

'Educational research: which way now?'

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### Abstract

BERA was established 43 years ago, in 1974, at the height of the postwar expansion of education, and at the onset of a long period of controversy and reform of education that has continued ever since. The presidential address for 2017 looks back to reflect on the birth and early years of BERA, on its founding principles and the circumstances in which it grew. It does so to identify the ideals that motivated and helped to shape the nascent organisation, and to ask how relevant and useful these are at a very different time, charting our future in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. More broadly, this address moves beyond an institutional history and a history of ideas, to contribute to a social history of educational research based on a wide range of documentary and archival evidence. In considering our past, we must attempt to resist an uncritical and functional approach in favour of a critical and reflective outlook that is alert to unresolved issues and problems, no less than it is to success and progress in our collective endeavours. This is necessary partly in order to reconstruct our historical experience in a robust manner, but also to address our present situation in an effective way. In 1977, the historian Brian Simon framed his presidential address to BERA around the key question 'Educational research: which way?' Forty years on, we can appraise how BERA has approached this question, and also ask at the same time: which way now?

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### *Introduction*

The history of BERA begins with a small group of colleagues who worked on classroom studies, at first with about 20 participants, then 80, people with similar interests from different disciplinary backgrounds coming together for the first time in informal discussions. According to the account of the late Ed Stones, this was the group that eventually led to the creation of BERA (Stones 1985, p. 18). A planning group was set up to organise a meeting in Birmingham in October 1973, and applied to the Department of Education and Science (DES) for a small pump-priming grant. This application was turned down, for reasons examined in this paper, but an inaugural conference was held, again in Birmingham, in April 1974.

Great oaks from little acorns grow. We can look back with justifiable pride over forty years later, and consider how far this Association has come since then, still just about within the professional memory of some who remain active in the field. Thus, when we come to reflect on our development over this time, it would be very easy to think about our progress, to reassure ourselves about our growth, to concentrate on our success. It is part of a sentimental attachment that we seek when we come together as a profession, as an academic community, in this space that we have carved out for ourselves over these many years. Yet there is another kind of story, somehow different, and yet no less to be valued. This is to look at ourselves critically, as researchers, to seek a critical distance in appraising our past development, and somehow not to flinch or be apprehensive or afraid of doing so. This is what it means to look at ourselves historically, and it is much more difficult.

### *Towards a social history of educational research*

There are also different kinds of history that we can develop in understanding our past. One would be a straightforward institutional history, or a house history. This would chart the growth of our Association in detail, listing the presidents and their dates, identifying the locations of conferences and the numbers that attended, and the range of our interests. There are many such histories that have been produced for associations and societies such as ours, often for anniversaries. Another kind of history is a history of ideas, which explores how ideas about education and educational research have developed over the decades, and the role of BERA in supporting these and helping them to develop. Again such histories are not hard to find, and again they can fulfil an honourable and useful purpose.

However, I wish to recommend another approach to understanding our history. This is that of social history – the relationship between ourselves as an educational institution and the changing society beyond. This indeed is the dominant approach that historians of education have adopted over the last forty years, influenced by broad developments in the practice and theory of history in general and pursued in the history of education since the heyday of Brian Simon in the 1960s (McCulloch 2011). It is this approach that is most likely to give us a critical purchase on our historical development as an Association, and to provide a framework that makes the

fullest sense both of our past and of our current position. This is not to suggest that there is only one interpretation of our social history; this is open always to argument and debate. It is to contend that we must try to locate this Association in its broader context if we are to fully comprehend its ideals and aspirations, its achievements and the work still to be completed or undertaken (see also McCulloch and Cowan 2018).

