

## **British Educational Research Journal (BERJ) Symposium' on Close-to-Practice Research**

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### **People and Practice: defining education as an academic discipline.**

A Response from the BERA Close-to-Practice Research Project Team to Hordern (2021); Takayama and Nishioka (2021); Kelchtermans (2021); and Parsons (2021) published as a 'symposium' in the *British Educational Research Journal*, [Issue, Part, page range].

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Education research that “focuses on issues defined by practitioners as relevant to their practice, and involves collaboration between people whose main expertise is in research, in educational practice, or both.” (Wyse, Brown, Oliver and Pobleté, 2020, p. 5) has been the source of a range of debates relevant to understanding the development of education as an academic discipline. The relationship between education practice and education research has been an important issue for almost a century, and antecedents of the debates can be traced as far back as Plato. Many of these debates have revolved around methodological issues and in some cases still do, as can be seen in the set of responses to our paper (the BERJ 'symposium') which reported the Close-to-Practice (CtP) research project funded by The British Educational Research Association (BERA) (Wyse, Brown, Oliver and Pobleté, 2020). Types of CtP research, such as practitioner research or action research, have been regarded by some as the essence of education, but there have also been prominent criticisms of education research, including from within education itself (e.g. Hargreaves, 1996) and outside education (e.g. Goldacre, 2013), that have questioned the rigour of education research on methodological grounds, including the questionable claim that education research has neglected the use of research designs using experimental methods. The establishment of BERA about 50 years ago came at a time when issues of practice were being debated as part of the discussions about locating teacher training in university education departments, including the possible consequences for perceptions of education as an academic discipline.

A more recent influence that has highlighted the nature of CtP education research has been the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) which is a review of all research in universities in the UK carried out every four or five years. Specifically, the report from the REF Education Panel, that reviewed all education research in the submissions by UK universities in 2014, noted that some CtP research was “world leading”, but

Less strong research in the submission was often the small-scale professional research or action research which was frequently insufficiently theorised to make a contribution to knowledge and/or was low in rigour with poor use of statistical data or inappropriately selective reporting of qualitative data (HEFCE, 2015, p. 107). (Wyse, et a. 2020, p. 6)

Although the REF is unique to the UK, some other regions have nation state assessment of research quality, for example Australia, whereas other regions do not, including the USA, and Japan as Takayama and Nishioka (2021) note in their response to this symposium.

For the purposes of our response to the commentaries on our peer-reviewed research paper reporting the BERA CtP research project (Wyse, et al., 2020) it is important to note that, putting aside views about the merits overall of having a national assessment of research *per se*, the REF is a peer-led, peer-reviewed, systematically reported and systematically reviewed process. As such, the outcomes of its reports require serious reflection in relation to the quality of research in academic disciplines, institutions, and at the levels of individual researchers. At the system level the consequences of the outcomes of the REF include the allocation of significant sums of annual state funding for research to universities on the basis of their success in the REF elements of research outputs, research impact and research environment. More generally the REF data and reports also enable reflections on the state of academic disciplines following each REF process.

The implications of the REF 2014 outcomes for Education as an academic discipline and for CtP research was one of the main reasons that BERA issued a competitive tender for a research project. BERA's rationale for engaging with CtP work is important in relation to any debate about the merits of the outcomes and publications. The overall purpose of BERA's initiative was to support education researchers whose research was close to practice. The research tender document for the CtP project noted that, "... there has been relatively little explicit discussion within the literature on the dimensions of quality in close-to-practice research. This project will address this." (BERA CtP Tender, p. 1).<sup>1</sup> Any criticisms of the BERA CtP work need to reasonably take account of this overall purpose to support researchers in the UK.

To date the BERA CtP research has resulted in a report (Wyse, Brown, Oliver and Pobleté, 2018); a BERA statement separate from but informed by the CtP project (BERA, nd); and a peer-reviewed research journal paper (Wyse, Brown, Oliver and Pobleté, 2020) published in BERJ. Early responses to the CtP work have included a range of ways linking CtP with different traditions of research in a variety of fields

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons of transparency it is important to note the following. The lead author of this response (Wyse) led the application to the BERA CtP tender (which attracted seven strong applications) in collaboration with the other authors of this response. At the time of the CtP Research Project application Wyse was not BERA President (started September 2019). At the time of writing this response Wyse was BERA President. This response is written in his capacity as author and one of the research team not as BERA President although he naturally has interests from the BERA perspective about how the debate proceeds.

