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Citation for final published version:

Baker, William and Connolly, Mark 2018. Educational research journals: a partial view from the UK. *Revista Española de Pedagogía* 76 (271) , pp. 437-448. 10.22550/REP76-3-2018-02

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22550/REP76-3-2018-02>

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Educational research journals: a partial view from the UK

Dr William Baker and Dr Mark Connolly

Abstract

This paper is about educational research journals in general and the *British Educational Research Journal* in particular. In this paper, we discuss some of the aims of educational research journals and several the challenges facing them; we also identify various ways in which journals could consider doing things differently. Two issues are of particular significance. The first is about the accessibility of educational research in an era of rapid technological change and the rise of Open Access publication models. The second is to do with the mission of education journals in relation to long-standing and pervasive educational inequalities.

Introduction

This paper is about educational research journals. It says something about what they are for, what they do, and how they might be better. Let's begin with some of the goals education researchers might be committed to: generating knowledge about education and learning; supporting the work of teachers and educators who go into the classroom every day to teach our children; providing the highest quality evidence to policy-makers to inform public policy; tackling educational inequalities and the injustices associated with them. If we are committed to some, all, or any of these goals, we should consider the extent to which educational research journals help to realize them. A worry for many is that in relation to such goals, existing journal publishing models, that have predominated for so long, could be significantly improved.

Thankfully in recent years, educational research journals and organizations have explored new ways of communicating and connecting with their various publics, particularly in light of rapid technological change - specifically the growth of electronic publishing and social media platforms. Such changes have raised important questions for journals. What are they for? Who are they for? How can we make research more accessible? Reflecting on the mission of journals is an important and fitting way to celebrate an important milestone in the history of *Revista Española de Pedagogía*: its 75th year anniversary. Given how easy it is to slip into parochialism, it's particularly valuable to be able to place these issues in comparative perspective.¹

We begin this paper by providing some background to *British Educational Research Journal* (hereafter BERJ) and its connection to the British Educational Research Association; their histories are intimately related, as are their missions. Highlighting this relationship brings into focus how journals are not simply a means of sharing research and knowledge; they

¹ A few points of clarification are in order before we go any further. We were invited to write this article as co-editors of the *British Educational Research Journal* (BERJ). BERJ is the flagship of the British Educational Research Association. We co-edited the journal along with colleagues at Cardiff University for five years. As of early 2018 we are now the ex-editors¹. Our views in this paper are our own, and don't reflect either this views of BERA or BERJ.

play an important role in helping to define the contours of a discipline and researchers' own disciplinary identities. BERJ has played a key role in the *project* of establishing educational research a distinctive discipline in the UK. It's therefore important to consider the role of journals in the contentious political life of academic disciplines.

We then provide a descriptive overview of BERJ: acceptance rates, the countries papers are submitted from, the methodologies employed and so on. Finally, we discuss some of the general challenges and issues facing education research journals. Two strike us as particularly important. One is how research can be most effectively shared and disseminated. Many scholars in the field rightly worry that research does not find itself in the public domain quickly enough and that existing publication models create unnecessary barriers and bottlenecks in accessing research. The rapid pace of technological change has opened up possibilities for improving this state of affairs and therefore presents challenges for existing publication models.

The second issue we discuss is the persistence of educational inequalities that scar individual, and our collective, lives. Against this backdrop, how should we think about the mission and focus of educational research journals? At various points, we outline ways in which education journals could do things differently – after all, despite some important and welcome changes, the basic structure of academic publication remains in place. It is not possible in such a short article to cover all the issues relating to the mission of educational research journals and the implications they have for the future of educational research. We work in broad brushstrokes and no doubt leave out relevant details and neglect topics deserving consideration.

