

The nature of contemporary studies of education: an analysis of articles published in leading journals

Article

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THE NATURE OF CONTEMPORARY STUDIES OF EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF ARTICLES PUBLISHED IN LEADING JOURNALS

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ABSTRACT: The article is based on a Keynote Lecture at the 2022 Colloquium of the Society for Educational Studies. It analyses the articles published in four leading journals in 2021 and compares these with the same journals 20 years earlier. Key findings include a considerable increase in authorship and multiple authorship and a very strong international dimension to authorship in current UK-based journals. Two-thirds of the papers were empirical, and by far the most common type of research design was qualitative interview studies, often of a very small-scale nature. Aspects of the teaching profession were the most common form of content, and there was also a focus on social class and multi-cultural issues.

Keywords: Education studies, journal content, article type

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a keynote lecture given at the 2022 Colloquium of the Society for Educational Studies. The Colloquium was titled ‘Educational Studies Today and for the Future: Threats, Hopes and Collaborations’. The lecture was intended to set a context for the Colloquium by giving a sense of the state of contemporary studies of education as reflected in articles published in leading journals of educational studies. Based on the lecture, the present paper considers aspects of the nature of the contemporary study of education through an analysis of journal articles published in the most recent complete calendar year before the colloquium, 2021, and then makes a comparison with articles published in the same journals 20 years earlier, 2001. Four major journals were selected for analysis: *The British Journal of Educational Studies* (BJES), *The British Educational Research Journal* (BERJ), *Educational Research* (Ed Res) and *Research Papers in Education* (RPE). These are all generalist journals rather than specifically disciplinary journals (such as sociology of education or history of education), and they all produce a wide range of theoretical and empirical material and have high readerships and impact factors. BJES was included as it is the journal of the Society organising the Colloquium, BERJ as it is the journal of the British Educational Research Association and Ed

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Res as it is the journal of the National Foundation for Educational Research. RPE was selected as an additional leading journal. The present author has a degree of association with all of the journals. He was editor of BJES for 8 years. He is currently on the editorial board of Ed Res and on the reviewing panel of RPE and referees regularly for BERJ. He has published in all four journals.

The paper is based principally on an analysis of the 184 articles published over the year 2021 and the 92 articles published in 2001. It is intended to give a sense of the sort of work which was being produced very recently and which reached a standard which made it acceptable for publication in leading journals. In this sense, the paper should be seen as representing the highest standard of work being produced in educational studies rather than necessarily the full range of work being conducted. The comparison with the same journals 20 years earlier is intended to give a sense of the directions in which published work in educational studies is moving. Articles have been categorised along a series of dimensions including the nature of authorship, the extent of their empirical and theoretical content, the types of methodologies involved, the role of the researchers, the nature of data sets used the research questions addressed and the types of theoretical dimensions drawn on. All these journals publish work by non-UK authors as well as UK-based authors and dealing with non-UK educational situations and the nature of the national and international contexts of the articles will be an aspect of the analysis. The paper will present an overview of the totality of educational studies reflected in the articles but will also provide a picture of work that is specific to the study of education in the educational systems of the UK.

The paper aims to present an overview of high-quality work currently being conducted in the study of education. Based on this analysis we will consider the implications for future developments in educational studies. The study will be able to show the kinds on theoretical and empirical approaches which people involved in the study of education are currently finding productive and arguments which they may be putting forward about future approaches. It may also be able to identify gaps in the field and areas where further developments would be productive.

ARTICLES AND AUTHORSHIP

Table 1 presents the number of articles contained in these journals and considers various aspects of authorship. In 2021, the four journals being considered consisted of 22 issues, six each for BJES, BERJ and RPE and four for Ed Res. These 22 issues contained a total of 184 articles, an average of just over 8 articles per issue. However, issue size was not constant across the journals and, in particular, BERJ tended to contain a greater number of articles. Most articles were multi-authored, and, across the year, there were 450 named authors

