Educational Research, Democracy and TLRP
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Introduction
By inviting me to speak about ‘Educational Research, Democracy and TLRP’ Andrew Pollard has not only given me an interesting set of concepts to work with; he has also set me an interesting challenge. But it is a challenge I gladly accept, as I do believe that what matters at the end of the day is not the methodological perfection of educational research but the extent to which such research can play a role in the ongoing deliberation about the ends and means of education – be it education in schools, colleges and universities, be it education in the work place, or be it education throughout the life course. Societies in which such deliberations are not only possible but are actually desired and actively supported can be called democratic societies, and it is for this reason that the link between educational research and democracy matters. In this regard I do consider myself a ‘Stenhousian’ in that we should not think of research as a form of systematic enquiry per se but, in the formulation of Lawrence Stenhouse, as ‘systematic enquiry made public’ (see Stenhouse 1981). It is only when systematic enquiry becomes public, i.e., when it enters the wider democratic discussion, that it deserves the name of research.

The third term in the title, ‘TLRP,’ is perhaps the most interesting one in this respect, as TLRP has been an unprecedented endeavour – and perhaps we should refer to it as an unprecedented experiment – to influence the shape, form and direction of educational research in the UK in the face of very public criticisms about its usefulness and quality. A good decade later we should be in a position to look back and see what has been achieved, in order then to look forward and address the question ‘Where do we go from here?’ Whereas many of the sessions at this conference will focus on questions of methodology and the conduct of research, I will use this lecture to raise some wider issues about what we might call the socio-political dimension of TLRP and the field of educational research more generally. I will focus on three issues: (1) the question of the usefulness of educational research; (2) the relation between evidence and values; and (3) the relation between methodology and theory in educational research. This will also allow me to say a few things about democracy, about the relationships between policy, research and practice, and about the need for UK educational research to become more international.

Usefulness: The Practical Roles of Educational Research
Part of the history of TLRP lies in the critique of UK educational research that emerged in the late nineties. Reports commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment (the Hillage Report 1998) and Ofsted (Ofsted) (Tooley and Varby 1998) expressed serious doubts about the quality and relevance of educational research, arguing, among other things, that educational research did not provide answers to the questions of policy makers, that it did not provide educational professionals with clear guidance for their work, that it was fragmented, non-cumulative and methodologically flawed, and that it often was tendentious and politically motivated. It is clear from how TLRP has developed over the years that serious attempts have been made to address all these issues, partly by focusing on the methodological quality of educational research
and partly by improving communication between the academic research community and many other constituencies. Whereas these lines can be seen as separate, they are united by the fact that they both try to address the issue of the usefulness of research. Methodologically the assumption is that particular designs are more likely to generate findings that are useful – and one of the more extreme manifestations of this is the whole ‘what works’ industry which only accepts one methodology for the generation of useful knowledge (see Biesta 2007a). Sociologically – or perhaps we should say: politically – the assumption is that it is only when the needs of those who are supposed to be using the outcomes of research are taken into consideration early on in the research process that there will be a chance of generating outcomes that will indeed be seen as useful.

One important question in relation to this concerns the definition of ‘usefulness.’ The point I wish to make here is that there is a strong tendency in discussions about the usefulness of educational research – and social science research more generally – to see useful research as research that tells us how to do things, how to solve problems, how to answer questions, and so on. This was precisely what was at stake in the criticism of UK educational research – i.e., that it was not providing policy makers with the answers to their questions and educational professionals with the means and techniques to improve their practice – but it is important to note that such criticisms are not typical for UK educational research and that they are also not a recent phenomenon (see, e.g., Lagemann 2000). They have been around ever since education emerged as an academic discipline.