In terms of context, it is worth recalling that BERA's birth took place in particular circumstances that helped to shape its later growth. BERA was the product of a period of educational expansion and a growth in confidence, when there were very high expectations about what research could achieve (McCulloch 2015). Nonetheless, the new Association had itself to learn to survive and grow in a very different climate. Education stood at the beginning of a 'generation of radical educational change', as Pring and Roberts (2016) have described it. Far reaching controversy was underway over radical progressive teaching methods at William Tyndale Junior School; James Callaghan's Ruskin College speech and the 'Great Debate' were only two years away, leading to over forty years of active state intervention and neoliberal reforms.

It is surprising that we have such sparse research-based analysis of the origins of our Association beyond personal accounts and reminiscences. But then, until recently there were few published histories of educational research in the UK (McCulloch 2003, 2012). The work of our first president, John Nisbet, is certainly an outstanding exception to this (see e.g. Nisbet 2000, 2005), and Brian Simon also took an active interest in this history (Simon 1990). Martin Lawn and Ian Deary in particular have produced significant work on the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) in the 1920s (e.g. Lawn and Deary 2014). By contrast, there is currently growing interest internationally in the history of educational research. In the USA, the most important work has been Ellen Condliffe Lagemann's An Elusive Science which traced the 'troubling history' of educational research in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Lagemann 2001). David Labaree, also in the USA, has appraised the low status of schools and departments of education within the academy, explaining this poor reputation in terms of the historical association of schools of education with teacher education and schooling (Labaree 2006). A special issue of the journal Review of Research in Education has recently explored what it calls a 'century of discovery' in educational research since the founding of the American Educational Research Association in 1916 (RRE 2016). In Europe, Hofstetter and Schneuwly have led research on the institutionalisation of educational science (e.g. Hofstetter and Schneuwly 2004; Hofstetter 2012), and new work is charting the development of the educational sciences in different European countries since the Second World War (Laot and Rogers 2015). Another new collection edited by Geoff Whitty and John Furlong based on a project funded by the British Academy takes this area of research further through an international exploration of the study of education, including knowledge traditions in several nations around the world (Whitty and Furlong 2017).

### *Representation and engagement*

So, what were the Ideals that motivated and helped to shape the nascent BERA, and how far these are relevant and useful for us today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? These fall broadly into five main categories: first, representing the community of educational researchers; second, engaging with cognate organisations; third, liaising between the academy and the everyday work of teachers in schools; fourth, reconciling

special interests within an interdisciplinary ideal; and fifth, managing the growing interest and demands of the State.

Let us look first initially at the first two of these categories – representation and engagement at a national level. Other areas of study and research commonly had a national organisation, generally with an annual conference and a journal in which to publish relevant research. In education, such coverage was only partial at best. The established cognate university academic disciplines such as psychology and latterly sociology had assumed some responsibility for supporting education. Despite the responsibilities assumed by SCORE, and after the Second World War the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER, 1946; see Griffiths 2003; Fletcher-Campbell and Brill 2008), and the Standing Conference for Studies in Education (SCSE, 1951; see McCulloch 2012), there was no national organisation representing all educational researchers, nor any regular conference or journal that could bring all educational researchers together.

And yet there was an urgent need for some such support. Concerns were widely expressed about both the limited amount and the poor quality of educational research, especially at a time, in the 1960s, when educational policy and planning were becoming prominent national issues. In 1961, it was calculated that the total number of staff employed for all purposes, mainly teacher training, by university education departments and institutes of education was 500 at most, and of these few if any were engaged in full-time research, so their total research effort would not be equivalent to a hundred full-time workers (PSC 1961). Nor was this research well regarded. A senior official at the Ministry of Education pointed out that more trained researchers were required, but that few universities had developed education as a respected academic discipline, while professors of education in general ‘seem to enjoy little prestige among their colleagues in other faculties’ (Sloman 1962).

There had long been complaints about the lack of attention paid to research in education policy. In the 1940s, Fred Clarke, the director of the Institute of Education in London, had observed caustically that

...if we conducted our medical and engineering services and our industrial production with the same slipshod carelessness, the same disregard for precision of thought and language, the same wild and reckless policy of sentimentality or class prejudice or material interest masquerading as principle, with which we carry on our public discussions about education, most patients would die, most bridges would fall down, and most manufacturing concerns would go bankrupt (Clarke 1943, p. ii)..