(see BERA Research Intelligence Issue 137 Autumn 2018<sup>2</sup>) and new research that has positively and constructively built on some of the ideas that emerged as a result of the BERA CtP project (e.g. Kay, 2019; Dickens, 2021). The work also attracted a critical response (Hordern, 2021) that was published in BERJ, which according to the BERJ editors was the catalyst for thinking about organising this symposium, papers from which we address in our response. The responses in this symposium were not peer-reviewed by independent referees, instead the responses were commissioned and reviewed by at least one BERJ editor. It is also important to note that all the responses in this symposium, apart from ours, were published in electronic form ‘i-first’ without holding them back for simultaneous release, and as a result initially lacked the corrections from our response, and also lacked the cohesiveness of the collected views of the symposium, ultimately published in print form.

The approach to writing our response began with three of the research team (Wyse, Brown and Pobleté) reading all the contributions to the symposium in full. Key points of interest were identified to form the basis of a plan and first draft of our response. Two peer reviewers were selected who were known to the authors for their long-standing expertise in the issues raised: both reviewers are eminent in the field of CtP research and research quality. Following the comments, offered separately, from these peer reviews the draft was revised again. The final draft was reviewed by all four members of the research team (Wyse, Brown, Pobleté and Oliver) then further changes made. The response went through five major drafts of writing. Inevitably the piece reflects our views as authors because the symposium contributors were commenting on our research, in addition to any comments about the related BERA Statement on CtP research.

### **Methodological imperialism and methods fetishism?**

Hordern’s (2021) paper raises a number of important points in relation to CtP research. For example the idea that there is a tension in the UK research and policy landscape between the need for research that offers genuine insights into education practice and the pressures caused by government policies to “deliver desired outcomes” (Hordern, 2021, p. 1). This is of course a long-standing area of debate, for example related to issues about knowledge mobilisation raised more than a decade ago (Pollard and Oancea, 2010), the kind of seminal work that Hordern might have cited. Hordern also raises the point that research methodology is related to the overall purposes of, and rationale for, any research project, but this is not the simple relationship between method X and value position Y that Hordern, and Parsons (2021), argue in their responses to our paper.

Hordern’s paper is built on his main criticism that “The BERA statement, and the report on the research that fed into its development (Wyse et al., 2018), draw on a conception of practice that is primarily regularist rather than normative.” (p. 9) Hordern takes his definition of ‘normative’ from the North American philosopher Joseph T Rouse based at Wesleyan University. But Hordern’s main criticism is conjecture: the conjecture that the authors have based the CtP report on a ‘regularist’ conception of practice. In spite of numerous direct quotes from Wyse, et

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<sup>2</sup> BERA RI is available to BERA members only

al. (2018) Hordern fails to demonstrate that the report, or more accurately members of the research team, were informed by this regularist conception of practice.

Given we now have the chance, for the first time, to respond to this conjecture we can confirm that on the contrary we did draw on normative conceptions of practice, consistent with our work over several decades including in some cases our prior experiences as classroom teachers and as policy makers. As far as direct evidence of taking account of normative perspectives is concerned, this quote from our paper is appropriate: “As a result, action research has been described as both democratising and political, as it can be used to challenge both existing social norms and the structures that perpetuate inequalities (Cain & Harris, 2013; Whitehead, 2019; Wood et al., 2019).” (Wyse et al., 2020, p.204) Contrary to Hordern’s conjecture our point about action research is directly concerned with education activity “driven by a central purpose or educational understanding” (Hordern, 2021, p. 10): the idea that action research *can* be conceived as driven by democracy, political critique, and by communities seeking more equity.

To fully fit Hordern’s apparent expectations about how the CtP research project should have been conceived would have required a completely different research project, an unreasonable expectation of any research, and one that fails to account for the context of the competitive tender of the funded CtP project and hence the parameters the research team were required to work within. Hordern also fails to acknowledge the positive aspects of the methods that were used in the BERA CtP research project. For example the merits of a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) in informing the understanding of topics in a robust, cost-effective, timely and *inclusive* way through relatively large scale searches of relevant publications. What’s more Hordern fails to acknowledge the work done in the research project to articulate a new definition of CtP research based on our systematic reviewing of a wide range of publications of both conceptual/theoretical pieces and empirical pieces: education research that “focuses on issues defined by practitioners as relevant to their practice, and involves collaboration between people whose main expertise is in research, in educational practice, or both.” (Wyse, Brown, Oliver and Pobleté, 2020, p. 5)