Background to the journal

The first copy of the *British Educational Research Journal* was published in April 1978. The lead article was by the important educationalist and historian of education Brian Simon - this was in fact his Presidential Address from the fourth BERA Conference and was entitled '*Education research: Which way?*' (Simon, 1978). The paper discusses both critiques of education research and key issues facing the field. Importantly, the question posed by Simon is one that scholars and educators have regularly, and rather anxiously, returned to over the years. Expressions of concern and ruminations about research quality, disciplinary identity, methodological divisions, what education research is, and the general fate of field are persistent topics for reflection and often find expression in the pages of BERJ (see also Furlong 2013). Indeed, the new BERJ editorial team has made it clear that they 'hope to lead a journal that will be recognised as a reflection *on* as well *as* of the field of educational research' (Aldridge et al, 2018: p.2). What should we make of this? Clearly, such critical self-reflection seems important for the long-term health of any discipline and is an intellectual virtue that should be cultivated. However, it may also suggest something more disconcerting about education research - that it is internally fractured and lacks a shared sense of purpose about its basic goals and furthermore, that education research often has to defend itself from external critique, most notably from politicians.

As we've already mentioned, BERJ is the flagship publication of BERA. BERA itself was founded in 1974 and in the decades that followed has established itself as the leading educational research association in the UK. Its core goals are to support high quality research and foster engagement with it. It has a large membership, holds an annual conference, and supports the work of thirty-three 'Special Interest Groups' focusing on a range of critical educational issues. In its own words, BERA seeks to be the 'home of all educational researchers in the UK' and 'welcomes members from a range of disciplinary background, theoretical orientations, methodological approaches, sectoral interests and institutional affiliations'. A key way in which BERA aims to advance the quality of education research is through its varied peer reviewed journals. In addition to BERJ, BERA also publishes the *British Journal of Educational Technology* (BJET), *The Curriculum Journal* and *Review of Education* (RoE). In recent years, BERA has also supported the creation of the *BERA Blog* and *Research Intelligence*. Academic publishing and particularly the publication of journals is central to the association's mission of promoting educational research in the UK and internationally.

Publications such as BERJ are not only important in disseminating knowledge - they play a central role in creating and sustaining education research as a distinctive discipline. It is for this reason that there is often fierce debate, and expressions of disquiet, about what does and does not get published in journals. Academic journals confer status and legitimacy on research – they come to define what counts as educational research and what questions are taken to be worth asking. This disciplinary-making boundary work is particularly important for educational research in the UK; this is because it has traditionally lacked a strong disciplinary identity and been weakly institutionalized within the university system. One reason for this relative insecurity has been that Education Departments have historically focused on the professional training of teachers. Although education may now be more firmly integrated into the university project, worries about its relative strength, status, and identity are still commonly heard. Past president of BERA John Furlong recently remarked:

If education as a field of study is therefore now fully integrated into the university system, then, like the system as a whole, it urgently needs to find a voice, it needs to set out a vision for itself, it needs to state what its purpose or purposes should be within a university in the modern world (Furlong, 2013: p.5).

BERA and BERJ are no doubt central to this task and have over many years, and with varying degrees of success, helped to carve out institutional and intellectual spaces for educational research to emerge as a distinctive discipline. One expression of this is the increasing number of 'Educational Research' methods books aimed at students, researcher and practitioners (e.g. Wyse et al., 2017). Whilst in many ways this might be read as a success story, the rise of education as a discipline in its own right raises important questions about its relationship to other disciplines, most notably sociology, history, and philosophy, that have provided researchers with a rich set of methodological and theoretical resources to draw upon.

BERJ today

Where is BERJ today as a journal? It is firmly established as an internationally leading, peer-reviewed journal that is a focal point for the publication of educational research throughout the world. The journal is published bi-monthly with between 8-10 articles published in each issue. Like many generalist journals it seeks to publish articles that appeal to as wide an audience as possible whilst still satisfying specialists in a given area. The journal is methodologically pluralist in both spirit and content. It publishes case studies, quantitative work drawing on surveys and administrative data, and also empirical work using the ubiquitous semi-structured interview; the journal is also open to work grounded in various theoretical traditions. The journal rarely has ‘Special Issues’ on a given topic and does not currently publish book reviews.

For the last 6 years, the acceptance rate at BERJ has been roughly between 10-15% of all submitted articles.

