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What works? Academic integrity and the research-policy relationship

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Abstract

In this paper, we consider the intensifying pressures on critical research and academic integrity in a research policy context that has come to be increasingly dominated by an instrumentalist mind-set. Using sensitising resources drawn from Geoff Whitty's critique of the 'what works' agenda, we reflect on the current conditions of academic labour and some of the key issues and dilemmas they pose for critical researchers in the sociology of education and beyond. In particular, we underline the trend for 'what works' agendas to become constitutive of academic identities and practices, including at micro-levels, such that the option of 'standing outside' them is shifting from being merely personally taxing to being institutionally disallowed. In addition to highlighting the dilemmas this creates for critical researchers and the threat this poses to expansive and democratic approaches to education, the paper emphasises the centrality of relationship-forming in understanding and underpinning academic integrity.

Lying behind this paper is a concern about the possibility of, and what is entailed by, being a critical education researcher in a ‘what works’ climate. We imagine this is an extremely familiar concern to very many of our colleagues. More specifically we wish to consider the challenge of managing academic integrity whilst being in the ‘business of delivering’ as an academic. We were prompted to address these issues recently because of the sad death of our colleague, Geoff Whitty and the resulting invitations to reflect on and celebrate his work, and to contribute to a Festschrift for him.

In his British Educational Research Association (BERA) presidential address of 2005, Whitty expressed concerns about the then UK government’s ‘what works’ agenda and associated policy initiatives that were seeking to instrumentalise education research, constructing it, as he was later to put it, as ‘the handmaiden’ of education policy and practice (Whitty 2016, 2). In this paper, we want to revisit these concerns by considering the intensifying pressures on critical research and academic integrity in a research policy context that continues to be dominated by an instrumentalist mind-set. We will begin by summarising the key planks of Whitty’s critique of the ‘what works’ agenda, and then go on to use these as sensitising resources through which to reflect on the current conditions of academic labour and some of the key issues and dilemmas they pose for critical researchers in the sociology of education and beyond. In particular, we wish to underline the trend for ‘what works’ agendas to become constitutive of academic identities and practices, including at micro-levels, such that the option of ‘standing outside’ them is shifting from being merely personally taxing to being institutionally disallowed. In addition to highlighting the dilemmas this creates for critical researchers and the threat this poses to expansive and democratic approaches to education, we will emphasise the centrality of relationship-forming in understanding and underpinning academic integrity.

Whitty's critique of 'what works'

The idea, which has become popular amongst policymakers around the world over recent decades, that it is the primary role of researchers to find out and disseminate 'what works' is based on an engineering model of the research-policy relationship which assumes both that research can tell us definitively what works and that there is a direct and linear relationship between research and policy. This model of the research-policy relationship also tends to construct a credibility hierarchy of research methods in which experimental and quantitative traditions of research (randomised control trials [RCTs], large scale surveys etc.) are valorised over qualitative and narrative ones (Hammersley 2001). The promotion of the 'what works' agenda was at the time of Whitty's BERA address, and continues to be, accompanied by a more instrumental government approach to the funding of education research, where research funds are tied more closely to government priorities. Both of these developments are also linked to the growth of the impact agenda, which calls for publicly funded research to be oriented towards achieving economic and/or social benefit. As with 'what works', impact narratives tend to construct a linear, unmediated relationship between research and policy.

In his BERA address (published in the British Educational Research Journal in 2006 and revised and updated – with Emma Wisby - in his 2016 book, *Research and Policy in Education* [Whitty 2006, 2016]), Whitty warned of the precarious positioning of critical research in this new instrumentalist landscape and underlined the importance of researchers, as a community and as individuals, standing firm against Ministers' and others' attempts 'to define our field' (2006, 162). Citing the evaluation scholar and practitioner, Carol Weiss, he challenged the engineering model, arguing for a more democratic and critical construction of the research-policy relationship in which research is used to help 'people reconsider issues,

... think differently, ... re-conceptualise what the problem is and how prevalent it is, ... discard some old assumptions [and] puncture... myths' (Weiss 1991, cited in Whitty 2006, 171). This questioning of prevailing assumptions, Whitty argued, should include the consideration of 'such questions as whether an activity is a worthwhile endeavour in the first place and what constitutes socially-just schooling' (Whitty 2006, 162, citing Gale & Densmore 2003).

