

## CHAPTER 1

### A 'BIOGRAPHICAL POSITIONING'

As researchers we all have an individual trajectory which shapes the research we do, the questions we ask and the way we do it. But as researchers we are also socio-culturally located, we have a social autobiography, and this has an equally if not more important part to play in shaping our research and directing the kinds of reflexive questions which need to be asked but rarely are. (Usher 1996: 32)

Some thirty years ago I was attending the first meeting of a group embarking on an MA programme in Ethics under Robert Dearden's guidance at the London Institute of Education. Dearden began by reminding us of the question which was to be the focus of our discussion and then invited the first contribution on the issue. An Australian woman cleared her throat and appeared to be in some state of agitation. Dearden turned to her expectantly.

'Excuse me,' she intervened, nervously but with some determination, 'but do you think we might begin by introducing ourselves, so that we know a little about each other? Otherwise we're just, well...'

'...just sources of argument?' offered Dearden.

'Yes.'

'Well, that's exactly what you are here – sources of argument. It does not matter who you are or where you come from. What matters is the quality of your argument. If you want to know more about each other then you can meet in the pub afterwards. Now, on virtue...'

Similarly, perhaps, when John Russell asked the painter Balthus for some biographical details for a catalogue in 1968, the artist cabled him back, abruptly: 'Balthus is a painter about whom nothing is known. Now, let us look at the pictures. Regards. B.' (The Times, 19<sup>th</sup> February 2001: 21)

Those who approach this book from a background in analytic philosophy or with Balthus's preference to focus on the product rather than the person will properly skip this quasi biographical chapter and get to the argument. I have some sympathy for this approach and indeed for what is in many ways the very emancipatory requirement which Dearden imposed on his seminar<sup>1</sup>: address the argument, not the person; judge the validity of the view presented by reference to the strength of the argument adduced in its support and not by reference to the authority, standing, unpleasantness, charm, kinship, race, gender or sexuality of the person who is its source. These are principles which I continue to hold as fundamental in the

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to it as 'emancipatory' because, in principle at least, (i) it makes no requirements on the social status of contributors only on the epistemological status of what they have to say, and (ii) it de-personalises criticism, which is addressed to the argument and not against the person.

conversations of the academic community – and I shall be very content if the argument which follows in this collection of essays can be approached on this basis.

There is however a different tradition in contemporary educational research which argues that the attempt to render the writer invisible in the text, the effacing of the narrative which lies behind the text and which is (on this view) inevitably entangled with it, is an artifice which is doomed to fail. The researcher's subjectivity is, in Peshkin's phrase, 'a garment which cannot be removed' (Peshkin 1988: 17. See also Peshkin 1982 and Cheater 1987). Not only that, but such artificial self-effacement is actually an obstacle to others' proper understanding of what is being said and evaluation of its merits. What we choose to say and how we say it does not after all come from out of the blue. If it has any integrity it is rooted in our life histories, our values and our deepest beliefs and in the social context of our writing. 'Who a researcher is is central to what a researcher does' (Bullough and Pinnegar 2001: 13). Rather than obscure these connections we can help the reader by rendering them explicit. 'Biographical positioning,' writes Atkinson, 'forms an important part of interpretative enquiry in a post-modern frame' (Atkinson 2000 but see also Richardson 1992, Sparkes 1994, Packwood and Sikes 1996), though I do not I think have to swallow the whole postmodernist project in order to come to the same opinion.

Since I am hoping in this book to address an eclectic research readership I shall defer to this expectation and offer a brief account of what lies behind this collection of thoughts. It may have an additional interest as evidence towards an empirical sociology of educational research knowledge. Besides, it helps me to make some sort of sense of what might otherwise be assumed to be some erratic wanderings. As MacLure (1993) observed: 'People use (biographical accounts) to make sense of themselves and their actions – to find order and consistency in the journey from past to present; to work out where they 'stand' in relation to others; to defend their attitudes and conduct' (p. 320). I do this, however, with the clear acknowledgement and warning that this is, and must be of course, highly selective. 'In telling our lives, or those of others, we must select; we must conceal in order to reveal' (MacLure and Stronach 1989: 11). It is a story – a storying – among many that might have been told. And though it is hardly startling in its self-revelation, my colleagues whose commitment to de-personalised argument has not suffered the same corruption that mine has, through promiscuous association with narrativists, phenomenologists, ethnographers, psycho-dynamicists and the like, should move speedily and without embarrassment to the next chapter.