National educational policy increasingly highlighted the importance of research based on ideas about effective scientific planning for an improved society. The Crowther Report of 1959, 15 to 18, championed the cause of a ‘forward plan for education’ that would need to be based on much improved research facilities, with greatly enhanced provision for research and statistics underpinning a consistent programme of educational development (Ministry of Education 1959, p. 473).

There were several remedies proposed to address this problem. The first was to expand the research capacity of the Ministry itself. A research department was established within the Ministry in 1960, and this approach did have some effect. The

Newsom report on the education of the average child and the Robbins report on the universities, both published towards the end of 1963, were notable for their strong research base (Ministry of Education 1963; Committee on Higher Education 1963). As one Ministry official wryly observed: 'There is indeed an element of fashionableness about all this and no report on an educational subject is now complete without its sample, pilot scheme and survey.' (Giles 1964).

The second approach, allied to the first, was to provide more money for educational research. It was possible to provide grants for educational purposes under Section 100 of the 1944 Education Act, in England and Wales if not in Scotland (Tanner 1969), but finance for educational research remained, as the Crowther Report put it in 1959, 'pitiably' (Ministry of Education 1959, p. 473). In 1961, the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee (PSE) calculated that while national expenditure on education in Britain had reached £800 million per year, empirical research into education and its achievement was only about £125,000 per year, or 0.014 percent of the total amount spent on education (PSE 1961). In a special debate on educational research in the House of Commons in April 1962, it was pointed out that the total amount spent on research into cast iron, welding and ceramics was in each category a quarter of a million pounds, or nearly twice the amount spent on educational research; and that more was known about training capstan lathe operators than about the training of classroom teachers (House of Commons Debates 1962, cols. 726-27)

The Ministry began to commission research in 1962, and this provision grew rapidly so that in 1969 grants totalling £500,000 were made to support a total of 109 projects. The new Department of Education and Science (DES) was advised within its planning branch by A.H. Halsey at Oxford University until April 1968 when he was succeeded by William Taylor at Bristol (BJES 1969). The Schools Council, established in 1964, was financed by the local education authorities and the DES to promote curriculum innovation, and by the end of the 1960s had a budget of about £1 million per year (BJES 1969). Such curriculum development was also supported by charitable funding from the Nuffield Foundation, especially in science, mathematics and languages. By 1972, Taylor could estimate that about £3.5 million was now spent annually on research and development activities in education. This remained a low figure by many standards; as Taylor observed, it still amounted to only 0.16 percent of the total budget for education (Taylor 1972, p. 4). Yet it was a large amount compared with the figure of only £125,000 ten years earlier, or indeed with the sum total of zero twenty years before that.

A third possibility was to launch a new research council specifically to support research in education. This idea had influential supporters in the early 1960s. The Parliamentary and Scientific Committee recommended in 1961 that an Educational Research Council should be established, comparable in its constitution to the Medical and Agricultural Research Councils, and with a substantial budget granted by Parliament (PSC 1961). This was also proposed in the House of Commons debate on educational research the following year – perhaps a high point with significant political support being expressed for a full research council devoted to educational research (H of C Debates 1962). In June 1963, the heads of university departments and institutes of education came together to make a formal request for the formation of an Educational Research Council. They stressed that such a body would have the principal function of encouraging and supporting research in

education, but that it would also promote the training of research specialists, provide consultation, and disseminate research findings (Judges et al 1963). This approach was turned down in favour of the recommendations of the Heyworth Committee in 1965 to set up a new Social Science Research Council (SSRC) which would preside over an Educational Research Board (Embling 1963; DES 1965; King 1997).