As a pragmatist, Whitty accepted that if researchers want to influence policy then they sometimes need to work 'with the Government's agenda', but, he asserted, this should 'not [be] at the expense of our values as researchers' (2006, 170). Whitty also recognised that sometimes the engineering paradigm can be used in strategic ways by critical researchers to 'further progressive and emancipatory ends' whilst pointing out that any 'concessions' regarding the value of the engineering model:

should not be allowed to undermine the credibility of research that seeks to work against or to disrupt the engineering paradigm, or inform policy and practice in more subtle and modest ways, by feeding into public debate and the discursive milieu within which policy makers operate. (Whitty 2006, 170)

Here Whitty was arguing for a more democratic and critical model of the research policy relationship, one that foregrounds more grassroots forms of engagement and that attempts

to influence public debate rather than seek privileged access to policy ... engaging the public in the circumstances of their lives and the possibilities of changing those circumstances. This is a much richer and more potentially transformative idea than that encapsulated by instrumental notions of impact ... (Whitty 2016, 17)

Whitty's work illuminates the parallels and interactions between debates about schooling policies and the agendas of education research. Critical education researchers, not least policy sociologists, have to navigate challenges at both these levels; that is, they need to decide both how to position themselves in relation to dominant policy settlements and at the same time how to manage the conditions of academic work that shape their immediate practice. In what follows, we will consider the threat to the integrity of critical scholarship posed by an ideology and set of practices that have becoming increasingly influential in education in recent years, for which we will use the shorthand, 'deliverology'. As we proceed we will also have in mind an ideal-type distinction between two models of the research-policy relationship, as summarised in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 near here]

'Deliverology' is at the core of a new policy common-sense propagated through a global movement of educational reform (Sahlberg 2011; Gewirtz et al. 2019). It encompasses ideas described elsewhere using the language of neoliberalisation, corporatisation, economisation, productivism and performativity. All of these ideas have different emphases but they have in common the basic contention that public services are best managed through technicist and competitive processes of regulation in which the hoped-for ends of greater efficiency and productivity justify the means. There are obvious affinities between the deliverology agenda for education and the 'what works' agenda for academic research. As one of us has written elsewhere (Gewirtz 2003, 5), both are 'underpinned by a technicist orientation where policymaking is conceived of as a technical matter of putting into place mechanisms that are effective in producing outcomes the value of which is not viewed as contestable'. And they

are both informed by a reductionist ‘accounting logic’ (Broadbent & Laughlin 2013) which only values what can be measured.

Although the ‘what works’ agenda is not hegemonic in the education research policy context in the UK, it has come to have strong resonances even in policy circles that are more liberal. For example, a recent Royal Society/ British Academy (2018) report, *Harnessing Education Research*, celebrates the value of both theoretical and blue skies research and is therefore phrased in ways that transcend narrow technicism; yet it nonetheless constructs the research-policy challenge as one of closing the gap between ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ and as essentially about developing evidence-based solutions to policy and practice questions about the improvement of educational outcomes. In this regard, it is arguably more an extension of the ‘hand-maiden’ construction of education research than a replacement of it.

