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# From interesting times to critical times?

## Teacher education and educational research in England

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In 2011 Olwen McNamara and I wrote a piece for a themed issue of *Research Intelligence* called "‘Interesting times’ in teacher education" (McNamara and Menter 2011). Since then, unfortunately, the times have become even more interesting in teacher education, especially in England, and what we see now represents not only a threat to high-quality teacher education but also a serious threat to educational research. That is the theme of this article.

On 14 March 2013, Mary James (President of BERA) and I attended a meeting hosted by Teach First at Bethnal Green Academy in London to hear a presentation by the medical researcher and journalist Ben Goldacre entitled 'Building evidence into education' (Goldacre 2013). Goldacre was introduced by the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, who had commissioned the paper that was the basis of Goldacre's talk. Mr Gove praised teachers and researchers for their hard work and urged us all to heed the message that evidence should inform policy and practice

in education as it was much more significant than the views of politicians! Although a few jaws dropped at this statement, unsurprisingly no one seriously challenged him directly. Indeed it was very reassuring to hear such a commitment to research.

This 'good news' was also supported by the main thrust of Goldacre's talk, which was indeed to suggest that, just as medical science had greatly improved the practice of doctors over recent decades, it was now time for educational practice to do likewise. What we need, he said, is scientific evidence to show us what works in education so that we can improve the quality of provision and at long last 'close the gap' between the best and the worst in education. If that is good news, then there was some less good news. Those who have heard Goldacre on the radio or have read his columns in *The Guardian* will know that when he talks of evidence, he is almost totally committed to one particular form of creating evidence, that is the Randomised Control Trial, or RCT. RCTs, he argues, can provide clear proof of

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which practices are successful and which are not. Drawing largely on medical examples he suggested that RCTs are effectively the only approach to fairly assessing which practices actually lead to improvement. He suggested that a number of myths exist that discourage the deployment of RCTs in education, including a myth that they are ethically unsound. He attempted to disabuse us of the myths (see references for further illumination).

One of the members of the panel that was there to respond to Goldacre's talk was Kevan Collins, formerly Director of the National Literacy Strategy and now Director of the Education Endowment Fund (EEF). One of Mr Gove's early decisions on taking his post as Secretary of State was to allocate £125 million of Department for Education

(DfE) research funding to the Sutton Trust in order that the trust might support the EEF. The EEF is totally committed to the use of RCTs. (One wonders whether the thinking goes along these lines: if the Literacy Hour, imposed across all schools, worked for teaching children to read, then RCTs will work across the whole system for improving educational practice more generally!). In other words, a huge proportion of DfE research funding has already been allocated to support RCTs. Collins stated at the Bethnal Green meeting that one in 15 schools in England are already taking part in RCTs. If that is true, then it came as something of a surprise to the 60 teachers I was working with at a Master's session the following weekend in Oxford. Those teachers came from schools across the country. Not one of them was aware of such a project going on in their school.

As Mary James has argued (James 2013), in spite of the thrall in which Goldacre appears to be held by Gove and the enormous influence these somewhat idiosyncratic views are having within the DfE, Goldacre appears to know rather little about educational research. He was not able to draw on actual examples from education either in this country or from elsewhere (RCTs have been very popular in the USA for many years).

My argument is not that we should not have RCTs in educational research – clearly they are and should be one important element in a rich and diverse educational research environment – but they must be complemented by other approaches including evaluation research, qualitative research, action research and theoretical research, to name a few.

Goldacre did include some comments on teacher education in what he said. He explicitly sees teachers as users of research as opposed to being researchers themselves. Indeed he was quite disparaging about small-scale classroom-based research, suggesting that it is of very limited value. Of course that entirely depends on what the purpose of such

research may be. Practitioner research may be an incredibly powerful tool in the development of an individual teacher's practice and may also make a huge contribution to school improvement and school development. We can certainly agree that when teachers are taking part in wider networks of research activity, the influence of that research may be more widespread, but to completely write off small-scale research is plain silly.