TABLE 1. *Articles and Authorship 2021 and 2001*

	2021	2001
ISSUES	22	16
ARTICLES	184	92
TOTAL AUTHORS	450	169
AUTHORS PER ARTICLE	2.4	1.8
AT LEAST ONE UK AUTHOR	59.2%	85.9%
UK BASED AUTHORS	49.8%	84.6%
SINGLE AUTHORED PAPERS	27.7%	53.3%

represented in the journals. (Of course these are not necessarily 450 different people as the same person could be an author of more than one paper.) Nearly three-quarters of the papers had more than one author, and the average was 2.4 authors per paper. Just over quarter, 27.7% of papers had just one author. There is a very strong international dimension to authorship in these UK-based journals. Just half of the authors were UK based (49.8%), about six in ten of the articles (59.2%) had at least one UK-based author which leaves four out of ten papers without a UK author. A total of 33 countries were represented among the authors. By far, the most common location of overseas authors was Australia with 49 authors and Sweden, the USA, Israel, Spain and Belgium all had more than a dozen authors. The overall picture to emerge here is one of the great deal of multiple authorship and also a very strong international dimension to authorship in recent UK journals.

Table 1 also presents data from the same journals 20 years earlier in 2001. This gives a perspective on the way that the most recent picture is similar to or different from that of the fairly recent past. The first thing to emerge from the 2001 data is that there are many more articles in 2021 than there were earlier. In 2001, there were 16 issues of the four journals (four for each journal), an increase of over a third in the number of issues. The difference in numbers of papers is even more striking; the 92 papers in 2001 is exactly half the figure for 2021 so papers in these journals have doubled over the 20 years. There are also considerable differences in multiple authorship and overseas authorship. In 2001, there was a total of 169 authors compared with 450 20 years later and the average number of authors per paper was 1.8 compared with 2.4. Single authored papers were also a much higher proportion of the total in 2001. The 53.3% of papers single authored are about double the proportion in 2021. There is also a very substantial increase in international contributions to these journals. In 2001, the journals contained a very high proportion of UK-based authors; 84.6% compared with just under half 20 years later. So, overall in 2021 there were many more articles and authors, a much increased multiple authorship and a very much increased international contribution to the journals.

Article length remained pretty much constant across the 20-year period with articles averaging at about 20 pages in both 2021 and 2001. The size and nature of the editorial teams was also constant. The 2021 journals ranged from an editorial team of three editors and four associate editors to one of the journals having a single editor. In total there were eight editors and five associate editors. The situation in 2001 was very similar ranging from three editors and four associate editors to a single editor. In total there were seven editors and four associate editors, very similar to 2021. None of the editors or associate editors in either year were based outside the UK. So although there was a very strong overseas component to authorship, the editorial arrangements for these UK journals were entirely UK based. In particular, the very much increased overseas authorship in 2021 was not associated with any increase in overseas editorship.

ARTICLE TYPES

In [Table 2](#), data are presented on various aspects of the type of articles, first for 2021 and then, for comparison in 2001. First, a distinction is made between empirical papers containing data of various kinds and non-empirical papers based on various sorts of discussion of educational issues or reviews of literature. It is clear that empirical papers are by far the largest category although there are also a substantial number of non-empirical papers. Just over seven in ten of the papers were empirical involving data presentation and analysis whilst the remainder were non-empirical. Within

TABLE 2. *Article Types 2021 and 2001*

	2021		2001	
EMPIRICAL	132	71.7%	55	59.8%
NON EMPIRICAL	52	28.3	37	40.2%
EMPIRICAL PAPERS:				
QUALITATIVE	89	67.4%	28	50.9%
QUANTITATIVE	43	32.6%	33	60.0%
QUALITATIVE	75	56.8%	15	27.3%
INTERVIEW STUDIES				
SMALL SCALE	39	29.2%	7	12.7%
INTERVIEW STUDIES				
SECONDARY	30	22.7%	11	20.0%
STATISTICAL				
ANALYSIS (eg. LSYPE, PISA)				
NEW STATISTICAL	13	9.8%	16	29.1%
DATA (eg SURVEYS)				
NON EMPIRICAL STUDIES:				
POLICY ANALYSIS	23	44.2%	14	37.8%
CURRICULUM	12	23.1%	0	
LITERATURE REVIEW	10	19.2%	20	54.1%
PHILOSOPHY	7	13.5%	10	27.0%

the empirical category by far, the largest proportion involved qualitative rather than quantitative data. Two-thirds of the empirical papers were qualitative in nature compared with one-third quantitative. By far, the most common type of empirical studies was qualitative interview studies. These accounted for well over half of the empirical studies. Many of these were relatively small-scale interview studies. Small scale was defined as fewer than 30 interviews and there were 39 such studies, 29.5% of the total of empirical studies. Some of these studies were very small scale indeed with 14 studies involving fewer than 10 interviews and 31 in total with fewer than 20.