Accommodation or resistance? Dilemmas for critical researchers

For critical education researchers, a central day-to-day challenge is how to engage with deliverology. For example, how far should they accommodate themselves to the performance measurement regimes that dominate the school sector? For most critical and progressive educators, deliverology represents a serious set of problems because it has a tendency to reduce education to the production of ‘results’ at the risk of dehumanising teaching and learning, to reinforce narrow conceptions of what matters in education, to generate competition between educational institutions, between teachers and between students, and to reproduce and exacerbate class-based and racialised inequalities in treatment and esteem (see, for example, Ravitch 2011; Polesel, Rice and Dulfer 2014; Pinto 2016; Stuart Wells 2019). To the extent that critical researchers accommodate themselves to performance measures, they risk endorsing and amplifying the basic idea that quantitative measurement and the

publication of quantitative measures is a valid and effective means of incentivising school improvement. On the other hand, critical researchers can be motivated to engage with policy orthodoxies because they see them as providing opportunities to pursue social justice ends, such as the redistribution of ‘academic capital’ (see, for example, Francis et al. 2017). This poses a dilemma for those researchers who wish to encourage refinements of performance measures that they see as more compatible with the pursuit of social justice. The risk for such researchers is that exercising their ameliorative instincts comes at the cost of blunting the full potential of their critical resources. Here, as ever, it is difficult to clearly separate out even one’s own currents of motivation, especially in a climate where being critical is not just anti-common sense but, as a result, risks being less widely valued and less generously funded.

One example of a possible accommodation faces researchers contemplating applying for funding from the UK-based Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Sutton Trust, a charitable partnership officially designated as the ‘What Works Centre for Education’.¹

[Figure 2 near here]

Supported by £125 million of government funding, this partnership is dedicated to generating ‘high quality evidence’ that demonstrates and supports the implementation of ‘what works’ with regard to ‘breaking the link between family income and educational achievement’ (EEF 2016). Subscribing to the credibility hierarchy of research methods associated with the engineering model of the research-policy relationship discussed above, the partnership uses large-scale RCTs that purport to demonstrate which educational interventions are most effective in reducing the social-class attainment gap as measured by success in national tests. The results are disseminated in the form of a ‘toolkit’ that enables ‘at a glance’ comparisons

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¹ What Works Centres use a technicist data-centric conception of the research-policy relationship, as summarised in Figure 2.

of the cost, evidence strength, and months of learning gained that are deemed to be associated with different kinds of educational interventions. (For an example, see Figure 3.)

[Figure 3 near here]

The association between positivistic methods and the pursuit of progressive ends has a long history, notably including Ann Oakley's (2000) robust defence of RCTs and quantitative methods as providing more credible and democratic knowledge for the promotion of women's interests than can be generated by qualitative methods. Such experimental and quantitative approaches do arguably have the potential to ameliorate the worst effects of instrumentalist policies. More generally, it is important to acknowledge that the appeal of broadly positivistic methods is not illusory. The capacity to identify and elucidate causal mechanisms which can then be 'turned around' to produce desired changes in the world has produced many benefits in fields such as medicine and engineering and, in principle, has at least some of the same potential relevance and value in education. The problem from a critical research perspective, however, is that much education research in this tradition, which coalesces around recognising the advantages of quantifiable measures of educational success, is ultimately complicit in reinforcing and reproducing the new taken-for-granted policy common-sense that revolves around an instrumentalist, deliverology mind-set and an engineering model of the research-policy relationship.

If critical researchers are to guard against compromising their academic integrity when accommodating to aspects of a 'what works' model, it is imperative that they do not get sucked into this new policy common-sense, but rather that they maintain a critical attitude and find ways of thinking and talking otherwise. As Helen Colley (2014) has argued, 'education researchers need not only to resist being co-opted by narrow research agendas

driven by narrow definitions of “impact”, but to struggle actively against that outcome’. This is not easy in current conditions which pose various challenges for critical researchers. Not least these conditions make it harder for critical researchers to use the kinds of approaches and methods that are better suited to dislodging an engineering construction of the research-policy relationship and that are more aligned with a democratic and critical model (see Figure 1). In what follows, we want to say something about these conditions and the challenges they pose. But first we will briefly illustrate the kinds of critical approaches and methods that we would suggest are under threat by using the example of some of our own recent research (Gewirtz & Cribb 2020) – not because we believe it is necessarily an especially good example of the genre, but rather because it is close to hand and, in particular, because it was written for the Festschrift mentioned at the start of this paper.