The fourth potential approach was to persist with supporting the university sector itself to improve the development of educational research across the country as a whole. There continued to be frustration over the slowness of progress in building up educational research (Embling 1962), but by 1964 there was greater optimism 'that educational research will be more prominent at the universities and that, as some of the livelier spirits among the professors (and there are one or two) make themselves increasingly felt, a greater number of students may be attracted to follow their example' (Giles 1964). A significant indication of this new activity was the new development of societies in areas of educational research that set up their own infrastructure of coordination, conferences and regular journals. A Philosophy of Education Society was launched in 1965, followed by a History of Education Society in 1967.

Perhaps more important for the field as a whole than these disciplinary-oriented initiatives was the establishment of the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE). This was set up in December 1964 at a meeting held in the Senate House of the University of London, and with an annual subscription of one pound for individual members it quickly attracted over 300 members. According to Harriet Greenaway's early study of the SRHE, it aimed to be a 'channel of communications' that would act 'not exactly as a pressure group but as a forum through which careful study of these subjects can be coordinated and publicised' (Greenaway 1973, p. 331). The success of the SRHE in attracting members was significant, especially since as Greenaway pointed out, unlike other learned societies including the disciplinary-based societies in educational studies, there was no one discipline from which it could automatically attract members (Greenaway 1973, p. 330).

Another key development at this time was the creation of university-based centres on particular topics that could bring educational researchers together within and across institutions. These included the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) led by Lawrence Stenhouse at the University of East Anglia, the Centre for Studies in Science Education founded by David Layton at the University of Leeds, the Association for the Study of the Curriculum, and the British Educational Administration Society.

#### *The foundation of BERA*

These activities helped to encourage the formation of a new university-based Society that would represent educational research as a whole at a national level.

Gordon Miller at the IOE suggested to Brian Start, head of the research division at the NFER, that 'The idea of a British Educational Research Association is an appealing one and will do a great deal to overcome the dispersion of interest in education among the various professional organisations.' (Miller 1973). Start concurred and threw his weight behind this, circulating to senior colleagues his view that 'The idea of a British Educational Research Association to which can be brought all those with interests in education as an area and with skills involved in other disciplines has obvious attractions.' (Start 1973).

One question that was immediately raised was over the issue of membership of such an organisation. The SCSE's membership was mainly confined to professors of education, but the new Association was aspiring to an inclusive coverage. Some insiders still hankered for an elite model of membership. For example, Neville Postlethwaite of the International Institute for Educational Planning proposed that it should be 'a quality-type organisation and should only convene every second year, and that the meetings should be so structured that there should be complete interaction between all people there'. This might involve only 30-40 people to begin with. He continued:

In general, I believe that the more people can interact with each other, the better it is, but there is the problem of hangers-on and if you do get the hangers-on in education, all you get is a very large convention once a year where people meet their friends. This, I presume, they could do at the British Psychological Association anyway. Therefore, I would again plead for some quality-type membership (Postlethwaite 1973b).

However, it was agreed at the initial meeting held in Birmingham in October 1973 that there should be an open membership due to the difficulty of deciding what would be the necessary qualifications for a restricted membership and in the interests of representing the field as a whole in an inclusive way (Whitfield 1973b), with an 'academic orientation', albeit recognising that 'in due course there may be political spin-offs in terms of promoting educational research' (Whitfield 1973b). This in turn raised the problem of how the new Association should relate to existing university-based organisations in the area. This was agreed to be a sensitive issue, especially with regard to SCSE and SRHE. Alec Ross from Lancaster University, the current chairman of SRHE and also involved in SCSE, suggested bringing bodies such as these into a relationship with each other (Ross 1974a), and Ed Stones agreed that these connections required further discussion (Stones 1974a). SCSE, which Ross and others hoped to revive, broaden and develop 'to make it something more significant than the prof's club!' (Ross 1974a), was seen as the 'most difficult' issue to resolve (Ross 1974b).