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My first encounters with philosophy came when, as a history undergraduate at Oxford, I took a course in the history of ideas. I recall, for example, Isaiah Berlin explaining that there were seventeen interpretations of Macchiavelli's Prince and being impressed that by the end of a lecture in which he appeared never to take his

eye off a plaster decoration on the ceiling he had indeed covered exactly seventeen. As a history student I was already developing some interest in what I now recognise as issues in the philosophy of history. I remember arranging a seminar for my college historical society on the historical novel, which was possibly the source of the interest which is reflected many years later in chapter eight. I had come to Oxford from a working class family (though we were not actually very self-conscious about that), none of whom had stayed on at school beyond fourteen. My parents were heavily involved in the local Labour Party (an unpromising cause in Leamington Spa) but theirs was a very humble, gradualist brand of socialism and I was more than a little daunted by the upper middle class Marxists whom I encountered at Oxford. I was nevertheless prompted to write my first essay on education while I was there in a Christian Socialist tract on education: a detailed argument in support of the then relatively novel idea of comprehensive schooling. Re-reading this recently I was both alarmed and comforted to find how little my views had changed over these forty years.

I went from Oxford to the London Institute of Education for my teacher education (this was only later to become teacher training), but though Richard Peters was already regaling the massed ranks in the Beveridge Hall with his careful analysis of the concept of education, it was Bernstein's incisive and colourful analysis of language and social class, the sweeping scope of Lowry's lectures in comparative education and my history tutor, Jim Henderson's, idiosyncratic Jungian approach to the teaching of history and to education and international understanding which I found intellectually stimulating at that stage<sup>2</sup>. Jim Henderson's teaching, friendship and encouragement led me into some of my early experience in curriculum development – developing and teaching multi-disciplinary programmes in World Studies, Peace Education and 'Conflict' in the mid sixties and to my first editorial role with *New Era*, the long established mouthpiece of progressive education, to which I felt that I subscribed. I was joined in this role by Michael Fielding with whom I shared then and later, as we both developed our philosophical interests, values to do with student centred learning, communitarianism, responsible anarchism and internationalism.

I had only been teaching for three years – a very happy experience which provoked in me, nevertheless, some increasingly searching questions about educational purposes and practice – when an opportunity arose for me to take an advanced course in education. Tony Morris, the head of history at Blackdown High School, where I had done my pre-PGCE teaching experience, had been studying for a Diploma in Philosophy at the London Institute of Education and every time I met him he drew me into what seemed at the time to be intensely interesting debates which he was enjoying on the course at the Institute – and this was the course on which I subsequently enrolled. When Richard Peters responded to one student invocation of Plato 'Yes, that is what Plato said – but was he right?' I began to

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<sup>2</sup> For a more extended recollection of this period at the London Institute of Education see my lecture in celebration of fifty years of Philosophy of Education at the London Institute of Education (Bridges 1998a).

## CHAPTER 2

### INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHISING ABOUT EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Research... always conveys a commitment to philosophical beliefs even if this is unintended and even though it remains implicit and unacknowledged. (Carr 1995: 1)

#### PHILOSOPHISING AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

It is helpful, I think, to distinguish three sets of relationships between philosophy and educational research.

First, there is the role of philosophy in addressing in particular the epistemological and ethical underpinnings of that research – *philosophising about educational research*. This is the traditional role which philosophy exercises in relation to other fields of enquiry, as in philosophy of science and philosophy of history, though, in practice, epistemological considerations about the nature of knowledge claims in these areas have tended to dominate the philosophical literature, whereas in educational research I would judge that the ethical issues have been at least as prominent.

