The myth of meeting needs revisited: the case of educational research

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Abstract

Our primary objective in this paper is revisit a debate that was articulated 25 years ago in this journal in which it was argued that the idea of meeting needs in adult and continuing education is a myth. We look at the policy context which has, in the intervening period, increasingly reflected the neo-liberal emphasis upon accountability and measurement. Taking into account the discussion stimulated by Hargreaves and followed through by Tooley on the supposed 'poverty' of educational research in the UK, we show how the discourse of need has been sustained and at the same time become a global phenomenon. By way of method, we extend the original analysis of need and apply it to the case of educational research. Taking the Transforming Learning Cultures (TLC) project in the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) as an exemplar, we show that, despite the constraints that are imposed upon researchers by the funding and accountability frameworks of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the researchers on that project have nonetheless made significant and important contributions in the field that they have researched. By way of outcomes, we argue for an approach to the commissioning of educational research from bodies such as the ESRC that will allow researchers to frame their projects in ways that do not meet current prescriptions. In conclusion, we suggest that what is needed is a greater level of trust which will allow researchers to set the research agenda themselves, rather than be driven by the needs identified and specified by policymakers.

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Introduction

In this paper we revisit a debate that was first articulated 25 years ago in this journal where it was argued that the idea of meeting needs in adult and continuing education was a myth (Armstrong 1982). Intending to challenge the liberal ideologies that subscribed to, and supported the idea that needs have an objective reality of their own, the claim of the original paper was that needs are manufactured political constructions. Whilst there appeared to be some considerable support for the critique at the time, it did not have the effect on the academy that initial indications had suggested. Writing about recent 14-19 education policy in the UK, Lumby and Wilson (2003) suggest:

> In fact 'needs' can be interpreted in a number of different ways, including an internalised compulsion, a feeling of being impelled to act in some way, and also an external perception that there is something lacking, which, if not rectified, will lead to detriment. (Lumby and Wilson, 2003, p. 536)

In this paper we revise and extend the argument in the original article and show how the discourse of need has not only been sustained in the context of educational provision, but continues to be influential in policies around contemporary educational research. We look at the policy context that has shaped the direction of research particularly in the UK, and more particularly the funding of research over the last few years. We exemplify our argument through examination of research that has been, and is currently being, supported in the UK through the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) of the UK's most significant national research funding organisation, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) which has funded a substantial number of large projects (in excess of £30M) in the past seven years. Although we are using a UK case study, we have good reason to believe that our argument is relevant globally. In the 2006 edition of the World Year Book of Education, the focus is on how education research and policy is being 'steered' in a global context, or 'how policy for education research is shaping research processes and practices' (Ozga, Seddon and Popkewitz 2006: xviii). There is much evidence in Part 2 of the book to indicate that whilst education research is being steered in 'different and contrasting national contexts', there is an increasingly common discourse around 'outcomes-based' education, characterised by issues of measurement of 'output' and 'impact'('evidence-based'). Our argument is that this contemporary discourse is our original 'needs analysis', which has shifted from the social and cultural domain, to the economic.

We claim that needs and their outcomes are economically constructed in culturally specific contexts. They are based on a set of assumptions about the purposes and outcomes of education and learning. If we accept that our contemporary discourses of learning and of research have been influenced by these assumptions the fundamental question that we pose is: 'What is possible, or what can happen, when we do not share these assumptions about the purposes and outcomes of education?' Our intention is to remind the reader of those questions and issues that continue to be precluded from the discussion as a consequence of an over-reliance on a particular set of cultural and economic imperatives and of a set of accountabilities that inform our practices as teachers and researchers within the academy.