In the Festschrift contribution, we use a combination of lived experience, qualitative data, and sources from theology and the critical theory and critical pedagogy literatures to expose and illuminate how a performance measurement regime that looks entirely rational and plausible in the abstract can have substantially negative emotional and social effects. This work embraces kinds of knowledge and relationships that contrast markedly from the kinds of knowledge and relationships implicated, for example, in the EEF research, cited above. The knowledge we draw on comprises: a story told to us by one of our doctoral students, Louise Ceska (2018), who is also a secondary school headteacher, about the kinds of teaching she is no longer able to do under the reign of deliverology; qualitative data and insights from teachers who participated in an empirical research project funded by the National Union of Teachers (Neumann et al. 2016); Martin Buber’s (1970) theorisation of human relationships; ideas from Nancy Fraser’s (1998) work on social justice; and bell hooks’ (1994) *Teaching to Transgress*. This combination of narrative and critical-theoretical resources is used to convey a construction of teaching that is being lost as a result of the intensification of deliverology

discourses and practices. Specifically, we argue against the instrumentalising and datafication of people and the related tendency to substitute the cultivation of human relationships with the production of measurable outcomes:

Encountering other people, at least in some of their richness, by contrast, involves a large repertoire of possible social relations. For Buber (1970), authentic human encounter is precisely not about instrumentalising people; relationships and community are ends in themselves. In an educational context, for example, this means that although we should not treat encounters as means to ‘learning outcomes’, they can provide the conditions for the most profound and expansive forms of learning. (Gewirtz & Cribb 2020, 225)

We also attempt to show how, in the new ‘transactional’ school, space for the exercise of artistic, social, and political creativity is being compromised making ‘it much more difficult for teachers to direct their attention towards larger debates about the nature and purposes of education, the contribution of education to social life and the political and economic organisation of education, all of which should be central to any occupational model of professionalism’ (ibid, 226).

In contrast to the EEF research discussed above, this work attempts to valorise diverse forms of knowledge, including knowledge derived from experience. Whilst this, we believe, is entirely appropriate for the task at hand – to critique the new policy common-sense - we are in many respects working against the grain of the current research policy landscape that is much more conducive to work that sits within, or accommodates itself to, the engineering paradigm. This kind of work is arguably against the grain in another sense too, because it arises from and embraces different kinds of relationships as well as different kinds of

knowledge. Specifically, it has involved actively engaging with and listening to students, colleagues and the voices of teachers on the frontline. Furthermore, these different kinds of relationships were grounded in and made possible by the specificities of the particular university space in which the research was carried out – that is a research group with a democratic and critical ethos and a strong interest in equality and social justice, which is dedicated to working collaboratively with its students and other constituencies and has a particular history of grassroots engagement with frontline professionals and their representative organisations. However, as we will indicate in the next section, such spaces are increasingly difficult to sustain, let alone create from scratch, under current conditions of academic labour.

This is just one indicative illustration of work that reflects a more democratic and critical conceptualisation of the research-policy relationship; an approach that reflects a very different and much more expansive conception of who constitutes a legitimate agent in the construction of policy than that reflected in the engineering paradigm. That is, rather than seeing policy as the exclusive preserve of government policymakers, it is seen as ‘something that is continually being made and recreated by multiple agents at every level of practice’. In parallel, it does not see research as the ‘sole preserve of professional researchers [but] as a practice which can and should be undertaken by others’ (Gewirtz 2003, 8).