It was finally agreed reassuringly at BERA's inaugural meeting in Birmingham in April 1974, after drawing up a draft constitution, that 'the establishment of informal relationships with other kindred organisations was desirable to avoid conflict and reduce duplication of activities'. A 'sensitivity to common areas' would strengthen the achievements of the new Association, it was felt, and a list would be drawn up of related organisations with a view to informing them of BERA's purposes and activities (BERA 1974).

As it transpired, relationships with Scotland raised similar issues. Even as BERA was being established, Bryan Dockrell and his colleagues at SCRE were planning to form a Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA). John Nisbet, himself based at Aberdeen, hoped that there could be 'liaison and even a close co-ordination' (Nisbet 1973), although R.C. Whitfield at Cambridge argued that such a development should be prevented as it would 'distract from our intentions' (Whitfield 1973a). In the event, while John Nisbet became the first president of BERA, his brother Stanley assumed the same role for SERA, thus establishing fraternal

relations between the new organisations that were maintained well into the next century. SERA was formed at a meeting held at Moray House College of Education in September, followed by its first annual general meeting held at Stirling University on 31 January 1975 (SERA 1975).

There was also the possibility of a new European organisation. The European Association for Research and Development in Higher Education held its inaugural Congress in Rotterdam in December 1973 (Verreck 1974), and Postlethwaite was keen to establish a European Educational Research Association (EERA), perhaps modelled on the American association (Postlethwaite 1973a). The idea was not pursued further, and it was to be another twenty years until EERA came into being, in 1994.

For the further development of a research infrastructure, BERA's founders hoped to establish a regular journal. The meeting in October 1973 noted that initial publications might be restricted to a Newsletter, but that 'the sponsoring of a journal of a rigorous kind, either new or growing out of an existing one, is thought to be both desirable and inevitable' (Whitfield 1973). At first, it seemed possible that BERA could take over the NFER's journal, Educational Research (Christie 1974). However, the conference held in April 1974 decided not to start a journal immediately but, according to Stones, 'to talk more in terms of occasional publications supplemented by some form of research intelligence which I suppose is a type of house journal' (Stones 1974). A house journal was launched, actually entitled Research Intelligence, with a rigorous research journal following in 1975, the British Educational Research Journal.

Overall, once the idea of BERA had been mooted, it was realised with remarkable speed in a matter of months, with a basic structure, aims and an underlying continuity of approach, and a relationship to the field, that were to remain virtually intact despite a changing social and political context in succeeding decades. It is important for us today to recognise these lines of continuity amid the changes of recent decades. The founding ideals of BERA favoured a university-based, academic orientation, and supported collaboration with established cognate organisations in a common cause of promoting educational research.

#### *Partnerships and educational research*

We should also understand the processes of contestation around particular issues. Three key problems that it was not possible to settle in a speedy manner were, first, the approach of teachers to educational research, second, the idea of interdisciplinarity in educational research, and third, the relationship between BERA and the central government department, the DES. BERA may have stemmed from a group on classroom research, but the issue of how school teachers might benefit from research was keenly debated. Ben Morris, at the University of Bristol, argued that 'Unless schools and their teachers are much more research-minded in the sense of being willing to check in some way their educational hunches..., educational research is going to have remarkably little effect on the actual effect of education.' In his view this meant that 'schools must develop from being little closed societies into which the intrusion of the outside world in the form of research workers and others is resented' (Morris 1967b). Teachers could be awarded studentships and fellowships from the SSRC, but these were given too sparsely and at too low a level financially to have a significant effect (Morris 1967a).



How could BERA help to address this issue? The first BERA president, John Nisbet, thought he had an answer. In an address to NFER's annual conference later in 1974, he proposed that educational research could only have an indirect influence, but should have some effect on the attitudes of those who taught. Researchers and teachers, he suggested, were fundamentally different, but should enter into a 'marriage' with distinct roles; researchers in his view being in a position that was 'often promiscuous, irresponsible and indifferent to the fate of their offspring' (Nisbet 1974b). This might in fact have been grounds for divorce. Other early BERA presidents such as John Elliott and Lawrence Stenhouse showed more sensitivity, but certainly much was left to be discussed in subsequent decades.

