Does educational research have any impact on educational policy and practice?

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Recent controversy regarding the nature, organisation and impact of educational research in the UK seems to devote little attention to research on the impact of educational research. This paper examines a recent Australian report in terms of both its conclusions and its methodologies. It suggests that the impact of educational research on both policy and practice is often complex and indirect rather than linear and straightforward, and that the methodologies employed in assessing such impact need to be similarly complex. Moreover, it would appear that this particular research supports Atkinson’s (2000) contention that the ways in which educational research is typically produced and utilised is as part of a complex conversation about a diversity of purposes, effects and judgements rather than a more technically oriented implementation of what works.

Introduction

The concerns which have shaped the recent discussion of educational research in the United Kingdom (Hargreaves 1996, 1997; Hammersley 1997; Tooley 1998; Hillage et al. 2000; Ball 2001) are similar to those that have shaped discussion in Australia. In the Australian Research Council’s (ARC) disciplinary review, Educational Research in Australia (McGaw et al. 1992), and in The Response by the ARC to Reviews of Grant Outcomes (McGaw 1997) educational research in Australia was found to be well recognised internationally and of a vigorous and substantially applied nature. Nonetheless:

Despite this vigour and the highly applied nature of much of the research, the reports also identified a tension between educators and researchers, which the authors attributed to different goals. The professional wants new solutions to operational problems while the
researcher seeks new knowledge. This argument is crystallised in the claim in the 1992 review that education administrators and practitioners perceive much of educational research to be irrelevant to their concerns (DETYA 2000:3).

In 1998, the Australian Research Council and the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) sought proposals for further investigation of the impact of educational research. In particular, the terms of reference specified that the following issues be considered:

- the extent to which outcomes of educational research contribute to improved teaching practice and student learning outcomes;
- the extent of collaboration between educational researchers and the teaching profession and pathways for disseminating research findings and outcomes;
- opportunities for priority setting and coordination mechanisms in research planning to improve the flow-on benefits from educational research to practice;
- the strengths and weaknesses of educational research in Australian universities;
- the extent to which research in areas not directly founded on pedagogy, such as the sociology of education, has contributed to improvements in teaching and learning and educational administration;
- the effectiveness of the discipline in meeting the needs of practitioners and policy makers; and
- the implications for educational research of emerging modes of delivery in teaching practice (DETYA 2000:4).

While it was initially envisaged that one proposal be funded, eventually three reports and a bibliometric analysis were commissioned. DETYA’s evaluation of the reports is that they “[p]rovide compelling evidence that Australian educational research is respected internationally and makes a difference in the worlds of schools, and policy development” (DETYA 2000:4).
The Reports

The four reports commissioned by DETYA utilised substantially different methodologies. The first, *Mapping Educational Research and its Impact on Australian Schools*, was conducted by a team from the Australian Council for Educational Research and Melbourne and Newcastle Universities (Holbrook et al. 2000). The Australian Education Index (AEI) and faculty documentation were used as a basis for counting and classifying research done by university staff and postgraduate students for the period 1992-7. The AEI data showed a substantial concentration of activity in the processes, structures and curriculum areas, and particularly so in what might be called teaching and learning (DETYA 2000:129). In addition, the analysis of the faculty data also yielded evidence of hundreds of specific instances of different and direct links with schools, departmental officials and other members of the educational community, nationally and internationally (DETYA 2000:129). Key stakeholder groups, such as postgraduate students, principals, professional associations and policy makers were interviewed regarding research.

Postgraduate students were found to be overwhelmingly (88%) practising professionals whose research arose out of workplace issues. They therefore provided a very direct link between schools, school systems and university research. Moreover, other stakeholder groups, such as school principals, professional associations and system administrators, expressed the view that educational research had benefited Australian education. There was evidence of key research findings being incorporated into publications for schools; of cross-divisional research committees with education departments; of secondments of researchers to education departments; of regular meetings of education faculties on research priorities, and of encouragement of officials and teachers to pursue postgraduate studies. On the other hand, there was also evidence that the impact of research was frequently indirect, unstructured and often mediated through individuals. Action research was the most frequently mentioned form of direct research impact. Other forms of research were being restricted by schools as the
general burden of requirements increased. Overall, however, there was significant recognition of the role and applicability of research among practitioners, although much of the impact of university studies was indirect.

The second study, *Backtracking Practice and Policies to Research* (Figgis *et al.* 2000) was conducted by AAAJ Consulting Group and reversed the usual research to ‘practice investigation’, researching backwards from program and policy initiatives towards research that informed them. Intensive interviewing, observation and document analysis focused on four program/policy initiatives: improving literacy; gender equity programs; students at education risk; and the introduction of new information technologies. In each of these areas the researchers discovered connecting webs which linked practitioners and policy makers with research and researchers: real networks forming around real issues (DETYA 2000:367). However, there are two significant gaps. At one end there is a gap between practitioner/policy-maker and the connecting networks and at the other end a gap between research knowledge and the connecting networks (DETYA 2000:366). Moreover, there is no general network which connects all research with all practitioners/policy-makers: there is no generalised school education network containing all research-based knowledge about schooling (DETYA 2000:367). Specific findings were interesting for their emphasis on the agency of the practitioners/policy-makers who:

- decide for themselves whether to engage with new information,
- are constructivist learners, not passive receptacles waiting for researchers to tell them the answer,
- need to be segmented in terms of their motivation (DETYA 2000:367).