The neo-liberal settlement: idea of educational research for a purpose

In recent years the value of educational research has been seriously challenged because of its perceived failure to satisfy economic outcomes, in a context in which researchers are more intensely subjected to the 'audit culture' (Power 1997). In such a culture, where the economics of research has become more significant and outcome-driven within a culture of accountability, educational researchers have been forced to account for both the use of time and money, where the first is a cost, and the second an indicator of value. In this 'brave new world' education is recast as,

> an economic transaction, that is, a transaction in which (i) the learner is the (potential) consumer, the one who has certain needs, in which (ii) the teacher, the educator, or the educational institution becomes the provider, that is, the one who is there to meet the needs of the learner, and where (iii) education itself becomes a commodity to be provided or delivered by the teacher or educational institution and to be consumed by the learner. (Biesta 2004: 74)

Learning is reduced to a rational-choice where learners contemplate their educational options, and make choices in the same way that they would if they were purchasing any other consumer product from a supermarket shelf. It assumes that social and economic needs can be conflated and expressed in educational terms, which is consistent with the assumption that learner-need (consumer power) and the needs of the economy are commensurate with one another. This, of course, contradicts a large part of the (adult) educational literature which is predicated on the assumption that an individual's learning needs are typically distinct from the strictly economic and social needs (including the need for social inclusion) which purportedly drive the economy. This is reflected in the humanistic perspective (Knowles 1978) on adult learning, stemming, of course, from Maslow's self-actualisation thesis (Maslow 1987). It has been confirmed in the UK in the post-1997 period, with the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) regularly criticising Labour's educational (lifelong learning) policies for stressing economic rather than social or cultural benefits. These have prioritised the 'learning needs' of younger rather than the older adult learners, whose learning needs are not regarded in the same way as an economic investment.

The idea of the individual having 'learning needs' and of the state intervening in the education system to provide the necessary conditions for individuals to meet their perceived 'needs', was foregrounded in the 1960s and 1970s at a time of rising unemployment, global uncertainty and structural change in the economy. This was represented as part of a wider globalised movement organised on transnational rather than national lines, leading towards a new post-Fordist society or enterprise culture (see

Brown and Lauder 1992; Avis et al. 1996). There had been the failure, particularly in the period following the Second World War of non-interventionist policies either in respect of social policies or market policy. The solution, which found expression in the neo-liberal ideas espoused by Ronald Reagan in the USA and Margaret Thatcher in the UK. The claim is that this has freed individuals from the intervention and tutelage of the state to express themselves, and has allowed the natural inclinations of the citizenry to flourish. As such it represents a new settlement between the citizens and the state, with the nature of the relationship transformed from one where there is a concern 'to provide the material well-being of the nation' (Bobbitt 2002: 240; see also Ainley 2004) to the market-state where the emphasis is now focused upon providing appropriate mechanisms for enhancing individual opportunity.

> Whereas classical liberalism represents a negative conception of state power in that the individual was taken as an object to be freed from the interventions of the state, neo-liberalism has come to represent a positive conception of the state's role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation. …. [S]uch a shift involves a change in subject position from '*homo economicus*', who naturally behaves out of self-interest, and is relatively detached from the state, to 'manipulatable man', who is created by the state but who is continually encouraged to be 'perpetually responsive.' (Olssen 1996: 340)

Although there are differences between the classical and neo-classical articulations of liberalism (in terms of the role of the state) both assume that in developing their capacities for critical judgement and autonomous action individuals will make rational choices that are objective, outcome driven and purposive. The aim is to release the autonomous potential and natural inclinations of individuals to become ‘self motivating and self-directing’ so that they are able to ‘exercise their individual and intentional agency’ (Usher and Edwards, 1994: 24-25).

It is these instrumental concerns, supported by the ‘common-sense’ assumption that the experience of learners can be enhanced by improving the quality of teaching and/or through more effective ‘management’ of the essential character of the learner, that have been evident in recent years. Teachers, after all – we assume - want students to achieve their full potential. Furthermore, policy-makers want to be able to demonstrate that they are achieving measurable incremental improvements or outputs, and researchers want to contribute in the best way that they can to improving practice, and to developing more ‘accurate’ theorisations and representations of the issues at stake in support of the new education policies.

Mythologizing the notion of need

Over 25 years ago, Armstrong (1982) applied Bradshaw’s (1972) taxonomy of social services need to the (adult) education context at that time. *Normative* need was defined in relation to a set of ‘desirable’ standards that are imposed on a consumer/client.