Secondly, there is the sense in which philosophising about education (the products of which are to be found for example in the pages of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education or Educational Philosophy and Theory*) itself constitutes a form of educational research – *philosophising as educational research*..

Thirdly there is the role of philosophy in the process of empirical research – *philosophising in educational research* and in particular in the context of expressly interdisciplinary projects.

In this chapter I shall consider the first of these three relationships – and provide in so doing an introduction to some of the topics dealt with in more detail in the rest of this book. I shall consider the second and third relationships in chapter three which follows.

#### PHILOSOPHISING ABOUT EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Carr observed succinctly in a paper presented at a BERA/ECER conference roundtable in September 1995:

research... always conveys a commitment to philosophical beliefs even if this is unintended and even though it remains implicit and unacknowledged... (Researchers) cannot evade the responsibility for critically examining and justifying the philosophical ideas that their enquiries incorporate. It follows that philosophical reflection and

argumentation are central features of the methods and procedures of educational research. (Carr 1995: 1)

Many researchers who would not necessarily identify themselves as philosophers are, of course, perfectly alert to these methodological issues and their philosophical underpinnings. Guba and Lincoln (1994), for example, construct their very notion of a research paradigm in terms of three areas – epistemology, ontology and methodology – of which the first two are unequivocally philosophical. The growth of qualitative research methodology in educational research circles has, for example, itself rested on epistemological challenges to: the naive empiricism and behaviourism which has been applied to social research and human interaction; to traditional notions of validity; to positivistic constructs of reality; to conventional views of the way in which inferences may be drawn between the particular and the general; and to the perceived gendering of particular research styles. In the field of ethics, the same developments have represented challenges to conventional definitions of the relationship between researcher and researched and to conventional views about the ownership of research data and who is entitled to access to it or protection from its exposure.

This area of development alone offers an enormously fertile field for philosophical engagement. My complaints have been that too few of those who might be identified as philosophers of education have actually chosen to engage with it (Bridges 1995, 1998c) and that some of those who have entered the field from an empirical research background have done less than justice to, for example, the subtle and complex history of philosophical writing in both ethics and epistemology.

I am concerned, too, that researchers who have clearly recognised the fundamental importance of the philosophical questions underlying education and educational research have not always recognised them as philosophical. Ranson, for example, in a report to the UK Economic and Social Research Council under the title 'The future of education research: learning at the centre', argued that:

The transformations of our time are altering the structure of experience and the powers and capacities needed to live in a post-modern world. The changes raise deep questions for education and for the polity in general about: what is it to be a person?... Is there such a thing as society and what is it?... What should be the nature of the polity? (Ranson 1999: 11)

While I can readily endorse the importance of the 'deep questions' which Ranson identifies, I have, too, to observe the oddity of the assumption that these questions are peculiarly the product of the post-modern world and the writer's apparent failure to observe 2,000 years of philosophical literature dedicated to precisely such questions as these.

The failure of awareness and communication is, however a problem for which the philosophical or philosophy of education community has to accept its share of the blame. Philosophers of education have been slow to acknowledge and engage with the philosophical sophistication of some of the mainstream 'research' writing, particularly perhaps, that which draws from US pragmatism and constructivism and that continental European tradition in which the Anglo Saxon boundaries between sociology, politics and philosophy are routinely transgressed. As I illustrate in

chapter three, philosophers of education can be naïve and patronising in their own assumptions about educational research. Too often, when philosophers do engage with issues to do with educational research, they do so with scant attention to the actual debates and dialogue which are going on within the educational research community itself.

I am of course not the first to have bewailed the absence of mutual recognition between the educational philosophy and educational research communities. In a 1981 response to *Philosophy of Education, the Eightieth Yearbook of the NSSE* in the United States, Rist complained of the absence of any reference in this philosophical writing to research findings which were applicable to the concerns of the authors. 'Those who toil in the vineyard of educational philosophy,' he concluded, 'are unaware of those who are working in the fields of research.' But he hastened to add that 'the absence of familiarity and utilization is not simply one way. The same can be said for those in educational research with respect to their understandings of cogent philosophical issues... The single most important conclusion I come to in reflecting on the evident isolation of the philosophical enterprise from that of the research enterprise is that we are all diminished by the lack of a viable linkage' (Rist 1981: 27). My ambition in this book is to establish some of those linkages and to draw debates which have taken place in the educational research and philosophical communities more closely together.