Quantitative studies involving statistical analysis made up one in three of the empirical studies. What was very striking in the 2021 data is that the great majority of the quantitative studies involved secondary analysis of existing data sets rather than new statistical data collected by the investigators. Seven out of ten of the quantitative studies were of this kind and involved analysis of publically available data sets such as the PISA data, the Longitudinal Survey of Young People and government and local authority data sets such as examination results and participation rates. Newly collected quantitative data such as surveys and experimental data made up less than a third of the quantitative papers and just under 10% of all the empirical papers.

Table 2 also presents information on the nature of the non-empirical papers. The most common type of paper here was an analysis of various aspects of education policy, often involving critiques of existing policy and also advocacy of particular policy developments. These made up getting on for half (44.2%) of the non-empirical papers. Other papers involved curriculum analysis and various kinds of literature review. There were just seven papers consisting of philosophical analysis, just 13.5% of the non-empirical papers and only 3.8% of all the papers published by these journals.

The general picture to emerge from the analysis of the 2021 data is that of a substantial proportion of empirical papers, typically qualitative in nature and often fairly small scale. Among the non-empirical papers, policy analysis of various kinds was the most common type of paper. Table 2 also presents a comparison with the data from 2001 to see the extent to which the types of paper have changed or remained constant over time. The first thing to emerge is that the ratio of empirical to non-empirical papers has changed somewhat. Empirical papers still make up the majority of the papers published but the gap is rather less than it was in 2021. Of course, because there are so many more papers in the 2021 issues, there are still many more non-empirical papers in 2021 but not such a high proportion. Much more striking is the difference in types of paper in terms of the presentation of qualitative and quantitative data. In 2021, there were twice as many qualitative compared to quantitative studies. But 20 years earlier in 2001 a majority of papers (although a fairly small majority) were quantitative in nature. As with other analyses, because there

were so many more articles published in 2021, the 2021 figures show more quantitative papers than 20 years earlier, although these make up a much smaller proportion of the total.

In 2021 by far, the most common type of empirical study involved qualitative interviews and about half of these were characterised as small-scale interview studies. Twenty years earlier, the picture is very different with only a quarter of the empirical studies being qualitative interview studies and just half of these being small-scale studies. The ratio of small-scale to the total of interview studies is about the same in the 2 years but the absolute number in 2001 is very much lower. The nature of studies involving quantitative data is also very different across the 2 years. In 2021, over two-thirds of statistical analyses were of secondary data sources and less than a third involved newly collected data. In 2001, the majority of statistical analyses were of newly collected data such as surveys and well under a half involved secondary analysis. It is striking that despite there being twice as many articles published in 2021 compared to 2001 the earlier year had more examples of researchers collecting their own quantitative data.

Table 2 also compares the types of non-empirical studies across the 2 years. The earlier year has papers involving policy analysis, nothing on curriculum but rather more literature reviews and philosophical analysis than in 2021. However, by far, the most striking features of the comparison are a distinct shift to qualitative studies in 2021 with these by far the most common type of empirical studies and many of them of a rather small-scale nature. Quantitative studies make up a much greater proportion of the empirical studies in the earlier year and, in particular, researchers are much more likely to have collected their own quantitative data rather than conducting secondary analysis.

ARTICLE THEMES AND CONTENT

In Table 3, data are presented on the substantive content of the articles such as the topics covered and themes discussed. The table covers all kinds of papers, both empirical and non-empirical. The first column presents the most recent data for articles in the 2021 issues, and the second column gives comparative data for 20 years earlier in 2001. Types of content are listed in the order of occurrence in the 2021 issues, so the first topic/theme listed is that which was most frequent in 2021, the second the next most frequent and so on. As will become apparent, the frequency of topics changes considerably between 2001 and 2021.