If this is indeed the only way in which the outcomes of research can considered to be useful, then one could argue that when research fails to generate such outcomes it is – almost by definition – useless. But the point is that this is not only way in which research can be useful for and can influence educational practice. Partly based on studies conducted in the Netherlands on the relationships between educational research, educational policy and educational practice (see Harbers 1986; Boon et al., 1998), the Dutch sociologist Gerard de Vries has developed a simple but important distinction between two ways in which research can be useful for practice (see De Vries 1990). On the one hand research can produce ‘technical’ or ‘instrumental’ knowledge, i.e., knowledge that indicates what one should do in order to achieve a particular result or outcome. To this De Vries refers as the technical role of research; it is a technical way in which research can be useful for practice. But the technical role – i.e., the provision of technical or instrumental knowledge – is only one way in which research can be useful for educational practice. The other way in which research can inform and improve practice is through the provision of different interpretations and understanding of educational practice. This is what De Vries refers to as the cultural role of research.

The distinction between the technical and the cultural role of educational research allows us to see that the provision of technical knowledge is not the only way in which research can benefit educational practice. While there is an important task for research in finding, testing and evaluating different ways of educational action, research can also have a practical impact if it helps practitioners to acquire a different understanding of their practice. To see a classroom through the lens of behavioral objectives, through the lens of legitimate peripheral participation or as a learning culture (see James & Biesta

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1 I have discussed this in more detail in Biesta (2007a) and Biesta (2007b) and refer the reader to these publications for more detail.
2007) can make a huge difference, not only in that we can see things differently but also in that we may be able to see problems where we did not see them before. As a result, we may see new and different opportunities for action and improvement. The cultural role of educational research is thus no less practical than the technical role; it is just a different way in which research can be useful for educational practice – and when we look at the history of our field from this angle, we may begin to see that research has actually had a huge impact on educational practice and policy, albeit it not along technical lines. This, in my view, is a very important insight, also for the self-understanding of our field as it prevents us from slipping into expectations – and perhaps we should say: specific, narrow or even unrealistic expectations – set by others about what useful research should look like.

There are two further aspects of De Vries’s distinction between the technical and the cultural role that are important for our discussion. The first point is that although the two roles can be distinguished from each other, this does not mean that they should necessarily be thought of as separate. On the one hand de Vries shows that different interpretations often help us to see new opportunities for action and therefore can lead to different and/or more precise ‘technical’ questions for further research. In this respect the cultural role of educational research can pave the way for the technical role. On the other hand: if research is successful in performing its technical role, if, in other words, research does bring about strategies and approaches that successfully solve problems, this may well convince us to see and understand the situation in terms of the framework that informs this particular approach. More often than not, therefore, the technical and the cultural approach mutually inform and reinforce each other. Seeing the field of research in this way can thus help us in having a more refined and ‘complex’ understanding of the possible interrelationships between research, policy and practice.

But there is one further aspect of the distinction between the two roles that I wish to highlight – an aspect which connects the discussion with the question of democracy. The point is that the foregoing discussion may have given the impression that the technical and the cultural role are two options available to researchers to choose from. This, however, may not always be the case. De Vries argues that the role that educational research can play in relation to policy and practice to a large extent depends on the micro- and macro-political conditions under which researchers operate (see also Harbers 1986). The research on which his theory is based indicates that in those cases in which there is a strong consensus about the aims of education or, to look at it from a different angle, where the aims of education cannot be questioned, the only possible role for research is a technical one. When such a consensus does not exist, either because parties cannot agree or because there is a belief in the worth of a plurality of views about the aims of education, it becomes possible for research to play a cultural role. It is precisely here that De Vries connects his analysis with the idea of democracy. He argues that a democratic society is a society in which social research is not restricted to a technical role, but can also perform a cultural role. A democratic society is, in other words, characterized by the existence of an open and informed discussion about problem definitions and the aims and ends of education, a discussion, moreover, to which research is expected to make a contribution as well.

It is difficult at this point to say to what extent the research conducted within TLRP has impacted on practice along technical or cultural lines – or a combination of the two – just as it is difficult to say in any precise sense what the particular socio-political conditions of such interactions have been. But I do think that these are very important
questions that would need to be addressed through careful empirical investigation. From a programmatic point of view I believe that the distinction between the technical and the cultural role of educational research is important in that it can help us to have a more refined sense of the different ways in which the work of educational researchers can have impact and can be useful. In this regard there is also a task for educational researchers to not simply accept the ‘needs’ of users and simply give them what they say they want – which is a bad educational strategy anyway – but also to educate ‘users’ about what realistically can be expected from educational research. Again, an empirically informed understanding of the different ways in which research can be useful would be an important argument in such an endeavour.