Representing a judgement that is imported from the outside by experts who claim to know best, normative need takes some baseline measurement of the standards or needs in any situation, and does so on the advice of those who make professional judgements about those who are defined as being ‘in need’. The sister concept of c*omparative* need assumes that those ‘in need’ can make the judgement themselves, about their needs. In this respect the judgement is ‘internal’ rather than external to the situation and is made by the consumer/client in relation to what they know or can perceive: ‘They have it so I want it’.

The third category of *felt* need distinguishes ‘wants’ from needs of the individual or group which commonly stretch beyond what is possible or realisable. For example, an individual may want/desire a new and expensive car, knowing they have so far managed perfectly well in their career without one. Bradshaw’s final category is that of *expressed* need. Unlike *felt* need this is not just subjective, an expression of what the individual would like, but is actually manifested or articulated in some way. As C. Wright Mills (1940) has noted, individuals routinely say and do things without thought. They do not consciously rationalise their actions but will draw-upon an repertoires or ‘vocabularies of motive’ (Wright Mills 1940) in order to explain or justify their behaviour.

Needs, whether defined in terms of the individual and/or in relation to a set of requirements that are economic and social in their origins, are not technically rational, clear and unambiguous (see Hodkinson et al. 1996). They are susceptible to change over time, and are likely to be different for each individual. The corollary of this, which we would wish to emphasise, is that any action, which follows from need, may well serve intentionally misleading or unintended purposes when judged against the criterion upon which it is based. There is a second but no less important distinction here, between need as an end in itself (i.e., solving a particular problem) and need as an expression of something that questions 'the source of "needs", how they come to be defined as such and how they are to be met in capitalist societies' (Armstrong 1982: 300). The economic arguments are now much more explicit in contemporary discourses around research outcomes and evidence-based practice.

All of this suggests that the discourse of meeting needs is not only about maintaining and supporting the status-quo but is also about the legitimation of existing practice. It is functionalist and teleological insofar as it seeks to explain things in terms of what has happened without providing an explanation of how the situation arose in the first place. Furthermore, it presupposes that the same laws and rules and natural order that explain the physical world apply in equal measure to the social world. This reification of the social world takes for granted that it is 'objectively real' and that it can be studied using the same 'value free' scientific methods that are applied in the natural and physical sciences. Hence, the assumption that there is some organic unity in society concerning needs that have to be met for the social system to exist.

Policy science or policy scholarship?

One of the important connotations of adopting a functionalist framework for educational research is that it assumes that research objectivity does exist. Hence, it provides for clarity of purpose, including accountability frameworks and systems that are transparent and easily accessible. This is achieved by framing and organising research objectives, practices and processes in a way that can only serve the objectives and outcomes that it sets for itself. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that within the research community there are almost as many different views about the purposes and functions of educational research as there are researchers.

Rather than focussing solely on functional and utilitarian concerns Gerald Grace (1984) urges a critical approach that is focused upon historical and cultural issues as well as those that are functional. More recently Avis (2006), draws a distinction between policy science and policy scholarship. Whereas policy science 'articulates with an interest in "what works" and with the strategies that should be marshalled to improve educational practice', policy scholarship 'seeks to draw upon a much wider historical and contextual analysis' (Avis 2006: 108). Hence, the idea of education as policy science is consistent with the view of education as an applied science that should be used to inform practice, whereas policy scholarship is concerned with broader socio-political, psychological and philosophical concerns. This emphasis on applied science and upon the so-called 'usefulness' of research has had far reaching implications for research which, as we indicate below, have had a substantial impact upon the ways in which research bids for large funding bodies such as the ESRC have to be formulated, in respect of such issues as 'user engagement' and 'evidence-based improvement practices'. This argument is well rehearsed and follows the line taken by Hodkinson (2004), amongst others, and claims that there has been a concerted effort to move the focus of educational research to a more instrumental focus upon ‘objective research’ to inform practice.