In 2021, the most common type of content dealt with various aspects of the teaching profession. Teachers' work, teacher views and teacher characteristics were the themes of more than one in five of the papers published. The next most common area of content was that of social class including discussions of socioeconomic status (SES) and disadvantage. Such papers made up about one in six

TABLE 3. *Article Content 2021 and 2001*

	2021	2001
	%	%
TEACHERS: WORK, CHARACTERISTICS, VIEWS	21.7	21.7
SES, CLASS, DISADVANTAGE EQUAL OPS	17.4	3.3
MULTICULTURAL, MINORITIES CULTURAL DIFFERENCE, RACISM	15.2	6.5
PEDAGOGY	8.2	4.3
METHODS, RESEARCHER ROLE	8.2	16.3
MENTAL HEALTH, WELLBEING	4.9	0
HIGHER EDUCATION	4.9	8.7
COMPARATIVE EDUCATION	4.3	4.3
TEACHER EDUCATION	3.8	3.3
PARENTS	3.8	3.3
ATTAINMENT, EFFECTIVENESS	2.7	14.1
GENDER	2.7	4.3
ASSESSMENT	1.6	1.6
SEN, INCLUSION	0	10.9
BULLYING	0	4.3

of the papers published. The third most common area of content was that of multi-cultural issues, minorities and racism. Just under one in six of the papers was of this kind. These three areas of content were much more common than other categories. Together they made up well over half of all the papers published.

No other category accounted for as much as 10% of the types of content. The largest categories were concerned with pedagogy at rather under 10% and methodological issues (including the role of the researcher) also at under 10%. Mental health and well-being and higher education were the next two largest categories at about 5%. It is worth noting some of the categories of content which had low levels of representation, perhaps surprisingly so in some instances. For example, comparative educational studies were very infrequent. This contrasts with the figures reported in [Table 1](#) showing the strongly international flavour of the authorship of the 2021 articles with half of the authors based outside the UK and 40% of papers without any UK-based authors. It is striking that this strongly international characteristic of authorship has not resulted in articles involving comparisons of educational systems internationally. Many papers are from authors outside the UK, but they have not typically chosen to compare their own educational context with that of the UK (or elsewhere). Many papers involve both UK-based and non-UK-based authors but have not used this to include a comparative dimension to the analysis.

There are also other areas of content with perhaps surprisingly low representation. Teacher education is little represented, although many authors are clearly from teacher education contexts. The analysis of attainment and educational effectiveness is very low as is also that of gender. No papers at all dealt with special educational needs or inclusion. These very low figures for effectiveness, gender and SEN seem at odds with current public policy issues and concerns in the field of education.

Table 3 also presents comparative data on the substantive content of articles 20 years earlier in 2001. While there are certain similarities, the main picture is of a substantial shift in content over time. The first, and most striking, similarity is that the most frequent type of content is the same across the two data sets with identical levels in the 2 years. Aspects of the nature of the teaching profession and the work and characteristics of teachers made up more than one in five of the 2021 articles and were an identical proportion of the 2001 articles, but the next two most common categories were very different in the 2 years. Social class and related issues and multi-cultural and related issues which were major areas of content in 2021 were very much less common in the earlier data, especially in the case of social class. As with the 2021 figures, the top three categories of content made up well over half of the content areas in 2001. However, in 2001, the major content areas were research methods and researcher role and attainment and effectiveness. These were substantial areas of content in 2001 but were much reduced by 2021, especially so in the field of attainment and effectiveness. The other content area which showed a striking reduction in prevalence was that of special educational needs and inclusion. Articles dealing with SEN and inclusion made up over one in ten of the 2001 papers but none at all in the same journals 20 years later.

So, while a focus on the teaching profession was the largest area of content in both 2021 and 2001, there were also substantial changes over the period. In particular, a concern with research methods, attainment and effectiveness and SEN/inclusion has been much reduced over time, while a focus on social class and socio-economic status and on multi cultural issues, minorities and racism has very much increased.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE STATE OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES

The data presented above show some very clear patterns in the nature of recent articles published in the field of educational studies recently and some quite dramatic changes compared with the situation 20 years ago. Very strikingly, there are very many more articles published in these four journals than there were previously. The number of articles published has doubled over these 20 years, and the number of authors represented in the journals has more than doubled. It is also clear that leading UK-based journals now attract many articles from authors not based in the UK. Half of the authors represented in

the journals were not UK-based and 40% of the articles published had no UK-based author. This strongly international feature of the journals is a new phenomenon with the proportion of non-UK-based authors increasing very considerably compared with 20 years ago. So educational studies, as represented by these leading journals, now have a clear international focus, at least in terms of the national location of authorship.

