

The times they are a-changin’

What can researchED offer in 2024?

Anonymous

Abstract

Initially launched in 2013, researchED claims to be a ‘grassroots’ organisation which disseminates the best educational research to classroom practitioners. During the last 10 years, it has played a pivotal role in cementing the ‘new science’ of educational research as the primary route to educational effectiveness. ResearchED events are popular with practitioners, enabling the organisation to be an effective element in the Conservatives’ long-running project to remake compulsory education in England along instrumentalist and technicist lines. However, recent events suggest that researchED may struggle to offer solutions to the complex and interrelated problems that schools have faced since the Covid-19 pandemic. This article highlights researchED’s political significance, considers what the organisation offers today’s teachers, and suggests the moment may be ripe for universities and other organisations involved in educational research to offer teachers something better.

Keywords: researchED; educational research; initial teacher education; professional development; ‘new science’ of education

The first time I attended a researchED conference was in 2018. I think I attended two that year, or perhaps one in 2018 and one in 2019; a local conference, and the national one in London. I decided to attend again in 2024, to see how things have changed for researchED in the intervening years. The reason for my interest is that a lot has changed in education since 2018. The ongoing impact of Covid-19 has shifted public discourse on the problems faced by schools in England. Concerns about low attendance, student trauma and the cost-of-living crisis have heightened, concomitantly reducing the amount of airtime given over to discussions of poor discipline, curricular knowledge, and teacher quality, which were common touchstones in pre-pandemic discussions around education. (Indeed, these have been common touchstones in Conservative education policy since the publication of *The Black Papers* in the 1960s and 1970s.)¹ In short, what people are worried about in school *looks* different in 2024 than in 2018. There doesn’t seem to be much point kvetching about the knowledge content in a school’s curriculum if the pupils are too traumatised, or hungry, to turn up and sit through their lessons. Or, indeed, if pupils are learning outside in a hastily erected wedding marquee with heaters stuffed in each corner because their main school buildings are unsafe to enter.

I wondered if others felt the same. In this article, I reflect on how the passage of time has treated researchED, and where I think it stands now, given the many unanticipated changes in the education landscape over the time of its development.

What is researchED?

Perhaps I have launched in too quickly. Have you come across researchED? If you have more than a passing interest in the myriad ways in which the Conservative party has systematically pulled apart our education system since 2010, then you have probably heard of it, even if you have managed to avoid becoming embroiled in #Edutwitter. ResearchED was founded by Tom Bennett in 2013, with the aim to ‘bridge the gap between research and practice in education. Researchers, teachers, and policymakers come together for a day of information-sharing and myth-busting.’² What such lofty ideals disguise, however, is that one of the primary aims of researchED appears to have been to raise awareness amongst teachers and school leaders of the ‘new science’ of educational research, so that strategies informed by such research could become a normalised part of classroom practice. This ‘new science’ relies heavily on mobilising ideas from medicine, claiming randomised control trials (RCTs) to be the ‘gold standard’ of educational research and promoting the idea that teaching schools, based on teaching hospitals, would improve teacher training and development.³ As such, researchED can be understood as part of a wider ideological movement, closely associated with Michael Gove and Nick Gibb, which ultimately sought to reposition the professional ideals and identities of teachers, severing the influence of university departments of education (part of the infamous ‘Blob’)⁴ from the coalface. These ideologies did not arise out of nothing. They built on longstanding and damaging common-sense notions of a divide between educational ‘theory’ and ‘practice’.⁵ Since 2010, Conservative-led governments have deployed these ideologies through a range of initiatives, of which researchED (ostensibly a ‘grassroots’ movement) can be understood as playing a key role. ResearchED provided academic legitimacy to these ideologies – if universities were to be marginalised and undermined as the centres of research excellence in education, an alternative had to be sought to legitimate this ‘new science.’ And Tom Bennett’s ‘grassroots’ movement helpfully stepped into this role.

As you can probably tell, I went to researchED 2024 with a generally sceptical attitude, knowing from my 2018/19 visits that the ethos of researchED often conflicted with my own ideas about what quality education research looks like. I’m a humanities graduate; it doesn’t come easily to me to dismiss history and philosophy and sociology as irrelevant, to rely entirely on positivist scientific explanations for human phenomena. And I agree with Jim Hordern and Clare Brookes’s persuasive argument that the outcomes of this emphasis on the ‘new science’ of educational research in education is twofold.⁶ First, the

four foundational disciplines of the study of education (history, philosophy, sociology, and any psychology beyond the narrow version of cognitive psychology often offered through strategies such as ‘teaching walkthrus’ and ‘dual coding’)⁷ become marginalised in educational thought as they are considered irrelevant to practice. Second, teaching practice becomes increasingly instrumental and technicised, focusing on the repeated practice of ‘what works’ in the classroom rather than critical analysis of educational problems. This instrumentalisation of educational practice is evident in the current favouring of ‘instructional coaching’ as a way of supporting early career teachers.⁸

Why is researchED so popular with teachers?

