

FROM THE EDITOR

The Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS) is a five year, £2 million scheme, co-funded by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and the Scottish Executive Educational Department (SEED) to enhance educational research capacity in Scotland. The Scheme is led by a consortium of three universities, Edinburgh, Stirling and Strathclyde, and aims to include staff in all seven providers of initial teacher education.

The funding of the Scheme has several notable features. Firstly, it was a collaborative venture between two major funders of educational research, in itself something of an innovation. While educational researchers in Scotland were used to undertaking research commissioned by SEED on a number of topics, the role of SFC was rather different. It supported educational research indirectly through the monies distributed to higher education institutions through the 'R' stream, determined by the rating of research quality evaluated by the Research Assessment Exercise. It did not commission specific projects unless these were specifically concerned with its own policy initiatives. AERS represented one of the first strategic investments in educational research by SFC. Secondly, the specification for the Scheme to guide the tendering process encouraged a broad view of educational research capacity. This gave scope to develop an approach which focused not only on the capacity of educational researchers to conduct high quality research, but included the capacity of users of educational research, policy makers and practitioners to understand what research could and could not deliver. Thirdly, the specification recognised the nature of educational research as a field rather than a tightly bounded discipline, and encouraged applicants to demonstrate the ways in which the Scheme would link educational research to concepts and theories having currency in the social sciences.

The Scheme is now beyond its half-way mark and it seemed appropriate to illustrate some of the findings from projects and to report on some of the themes arising from work across the projects. We were thus delighted to have our proposal accepted for this guest edited issue of SER, the key journal for education research in Scotland.

The Scheme is organised in terms of three substantive networks, Learners, Learning and Teaching, Schools and Social Capital, and School Management and Governance. Each network is undertaking three projects. A fourth network is concerned with research training, both developing formal Masters level modules building to an MSc in applied educational research, and supporting a social practices model of research development. This model locates learning about research by doing it as a member of a team, led by an experienced principal investigator. Each of the networks is convened by a senior and experienced academic, with day-to-day activities managed by a senior research fellow. The programme as a whole is co-ordinated by a central team, comprising a 0.4 post of programme co-ordinator, a full-time senior researcher and knowledge transfer fellow, and myself.

The articles in this issue feature two linked themes. The first of these is the applied nature of the research being undertaken, that is, research that is intended to be useful and to be used by policy makers and practitioners. Sally Brown, in her invited contribution, reminds us, quoting Anne Edwards, that educational research should be relevant to long-term social well-being and therefore not always immediately utilitarian. She also reminds us that research findings can sometimes be uncomfortable for policy makers and practitioners. The second theme is the global nature of many of the issues preoccupying school systems.

All five articles comprising the main body of the special issue focus on matters of direct policy relevance and draw attention to the oscillation between liberation and

control in current education policy. The articles by Doherty, et al. and by Cowie, et al. discuss the unintended outcomes of specific performance measures of attainment. Recognising the importance of attainment in pupils' life chances, particularly for pupils from disadvantaged families and communities, they suggest ways of keeping attention focused on attainment in ways which might allow teachers to meet the learning needs of all of their pupils and thus achieve the shared goal of improved attainment. They draw attention to the tension between national prescription and local variation in curriculum and in what counts as achievement, and are important contributions to the debate about where it makes sense to draw boundaries. How much local variation do we wish to see in the curriculum in schools? This debate is likely to intensify as A Curriculum for Excellence begins to gather pace.

The same concern about education for liberation or control is evident in Kennedy et al.'s writing on teacher professionalism. It is a truism that teachers are central to change and cannot be bypassed. Classroom practice is often a long way, literally and metaphorically, from policy intentions. Opportunities for teachers to engage in deep thinking about the purposes of their teaching and how their day-to-day practices relate to these purposes are central to the successful development of A Curriculum for Excellence. A move away from hierarchical models of curriculum innovation with centrally developed materials and associated performance targets presents challenges to the workforce in all parts of the system. How liberated or controlled do we wish our workforce to be? This makes the contribution from Cowie and McKinney on the emerging models of school leadership revealed by AERS projects all the more interesting. It maps these models against a particular conceptual framework and uses this framework to reflect on the different perceptions of the nature and function of research held by different constituencies.

A move towards greater liberation necessarily requires the voices of children to be heard. Catts et al. describe the approaches taken in the Schools and Social Capital Network for including children's voices in the research process and the ethical issues involved. The paper also raises questions about whose voices get heard and draws attention to power relationships among pupils, as well as between pupils and teachers. In an era where policy is urging schools to develop a participatory ethos, this paper starts to unpeel the layers of the meaning and complexity of participation. Finally, the invited contribution from Tom Schuller addresses the issue of capacity building from an international perspective, relating this to enduring issues of the relationship between research and policy. Tom's contribution reminds us that England need not be our automatic comparison in education matters and, indeed, the current OECD review of our school system is a healthy recognition of the ways in which member countries are grappling with similar problems and finding diverse responses. The more we can understand these, the more we can shed new light on our own responses and understand the deep structure and culture of our education system.

AERS is an ambitious attempt to do capacity building in a way that goes beyond educational researchers themselves to involve teachers and policy makers in new research relationships. This volume is an early indication of some of the work being done. There is clearly much more to do. The networks are beginning to report on the findings of their particular projects. The programme, as a whole, should be able to identify more extensively key themes which emerge across the networks, both to contribute to our understanding of substantive issue, and to the practicalities of capacity building.

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Guest Editor