Interdisciplinarity in education was another issue that raised difficult questions. It is notable that the early leaders of BERA supported a broad, interdisciplinary approach to educational research, and indeed that they warned of the risks of splintering into a large number of sub-disciplines. The meeting at Birmingham in October 1973 favoured 'interdisciplinary commitment, so that whatever disciplines are relevant to educational research in the widest sense shall be included' (Whitfield 1973). Yet this raised the prospect of an 'indiscriminate spawning' of sections (Stones 1974a), or a 'jamboree' (Ross 1974b). Nisbet chose to present his inaugural address to the Association on the state of the art of educational research. He emphasised the growth of the field over the previous thirty years, which he suggested had carried with it the danger that the study of education might 'split up into less and less meaningful sub-divisions' (Nisbet 1974a). His own department at Aberdeen, although still relatively small, held special meetings to ensure that there was some link between the various aspects of educational research, and every member of staff was required to carry out some tutorial work across all the boundaries. Overall, Nisbet took the opportunity that his presidential address at BERA afforded him to 'argue strongly against the fissiparous trend in current educational research', and insisted that in educational research 'it is particularly important that the different aspects should not develop in isolation: the empirical social scientist needs to draw on history, comparative studies and philosophy' (Nisbet 1974a, p. 2).

Other early presidents of the fledgling Association, from different specialisms and disciplinary backgrounds, concurred with Nisbet's generalist outlook on educational research. Jack Wrigley from the University of Reading, then the chairman of the Educational Research Board of the SSRC, noted in his presidential address in 1975 the 'intended interdisciplinary nature' of BERA despite his own empirical and statistical preferences (Wrigley 1975, p. 1). Wrigley chose this occasion to suggest that educational research was akin to engineering as 'a problem solving subject drawing on the disciplines of anthropology, philosophy, psychology and sociology for its insights and techniques' (Wrigley 1975, p. 7). Indeed, according to Wrigley, 'BERA ought to be an excellent organisation to promote the kind of interdisciplinary study necessary for good research. The bringing together of workers from the various disciplines should help to expose the pitfalls due to blinkered thinking.' (Wrigley 1975, p. 1).

Perhaps most strikingly, Brian Simon, a champion of his own subdiscipline, the history of education, argued in his presidential address two years later, entitled 'Educational research – which way?', that BERA represented 'a coming together from various disciplines' (Simon 1977, p. 1), which would in his view encourage 'submerging the undesirable aspects of contributory disciplines while extracting the

most from them from the educational point of view' (Simon 1977, p. 4). Simon was emphatic in his belief that 'The study of education has manifestly suffered from subordination to disparate modes of approach and methodologies deriving from fields quite other than education which have simply been transferred to the educational sphere, and which, once there, have tended to maintain their own distinctive languages and approaches, to pursue their own ends.' (Simon 1977, p. 4).

The focus of educational research, indeed, said Simon, must be education, and 'its overall function is to assist teachers, administrators, indeed all concerned in the field, to improve the quality of the educational process – and, in so doing, enhance the quality of life' (Simon 1977, p. 5). This should also include recognition of the restraints on the educational process – economic, social, political and ideological – which require analysis. Education in this sense was nothing less than 'the characteristic mode of development of human beings in society', something that we still know all too little about, and so, Simon concluded, 'It is with a more effective penetration into the extraordinarily complex dynamic process involved, at many levels, that educational research is concerned' (Simon 1977, pp. 7-8)

Over time, such interdisciplinary ideals largely faded, to be replaced by the development of a large number of special interest groups, all doing valuable work, but a 'fissiparous trend', in Nisbet's words, with a risk of losing coherence for the field as a whole and perhaps of reducing the scope for a general philosophy of educational research which Hirst and Peters had championed in the 1960s, and Nisbet and Simon in the 1970s.