**Evidence and Values**

The exploration of the different roles of educational research also has implications for a notion that has become very prominent in many professional practices including education, which is the notion of ‘evidence.’ From an initial flirt with the notion of evidence-based practice, the discourse has increasingly shifted to that of evidence-informed practice, and the latter is also the notion that has been promoted by TLRP. The notion of evidence-informed practice is attractive and misleading at the very same time.\(^2\)

The attractiveness lies first of all in the fact that it is difficult to imagine anyone wanting to argue against the idea that policy and practice should be informed by evidence – or to put it even more strongly: for anyone wanting to argue that policy and practice should not be informed by evidence. This looks particularly ‘evident’ when we contrast the notion of ‘evidence’ with ‘bad’ notions such as prejudice, ideology or dogma – words that automatically make evidence look good. But the apparent ‘goodness’ of evidence becomes less evident when we contrast it with notions such as professional intuition, ‘Gestalt,’ or, to refer to a concept that has a respectable pedigree in the history of education, that of pedagogical ‘tact’ (J.F. Herbart; see Van Manen 1991) – an idea which highlights the importance of judgement-in-action about what is educationally right.

A further problem with the idea of evidence-informed practice is that the amount of available evidence is always limited in relation to actual practice. Educational practice, to put it differently, is always underdetermined by evidence. There is always ‘more’ practice, so we could say, than that there is available evidence which means that a lot of what is done in education – in schools and classrooms – is actually done without any basis in research evidence. Instead of seeing this as an argument for more research in order to generate more evidence so as to be able to move towards total ‘coverage’ of practice, so to speak, I wish to argue that such an ambition is fundamentally mistaken in its conception of what educational practice is. This becomes clear when we look at situations in which teachers are only allowed to do things for which there is positive research evidence available, as in those situations teachers would actually be able to do very little.

One could argue that these problems lie precisely behind the shift from evidence-based practice – i.e., the idea that ultimately practice can be totally based on evidence – to evidence-informed practice, where evidence is seen as one of a number of possible

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\(^2\) I have provided a detailed critical analysis of the idea of evidence-based practice in Biesta (2007a); see also Biesta (forthcoming).
sources to inform practice. The crucial question here is what kind of relationship is envisaged between research and practice if the discourse is that of practice being informed by research. There are epistemological, axiological and political questions at stake here. To begin with the epistemological point: ‘evidence’ operates in the domain of the empirical and is mostly a notion that refers to ‘technical’ knowledge, that is, knowledge about relationships between actions and consequences. The idea of knowledge that can tell us ‘what works’ is probably the most extreme example of how evidence should inform educational practice. But the notion of ‘what works’ raises an important epistemological point, because what research can provide us with is only information about what has worked in particular situations in the past. However, to know what has worked in the past in one situation is never a guarantee that it will work again in the future in a different situation. To the extent to which ‘evidence’ is seen as technological knowledge – knowledge about the relationships actions and consequences – there is, therefore, already an important epistemological limitation to what research can achieve. It can show us what has worked, but not what will work. This is one of the main reasons why John Dewey has argued that “(n)o conclusion of scientific research can be converted into an immediate rule of educational art” (Dewey 1929, p.9). It is also why Dewey emphasised that the only way in which research can inform practice is through the transformation of professional action into what he called ‘intelligent’ professional action.\(^3\)

What is important about Dewey’s notion of ‘intelligent action’ is that it in a sense combines the technical and the cultural role of research. Dewey sees intelligent professional action not as a form of the application of externally generated knowledge, but as a process of problem solving. Intelligent problem solving is not simply about the application of pre-produced solutions, but involves informed examination of the situation at hand in order to establish what the problem might be before one starts addressing it. This reveals that intelligent professional action both needs technical and cultural ‘input’ from research. It not only needs evidence about what has worked in particular situations; it also needs different ways of interpreting and understanding the problem at hand.