The contrast we have drawn between different sets of research orientation and relationships in this section broadly corresponds with the two ideal types of the research-policy relationship summarised in Figure 1. Up to now we have treated the dilemmas of accommodation and resistance as largely about achieving the right kind of balance between these two ideal types, and specifically the degree to which sociologists of education and allied critical researchers work with or against the grain of deliverology. In the next section, we wish to open up this problematic further and indicate how the current conditions of

academic work mean that such dilemmas have rapidly mushroomed and reach into every facet of almost every decision and working relationship.

Three threats to critical research posed by contemporary research conditions

In this final section of the paper we want to draw attention to three aspects of contemporary research conditions that generate dilemmas for critical researchers. These three aspects – or threats – relate, in summary, to metrification, the impact agenda and an associated instrumentalisation of relationships. We are suggesting that these threats make it harder for critical researchers to maintain their academic integrity, understood both as ‘thinking and talking otherwise’ and as forming particular kinds of relationships and alliances with a diverse range of policy actors. These include those working at the frontline of contemporary education policy developments, as students, teachers, union activists or members of other kinds of grassroots political and social movements, as well as more powerful policy actors, such as government ministers and their advisors, parliamentarians and the like.

Threat 1

First, the instrumentalising trends summarised in the first section of this paper mean that what is valued in education research is itself increasingly subject to technologies of deliverology and associated performance measures and metrics. Hence, critical researchers are themselves working in institutions that are constituted by the same logic that operates in schools and that threatens to distort their work in ways similar to those in which school teachers’ work is being distorted. This logic and its distorting effects has been brilliantly summarised by the Canadian scholars, Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber, in their book, the *Slow Professor*. There they write of how, in the corporatised university, the expectation for research to be

‘competitive, ground-breaking, cutting-edge, relatable, applicable, impactful, transferable, research-cluster grant-winning, profit-generating, and easily packaged for media coverage ... has infiltrated the ways in which all of us, across the disciplines, conduct our research and the way we think about research’. ‘The push towards the easily quantifiable and marketable’, they continue, ‘rushes us into “findings” and is at odds with the spirit of open enquiry and social critique’ (Berg and Seeber 2016, 14). With Berg and Seeber, we would suggest that there is something about being caught up in an instrumentalist, productivist logic - in which we are under continual pressure to demonstrate findings that can create tangible and quantifiable impacts within compressed time frames - that makes it harder for us to do the kind of slow, contemplative scholarship that would enable us to stand back and question the frameworks within which we are working.

In the UK and many other countries, one of the factors circumscribing the relevant time frames – i.e. the ‘research excellence’ assessment period cycles – also, of course, has many other substantial constitutive effects on academic identities and practices. In the UK, each such cycle has produced an ever-deepening set of sector-wide and intra-psychic accommodations including the gradual routinisation and hardening of ‘research excellence-related facts’ – such as categorisations of the quality of publications made by colleagues in their host institutions. These ‘facts’ are at the same time (i) highly salient, even defining, ‘facts’ about colleagues’ academic identity and value, (ii) well-understood to be at best unreliable, but also (iii) essentially (for all practical purposes) non-negotiable. The same period has unsurprisingly seen an associated set of adjustments to academic ‘common sense’, for example, about how to frame research such that its originality is foregrounded, or about what signifiers of ‘rigour’ need to be included in methodologies. Not very long ago it was possible to regard these kinds of audit frameworks as curious ‘add-ons’ to academic life, occupying a significant but parallel shadow presence in higher education. Now one has to

self-consciously embrace a quixotic temperament to see them in these terms, and only the most established scholars can really afford to do that.