Hammersley (2002) identifies two models of social science and educational research – the ‘enlightenment’ and ‘engineering’ models – that shape practice ‘through providing knowledge or ideas that influence the ways in which policymakers and practitioners think about their work’ (Hammersley 2002: 38). Whereas the ‘enlightenment’ model is founded on the development of rational reason and science which can provide knowledge about the world, the ‘engineering’ model with its technical focus is centred on providing solutions to problems. Although Hammersley sees the ‘enlightenment’ model as most appropriate for social science and educational research, he notes that the two models of research are predicated on a set of common assumption in respect of value neutrality/bias. By way of contrast Gewirtz and Cribb (2006) have argued for an approach which recognises that:

> evaluative judgements are made at every stage of the research process – in deciding what questions to ask, what evidence to record or collect, how to interpret that evidence, what findings and interpretations to emphasise in reporting the work, and in thinking about the practical or policy implications of the research. (Gewirtz and Cribb 2006: 142)

This approach regards value judgements as a taken-for-granted component of all research which can be achieved by subjecting all research to a thoroughgoing and rigorous ‘ethical reflexivity’, as part of the process of research. The position adopted by Gewirtz and

Cribb, contrasted with an approach that is founded on the certainties associated with improvement or on finding technical solutions to problems, reflects a fundamental ontological and epistemological distance between two sides of a paradigmatic divide.

We do not propose to enter a detailed debate about the policy implications as these have been well rehearsed. However, it is important to note that the initial impetus for the shift of emphasis arose from some comments made by David Hargreaves – a respected education researcher - not in an article published in a reputable academic journal, nor in a paper delivered at an academic conference, but in an address to the English government's Teacher Training Agency annual conference in 1996. Hargreaves (1996) asserted, without either specifying criteria or evidence, that educational research 'is poor value for money in terms of improving the quality of education provided in school'. He argued that much educational research is non-cumulative and of little use to teachers. He asserted that that there is a considerable amount of 'frankly second-rate educational research which does not make a serious contribution to fundamental theory or knowledge, which is irrelevant to practice; which is unco-ordinated with any preceding or follow-up research; and which clutters up academic journals that virtually nobody reads' (Hargreaves 1996: 7). He called for an approach to educational research that is 'evidenced-based'.

The supporting evidence base for Hargreaves' critique was provided by James Tooley (Tooley with Darby 1998) who was at the time Professor of Education at the University of Newcastle and Director of Education of a right-wing think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs. The Tooley Report examined a small sample of educational research, and from that asserted that a substantial proportion of the research suffered from serious methodological defects. It has been suggested that the report itself was value-laden, based on poor scholarship and research skills (particularly in sampling and data analysis), furthermore that it produced an outcome which reflected the very concerns that it was purportedly critiquing (Clark 2000).

The upshot of the Tooley critique and of the contemporaneous Hillage Report (Hillage et al. 1998) was that an Evidence for Policy and Practice Information Centre (EPPI Centre) was set up at the Institute of Education in London claiming to use systematic review processes to assess research evidence and provide intelligence on possible gaps where research might be needed. In addition, a National Educational Research Forum (NERF 2000) was also established which suggested that an agreed set of generic criteria should be applied to all research, to inform decisions about funding and efficacy as well as judgements about publication (see Hodkinson 2004:.10). The intention was that these bodies would co-ordinate the activities of funding agencies.

The UK context and the funding of educational research

Although we would want to extend the argument globally, we are here using a UK case study to contend that the very process of securing funds for research projects involves examining and developing research needs. An unintended consequence of this matching of research needs to a set of specific purposes has been to limit the potential of the research community to take risks, certainly in the framing of research bids. Researchers not only have to satisfy institutional needs to secure funding but have also had to demonstrate their capabilities in respect of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) which has had implications for the future funding of research in higher education. This is an irony since the proliferation of academic journals for the dissemination of research findings has been stimulated by the RAE in the UK, now into its sixth and what looks like being its final round.