Table 1. British Educational Research Journal Acceptance rates

	2010- 2011	2011- 2012	2012- 2013	2013- 2014	2014- 2015	2016- 2017
Submitted	406	396	325	336	377	372
Rejected	347	316	269	261	316	286
Accepted	51	57	40	42	40	377
Acceptance rate	12.8%	15.3%	12.9%	13.9%	11.2%	11.5%

(excluding book reviews, October to October)

Over the last two-three years acceptance rates have marginally declined. Such acceptance rates put it in the top tier of journals with regard to selectivity but with probably higher acceptance rates than other leading American publications (e.g. *Educational Researcher* and *American Educational Research Journal*). BERJ is therefore highly rather than hyper selective. By way of comparison, in other disciplines such as philosophy the acceptance rate at ‘top-tier’ generalist journals such as *The Philosophical Review* is below 5%. As a leading journal in the field BERJ has very high levels of submission – around 300-350 per year. Insert here number of volume per year

In recent years ‘Impact Factors’, for good or ill, have become a metric that is increasingly used to assess the status and success of academic journals. As a consequence, they are likely to be considered as part of the overall strategies and decision making of editorial teams. In 2016 the impact factor of the journal was 1.214. In 2017 this increased significantly to 1.696. This makes BERJ the highest-ranking non-specialist educational research journal in the UK. Despite such recent rises, there are still a high number of publications with low or no citations: around 50-60% of papers published in BERJ are not cited after two years of being published. To give a further sense of comparison BERJ’s Impact Factor is lower than that of the more specialist journal the *British Journal of Educational Technology* (IF 2.729 in 2017).

BERJ's readership and audience is international. This is reflected in the geographic spread of submissions. Table 2 summarizes the 'top twelve' submitting countries. Unsurprisingly, the UK accounts for the largest proportion of submissions and there is a skew to the Anglophone world. However, given the large volumes of educational research produced in the United States, it might be surprising that BERJ receives fewer submissions from scholars there. One plausible explanation is that for American scholars publishing in such journals carries with it substantially less prestige than publishing in their nationally focused, generalist journals (e.g. *Educational Researcher*).

Table 2: Number of manuscripts submitted by 'top 12' countries 2015-16

Country	Number	%
United Kingdom	169	45.6
Australia	23	6.2
Netherlands	10	2.7
Spain	10	2.7
United States of America	10	2.7
Belgium	10	2.7
Israel	9	2.4
Hong Kong	8	2.2
India	8	2.2
Turkey	8	2.2
China	7	1.9
Pakistan	7	1.9

Educational research in the UK and Australia has historically been closely connected and probably accounts for its position in second place. Table 2 also attests to the large range of countries that submit to BERJ that reflects the increasing globalisation of scholarship. China, Spain and India only entered the top-twelve recently and the relatively small numbers means that the lower rankings are likely to be volatile. It is also important to note that, submissions do not translate into acceptances. Submission from Anglophone and European countries are more likely to be accepted than submissions from elsewhere.

With regard to the disciplinary and methodological orientation of papers we would note two things. We mentioned above that a consequence of educational research developing a firmer sense of disciplinary identity might be that research in the field is less strongly grounded in the historically important disciplines of sociology, philosophy, history, and psychology. Whilst many BERJ papers (and many of the best papers!) do remain grounded in these disciplines, it seems plausible that discipline specific work is increasingly being submitted to more specialist journals. The second point is about methodology. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of quantitative papers published in the journal. Many of these papers make use of the world-renowned birth cohort studies or large scale administrative data that are ideal for studying educational inequality and social mobility. Whether this is taken to a good thing will likely depend on one's intellectual commitments and beliefs about nature of social science. We suggest that this increase, rather than reflecting any particularly strong view of the recent editorial team, is likely to

reflect a general growth in quantitative work in education that is partly the result of increased funding being available for this kind of work.