Moreover, the connecting web has its own characteristics:

- it is a learning space,
- practitioners/policy-makers bring a vast store of knowledge into the web,
- one-way messages placed in the connecting web need to be powerful,
- the most effective nodes in the web are shared spaces for two-
way, communication among researchers, practitioners and policy makers (DETYA 2000:368).

The conclusions about university researchers were equally strong in that:

- the signals [researchers] get from their universities about what counts as research and time well spent are wholly counterproductive to increasing the impact of their work,
- time and money for communicating research needs to be built into research budgets and agencies need to (gratefully) fund the additional cost, incentives for researchers to address development as well as research are needed (DETYA 2000:368).

Nonetheless, despite these difficulties:

Almost all of these networks were purposefully established. Inevitably there is a degree of chance and serendipity in exactly which individuals are involved, but most of the participants are logical entrants and have made conscious decisions which led them to the network (DETYA 2000:367).

The third study, *Teacher Knowledge in Action* (McMeniman et al. 2000), was conducted by a group of researchers from Griffith University. This study examined teachers’ practice for evidence of the impact of educational research. Ingeniously it set out to document what teachers do in classrooms and to identify the relative influence of educational research on these actions (DETYA 2000:381), conceptualising the practitioner as a mediator of propositional knowledge which emanates from a variety of research access points (DETYA 2000:383). Fourteen teachers from a variety of schools were videotaped in class. The videotapes were then subject to conceptual mapping as the teachers took part in a stimulated recall interview which was itself taped. The results are a series of complex but clearly interpretable concept maps which demonstrate links between practice and research. But the links are dramatically different from the theory to application paradigm which underlies much thinking about the impact of educational research. Indeed the role of the teacher outlined here demonstrates a much more active, complex behaviour on the part of the teacher.
The knowledge in action of classroom practitioners has at its conceptual heart the teacher as a self-motivating and intuitive person who mediates, researches, interprets, disseminates, transforms, learns, collaborates and communicates by accessing and interacting with formal and disseminated research sources as well as a constantly updated personal knowledge base (DETYA 2000:494).

The role of research in this complex process is not insignificant:

Formal research is not viewed by the participants in this study as a source far removed from or irrelevant to classroom practice. Indeed it is accessed and viewed as one of many proximal sources of influence along with disseminated research such as professional reading, in-service seminars, formal post-graduate studies, and initial training. Many of the teachers in this study saw research as a relevant, informed and accessible base in which to ground their action (DETYA 2000:494-495).

The fourth study, the bibliometric analysis of publication and citation rates of Australian educational researchers in international educational journals listed in the ISI index between 1981 and 1998 (Phelan et al. 2000), is basically concerned with the status, location and fields of educational research in Australian universities. It does, however, reinforce the point made by the earlier Strategic Review (McGaw 1992) that Australian educational researchers have made internationally significant contributions in a number of fields and that a large majority of this research has direct practical application to teaching, educational administration and policy development.

**Conclusion**

The conclusions to be drawn from these studies are varied and numerous and their complexity and subtlety are only glanced at in this paper. However, several major implications and conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, while the relationships between research and practice are often indirect, they are significant and numerous. Secondly, by using
more sophisticated methodologies which work backwards from practice, many of the ways in which research contributes to practice can be unravelled. Thirdly, the theory to application paradigm fundamental to so much research and development does not figure strongly in these accounts of educational practice. Fifthly, the models of relationships between the teacher/practitioner, administrator and policy-maker that emerge from these studies is far from the hierarchical instruction/compliance model that is so much part of a rational policy making/implementation model of education.

Indeed, despite attempts to increase the performativity of Australian education systems over the past decade, what emerges from these studies is an empirical account of interactions which are much closer to the model proposed by Atkinson (2000:322) where research is part of an educational process which opens up channels for debate and consideration of solutions to classroom problems. Or, as Ball (2001:266) puts it, research is conceived as a process that could contribute to teachers’ reflection, decision-making and judgements about their practice: not tell them what to do.

But perhaps the most important conclusion is that in a country that is divided between levels of educational authority, with major geographic dispersion, conflicting sources of accountability, multiple sources of funding, serious erosion of university support for research in education and no central funding authority dedicated to educational research, significant educational research and indeed research into educational research is being conducted. Moreover, much of it is applied and directed towards teaching and learning. It is not, however, applied as a mechanism which takes the side of policy against teachers, demanding their compliance to intellectual as well as political power, but as one of the sources of information which informed and expert teachers weave into their practice on the basis of their professional judgement.
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References