The disadvantages of the RAE have been extensively discussed, though the beneficiaries of this costly exercise – those who need research for funding will continue to argue that some judgment about the 'worth' of research in higher education needs to be made. Although the terms of the discussion about research were changing at the time of RAE 2001, the impact of the changes was still unclear. A key indicator of good educational research was whether it had been published in an 'esteemed' journal, such as the *Harvard Educational Review* or the *International Journal of Lifelong Education* or the *Journal of Education Policy*. In RAE 2008. the use of so-called 'expert review' (not quite the same as 'peer review'), means that the 'outputs' of all kinds of research, including practice-based research will be,

> assessed on a fair and equal basis. Sub-panels will neither rank outputs, nor regard any particular form of output as of greater or lesser quality than another per se. Some panels may specify in their criteria that where they do not examine an output in detail, they may use, as one measure of quality, evidence that the output has already been reviewed or refereed by experts (who may include users of the research), and has been judged to embody research of high quality. No panel will use journal impact factors as a proxy measure for assessing quality. (HEFCE 2006: para. 32)

Impact and citation analyses are currently being discussed as potential alternatives to the RAE in future. Whatever the future, it seems likely that the criteria will continue to be tied to the functionalist analysis of need, and the debates go beyond the educational, scientific, social or cultural value of research, and directly into economic value – 'how much am I and my research profile worth to the institution?' There is no doubt that higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK 'need' research income; most, including our own, have set up administrative support mechanisms that encourage academic staff to respond to the identified needs of organisations including research funding bodies.

Setting the research agenda

The need for HEIs to attract research funds has meant that control over the process has been handed over to those who provide the sources of funding. Today, it is the norm to bid for monies attached to specific research projects, based on an agenda set outside not only the individual academic researchers' control, but outside their institutional control. The model is one that has dominated medical, scientific and technological research for some time, but is relatively recently come to influence the distribution of funds for research in the arts and humanities, as well as social science and education research. The bidding for research funds has become a significant pre-occupation of academic researchers, where those research funds have been earmarked to address specified issues, rather than freeing up time for academic researchers to pursue their own research interests.

In his first presidential address to the History of Education Society, Roy Lowe (2002) took the opportunity to take stock of the myriad changes that have taken place over the last 40 years since he joined an academy as a young researcher. At that time funding was allocated through universities themselves and there was little pressure on researchers, particularly in the social sciences and humanities to attract large research grants. However, by the 1970s it was becoming clear that the allocation of research funding for the social sciences, humanities and education, was suffering at the expense of natural and applied sciences. Whilst there is more than a tinge of nostalgia in Lowe's (2002) account, the key point of his argument is that an historical perspective allows for an understanding of the way in which underlying research values have shifted to meet new research criteria:

> A cynic might observe that there is no neater device for political control than to limit strictly the monies available to the point of underfunding, whilst at the same time encouraging academics to compete for what is available. As the ability to generate research monies has moved steadily closer to the centre of academic life, so, inexorably, that academic life has changed as a result. Not only do academics now spend disproportionate amounts of time devising attractive research bids, but the bids themselves come to reflect a world with its own judgements of relevance and significance and with immediacy built in. (Lowe 2002: 494)

Echoing these sentiments the first director of the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) observed that there was an assumption, that research-informed and unprejudiced value neutral research would prevail (Pidgeon 1970). Writing more recently from an Australian perspective, Brew (2001) has claimed:

> Shortage of research funding and the highly competitive nature of the grant application process; restrictions in the numbers of high-level university positions (e.g. professors); research assessment exercises which determine university funding, all add to the competitive nature of the research. (Brew 2001: 168)

The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) was formed in 1965 with the assumption that it would draw upon quantitative research methodologies and be seen as part of science with an emphasis on practical value, (Finch 1986). Although some consideration was given to the setting up a separate Education Research Council, it was eventually decided to integrate education with the social sciences and subject it to the same criteria. This meant that the SSRC, was notionally, at least, independent from government and ready to contribute to 'informed debates' which would help policymakers 'make better decisions' (Finch 1986: 51). The assumption was that social science research could be utilised to inform the planning of social interventions (Finch 1986: 46; see also McCulloch 2002). Almost immediately, with the proposal to set up Educational Priority Areas (EPA) in the second half of the 1960s, a decision was made to attach to each EPA, a university-based research team that was to go beyond fact-finding, reflecting strong faith in social sciences to be of direct value in improving the quality of life for the nation's communities.