This collection of essays will illustrate, I hope, some of the different aspects of the educational research endeavour which, as Carr has indicated, are underpinned by contestable and contested philosophical assumptions, whether we are aware of them or not, whether we make the explicit or leave them as part of the implicit framing of our research discourse. To some extent we have to operate on the basis of undeclared or unexamined assumptions. There are psychological limits on our self questioning and certainly practical limits given that even philosophers have to mark assignments, submit to processes of audit, collect the kids and clear out the garden shed... from time to time. The unexamined life may not be worth living, but a life spent only in its own examination would be a pretty bizarre one too.

Most of this book will illustrate one kind of relationship between philosophy and educational research, ie philosophising about educational research. This is a second order activity which explores, in particular in this context<sup>5</sup>, the beliefs about the nature of educational research knowledge (and its relationship to other kinds of knowledge) and the beliefs about the right, the good and the virtuous in the practice of educational research – in short, the epistemology and ethics of educational research. The following outline of the contents and the chapters themselves will provide further illustration of this activity.

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<sup>5</sup> There is of course a much wider range of philosophical discussion about, for example, human identity, the political order and what kinds of things exist which could readily be applied here, but I have focussed on areas with which the educational research community has itself been most directly engaged.

## CHAPTER 3

# PHILOSOPHISING AS AND IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

That is all that 'philosophy', in the sense in which I am using the word, requires: it is a practice, a discipline of thought, devoted to getting clear about words and concepts and the logical implications that they carry. (Wilson 1994: 4 his underlining)

### PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

I began by distinguishing three sets of relationships between philosophy and educational research:

- *philosophising about educational research*, ie examining in particular its epistemological and ethical underpinnings;
- *philosophy as a form of educational research* in its own right paralleling historical, sociological and other academic traditions which provide a resource for educational enquiry, for example, philosophising about educational policy and practice;
- *philosophising in educational research* ie philosophy's role in and in relation to more traditional empirical research. For Wilson this has been primarily a role in 'getting clear about words and concepts and the logical implications that they carry' (Wilson 1994: 4), but I shall argue for something more substantive, and these considerations will lead me into an examination of the status of the distinction which is conventionally drawn between the empirical/scientific *a posteriori* and the necessary/philosophical *a priori*.

In this chapter I shall explore the second and third of these relationships.

### PHILOSOPHISING AS RESEARCH

There is clearly a political problem here and, I suggest, a more interesting philosophical problem about the nature of philosophy. The political problem, though not perhaps an overwhelming one, is that in many universities, the paradigm of research which is best understood and most powerful is the scientific paradigm with all its socio-cultural baggage of expensive equipment, large scale funding, international teams and half a page of collaborating authors in *Nature* as well as its more intrinsic positivistic features of data gathering, hypothesis testing and replicability. It is easy for research to become defined in terms of this paradigm in a

way which makes the work of social scientists look like a poor imitation of ‘proper’ science and that of the arts faculties including philosophy something which may well be dignified and respected as ‘scholarship’, but which is a distant remove from research *per se*.

This problem has been compounded in the UK (and perhaps elsewhere) by the requirement for the audit of research productivity and the link which is made between research productivity and university finance (see chapter nine). This puts the onus on academics to demonstrate that they are gainfully employed in *research* and to engage in their discipline in ways which generate auditable research products. This is one reason why philosophers of education have become alarmed when their discipline has appeared to be forgotten or rejected in the discourse of educational research. But they have problems too about incorporation in the culture of research audit. Martin McQuillan, head in fact of a university School of Fine Art and Cultural Studies, has put the problem rather nicely:

Thinking is not auditable. Thinking, the business of university, should be inimical to categorisation, measurement and commodification. Thought should disrupt and transform, opening up new directions in knowledge and experience. How could one audit the work of Socrates, Michelangelo, Blake, Kant or Heidegger? The moment that the articulation of thought is reclassified as ‘research’ (a ‘product’ that is auditable) then thought itself is compromised by the conditions under which it can emerge (McQuillan 2002: 15).