#### *Educational research and the State*

And so, third, the relationship between BERA and the central department. Here we return to the request for a small pump-priming grant from the DES that was turned down. When Ed Stones wrote to the DES early in 1973 to ask for a grant for a meeting to explore the possibility of establishing the new Association, he was turned down flat (Forrester 1973), and described it as a 'dusty answer' (Stones 1974a). John Nisbet and William Taylor both expressed 'disquiet' at this negative response, and unfavourable comparisons were made between the DES and the approach taken towards research in other countries (DES 1974).

What were the reasons for this? In the House of Commons debate on educational research in April 1962, the then Minister of Education in Harold Macmillan's Conservative government, Sir David Eccles, had gone out of his way to emphasise the importance of academic research based outside the Ministry. He agreed that 'research has to have a certain scepticism about it', and that 'There naturally ought to be complete freedom for people outside to say "The Minister is asleep. He does not realise that this wants looking into. We think it should be. May we have some help?"' He hoped that an increasing number of such applications would come forward (H of C Debs 1962). Yet officials in the department were suspicious of the value of academic research from an early stage, and generally resisted attempts to set up independent institutions to support it.

For example, the new Society for Research in Higher Education applied for DES funding in 1965, requesting £15,100 over three years, after which it would aim to be self-supporting (SRHE 1965). One senior official was scathing, telling a colleague that it was 'obviously highly questionable' that the SRHE would be able to support itself after three years, and also, 'a "Society" of this kind does not seem to me to be

the right body to carry this out – unless it was associated with a larger and more firmly-based institution’ (Caston 1965). Eventually, Peter Jay, then a Treasury official, intervened to point out that the Treasury would not object to a small grant being made of £5,000 over the next two years, as a pump-priming operation, and this is what was finally offered rather grudgingly in December (Jay 1965; Walker 1965).

DES resistance to such applications hardened further in the early 1970s. In June 1970, a Conservative government came to power, with Mrs Margaret Thatcher as the new secretary of state for education and science. This signalled a change of approach from one of ‘patronage’ top one that was ‘policy oriented’. In future, it was affirmed, researchers seeking funds should apply to the SSRC or other funding agencies such as the Leverhulme Trust. The DES would only support an application if it was ‘(i) directly related to the Department’s own policies (e.g. review of the probationary year for teachers), (ii) of direct public concern’ (DES 1970).

At the same time, it was observed that academic research was not the same as the research conducted within the DES. An example was when George Baron at the IOE, the first professor of educational administration in the UK at its key research base (McCulloch 2014), applied for funding to start a development unit in educational administration. This was met with some hostility from departmental officials, one administrator telling another: ‘it may be questioned whether academics are the best qualified or otherwise suitable people to set the pace in operational reform of this kind’ (Stevens 1971). The new DES planning unit argued in October 1973 that

The field of educational research has given rise to a number of research workers of sound academic reputation but with fixed ideas / prejudices about the direction in which education ought to be moving. Unfortunately these prejudices tend to spill over into their research and the results that come forward are not entirely unbiased.

It continued: ‘What the Department seems to need is the services of what might be called “hack” research workers. Not “hack” in a derogatory sense, but people who get down to a job of fact gathering and careful assessment without having too many preconceived ideas of where the educational system ought to be going.’ (DES 1973). Here lay the basis for the divergence between the DES and BERA, and in the end the seeds of conflict between the State and university-based research that became evident during the Conservative government of the 1980s.

But rather than stifling the nascent BERA at birth, the DES’s approach actually forced it to depend on the resources available to university-based educational researchers. It would not be dependent on the generosity of state funding which might be vulnerable to changes in government policy. Instead, it would be an independent agency standing on its own feet, accountable above all to its own membership for its future direction. In this sense, BERA has much to thank Mrs Thatcher for. Moreover, as Nisbet maintained, such research had a ‘critical role’, that is, providing ‘constructive criticism’, and it was for this reason, he added, that there would be differences or tensions between the researchers and the practitioner – and, as he might have added, the policy maker (Nisbet 1974b).