Much more extreme than Hordern’s point about an alleged regularist conception is the suggestion that the BERA statement reflects “methodological imperialism” and “methods fetishism” (Hordern, 2021, p 12). If we may ‘play’ with the same extreme metaphor, where is the evidence, rather than polemical opinion, that the BERA statement is informed by an intention to extend the organisation’s power and influence through colonization and use of military force? The BERA statement is clear in its normative conception that the use of the phrase “**educational** research” (bold font in original) is seen by some as important. The statement also notes the importance of the voices of practitioners: “it is recommended that practitioner voices are involved at all stages of the research process.” (BERA, nd, p. 3). Imperialists tend not to emphasise and seek the voices of citizens and other stakeholders. The suggestion of methods fetishism is built on the erroneous argument that the selection of particular research methods can in itself lead to undermining normative conceptions. But all research methods allow for more or less attention to, and influence of, normative conceptions dependent on the views and decisions made by researchers.

The claim about fetishism and research methods is related to how some researchers think about epistemology – an aspect that is at the heart of another respondent's piece, and which we pick up later in this piece. For the sake of doubt, we strongly refute the implication that anyone involved has 'an excessive and irrational adherence' to any research methods (Oxford English Dictionary definition of fetishism). We also object to the implied homogenisation of the views of all members of the research team who, individually and collectively, brought experience of a wide range of research methods and ways of conceiving research.

### **Criteria for research quality in the real world**

Another symposium response, by Takayama and Nishioka, correctly interprets that an important driver for the CtP research was the REF. They note that in Japan the link between quality assurance measures and funding for universities has not so far been made by government. As a result academic disciplines in Japan can establish their own quality criteria and these are respected in hiring and promotion practices.

A point made by Takayama and Nishioka is one we also agree with in relation to a further problem with the argument made by Hordern:

His [Hordern's] philosophical argument might benefit from a dose of political astuteness, or being "strategic" (Wyse et al, 2020, p. 22), in light of the declining public trust in state-funded educational systems and in those who work within them as witnessed in many parts of the world. (Takayama and Nishioka, 2021, p. 3)

Further challenges to Hordern's argument by Takayama and Nishioka include Hordern's lack of recognition that education has multiple roles and functions (not just the formation of individuals within society), and even the risk that Hordern's argument could "further isolate and delegitimize the teaching profession itself" (Takayama and Nishioka, 2021, p. 3). It is certainly salutary to reflect on how teachers might view Hordern's arguments, particularly in relation to teachers' views about the most important features of 'good' education.

### **The academic discipline of education**

Another point that challenges Hordern's position is made in Kelchtermans' response: the idea that the value of practice-related research is "often framed in terms of the tension or even opposition of rigour and relevance. As an opposition, this can only be a false one." (Kelchtermans, 2021, p. 2) Hordern's suggestions about imperialism and fetishism are built on his argument that the underlying purposes of education, or at least those purposes that Hordern asserts the CtP work should be attending to, can be, and were, marginalised by the selection of particular research methods in the CtP research project. A binary opposition is built by Hordern between on the one hand a normative conception of education and on the other hand the choice of methods which were, in the case of the BERA CtP research project, a REA triangulated with interviews undertaken with key stakeholders. Hordern describes this as "sophisticated methods providing impressive 'results' but being used to side-line or undermine that which is educational in educational practice" (Hordern, 2021, p.12). As we have argued, methods in themselves cannot side-line or undermine

anything – only people can do this. Once again there is no evidence presented that anyone involved in the BERA Statement or in the CtP research project undermined what Hordern regards as educational. And it is simply not sufficient to allege these things – clear real world evidence of the motivations of the people involved in the work would need to be shown, which it is not. Our clarifications in this response are direct evidence of our views which contradict Hordern’s conjectural assertions.

Kelchtermans also usefully suggests that collaboration between people with different kinds of expertise in research and/or practice could be more systematically developed as part of research projects, for example in the “careful *construction of a clear and shared research agenda*” (op cit., p. 4, italic font in original). Of particular importance in relation to our argument is Kelchtermans’ opinion that to create what he calls good examples of educational practice (which some describe as ‘effective’ practice) requires an answer to this question: “On what ‘evidence’ or ‘data’ is that explanation grounded?” (op cit. p. 6) This is a question that is a legitimate one to be answered in relation to all the papers that are part of this symposium.