But the decision to act in a particular way is not just made on the basis of available knowledge, be it of a technical or of a cultural nature. What is absolutely essential in educational settings is that decisions about action are always also informed by value judgements, that is, by judgements about what is educationally desirable – and this is the axiological dimension of the discussion. It is here that we encounter another important limitation of the idea of evidence – and the wider notion of evidence-informed practice – because ‘evidence,’ as I have mentioned, operates in the domain of the empirical not in the domain of the normative. What we need in education are not only judgements about the means we use; those judgements always need to be made in relation to judgements about the ends we wish to achieve – and the latter judgements are always value judgements, they are judgements about what we wish to achieve through our educational efforts. They are therefore judgements about what good education is.\(^4\)

\(^3\) A detailed discussion of Dewey’s views about the relationship between action and knowledge can be found in Biesta & Burbules (2003). See also Biesta 2007a on the importance of Dewey’s views about knowing for understanding how research can inform practice.

\(^4\) For more on how we might address the question of good education see Biesta (2009a) and (2009b).
Good education shouldn’t be conflated with effective education, as effectiveness is only an instrumental value, a value that says something about the ‘quality’ of processes. But we all know that there is effective and ineffective brain washing, which shows that there is always the further question about whether what is effective is also educationally desirable.

This means that for education the idea of evidence-informed practice is not enough. It needs at least to be complemented by the notion of value-informed practice, and perhaps we should say that value-informed educational practice is the overarching concept and within it there is a place for evidence, but always judged through the lens of the question of what is educationally desirable. This is an important reason why I think that in the field of education the idea of evidence-informed practice is a little misleading, as it tends to underplay the crucial role of value judgements. This brings us back to the issue of democracy, as it raises the question who should be involved in making such value judgements about the aims and ends of education. There are two points I wish to make in relation to this. One has to do with the question about the role of educational professionals – teachers, educators – in such value judgements. I wish to argue that this dimension is absolutely central to all good teaching, which not only means that there should be scope for teachers to engage in judgement and deliberation about what is educationally desirable; it also means that this should be a central element in teacher education and teacher professional development, focusing on increasing the capacity for educational judgement.\(^5\)

The other point has to do with the question how the issue of educational desirability reflects back upon us as researchers. On the one hand I believe that research can and should actively contribute to the clarification and critical analysis of the normative options that are at stake in educational practice and policy. The task here is not only to make particular choices and their rationales visible, but also to question such rationales and provide alternative orientations. It is here that research can play an important critical role in relation to educational policy and practice. On the other hand, and this is particularly important for empirical research, I believe that as researchers we should always aim to present our research in such a way that the normative dimensions and implications of our research are made explicit. What I have in mind here is, for example, that if we conduct research on ‘effective learning environments’ we should be explicit about what such environments are supposed to bring about, that is, how they contribute to the achievement of a particular views about what good education entails.\(^6\) This is not to say that empirical research should take position in such discussions, but it is to highlight that a notion like ‘effectiveness’ in itself remains empty if it isn’t connected to

\(^5\) For more on this see Biesta 2008.

\(^6\) In Biesta (2009a) I have suggested to make a distinction between three functions of education: qualification (roughly: knowledge, skills, dispositions), socialisation (the ‘insertion’ of particular social, professional, cultural, moral, political, religious, etc. ‘orders’) and individuation (or with a more ‘technical’ term: subjectification). What may be an effective learning environment for qualification (e.g., for the acquisition of a particular set of skills) may at the very same time be a very ineffective learning environment for individuation (e.g., the ways in which students develop a sense of agency or autonomy). This is why educational research should be very careful with using the word ‘learning’ because ‘learning’ can mean different things in relation to different educational ‘outcomes’. On the distinction between theorising learning and theorising education see also Biesta 2009c.
two other questions: ‘Effective for what?’ and ‘Effective for whom?’ (see also Bogotch, Mirón & Biesta 2007). Maybe an important place to start the task of rewriting the presentation of the outcomes of our research is at the highest level of synthesis, such as TLRP’s ‘Evidence-informed principles for effective teaching and learning’ which, in my view, are currently still lacking sufficient attention to the question of what is educationally desirable. A reformulation along the lines suggested here could help TLRP to make an even stronger contribution to the development of education as both an evidence-informed and also – and first and foremost, in my view – a value-informed profession.