The SSRC was reformed in 1983 as the ESRC. With a budget of more than £100 million, it remains the leading funder of social research within the UK. The ESRC is still largely funded from government sources, with a mission that maintains an emphasis on meeting needs by advancing knowledge, improving the quality of life, and strengthening economic competitiveness. In recent years, it has been primarily responsible for setting the research agenda, and determining research priorities. It has commissioned research around broadly educational issues, reflecting current concerns with the significance of education, especially helping to meet the social inclusion agenda. The aims of the TLRP reflect these concerns:

> The main aim of the TLRP is to support and develop educational research leading to improvements in outcomes for learners of all ages, in all sectors and contexts of education, training and lifelong learning throughout the UK. In other words it is interested in learning across the life-course. It also aims to combine research of the highest *quality* with research that has high *relevance* to the concerns of practitioners and policy-makers. (James, M. 2005: 3; original emphasis)

The TLRP has been characterised by four sequential project phases where there has been an emphasis upon different types of learning, including the formal/informal distinction, and learning within and between all the phases of the life-course. In excess of £30million has been directed through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the ESRC towards this project. Some of this money derives from funds that would have normally been directly channelled into university education departments, demonstrating how much control the ESRC has over the research agenda when it works in partnership with the HEFCE. The research opportunities arising from this are not only restricted, but have been underwritten by a system of accountabilities and frameworks, characteristic of the audit culture. Indeed, the programme is predicated on an assumption that there is some baseline for the measurement of outcomes and that learning can be in fact measured against a set of fixed- as opposed to notional standards.

When framing their bids, researchers are compelled to address the functional requirements, including the perceived needs that the research should address, and terms of reference of the bidding documents. It is not difficult to find through a textual analysis of the bidding documents, both in the ESRC briefing and in the bids submitted as response, the existence of the utilitarian discourse of ‘functional requirements’, including the rhetoric of ‘meeting needs’. There is a valid viewpoint expressed by those colleagues engaged in making such bids that to be successful, the bids need to at least appear that they are consistent with the rhetoric of the research agenda. However, even after safely securing the research funding, the discourse in the publicity documents has continued to reflect the unproblematic functional requirements and the identification and meeting of needs, suggesting assimilation into the dominant culture of research.

In the light of the traditions of research funding there is a debate as to whether the TLRP is imposing an agenda on education researchers. There is a normative issue here that goes to the heart of the questions that we are raising. Notwithstanding this, researchers, who have ‘chosen’ to operate within the parameters of these funding and accountability frameworks have found ways to challenge existing shibboleths and to raise some important questions that might otherwise have been ignored. Indeed, such arguments have been heard from those working within the Transforming Learning Cultures (TLC) project.

Early in the TLC research David James (2002) explained that the title of the research was deliberately chosen to be ambiguous. This was to reflect, firstly on the notion that learning cultures can and should perhaps be changed (assuming that they exist and are not reifications or abstractions) and secondly to reflect on the idea that transformation is itself a cultural construction – hence the emphasis upon exploring meanings and 'developing an understanding' of the participants (James 2002: 5). Whereas in the first case there is an assumption that learning cultures need/should be changed, in the second case this is subverted so that these assumptions and the needs and outcomes associated with them become the focal point for the research. As we indicate below, this second line is fundamental to the approach that we advocate, since it offers the opportunity to move research agenda and possibilities forward in new directions. Indeed, it is to an example of these possibilities that we now turn.

Drawing upon insights from the TLC project James (2005: 90) makes a conceptual distinction between 'learning outcomes' and 'outcomes for learners', terms which are often used interchangeably but which carry different meanings. He shows that the idea of learning outcomes, with its more narrowly defined focus on 'outcomes in the form of qualifications', is the institutionalised measure which carries the greatest currency, certainly in the FE sector where funding has tended to follow completion and exam success and hence measurable achievement. The idea of 'outcomes for learners' relates not only to these learner achievements but also to the other broader and difficult-to-measure outcomes including 'quite major shifts in perspective or life-chances' (James

2005: 91). Although the idea of learner outcome would seem to be focused on ‘the bottom line’, James claims that reality is far more complex.