The question here is not simply what critical researchers can do to ‘survive’ the immediate application of deliverology to their own working and scholarly lives, but how they can best comport themselves when they are invited to be, or perhaps required to be, instruments of deliverology with respect to their departmental or more distant colleagues. There is no obvious way through the resulting dilemmas. On the surface, it seems that critical scholars might be able to keep ‘clean hands’ by resisting any participation in the instrumentalising and datafying processes of deliverology. But, even assuming that was feasible, it is by no means clear that this would be the optimum way of supporting one’s colleagues’ personal or academic interests. The alternative, for example, might simply be that other much less sympathetic colleagues assess the value of the work of critical researchers in the sociology of education and allied disciplines resulting in such work being discounted and relevant units closed down. However – in addition to debating the feasibility and defensibility of non-involvement– there are an indefinitely large number of questions and dilemmas generated by the ‘how’ of any degree of involvement. For example, how can we communicate the precarious ‘institutional facts’ about the evaluation of people’s work to them and what, if anything, can we do to prevent these ‘facts’ inflecting – or infecting - real day-to-day relationships of mutual respect, trust and esteem? We will not rehearse these dilemmas any more here and indeed feel sure that they do not need rehearsal – because they relate to the fundamental question of how we maintain supportive and caring relationships with one another, as well as valuing one another’s accomplishments.

Threat 2

The increasing requirement for academics to demonstrate the impact of their research means that there is a premium attached to aligning oneself with powerful groupings. This can then push academics in the direction of conducting research in ways that is aligned with the new policy common-sense. The official definitions of impact used by UK research funders and university funding bodies are relatively broad (e.g., Department for the Economy [Northern Ireland] et al. 2019) – allowing, for example, for theory-developing research conducted in collaboration with grassroots organisations and influence on public awareness and debate to count in assessments of research impact - and their interpretation is largely in the hands of researchers. However, in practice these definitions are often read and acted on by institutions and individual academics in ways that privilege engagement with government policymakers and other powerful actors. This is because it is arguably much easier, for example, to demonstrate the ‘reach and significance’ (ibid.) of the impact of one’s research if it has directly influenced the policy of a national government or better still a supranational agency. There is an incentive, therefore, for researchers to produce findings that are in keeping with, and that can be readily used as evidence in support of, the ideological proclivities and political agendas of powerful agents, thus potentially seriously compromising the independence and integrity of the research produced.

One of the threats posed by the impact agenda as framed within the prevailing policy common-sense is that it risks obscuring, and worse still corroding, democratic constructions of the research-policy relationship and scholarly impact. This is because it rests on a primarily ‘technicist’ model of research and its role. As Biesta (2007) has carefully and powerfully articulated, the technicism of the ‘what works’ agenda effectively sidelines normative educational and political questions that are at the heart of any worthwhile scholarship and practice. As Biesta underlines, education research has a ‘cultural role’ as well as a technical role – it enables debate and potential transformation by opening up new

pictures of the social world and visions of the future. This kind of ambition for ‘impact’ is not a poor substitute for technically derived ‘actionable findings’ but something potentially much more ambitious. Crucially - and here we happily endorse Biesta’s contention – it is only the combination of technical knowledge and cultural influence that provides the conditions for democratic debate amongst stakeholders and even the possibility of a democratic society. In practice this means that critical researchers will be constantly (self-consciously or unconsciously) navigating the balance between technicist and cultural-democratic approaches to impact. Once again, this is played out in multiple routine practices – how funding bids are worded, who is included and excluded from fieldwork or stakeholder meetings, choice of ‘knowledge exchange’ venues and so on. Multiple pressures – for example from university managers in a prestige economy - will ‘invite’ critical researchers to privilege stories about the dissemination of technicist insights to powerful actors and there are some sensible pragmatic reasons to succumb to such pressures, but also good reasons to resist them.

