions

From the 1990s, too, major changes were happening to UK universities, which were embarking on a path to becoming businesses, and, as such, self-financing organisations driven increasingly by neoliberal market forces. In this context, funded researcher time was cut to the bone, with the result that few researchers worked on one project full-time and senior researchers were limited to minor funded percentages on their own projects. This led to greater work intensification, and meant that contract researchers had to cover any unfunded time in the form of piecemeal contributions to teaching, tutoring, student seminars or very small-scale or short-term research. The ability to accumulate expertise over time in a particular field, so central to the TCRU's original rationale, was compromised, as researchers had to juggle many activities to remain viable.

In December 2014, the IOE merged with UCL. The TCRU staff appointed to academic contracts since this merger have enjoyed greater security, while having to combine research with their teaching activities, resulting in significant workloads. Unlike the earlier generation of researchers, however, new research staff do not share the same status as academic staff and cannot extend their contracts.

Research councils and government departments have shortened the timeframes for the delivery of research; a pattern of smaller research budgets and shorter timescales premised on 'value for money' has become the norm. The opportunities for government-funded, long-term 'strategic' research, so typical of the TCRU's early years, have greatly diminished, to be replaced by an increasing focus on short-term policy concerns, in particular the move to the 'what works?' agenda (Whitty, 2016). As noted, the TCRU responded partly by offering a 'rapid response' mode to departmental funders, and partly by further diversifying the funders approached. These requirements have also been accompanied by the demand that all social science research demonstrate immediate or short-term economic and societal 'impact', a view that Jack Tizard would have found naive and unrealistic.

Other forces have also been at work. Universities' increasing focus on preparing for RAEs and later REFs tended to have negative consequences for team-based research and for those whose research does not fit under the disciplinary rubric of 'education', since the TCRU is part of the IOE. It discourages interdisciplinary working because of the REF's organisation of outputs in disciplinary panels. It also weights the contribution of 'academic staff' over those of 'research staff'. In the past, the TCRU was one of the few academic spaces where, regardless of grade, researchers were not relegated to the position of 'research assistant'.

Last, but by no means least, the world has changed immeasurably since the TCRU opened its doors in 1973. The TCRU was founded at the end of the post-war Keynesian regime that has been described as an era of 'state-managed capitalism of the class compromise' (Streeck, 2022: 9). The 1980s marked the emergence of a new, neoliberal regime, which saw 'trade unionism and collectivism ... entirely excluded from the neoliberal understanding of the political economy', and in whose place have emerged various types of 'technopopulism' (both on the left and on the right) that seek to create 'a normative unity among a classless society of equals' (Streeck, 2022: 11) and what have come to be known as the 'culture wars'. Over this period, public services have been increasingly privatised and marketised, inequality and insecurity have grown, the place that social science research used to occupy in addressing this growth of inequality has fragmented, and in its stead are myriad new spaces that mirror the rise of identity and minority politics.

Yet despite these upheavals and disruptions, the TCRU's story is one not just of survival, but of continuing to do good, innovative and policy-relevant work. Successive generations of researchers have succeeded in revitalising and renewing the TCRU. But as part of the TCRU's older generations, no longer in a position to influence the TCRU's direction, we feel it is important to ask the question: Does Jack Tizard's original vision for the TCRU still have relevance? Or has it been overtaken by events, long consigned to a past that is a different country? That vision was of a dedicated, university-based social research unit undertaking sustained basic or strategic research, with a multidisciplinary team providing a critical intellectual mass, digging deep into its areas of concern and expertise, and also with 'an eye to

the future', looking ahead to new needs for services and to new approaches to service provision. Such a research unit was largely government funded and committed to policy-relevant work, while also allowing for 'blue skies' research supported by other funders.

It must be admitted that the position of research units in a higher education system under ever-growing pressure to generate income from student fees raises important questions concerning what universities are for, which go well beyond the remit of this article. However, as a recent review of the international literature on research environments in medical education, education and medicine suggests, the centrality of the researcher identity over other identities is key (Ajjawi et al., 2018), and supports the case for dedicated research units.

It also seems to us, based on the TCRU's experience, that the Tizard rigorous 'strategic model' and the Rothschild customer–contractor relationship need not necessarily be in opposition. Both can be undertaken by the same research unit, and each can inform the other. Indeed, the TCRU's 'rapid response' work shows the benefits of such work being undertaken within a centre having a longer-term commitment to researching and deep knowledge of particular topics. At the same time, Jack Tizard's original vision of a research unit whose main rationale is to undertake sustained, strategic and forward-looking work undertaken by a critical mass of researchers seems to us to be even more relevant in the 2020s than in the 1970s, if for rather different reasons.

Today, we are entering another period of regime change, 'a comprehensive crisis of the neoliberal era' (Tooze, 2021: 22), with neoliberalism's prescriptions having failed and taking 'us to the brink of ecological, social and financial collapse' (Raworth, 2017: 70). Converging crises, including pandemics and continuing uncertainty about the future, call for the rethinking and rebuilding of society and the welfare state. In this context, independent, multidisciplinary and collaborative research centres that are able to explore with imagination and creativity emerging needs and possible policy solutions, as Jack Tizard did with children's centres, seem not only relevant but also necessary.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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