There have been unfortunate consequences for education policy making. Rather than the receptive approach to constructive criticism suggested by David Eccles, there has all too often been hostility, a lack of a spirit of partnership, reflected both in the approach of policy makers and the responses of researchers. For educational policy itself, this reached its nadir when experts only a few years ago were dismissed as the 'Blob' ([The Independent](#) 2013; Young 2014). But more generally, when policies are based on hunches rather than on evidence, or drawn from nostalgic memories of personal and family memories of the grammar schools and independent schools of fifty years ago, and when restrictions on overseas students, for example, can be characterised as 'a stupid policy based on bad data' ([The Guardian](#) 2017). There are days when we can recall Fred Clarke's remarks of over seventy years ago, and wonder how much has changed.

How, then, can educational researchers best contribute to policy? There should be scope for engagement based on Eccles' original assertions about the need for research to have a 'certain scepticism'. Trained researchers with ideas and minds of their own should be enabled and encouraged to contribute, and indeed to challenge fixed assumptions about the future; in a spirit of partnership, as critical friends, and that goes also for trained teams of researchers, specialist centres, special interest groups, societies and associations.

It was again Simon's presidential address of 1977 that crystallised this approach best. The real issue, Simon said, was 'whether scientists are to be allowed to operate as scientists, educationists as educationists, researchers as researchers; or whether all are to become service personnel, waiting cap in hand for orders in response to which appropriate methods will be sorted out to produce acceptable results or conclusions' (Simon 1977, p. 7). Educational research, he concluded, was, like education itself, open ended, in contrast with technological servicing; it did not abide by a given set of assumptions or goals. And he concluded: 'The pressures now are for technological solutions in the service of certain immediate policies, or for unequivocal statements. But educational research (any research) is good insofar as there is an awareness not only of achievements but also of limitations; insofar as researchers "come clean" and make explicit not merely findings but what they haven't done and can't do, even if this means the customer gets a dusty answer for his money, or for asking the wrong kind of questions.' (Simon 1977, p. 7).

### *Conclusions*

Brian Simon was asked 'which way?' for educational research. Exactly forty years on from Simon's presidential address, that question mark remains, and rightly so, for there must always be debate and discussion about our future direction. Preparing for our Golden Jubilee, seven years away in 2024, should present us with further opportunities not only for celebration, but also for critical reflection about our past and our future. Yet at present there may be no better answer to the question 'Educational research: which way now?'

Locating BERA in its broader context, it is evident that it carved out a more or less independent space for academic research in education, supported by its own largely academic membership, alongside the State but wary and sceptical of it, in partnership with practitioners but with a separate and critical rationale. Its birth in the early 1970s meant that it inherited the ideals of educational expansion and change

that had developed in the previous generation, with a supportive but not dominant State and enjoying general public goodwill for research. Like many other academic societies that were born into this environment, it survived and adapted to the decades of educational reform directed by the State that were to follow. It can prosper still at a time of widespread distrust of experts, when fake news and alternative facts displace evidence, and when the State is often unsympathetic or even hostile to informed criticism. As independent researchers supported by BERA with the help of other specialist academic societies we can promote educational research in all its wide diversity, that at its best can be Interesting, lively and irreverent as well as systematic and logical; deep and reflective as well as broad in implications; creative and imaginative; authoritative and wise; theoretically significant and empirically strong; for understanding as well as improvement; critical but with scholarly detachment; rich in detail but with an eye for the large scale and the big picture; interdisciplinary as well as multidisciplinary and engaging with single disciplines; helpful where possible, but inconvenient where necessary.

BERA means all of this to me, informed by its history, and this is much more than a sentimental attachment. Today, a social history analysis, locating BERA in its changing social and political context from its early origins as a small group interested in classroom research, is necessary to confirm its crucial place in the development of educational research, and its importance for the future.

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