Although Kelchtermans’ comment that there is a political dimension to the CtP debates is astute, rather like Takayama’s and Nishioka’s comments about the REF, we differ somewhat from Kelchtermans in the assertion that “As a logical consequence, educational research—as different from, for example, psychological or sociological research—cannot but be close to practice. (p. 1)” Education shares more similarities with psychology and sociology than differences because it is an academic discipline with characteristics shared by all academic disciplines. Education as a discipline includes some attention to practice in its research but the theory-practice relationship is common to all disciplines to some degree (see Wyse 2020 for further points in relation to this argument).

Overall, Kelchtermans’ thinking reflects well the difficult tensions between ‘value’ and ‘rigour’ which perhaps lie at the heart of the disagreements evident in the responses to our CtP research. Kelchtermans is quite clear on this fault in Hordern’s logic:

However, this is no reason to subordinate one to the other. Seeking relevance can’t be used as an excuse to reduce the rigour. At least if one wants to claim that the endeavour is rightly qualified as ‘research’. It may sound like stating the obvious, but the ultimate goal of educational research is to contribute to valid knowledge and theory-building on the complex phenomena of educational practices. (Kelchtermans, 2021, p.2).

This is also a reminder that reflecting on the general quality of education research, at times highlighting weakness as well as strengths, requires consideration of rigour, and in our view is a necessity for any mature academic discipline and its members. This consideration of research quality is also something built into BERA’s charitable objectives.

### **Epistemological leanings?**

A question about the extent to which the final selection of published CtP studies in our REA met the criteria we articulated for ‘high quality CtP research’, raised in the response by Parsons (2021), is another fruitful line of enquiry which enables people

to build on the BERA CtP work. If the CtP criteria could be reflected on, for example in relation to a range of studies described by Parsons as ‘participatory’, further important insights could follow. However although we agree with Parsons that participatory approaches are important, there are still issues about the quality of some of that participatory work that need to be addressed.

Parsons’ main argument is that we neglect collaboration in education research: “the report fails to adequately address the central importance of collaboration” (Parsons, 2021, p1) yet as she also points out, collaboration is *central* to the new definition that we established as one outcome of our research: CtP research in education is research that “focuses on issues defined by practitioners as relevant to their practice, and involves collaboration between people whose main expertise is in research, in educational practice, or both.” (Wyse, Brown, Oliver and Pobleté, 2020, p. 5, underline added). This definition was arrived at as a result of our systematic search for relevant publications and our interviews with key stakeholders all of whom drew on many years of experience and expertise in CtP research. Another clear and direct example of the way our paper addresses collaboration is seen in this quote: “As part of the work defining CtP research, the following key characteristics were noted across nearly all CtP methodology studies that were reviewed:

...

- close collaboration and/or a strong relationship between academics and practitioners;” (Wyse, Brown, Oliver and Pobleté, 2020, p. 13, underline added)

These quotes clearly counter Parson’s criticism that we failed to adequately address collaboration.

The problem with erroneously attributing *beliefs* to the research team on the basis of the *methods* adopted in the CtP research is even more marked in Parsons’ response than in Hordern’s response. Parsons’ reasonable point about the general importance of collaboration and participatory research is marred by a series of unfounded and erroneous claims:

1. that the authors of the CtP report are biased;
2. that the authors ignored ‘collaboration/collaborative’ and ‘co-production’ in the rapid evidence assessment;
3. that there was a lack of transparency in the reporting;
4. that the team has “epistemological leanings” that are “quantitative, positivist”;
5. that the team uncritically conflates robustness with positivist methodologies;
6. that we did not reveal if any of the interviewees were known to the research team and this was part of our opacity and lack of breadth in sampling.

Our reply to these claims can only be brief for reasons of word count in this response:

1. We agree with Parsons that all researchers have biases, so to protect these from being unduly influential our CtP work was subject to these processes:
  - a. rigorous and repeated peer review by an independent BERA steering group of experienced academics with a range of experiences of research;