After reading all this you might, then, wonder why I decided to spend a Saturday going to researchED rather than with family or friends, having a long lazy brunch, or heading to the cinema ... and that, indeed is the key question. Because every single researchED event I have attended has sold out. Teachers – who the National Education Union reports ‘work more intensively and for longer hours than any other profession’⁹ – happily pay (I’m assuming often from their own pockets) to attend these events. Furthermore, they choose to attend on a Saturday, when they could be having a day off from thinking about the classroom. This is no small thing. It shows that teachers see themselves as research-driven, committed professionals, an image which contrasts with negative images of teachers that are recycled and regurgitated by politicians and the media: the overworked teacher, the teacher on strike, the teacher who can’t cope and decides to quit. It is easy to belittle researchED and to question its motives and ideological stance, but to do so risks ignoring the bigger, more impactful questions for those interested in teachers and teaching in England: what motivates these teachers to attend researchED? What do they get from researchED that they cannot gain elsewhere? What is it about the way educational research is presented and communicated at researchED that continues to pull in so many teachers?

I wonder if the answer might lie, to an extent, with practical issues. Local conferences, organised in different cities around the country, enable teachers to attend for a day without the expense or inconvenience of staying overnight somewhere. Organising conferences on a Saturday means teachers don’t have to haggle for time off, which is notoriously difficult when classes need to be covered, and conferences which only last a day are easier to fit around heavy workloads. And £40 – the cost of a ticket at the researchED event I attended – is a significant amount, but not anything in comparison to the cost of attending most academic conferences (which can sometimes run into the hundreds of pounds, but for which costs academics are usually covered by grant funding or their institution). In short, academic conferences are out of reach to the vast majority of teachers, at least those working in state-maintained settings. ResearchED

stepped into a gap created by this inaccessibility. Consistently sold-out researchED conferences show that teachers want to engage with research – and the education research community could do more to facilitate this.

Furthermore, researchED conferences offer an opportunity for ‘normal’ teachers to interact with and question some of the most influential people in education – Daisy Christodoulou, Tom Bennett, Daniel Muijs, Amanda Spielman, Nick Gibb. At the national researchED conference I attended back in 2018/19, I remember one delegate being highly vocal in his criticism of mathematics policy in a question aimed at Nick Gibb. ResearchED provides a space where these influential figures are faced with people working at the coalface, the people trying to enact their projects and policies. In creating this space where policymakers and policy-doers interact (and importantly, where policy-doers can answer back to policymakers) researchED offers something which many other organisations involved in educational research cannot. But this interaction is important to practitioners – of course, if you are wrestling with some godawful education policy, the possibility of getting an opportunity to challenge whoever is responsible for it is worth giving up a Saturday for.

Is the terrain shifting?

My experience of visiting researchED in 2024 suggests to me that now is a good time to consider issues around how to widen access to educational research for practitioners. It feels like the ground has shifted somewhat – attending in 2024 felt different to attending in 2018/19. I remember in 2018/19 how attending these conferences felt, at times, a little bit like entering a cult – when certain statements were made by speakers, the crowd would cheer and whoop and clap. In contrast, I only heard one whoop during the 2024 keynote (which was a Tom Bennett presentation on school discipline/behaviour management and a truly no-alarms-and-no-surprises affair). The whoop felt offkey. There also appeared to be a few presenters breaking ranks from the expected ResearchED messaging. Amongst the usual suspects presenting (Andrew Old, Tom Sherrington, Alex Quigley, Daniel Muijs) there were also presentations from academics firmly situated in universities. One of these academics (Tom Perry) even warned of the challenges in transposing the theories of cognitive psychology successfully into classroom practice. This presentation was well attended and received, despite going against the usual grain of researchED discourse. Another presentation (delivered by Stephen Lane) which I could not attend, focused on the benefits of autoethnography as a tool for teacher reflection and an alternative approach to professional development. Based on my experiences attending in 2018/19, I wasn’t expecting to see such items on the programme in 2024. These presentations perhaps indicate a new area of resistance developing within the teaching community – resistance against ‘what works’ and against

didactic training programmes. These presentations suggest that researchED will have to expand its vision of what quality research is in education, in order to maintain the interest and buy-in of teachers and its claim to be a 'grassroots' organisation.

My feeling from attending the 2024 researchED conference was that the narrow version of educational research offered by researchED in the early 2010s doesn't quite cut it in 2024. In 2013, when Bennett set up researchED, austerity was beginning to bite – but in 2024 we are really feeling its long-term effects on all public services. 2013 preceded Covid and the following attendance crisis, it preceded the Ukraine War and associated cost-of-living increases, it preceded the general public's introduction to RAAC (or 'bubbly' concrete) and the possible impact of its widespread postwar use in schools. Interested, dedicated teachers attend researchED to help them improve their practice – but what will help teachers to improve their practice will necessarily look different in 2024 than 2013, as the educational and economic landscape we are experiencing has changed dramatically over that period.