BERJ publishes many highly influential and extensively cited papers. The three most highly cited papers reflect some of the core concerns of the field and deal with critical educational and social issues: namely, educational inequality, the formation of teacher and student identities, and the consequences of technology for education and learning. Reay et al's (2010) seminal paper explores the interconnections between social class, students' identities and their experiences of higher education against a backdrop of stark educational inequalities and a highly stratified higher education system in the UK. The importance of technological change for education is reflected in Helsper and Eynon's (2013) influential paper; they challenge the common assumption that the term 'digital natives', at least in its simplistic forms, adequately captures intergenerational differences in how technology is used and experienced. Day et al. (2010) critically evaluate the various ways in which research has studied the formation of and influences on teacher professional and personal identities.

Key issues and challenges facing educational research journals

We now discuss two major challenges facing education research journals. The first issue is to do with the accessibility, or lack of it, to educational research published in journals. More broadly, this issue relates to the economics of publishing in an era of rapid technological change and, most notably, the possibility of Open Access publishing. A common complaint is that too much publicly funded research sits for too long behind expensive paywalls and that it should be more widely available. How could we improve this state of affairs? A first step is to identify potential barriers to change. To take one example, academic research organizations are often heavily reliant on the revenues generated by publications in paywalled journals and a worry is that this has consequences for the likelihood of alternative publishing models being pursued and embraced. In 2015, Universities UK reported that:

280 learned societies in the UK publish scholarly journals and conference proceedings, and of their total revenues of around £1.2 billion, some £318 million (26%) derives from publishing (UUK, 2015: p.3)

As with most learned societies, BERA negotiates a publishing deal for its journals with one of the large publishing corporations which dominate the academic publishing field: at present the contract for publishing BERJ is held by one of these conglomerates - Wiley-Blackwell. Academic publishing - particularly the publication of journals - is not only central to the association's mission of promoting educational research but is important to its revenue generation.

Why does this matter? On the one hand, it helps to fund a broad range of important activities that can support education research. Of course, learned societies have an important role to play in supporting dialogue and communication between members of their community. Such network sustaining functions have historically been a core reason for members to join research organizations. On the other hand, it creates an incentive for

organisations, and their associated journals, to maintain the broad status quo of keeping a great deal of research behind paywalls and resisting or mitigating changes to existing publication models.

Advocates of Open Access publishing models rightly point out the downside to the status quo: it is both costly and restrictive. It is costly in the sense that libraries and universities have to pay large amounts of money to for-profit publishers to access publicly funded research. It is restrictive in the obvious sense that scholarship in paywalled journals is permanently or temporarily restricted to those with the relevant access. Such restrictions are worrisome for those who think that educational research has an important role to play in fostering democratic debate about education and should therefore be as widely available as possible. In recent years, governments and research organisations in the UK have used such arguments to support (and enforce) the transition to Open Access publishing; this has translated into increasing numbers of articles becoming openly accessible. In 2016, 37% of U.K authored articles were open access at the point of publication and 54% were available within twelve months (UUK, 2017). However, this means that a large amount of articles still sit behind publisher paywalls.

Supporters of Open Access and alternative publishing models also argue that existing technology means that journals, and academic publishing more generally, can operate for a fraction of its current costs, maintain the integrity of the peer review process, and make research much more widely accessible. For example, one such mechanism for making research more easily available, and one we think should be embraced, is preprint repositories such as arXiv and more recently SocArXiv that focuses on the social sciences. Some journals make *not* posting papers on such sites as a precondition for being beginning the peer-review process or publication. As Sullivan (2018) has recently argued:

Working papers allow authors to get early feedback on their work from their peers.

They also allow us to share our findings with both academic and wider audiences more quickly.

As she also points, out the use of preprint repositories is common in a range of other academic fields. This suggests there is no fundamental reason that they should not be adopted in education research. We hope the field moves in this direction. The challenge for educational research journals and organisations is deciding whether to welcome such changes or challenges to the status quo or see them as something to be largely defended against. This may well involve trade-offs being made between the types of activities that organisations support (if significant revenue is generated through journal publications), and supporting publication models that make scholarship as open and widely available as possible. Any consideration of such trade-offs should involve asking a question that motivated this symposium: what are journals for? And relatedly, who are they for?