This brings me to my third and final point.

**Methodology and Theory**

As I have mentioned earlier, part of the background of TLRP lies in criticisms about the quality and usefulness of educational research. Whereas on the one hand TLRP has tried to improve the quality of educational research, it has on the other hand also worked very hard to improve the quality of educational researchers. TLRP has sought to address a perceived capacity problem in the field of educational research; a problem that has been defined as a lack of capacity or, to put it in more ‘personal’ terms: a shortage in the educational research community of researchers with up to date knowledge, understanding and skills in a range of research designs, methods and methodologies. Although there is a tendency within the wider field of UK social science to see the problem predominantly in terms of a lack of capacity in working with quantitative data, TLRP has taken a broader approach and has invested systematically in opportunities for the development of research skills across a range of approaches.

The logic behind the capacity building aspects of TLRP is pretty straightforward: if you want to improve the quality of the work done by educational researchers, you have to make sure that they have the right tools and that they know how to use them. In this regard the ‘work’ of research does not differ from work in any other domain. But what is remarkable is that most of the efforts within TLRP – but again also wider efforts currently going on within social science research in the UK – only focus on one of the tools that educational researchers use when conducting research. Whereas a lot has been invested in design, method and methodology, relatively little attention has been paid to the other main ‘tool’ of educational researchers – the tool called ‘theory.’ Yet good – or if you wish ‘high quality’ – educational research is not just a matter of the application of the right methods and techniques but crucially depends on the combination of high quality techniques and high quality theorising. This also means that the ability to capitalise on capacity building in the relation to methods and methodologies may well be restricted because of a lack of attention to capacity building in the domain of theory.

Whether this is so, partly depends on our answer to the question whether there is a ‘capacity problem’ in the domain of theory. Although I do not wish to create problems where there are none, I do think that there are issues with regard to the role of theory in educational research and that this whole area is therefore in need of more attention – and perhaps at least as much attention as currently is being given to capacity building in the domain of design, method and methodology. I would like to make three general and initial observations (and I am aware that a more detailed investigation into the ‘state of theory’ is needed).
Firstly, I have the impression that a substantial amount of UK educational research is relatively under-theorised. There is a very strong tradition in the UK of detailed ethnographic studies of educational processes and practices, but such studies often remain at the level of (‘thick’) description or they employ weak forms of ‘grounded theory’ that often are not much more than higher level synthesis of findings. Such research is not unimportant as it can generate detailed insights in the realities of education, but it often lacks engagement with theory that would allow for the research to gain a wider significance. Where there is engagement with theory – and this is my second observation – there is often a tendency to go for rather general orientations such as the adoption, say, of ‘a socio-cultural perspective,’ often without considering why such a perspective is the most appropriate for the research at hand or why it is better than available alternatives. In this regard I consider it important to pay more explicit attention to the development of educational object theory. The third thing that in my view is remarkably absent in UK educational research is theory that is distinctively educational. The absence of educational theory has to do with a particular ‘construction’ of the field of educational research. The prevailing view in the Anglo-American world is to see educational research as the interdisciplinary study of educational processes and practices. As a result, research in education heavily relies on theoretical input from other disciplines. Historically, the four most prominent disciplines for the study of education have been philosophy, history, psychology and sociology (see, e.g., Tibble 1966), albeit that their respective influence on and role in the study of education has changed over time. What is virtually absent in the Anglo-American ‘construction’ of the field is the idea of education as a separate academic discipline with its own forms and traditions of theorising. In this regard the Anglo-American construction is different from the ways in which the study of education has developed on the Continent where there is a strong tradition of educational theorising linked to a conception of education as an academic discipline in its own right. This has been most strongly developed within the German tradition (which has influenced developments in many European countries), particularly through the contribution of ‘Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik’, which played a major role in the establishment of education as academic discipline in Germany in the beginning of the 20th century. Work along these lines has been ongoing up to the present day (see, e.g., Mollenhauer 1972; Benner 2005) and is exemplified in typical educational theorising around such notions as ‘Bildung’ or ‘Didaktik.’