Of course, there have also been significant changes to education policy over the same period. The 2019 publication of the core content framework (for initial teacher training) and the early career framework (for those in their first two years of teaching)¹⁰ – combined with the outcomes of the 2021 market review of initial teacher training¹¹ – have ensured that for many teachers, entering teaching essentially now involves a whistle-stop tour of basic cognitive psychology alongside opportunities to practise ad infinitum 'what works' in the classroom in accordance with these theories. The national professional qualifications (NPQs), again heavily prescribed by the DfE, have cornered the market in teacher development and are built on the same narrow research base as the core content framework and the early career framework. In many cases, teachers will progress through these frameworks with the same network of delivery providers who have developed increasingly close links with the DfE since 2010 (Ambition Institute, Teach First, National Institute of Teaching). ResearchED – which initially positioned itself as a radical alternative to mainstream teacher education and professional development – continues to preach the 'new science' of education research. However, thanks to increasing government intervention in teacher training and development,¹² these ideologies have essentially become the norm. In this new context, what researchED once offered up as innovative, radical and driven 'by teachers for teachers' is perhaps increasingly recognised by the teaching community as required, hegemonic, and pushed by the DfE.

Time for a better offer

It is becoming increasingly evident that, with its consistent emphasis on 'what works' to improve grades and behaviour, the 'new science' is unable to provide all the answers to

the educational dilemmas that teachers are currently facing (and are likely to face for the foreseeable future, regardless of election outcomes). Addressing increasing child poverty and mental health issues in a sensitive and effective manner requires thought and reflection on the societal structures which reinscribe educational inequalities, alongside a consideration on the purposes of education and the role of the teacher. I predict that teachers will be drawn back to the foundation disciplines, seeking out knowledge and direction from sociological, philosophical and historical research in education, and recognising the complexity inherent in educational research which is flattened out when cognitive science is king.

I have little interest in whether researchED folds or survives in this new educational climate. However, I do think that the organisation has shown that teachers want and appreciate accessible spaces to be made available to them, to learn about research which could improve their practice. This opens up opportunities for education departments based in universities, whose expertise across the foundation disciplines includes the sociological, historical and philosophical knowledge necessary to make sense of education in complex times. Indeed, there have been movements within universities to create such spaces – such as Rachel Lofthouse’s CollectiveED, based at Leeds Beckett.¹³ Visiting researchED in 2024 suggested that the appeal of the ‘new science’ is beginning to wane; now is the time for universities and associated educational research organisations to consider how they place a better offer on the table for teachers.

After several years’ teaching in English state schools, the author is now an educational academic.

Correspondence to the editor: patyarker@aol.com

Notes

1. James Wood, ‘Upward mobility, betrayal, and the Black Papers on education’, *Critical Quarterly*, 62(2), 2020, pp79-104.
2. ResearchED (2024), ‘What is researchED?’, <https://researched.org.uk/>
3. Michael Gove, ‘Michael Gove speech to teachers and headteachers at the National College for Teaching and Leadership’, 25 April 2013: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-speech-to-teachers-and-headteachers-at-the-national-college-for-teaching-and-leadership>; Michael Gove, ‘Michael Gove to the Education World Forum’, 11 January 2012: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-to-the-education-world-forum>
4. Michael Gove, “I refuse to surrender to the Marxist teachers hell-bent on destroying our schools”: Education secretary berates “the new enemies of promise” for opposing his plans’, *Daily Mail*, 23 March 2013: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/>

debate/article-2298146/I-refuse-surrender-Marxist-teachers-hell-bent-destroying-schools-Education-Secretary-berates-new-enemies-promise-opposing-plans.html

5. Henry A. Giroux, 'Intellectual labor and pedagogical work: rethinking the role of teacher as intellectual', *Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, 3(1), 1985, pp20-32.

6. Jim Hordern & Clare Brooks, 'The core content framework and the "New Science" of educational research', *Oxford Review of Education*, 49(6), 2023, pp800-818.

7. Tom Sherrington and Oliver Caviglioli, *Teaching Walkthrus: Five-step guides to instructional coaching*, Woodbridge, John Catt Educational Ltd., 2020; Oliver Caviglioli, *Dual Coding with Teacher*, Woodbridge, John Catt Educational Ltd., 2019.

8. Kathryn Spicksley, 'Instructional coaching in the Early Career Framework', *FORUM*, 65(2), 2023, pp46-58.

9. National Education Union, 'Workload and working hours', 2024: <https://neu.org.uk/advice/your-rights-work/workload-and-working-hours#:~:text=Teachers%20in%20the%20UK%20continue,reduce%20workload%20in%20your%20workplace.&text=The%20number%20of%20hours%20for,to%20a%20limit%20of%201%2C265>.

10. Core content framework and early career framework have recently been combined into the initial teacher training and early career framework (ITTECF): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-training-and-early-career-framework>

11. Department for Education, *Initial Teacher Training (ITT) market review: overview*, 2022: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-training-itt-market-review/initial-teacher-training-itt-market-review-overview>

12. Viv Ellis (ed.), *Teacher Education in Crisis*, London, Bloomsbury, 2023: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/teacher-education-in-crisis-9781350399655/>

13. Leeds Beckett University, 'CollectiveED: The centre for coaching, mentoring & professional learning', 2024: <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/research/collectived/>