This is how Goldacre positions teachers, research and teacher education:

*'Learning the basics of how research works is important, not because every teacher should be a researcher, but because it allows teachers to be critical consumers of the new research findings that will come out during the many decades of their career. It also means that some of the barriers to research, that arise from myths and misunderstandings, can be overcome. In an ideal world, teachers would be taught this in basic teacher training, and it would be reinforced in Continuing Professional Development, alongside summaries of research.'* (pp. 16–17)

One of the several ironies in the apparent lovefest between Goldacre and Gove is spelled out here: research methodology has been explicitly written out of what it is beginning teachers are required to know about. The revision of the Standards for new teachers was commissioned by Gove from a working group that reported in 2011 which was tasked with 'simplifying' the 'over-elaborate and burdensome' previous standards. Gove immediately and uncritically accepted the advice of the working group.

And it is the wider failure to make connections between teachers' ability to connect with research and to apply and develop theory on the one hand and the intellectual resources that can provide for this on the other, that is the central concern that has led BERA to establish its current enquiry into research and teacher education.

In January 2013 the Higher Education Academy held a 'summit' on teacher education and educational research. Among the speakers was Geoff Whitty, Director Emeritus of the London Institute of Education.

In reviewing the range of current policies on teacher education and educational research, he came to the conclusion that

*'The combination of these threats poses serious questions not only about the future of education research and about the very viability of some education departments, but also the quality of teacher education in those [university] education departments that remain. In particular, there is a threat that the link between teacher education and educational research will be weakened further.'*

Universities themselves – not only the education departments – are under enormous pressures at present, as shown for example by Michael Barber et al.'s recent essay (Barber et al. 2013) suggesting the need for rapid adjustment to the new globalised economy. Such a view is in sharp contrast to the calls by the likes of Stefan Collini (2013) or Martha Nussbaum (2010) for a reinvigoration of the liberal humane contribution of the university to society.

Another former BERA President, John Furlong, has echoed the latter aspect in his analysis of the trajectory of education as a subject within higher education and argues forcefully for the continuation and development of the university contribution as a key element in the sustenance of high-quality education within a democracy (Furlong 2013).

At the time of writing, the BERA Inquiry is well under way and is starting to commission a number of papers that will contribute to our understanding of the relationship between teacher education and educational research. To find out more about the process of the inquiry and how to contribute to it see the BERA website at [www.bera.ac.uk](http://www.bera.ac.uk)

These are indeed critical times. A great deal is at stake – the future of educational research, the future of teacher education and the future of our children and grandchildren. ■

### May 2021 Postscript

Looking back on what I wrote in 2013, two or three things strike me – rather hard!

First, the move to ‘evidence-based’ teaching and education has not been smooth and uneventful. Prompted by Goldacre’s discussion paper, the Randomised Control Trial (RCT) has burgeoned as a method of educational research, especially while Kevan Collins was still at the Education Endowment Foundation (Sir Kevan is now the Government’s ‘Education Recovery Tsar’ – likely to be a very onerous role). A team of us at Oxford played a part in a major national project led by the National College for Teaching and Leadership, called ‘Closing the Gap’ – an RCT based

initiative designed to evaluate eight particular classroom schemes in hundreds of primary and secondary schools. While many teachers developed their research skills through this work, little evidence of the attainment gap being narrowed – let alone closed – emerged from this work (Childs & Menter, 2018). Yet the commitment to educational ‘packages’ and ‘toolkits’ – panaceas or snake oil in other terms – seems to continue, at least in England (Menter, in press).

The completion of the BERA-RSA investigation into ‘Research and the Teaching Profession’ was a great achievement. The final report is frequently cited in professional and research literature around the world and the key notion of teachers needing to develop ‘research literacy’ has taken a strong hold (BERA-RSA, 2014).

But, of course, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic has had the most dramatic effect on teacher education – as well as on schools – since early in 2020.

These are indeed dangerous times for students, teachers, pupils and teacher educators – and all of their friends and families. In my view, it is truly remarkable that the processes of initial teacher education have continued to function, albeit in very new ways. The system has relied heavily both on virtual learning environments and on the ingenuity and creativity of those professionals with the responsibility of ensuring that we do have new teachers entering the profession (Breslin, 2021). The pressures on teacher education staff have been enormous and I can only express my deep respect and admiration for those who have been sustaining the work. BERA has encouraged and supported a range of research projects looking at aspects of the impact of the pandemic and journal editors have encouraged the writing-up of relevant experiences (Flores & Swennen, 2020; O’Meara & Hordatt Gentles, 2020). ■

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