Education, inequality and journals

We want to end the paper on a slightly more provocative note by discussing a specific challenge for educational research in general and educational research journals in particular. It relates to perhaps the defining empirical and normative concern for the field - educational inequality – and the sorts of conversation we have, and do not have, about

it. Clearly, educational research has played a vital role in mapping and explaining the extent of educational inequality. For example, we know that educational attainment gaps between socio-economic groups remains large and strikingly persistent despite decades of reform, policies and interventions. However, in some ways our collective discussion about education inequality in educational research journals is often strikingly constrained. The narrowness of this conversation is partly attributable to how social scientific research gets funded and the associated demands of policy makers for policy-relevant research. The challenge for educational research journals is how they can foster debate about the sorts of social, economic and institutional reforms that would in reality be necessary to reduce educational and economic inequality

We are taking our cue from a recent article by the sociologist Michelle Jackson. In it, she outlines how scholarly discussion about social stratification, and particularly poverty and inequalities in educational attainment, has become increasingly circumscribed. Debate has come to be dominated by what she calls ‘Conversation One’. Conversation One is ‘A precisely focused, science-based conversation that identifies social problems and offers specific, evidence-informed solutions’ (Jackson, 2017: p.33). The predominance of this approach can be explained by:

An increasing scientism within social science disciplines alongside an emphasis on evidence-informed policy generates pressure to catalog precise mechanisms that address small parts of the puzzle of inequality (ibid: p.34).

Whilst recognizing that this approach has depended our understanding of the causes and consequences of both poverty and educational inequality, Jackson also cautions that such an approach tends to focus on what can be achieved within existing institutional and economic frameworks. It tends not acknowledge the scale of social and economic changes likely to be necessary to meaningfully reduce poverty and educational inequality. Furthermore, the dominance of Conversation One often means that ‘The simple, profound, crushing impact of poverty and inequality on educational attainment or on life chances more generally is missed (ibid: p.34)’. It may also help to sustain the potentially pernicious view that the problem of educational inequality is, in important ways, largely epistemic rather than political in nature. That is, the problem of educational inequality regularly gets framed as resulting from a lack of knowledge about the processes and mechanisms that generate it and how it can be tackled.

Jackson argues for the importance of expanding the terms of the debate to include ‘Conversation Two’. Conversation Two is much bolder and radical: it focuses on the nature and scale of change likely to be necessary to disrupt and reduce inequality. It highlights the need for ‘A conversation rooted in what might be rather than merely what is (ibid: p.35).’

Jackson argues that such an approach:

...insists that in addition to any discussion about expedient, small-scale interventions, we have a wider discussion about where poverty comes from and what types of larger-scale changes might be needed to eradicate it (ibid: 34).

Although in this passage she mentions poverty, her arguments are equally applied to educational inequality. What she advocates is a mixture of identifying pragmatic strategies to ameliorate existing social problems whilst being clear-eyed and vocal about the fact that

without far reaching social, economic and political change, educational inequality and poverty are not going anywhere.

Our view is that Jackson's view is largely correct and is of direct relevance to the mission of educational research journals and educational research as a field. We should be asking ourselves, when it comes to educational inequality in all its forms, do academic journals such as BERJ provide the necessary space for Conversation Two to take place? It's hard to argue that many prominent educational research journals currently do so. One response here might be to argue that journals are, to borrow a phrase, more of a camera than an engine – they simply reflect rather drive changes in the field (Mackenzie, 2006). There may be some truth to this and it is important to recognize the sorts of social science likely to achieve funding and prominence in the current policy climate. However, this argument lets us off the hook too easily and we argue that journals have a key role to play in shaping the terms of this debate. To take an example of a journal that responded to this issue, the *Journal of Education Policy* organized a special issue that asked, 'What would a 'socially just education system look like?' (Francis and Mills, 2012) and a further related question is 'How do we get there?' When thinking about their mission, academic journals should consider the extent to which they create space for these questions.

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