A second very clear feature of the work represented in these leading journals and another contrast with the situation 20 years ago is the predominance of qualitative approaches in the methods employed in the empirical work represented. Over 70% of the papers were empirical and two-thirds of these used a qualitative methodology. By far the most common form of research method was that of qualitative interview studies and these were typically small-scale interview designs. Quantitative data analysis was a much smaller proportion of the empirical work than was qualitative analysis, and the quantitative work was mainly secondary analysis of publically available data sources rather than new quantitative data collected by the researchers. Overall, in terms of methodological approaches by far, the most common feature of the articles published in 2021 was that of qualitative interview designs, typically of a fairly small-scale nature.

What emerges from the analysis of the substantive content of the articles published in 2021 is that of two quite striking features. On the one hand, a concern with the nature of the teaching profession and the characteristics of teachers was a major focus of the study of education. On the other hand, there was a substantial concern with what could be regarded as social issues involving education, in particular, the relation of education to social class and social disadvantage and the relation of education to cultural diversity and multicultural issues. These areas of content; the teaching profession and social aspects of education made up well over half of the articles published. However, there were other areas of socially relevant aspects of education where there was surprisingly little representation. Special educational needs and inclusion were not represented at all, and there were very low levels of representation of gender and education or attainment and effectiveness. The strong international dimension of authorship has not resulted in very much comparative work being conducted. It was also apparent that despite a lot of focus on the nature of teaching and the teaching profession, there was relatively little explicit focus on pedagogy.

What was apparent in many of the papers of all kinds was an emphasis on the personal value of the work being conducted to the authors of the studies. Many authors were concerned to stress the extent to which they found the studies rewarding, both professionally and personally. However, despite this recognition of how valuable they found the work, there was very little discussion of methodological issues around researcher role. Given the nature of the research designs employed in many of the studies, this is perhaps

a surprising omission. As we have seen the most common form of research design was that of qualitative interviews, often of a fairly small-scale nature. Such designs would seem to raise important methodological issues. Such issues include the selection of participants to be interviewed, which sometimes seemed to reflect convenience rather than any explicit principles or sampling strategy and questions about the role of the researcher in relation to the participants. Questions of objectivity and reproducibility were rarely raised. (Of course, some authors may have claimed that these were not relevant to their particular research design but this surely ought to have been made explicit.) Overall, the impression is given of remarkably little attention to the methodological issues arising in small-scale interview studies with no very explicit strategy for the selection of participants and issues of reproducibility and representativeness.

Of course, it is not just in the case of these qualitative designs that methodological issues were sometimes neglected. As is shown in [Table 2](#), most examples of quantitative empirical analysis consisted of the secondary analysis of large scale, usually publically available data sets. Typically, these data sets were presented unproblematically with little attention to possible difficulties and limitations. With all such studies, there are issues with sampling strategies, response rates and other issues of the selection of participants. There are particularly issues when data have been collected from the same participants at different points in time with obvious issues around response rates and characteristics of the samples at different points in time. There are also clearly difficulties when data have been collected in different countries or different education systems and comparisons are made across these.

The analysis of changes over time and, in particular, some specific features of the 2021 data can be related to characteristics of and changes in the higher education environment influencing research practice. The very large number of rather small-scale projects reflects the much increased pressure on higher education staff to research and publish, together with the very limited extent of funding for educational research. Academic colleagues are therefore likely to be oriented to relatively cheap and therefore small-scale studies which can be completed fairly rapidly. This tendency is likely to have been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, which will have included the time when many of the 2021 studies were conducted. Qualitative studies involving just a few colleagues in the teaching profession, sometimes conducted online will have been a realistic way to conduct research in difficult circumstances.

So, the overall impression from an analysis of articles published in these four major journals in 2021 is, firstly, that of a great deal of impressive work and a vibrant state for educational studies. The analysis also shows the very considerable increase in the number of research studies published over the past 20 years and the much increased international focus of these journals. Alongside these there is a sense of much too

little attention being paid to methodological issues and a failure of some authors to give an appropriate degree of attention to difficulties in their designs and limitations with their data. While there is a great deal of work on the nature of teaching and certain social issues central to education, there is, perhaps, surprisingly little focus on other social issues such as inclusion and special educational needs and gender and also relatively little comparative analysis and analysis of pedagogy.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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