> The educational landscape is characterized by a range of interests and values, policies and practices, and there are few simple or straightforward alignments between government, agencies, schools, colleges, teachers, parents, learners and so on. This complexity also gives rise to differences in what outcomes of learning are seen as desirable and which are celebrated, and by whom. Furthermore, some learning outcomes are legitimated, resourced and communicated more willingly or readily than others – in other words, questions of social difference, social interests, culture and power enter into any consideration of learning outcomes. (James 2005: 93)

What this does, in a subtle and rather clever way, is to recognise the importance of challenging taken-for-granted notions and frames of reference. Such examples, which seek to undermine the performative framework that define them are not unusual. They beg two questions; (a) to what extent are such insights possible and; (b) what opportunities are being missed by framing research in a research culture that makes it difficult for research community to engage in discourses such as this?

It may well be that research that does not or cannot conform to the required functional requirements, offers perhaps the greatest potential for genuine advancement. One such assertion might, for example, challenge the assumption of a direct cause and effect relation between the quality of learning and its outcome, and would instead assert that any outcome is an effect of the theory that produces it. This is consistent with the idea of learning expressed as a future outcome, taking the *ex post facto* and normative idea of what learning ‘should’ be rather than what it is, and finding a set of circumstances that support it. It provides a self justifying, rhetorical or circular mechanism, within the methodological framework of the research which can include certain questions but excludes many others.

Beyond the rhetoric of meeting needs

Since the original critique of meeting needs, the significance of power in the process of identifying and determining which needs are to be socially and economically constructed has become central to the analysis. Post-structuralism has raised issues and questions that go beyond liberal and neo-liberal Enlightenment values about the nature of the individual. Now, the individual is ‘de-centred’, and is composed of different and conflicting discourses. These discourses are not just focused on language as a string of words within an autonomous rule governed system (Gee 1997) but embody meaning and social relationships in a way that ‘constructs, defines and produces objects of knowledge in an intelligible way while at the same time excluding other forms of knowledge as unintelligible’ (Barker and Galasiński 2001: 12). Discourse normalises certain accounts and strategies by constructing ‘certain possibilities for thought’ (Ball 1990: 17). The aim is not to produce a different set of grand theories or a meta-narratives; rather it is to deconstruct that which is taken-for-granted, breaking down overarching and transcendent narratives into a series of smaller narratives. This challenges humanist assumptions of rationality and autonomy and the Enlightenment view of educational research that pre-supposes a capacity for human agency as its primary condition (see Hirst and Peters 1970).

A post-structural perspective on educational research offers the possibility of a fundamental ontological and epistemological critique and revision of the different narratives and theorisations of interpretations, often destabilizing them. It encourages researchers to fully engage in a continuing critique and re-interpretation of their own practices and habits and of those around them, taking the analysis to a depth beyond the superficiality of the discourse of meeting needs. According to Foucault (1977; 1991), power articulates with knowledge and together they permeate every aspect of our lives, defining our knowledge and understandings of the world. Power is not only held by the state or a body politic but is ubiquitous, existing within discourse, in the minutiae of human relations as well as in the complex relations between groups. Hence, it is not possible to have either knowledge without power or power without knowledge:

> Power and knowledge directly imply one another: that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution in the field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose at the same time power relations. (Foucault 1977: 27)

Foucault has shown us how the bureaucratic regimes and disciplines of society both produce and exclude different forms of knowledge. These regimes are not directly coercive but work by bringing 'people's self-regulating capacities into line with the gaze (and regulation) of "government"'(Edwards 1997: 9). Disciplinary knowledge is embodied within expert discourse and it is this which sets the limits of what is possible. Hence, to speak is to be subjected to the disciplinary power of a discourse. It is not uncommon to articulate a subject position without always or necessarily understanding what it means. Such discourses comprise subject specialisms, including the theoretical bodies of knowledge that underpin the research processes in sciences, humanities and social sciences, as well as the practices or exercises of disciplinary power that underpin everyday life and work. Such disciplines comprise a system of covert social control. Hence:

> A body of knowledge is a system of social control to the extent that discipline (knowledge) makes discipline (control) possible, and vice versa ... As knowledge develops so do the parallel practices of controlling the outcomes of behaviour. (Marshall 1989:. 107)

Whilst the liberal critique of the myth of meeting needs recognises the multiplicity of meanings that can be attached to the notion of need it does not address the ways in which the policy making process itself constructs meaning. Post structuralism tells us that to speak is to be subjected to the regulatory power of the discourse, which itself exercises a regulatory gaze. This is not simply a matter of providing value for money nor controlling budgets but involves more insidious controls over the phrasing of research questions, the different methodologies that underpin them, and the measurement and evaluation of outcomes and their significance.

Conclusion

This paper has revisited a debate about the myth of meeting needs and in so doing has both exposed the functional analysis and utilitarian expectations of educational research and shown how contemporary understandings have benefited from theoretical insights that have emerged in the intervening period. When the discussion was first raised 25 years ago, the world of education research in higher education institutions was a different place. Then such critiques were part of the struggle for acceptance of alternative research perspectives and were set in a Marxist discourse, that in some interpretations recognised the centrality of economic power and structural determinants. Contemporary post-structural conceptualisations have taken us beyond a matter of competing perspectives, into ideological struggles for survival and issues of hegemonic control of those with economic power to set the research agenda, and research priorities through the construction and reification of research needs.

We are not claiming that our extant theorisations do not have value, for they provide, and in a strong sense of the word, a purchase for understanding key aspects of education research. Rather, our claim is that our theorisations and understandings only provide a partial reading of the story. Whilst contemporary perspectives and approaches have extended the parameters of what can and should be included as valid education research, they continue to be framed in a way that attends to the quality of education research and its measurement, to audit and monitor or to improve efficiency and effectiveness, for example, learner outcomes. Notwithstanding this, an important element in any research is to encourage everyone involved in the process to explore and examine the character of their research values underpinning their practice which may be individual and/or intersubjective. Such an approach would be consistent with the line adopted by Gewirtz and Cribb (2006) for ethical reflexivity. This would begin to open more possibilities than currently exist for approaches to research and its potential outcomes in a world framed by a rationalist and functionalist framework of need.

The framework of accountabilities provide sensible, safe and bureaucratic outcomes and solutions to a range of technical rational problems related to poor or inadequate teaching and learning and has, for the most part, made it difficult for researchers to address certain types or categories of questions and issues. In part, this is because researchers operate within an Enlightenment framework that predisposes them to a particular world view, which effectively constrains the possibilities for research. Indeed, the bidding criteria for research make it difficult to secure funding for research which challenges existing orthodoxies. This is not only evidenced in RAE criteria and working methods but also in the way in which grants and projects are allocated to those researchers who ‘know best’ how to frame their research projects in a manner that is consistent with the funding methodology and is locked into the means-end functional rationality and tied to a set of specific outcomes or goals. What is needed is a range of different approaches, sanctioned by major funding bodies such as the ESRC that encourage researchers to pose questions that, for example, cannot be framed in terms of functional ‘cause and effect’ relations or articulated by way of a set of research questions that delimit the possibilities for research. Such approaches would broaden the basis of educational research, deepen the trust of the educational research community, support research as praxis, and in this way would afford the greatest potential for the developments of new insights and understandings. In order to satisfy their own institutional needs, researchers have to demonstrate their ability to attract funding. Moreover, they have show that they can meet the accountability frameworks of the various funding bodies, which are set up to ensure that they are achieving ‘value for money’. On the other hand funding bodies have to satisfy the accountability frameworks set up to ensure that they are achieving ‘value for money’. As David James argues, it is unfortunate that today’s performative culture does not take account of researcher identity or praxis, and recognise that ‘a democratic society places in the hands of independent educational researchers – a trust that is already dangerously eroded’ (James 2005: 94).

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