- b. the research methods we used are fully described in the original research report for reasons of transparency. The REA method is explicitly designed to support more objective selection of studies;
  - c. the BERJ paper reporting the findings of the CtP study was peer reviewed by two independent referees and the BERJ editors.
- 2. The selection of terms in the REA was based on frequency of occurrences in the titles and abstracts that are the first level of search. Terms such as collaboration were simply not very prevalent in those titles and abstracts. This is the value of selection of terms based on evidence as opposed to personal preference which we all agree has biases.
- 3. The reporting is fully transparent about the methods, as the original report shows. In fact most research papers report much less fully their research methods (as we had to in the BERJ paper due to word count constraints).
- 4. The idea that we have 'positivist leanings' is an unsubstantiated allegation. Even a cursory review of our academic profiles would show that the research of the team, individually and collectively, includes qualitative research; auto-ethnography; theoretical work; work related to the arts; a range of mixed methods designs; and quantitative work including experimental trials. parsons' criticism is based on conjecture. A correct summary of our perspective is that we take a pragmatist (literally and philosophically) view, rather than dogmatic view, of research methods recognising that all methods and designs have strengths and limitations.
- 5. To contradict another erroneous assertion: we do not equate robustness with "positivist methodologies". Our paper is explicit about how we conceptualised robustness: originality, rigour and significance across all chosen methods. We would add that judgements about robustness of methodology applies to critiques and conceptual/philosophical pieces just as much as it does to empirical pieces, and reflection on more robust understanding of research methods in relation to research quality is important for CtP research as it is for all education research.
- 6. Revealing whether the interviewees were known to the research team would risk compromising the need for pseudonymity something which, of course, would be ethically unacceptable. For the record two of the interviewees had knowledge about primary and early years education.

## **Final remarks**

To sum up, two topics seem to us to be most important: people and practice. Although we have dealt with the issues raised by the respondents in an academic way we reflexively acknowledge that to some degree this kind of debate is not merely academic, it is also personal. Claims of imperialism, fetishism, and deliberate bias without due transparency are not just neutral points that can without consequence be published in a leading research journal for all to read. These are points that are in the end directed at people, the authors of the CtP research; the authors of the BERA Statement, and all involved in the CtP projects. The important idea of paying attention to inclusivity and the voice of participants cannot simply be applied to conveniently suit an argument, it has to be applied in an equitable way in all contexts, including in responses to our work and to others' work with which one might not agree. More generosity of spirit, from some respondents, could go a long

way towards a more productive future for many of the issues that face education research.

Finally we return to the 'rough ground' of practice, and related to that 'practical outcomes'. What are the practical outcomes of allegations of imperialism, fetishism and positivist epistemological leanings? What is the contribution to knowledge, and how do these points help us to constructively and positively develop education and education research? Given that Plato's depiction of a disagreement between perspectives influenced by poetry and perspectives influenced by philosophy is the beginning of a very long history of philosophical debate it is important to ask where is the original contribution to knowledge in the points made by the symposium contributors, and what is the warrant for this original contribution? The two more negative responses to the CtP work in this symposium could have accommodated a more balanced range of sources including those researchers who long ago recognised that the 'paradigm wars' have necessarily moved on and needed to, for fear of endless cycles of unedifying and unproductive arguments, ironically *without practical impact* (e.g. see the introduction to Wyse et al 2017 which cites a range of authors' points on topics relevant to the *paradigm wars*). The more extreme of these hopefully ever-diminishing cyclical arguments risk all kinds of damage to education.

Following the REF 2014, BERA's overall aim was, as ever, to defend and promote educational research, including through a project to examine the features of CtP more explicitly. The reason that BERA was concerned was that, in spite of comparable highly rated outputs, education as an academic discipline had more outputs that were not highly rated than any other academic discipline (in REF outputs this means papers reviewed by our peers as 2\* or 1\* for originality, rigour and significance). We have made the point that these judgements were made by our peers and therefore are worthy of respect and consideration. If a critique of BERA's work is to be accurate and purposeful it needs to reflect explicit understanding of this context. If as a community of researchers we don't think and act strategically on these research quality issues we may miss genuine opportunities for the development of education research, and education practice and policy, as a result of being trapped in repetitive internal arguments. This does not mean that debate is not needed, it means that the debate needs to begin each time from a more informed understanding of what has changed including the powerful sources of data that now exist. This includes not only the REF reports themselves, but also all other relevant sources of data. The job of reflecting on the quality of research, by individual professionals, by institutions and in relation to academic disciplines requires the honesty, capacity and rigour to not only acknowledge positive aspects but also to acknowledge (and act on) aspects that need improvement, however much we might feel that certain kinds of institutional and governmental processes are undesirable. BERA's new State of the Discipline work is built on these premises, and is shortly due to advertise a new tender for a major survey about colleagues' experiences in education departments across the UK.

We appreciate the time taken by the editors and all respondents to engage with the issues that they feel are important. In particular the reflections about implications of CtP issues for education as an academic discipline in different parts of the world has made an important contribution to this ongoing debate. The social media reaction from colleagues in wider Europe to the co-published EERA and BERA blogpost

(Wyse, nd) that focused on some of the issues covered in this response is another welcome example of how the issues we are raising are resonating with colleagues in different parts of the world.

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