Threat 3

A corollary of threats 1 and 2 is that the primacy of certain kinds of knowledge, and conceptions of impact are likely to privilege certain kinds of relationships over others. Specifically: relationships amongst professional researchers and with powerful sponsors or stakeholders are likely to be privileged over more dispersed and democratic relationships. It is not just that expert knowledge of professional researchers or system leaders are likely to be privileged over the experiential knowledge of grassroots actors; or that methodologies that are at the top of the credibility hierarchy such as RCTs and large-scale surveys are likely to be privileged over those at the lower end such as qualitative and narrative methods; but that some relations and actors will be treated analogously – as if some are simply more worthwhile and valuable than others. Moreover, where relationships with less powerful actors

are sought, there is a risk that these will be instrumentalised and exploitative, prioritising the institutional and individual career interests of researchers over the agendas of the less powerful partners, and thereby also threatening to undermine public trust in the research community (Reed 2016).

The cumulative effect of these changes ironically risks needlessly segregating researchers from broader knowledge communities and separating out official ‘research knowledge’ from ‘public knowledges’. And instead of working with others in open and authentic ways – in which the relative contributions of different parties and the co-production of learning are cheerfully lost or disguised - academics are required to mindfully audit knowledge ‘production processes’ and to stake intellectual property claims on insights. The worry, of course, is that all research-policy relationships become the kind of individualised, marketised and competitive relations that critical researchers spend much of their scholarly time contesting.

In summary, all of these threats can push researchers in the direction of pursuing research questions, using research approaches and forming relationships in ways that are aligned with, reinforce and reproduce the new policy common-sense, and thereby create endless tests of academic integrity and routine dilemmas for critical researchers.

Conclusion

What we have just outlined are the conditions that make work in the critical research tradition more difficult, but, of course, as we hope to have also illustrated here, critical research is still possible, because, as Berg and Seeber (2016) and others remind us, we still have agency: there is, in other words, space ‘between the ivory tower and the academic assembly line’

(Barry, Chandler and Clark 2001, cited in Berg and Seeber 2016, 10). However, as we have tried to underline, this space is increasingly confined and is heavily ‘polluted’ by deliverology. So, what does the analysis we have offered here mean for how we, as critical researchers, should position ourselves in, and navigate, this space? And, more specifically, how should we relate to the instrumentalisation of the research-policy relationship? On the one hand, there may be good reasons to strategically accommodate ourselves to an engineering logic. For example, as noted above, using positivistic methods and forming relationships with powerful stakeholders may help to steer policy in more socially just directions or ameliorate some of the more harmful effects of deliverology and associated policies. On the other, we need to beware of the risks of strategic accommodation, in particular the risk that our research will end up reproducing the very logic we should be trying to disrupt; and, more generally, we need to be reflexive about the choices and dilemmas inherent in negotiating an instrumentalised educational landscape and in negotiating the instrumentalisation that constitutes the conditions of our own academic labour. The further question we have raised is whether critical reflexivity is enough. In a climate where it is impossible to keep ‘clean hands’, how can we determine and enact the least damaging accommodations to deliverology?

Every choice that we make in terms of the research questions we pose, the kinds of knowledge we draw on and produce, the methods we use, who we relate to and how we relate to them is a test of our integrity. All of this means that maintaining academic integrity is a continuous struggle that involves constantly navigating difficult ethical choices. We need to be conscious of these choices and, more specifically in terms of the relationships that we form, we need to be conscious of both what these relationships make possible as well as what they represent. If the purpose of our research is to work towards a more socially just and democratic education system, then we need to be clear that how we live out these values as

academic researchers in the choices we make is a constitutive component of this. In other words, in a democratic and critical model of the research-policy relationship, the means are as important as, and constitutive of, the ends. Instead of simply asking ‘what works’, critical researchers, in the sociology of education and beyond, must somehow strive to make research relationships work for those they study, their colleagues and in the wider pursuit of social justice.

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Two models of the research-policy relationship (RPR)

Figure 1: Two models of the research-policy relationship.

Figure 2: What works centres' areas of activity. (Source: What Works Network 2018.

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Figure 3: The EEF-Sutton Trust Teaching and Learning Toolkit. (Source: EEF 2019 [<http://eef.li/toolkit>]. Reproduced here with the kind permission of the Education Endowment Foundation.)