There are two or three alternative moves for philosophers here, which are interesting not just as defensive political moves in a particular academic economy, but for what they reveal about the characteristics of different kinds of philosophical activity:

- to accept that the term ‘research’ is appropriately attached to the scientific or (in the case of social sciences quasi scientific) paradigm indicated here and to find a different descriptor for the activities of philosophers;
- to advance a somewhat more inclusive but still restrictive definition of research which would include the evidentially based work characteristic of historical and literary scholarship and biography and hence a good deal of philosophical writing rooted in the history of ideas or, for example, the sort of philosophical biography that Monk produced of Wittgenstein (Monk 1990). This would, however, leave out most of more strictly philosophical writing;
- to advance an even wider definition of research which would encompass at least some philosophising. Stenhouse defined research as ‘systematic and sustained enquiry made public’ (Stenhouse 1980)<sup>6</sup>. Now most philosophical work could probably meet the first two criteria – ie it is

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<sup>6</sup> Peters and White employed a very similar account of the use of the term research in academic communities to refer to ‘systematic and sustained enquiry carried out by people well versed in some form of thinking in order to answer some specific type of question’ (Peters and White 1969: 2). They contrast this with a broader definition employed by Mace who in his *Psychology of Study* maintained that ‘research is, after all, just “search”, looking for answers to questions and for solutions to problems’. (Mace 1963)



systematic (in the sense of eg being rule governed) and sustained – and the fourth criterion of being ‘made public’ through eg presentation at a seminar or conference. It is interesting however to consider how far philosophical work represents an ‘enquiry’ – a condition which I think is properly attached to the nature of research.

The notion of enquiry suggests some initial puzzlement or curiosity, a question which the individual seeks to clarify and answer. Is this something we should reasonably expect to be a characteristic of philosophical research? And if so, would all or only some philosophising qualify?

I realise as I pose this question, that it is a difficult one to answer, because it supposes that one may know something at least about how a philosopher went about his or her work. In reports on scientific and social scientific enquiry we conventionally expect to find an account of and defence of the methodology employed. We know, or at least have a report of, the approach taken, the research questions which were posed and in some conventions of, for example, ethnographic research the relationship of the researcher to the research project. Some philosophical writing describes or represents a particular methodology – Socratic questioning, Cartesian doubting or linguistic analysis, for example – but a great deal more leaves it implicit or even invisible. It is certainly not a standard requirement of philosophical writing (in contrast with social science) that the author explains and defends his or her methodology. Indeed I suspect that many philosophical journal editors would probably wield a thick pen deleting such matter if an author dared to include it. Traditionally, scientific writing renders the researcher artificially invisible. Philosophical writing tends to take this a stage further and render even the research process invisible. One curious consequence is that of course we have relatively little public evidence of the way in which philosophers go about their business<sup>7</sup>: we have rather the fruits of that business.

Now the actual products of philosophical work provide a very mixed picture of the extent to which the producer was indeed engaged in an enquiry. Commonly they take the form either of a critical attack on a previous writer or an attempt to advance and defend a point of view held by the author or some combination of the two. Occasionally the author will place the question or point of curiosity in the centre, but this is by no means a requirement or expectation of philosophical writing, which in some of its more declamatory forms can come across as the product not of a humble enquirer after truth (or whatever passes as the alternative in a post-modern age) but of a somewhat arrogant holder of the truth, a knower rather than a seeker after knowledge. It is interesting, for example, to contrast the very assertive character of Wittgenstein’s philosophical writing with the agonising picture of the process of its construction which can be gleaned from biographical accounts. For post-modern scholars any text is in any case a piece of polemic, so that for Foucault, for example, the goal is ‘to incite us to listen to a different claim rather than to accept the findings of an argument... to excite in the reader the experience of discord between the social

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<sup>7</sup> It was partly this observation which prompted me to record and write my own account of the process of writing a philosophical paper – included here in chapter thirteen.