

School of Education

Professor Emeritus Michael Byram MA, PhD, FAcSS

Report on visit to CIDTFF July 2017

Forum CIDTFF (5 July)

Research Group “Languages, theories and practices of education and supervision” -

Seminar “Diversity, literacy and supervision: issues arising from published texts” (6 July)

My report is in two parts to mirror the two events, the first of which focused on the Centre as a whole and the second on one research group.

PART 1 – Forum

The event in question presented the historical context and explanation of the nature of the Centre which is complex and large. My suggestions are concerned with future directions and the nature of the Centre as interdisciplinary.

1 ‘Education’ is not a discipline in the usual sense but a field of study which is almost exclusively ‘applied’. This creates opportunities and problems. The main problem of interdisciplinary study I would like to focus on here is the need for ‘trust’ i.e. that specialists in one aspect of education e.g. psychologists cannot know the discipline of all others e.g. sociologists, and there is a need for mutual trust which has to be created and managed by those responsible for the Centre.

As an applied field of study, Education needs to focus on the issues and problems which arise in practice and the needs of practitioners – whether teachers, curriculum designers, inspectors or other stakeholders, including parents and employers – and to offer help in the form of analysis and solutions.

The concerns of the specialists with problems in their own discipline, in ‘pure research’, are more appropriately addressed by those working in specialist departments of the University e.g. ‘Psychology’ in combination with psychologists and others in Education.

A focus on the problems ‘in the field’ does not by any means exclude new insights and contributions to a discipline and may lead to publications of this nature. However the focus on problems in the field is appropriate for an applied approach and, importantly,

will lead to more observable impact of research on practice. The question of impact needs to be taken seriously.

2 In an interdisciplinary field of study, new, junior researchers are likely to have more difficulty than in a traditional discipline to find their place and role. The Centre needs to consider how junior researchers can be helped to find appropriate partners from other disciplines within the Centre. Such junior researchers also need training, not only in methods of research, but in problem-oriented research: how to identify problems with stakeholders in the field, how to create appropriate teams (see below), how to make their impact evident.

3 The focus of the Centre is largely upon education as practiced in institutions for children and young people. However, lifelong education of formal, informal and non-formal types is already an established field and will become more important. The Centre needs to consider its approach to lifelong education, how problems in this educational process arise and can be addressed.

In general, the Centre needs to consider how problems in education arise and are defined by actors, not just in formal education in school but in education elsewhere and at other times. Furthermore, when a problem is defined by stakeholders and other users of research, the Centre needs to be able to form research groups which may be temporary until the problem is solved. Such research groups should be working groups which form and reform according to need [whilst maintaining the current research groups]. The Centre management might wish to consider how this flexibility can be created.

4 Competition in academic life is not new but is increasing and becoming more evident. The Centre has to compete for national and international recognition and funding.

The Centre is large, and there are historical explanations for this. Much was said at this event about how to overcome fragmentation, how to give the Centre a unifying narrative, a visible identity and an approach which is distinctive in a competitive environment. In my view, in a competitive environment in search of excellence, it is necessary to be selective: to select the individuals who find solutions before problems are defined; to select research groups who can work effectively with stakeholders and users.

Selection is realized and implemented mainly through providing time and funding. Policies of selection are always implemented through financial means. This means making decisions and some decisions are hard; easy to make but hard to implement and challenging for management.

In summary:

The way forward is complex:

- To accept the consequences of being an applied research whilst leaving space for originality
- To look to users for problem definition and to have responsive interdisciplinary groups to solve them and create impact
- To recognise the implications of competition in training and selection of the best.

PART 2 - Research Group “Languages, theories and practices of education and supervision”

The research group has a remarkable and enviable track record. Some members commented however that there is a need to create more coherence and a ‘narrative’ as well as maintaining the high quality of research by teams and individuals in specific areas.

The question of research impact, as mentioned above, is gaining ground as a criterion for evaluation in the Anglo-Saxon world and – like other influences for better or worse – is likely to become important in Portugal. The group, like the Centre as a whole, needs to continue to pay particular attention to this.

My earlier comments in Part 1 about education being ‘applied’ and responding to stakeholders’ problems, are not repeated but equally important for this research group, as are the comments concerning the relationship with ‘pure’ research.

I suggest the following points arising from presentations during the seminar for more particular attention:

- from the presentation of analysis of articles produced with the research group: the explanations of ‘objectives’ tended to be focused on acquiring knowledge – of course important – but much less on using the knowledge for interventions and ‘actions’ which can in turn create ‘evidence’ for ‘users’ (and could be the basis of ‘impact studies’ to demonstrate the relationship of the research group with stakeholders and the field).
- ‘evidence-based policy’ is a dominant concept in the relationship of researchers to users – whether evidence of ministries or evidence for schools which make policy decisions about where improvements need to be made; this concept might help in conversations with ministry officials (who may want evidence to support their policies but then get evidence which makes them modify their policies). This way of thinking comes from a

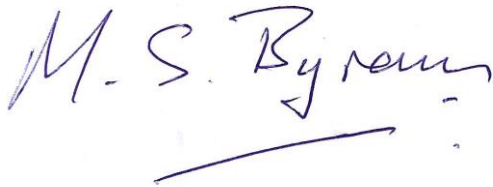
view of education as ‘applied science’ which looks for and solves ‘problems’ for users or stakeholders

- education can also be ‘pure science’ in the sense that we need to develop knowledge for its own sake - and ask questions which are of interest to scientists irrespective of their relevance to users [they may turn out to be useful for users later]. This work might be best undertaken as said in Part 1, with specialists in other departments of the University¹.

- the presentation of ‘questions for the future’: these seemed above all to be ones important to researchers – and rightly so – but there needs to be also questions orientated to users – e.g. most generally ‘how do we connect with users outside our comfort zone, with types of education other than ‘formal’ (see earlier comments on the scope of the Centre in Part 1)

Other issues arising:

The Centre has members in other countries. In preparing for evaluation, it is important to demonstrate how these members contribute to the work of the group in ways which are different because they are in other countries. This raises the general question of the internationalisation of research in which the group seems already involved but can perhaps make more use of its international members.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "M. S. Byrom". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

July 2017

¹ To illustrate how ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ can complement each other I imagined one research group (RG1) giving an individual in their group the task of working on the concept of ‘plurilingualism’ in a ‘pure’ way (e.g. sitting in a library working on the concept, consulting with specialists in language acquisition) and this being complemented by a task group working in a pragmatic way with a local company employing immigrants and perceiving that they have a problem in communication. RG1 with its expertise in language might then be complemented by sociologists and psychologists to solve the problem - in doing so they gain a better insight into ‘plurilingualism’ which complements what is being done by the person sitting in a library.