If these observations are correct – or even if they are only partly correct – they do indicate that there are issues around the role of theory in educational research, which deserve further attention. In this regard I want to make two final points. The first is a plug for a new initiative we have taken at the Stirling Institute of Education where we have established a Laboratory for Educational Theory. The intention with the Laboratory is to provide a space where issues concerning the role of theory in educational research and educational practice can be explored and addressed. We see the Laboratory as a space where things can be tried out. The Laboratory is a deliberate attempt to put the question of theory more explicitly on the agenda of the UK educational research community. At the same time we are setting up activities that we hope will contribute to capacity building in relation to theory, partly on the basis of our own expertise and partly through involvement of educational researchers from the UK and from abroad.

The latter input is particularly important because of the relatively isolated position of the UK educational research community – and this is a point that is not only relevant for
the role of theory but in my view is something that should be taken into consideration for the conduct of educational research more generally. The point is perhaps a difficult one to make, but I wish to suggest that in a sense UK educational research is not international enough – and to make my point it is perhaps helpful to say (or write) that UK educational research is not ‘inter-national’ enough. By this I do not mean that educational researchers from the UK do not travel to other countries and do not interact with researchers from other countries. Again I think that TLRP has done a lot in promoting such interactions. But one of the problems for the UK educational research community is the fact that many people around the world speak English. This means that quite often when researchers from the UK go abroad, they are only exposed to translated versions of other traditions of educational research and theorising. This makes it very difficult to perceive that when someone from say Finland uses a word like ‘education’ or a phrase like ‘teaching and learning’ they have something in mind that is very different both in its content and history from what a native English speaker might be able to hear. That is why I think that we need less translation and more real interaction and inter-national dialogue.  

I come to my conclusions.

Conclusions
In this lecture I have raised some issues that have to do with the wider socio-political context of educational research. I have done this partly through a reflection on the achievements of TLRP – and I wish to emphasise again that these achievements are very significant and impressive and have indeed changed the shape, form and direction and also, and perhaps this is the most important achievement, the perception of UK educational research. Whereas the purpose of this event is partly to look back and take stock, it also marks the transition to a life without TLRP. This means that it is also important to look forward and ask questions about the future of educational research. The points I have raised in this lecture can be seen as an attempt to redress three imbalances within the domain of educational research. I have argued that in the discussions about usefulness there is too much emphasis on the technical role of educational research, and too little on the cultural role. I have argued that in discussions about the interrelationships between research and practice there is too much emphasis on evidence and too little on values. And I have argued that in discussions about the quality of research there is too much emphasis on methods and methodologies and too little on theory. In my lecture I have made several connections to the idea of ‘democracy’ because I strongly believe that we should not think of research as just a matter technical problem solving but should see it as a public act and therefore also as a public responsibility. The quality of democratic life not only depends on the extent to which educational researchers have a voice in the public deliberation about the ends and means of education. It also depends on the ways in which we take up our public responsibility as researchers, both as individuals and as a research community. TLRP has been an important example of how this can be done. It is now up to us to build upon these considerable achievements.

Thank you.

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7 For an example of an approach that is explicitly inter-national in the sense suggested here see Gundem & Hopmann (1998).
References
(The reason for the relatively large number of references to my own work is not to suggest that I am the only person who has written on the themes discussed in this lecture, but to indicate that the claims and ideas presented in the lecture are based upon more detailed work published elsewhere. These publications also provide references to a wider body of literature on these issues.)


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