

Doing and using educational research: engaging researchers, practitioners and policy makers in productive partnerships

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Resum

Un aspecte clau per als investigadors educatius que pretenen que el seu treball contribueixi a canviar el sistema educatiu en general i les escoles en particular és com promoure que els dissenyadors de polítiques i els docents usin i possiblement es comprometin en la recerca.

La difusió dels resultats en investigació educativa és problemàtica en alguns sentits. No és de fàcil accés per a usuaris potencials ni en el format imprès ni electrònic, particularment per als docents que no poden accedir a biblioteques reservades a docents o a serveis de recerca electrònica. L'ús dels resultats de la investigació educativa com a font d'informació per a la presa de decisions sobre la reforma educativa ha estat recentment considerat com a àrea d'estudi. A nivell nacional, al Regne Unit la major part de polítiques i estratègies són donades a conèixer a través de la investigació educativa i a través del procés d'aplicació que influencien els docents a les escoles.

Estudis recents han demostrat com els professors de les aules i escoles poden usar i prendre part en investigació per al seu propi ús i crear, d'aquesta manera, nou coneixement. No obstant això, es necessita entendre bastant més sobre aquests processos i sobre com es pot donar suport als docents en els intents esmentats.

Paraules clau: influir el canvi, testimonis clau, investigació educativa, pràctics, informar decisions, canvi educatiu, nou coneixement.

Abstract

A key issue for educational researchers who intend their work to influence change both in the educational system and in individual schools is how to engage key stakeholders both policy makers and practitioners in using and possibly engaging in research. The dissemination of the outcomes of educational research is problematic in several respects. It is not easily accessible to potential users in printed or electronic form, particularly to practitioners who do not have access to academic libraries or electronic search facilities. The utilization of educational research findings to inform decisions about educational change has only recently been opened up as an area of study. At a national level in the UK, most policies and strategies are informed by educational research and through the implementation process they do influence practitioners in schools. Recent studies have shown how practitioners in schools and classrooms can use and engage in research for themselves to create new knowl-

edge. However it is clear that much more needs to be understood about these processes and how practitioners can be supported in these endeavours.

Key words: influence change, key stakeholders, educational research, practitioners, inform decisions, educational change, new knowledge.

Resumen

Un aspecto clave para los investigadores educativos que pretenden que su trabajo contribuya a cambiar el sistema educativo en general y las escuelas en particular es cómo captar a los diseñadores de políticas y a los docentes para que usen y posiblemente se comprometan en investigación. La difusión de los resultados en investigación educativa es problemática en algunos sentidos. No es de fácil acceso para usuarios potenciales ni en formato impreso ni electrónico, particularmente para los docentes que no pueden acceder a bibliotecas reservadas a docentes o a servicios de búsqueda electrónica. El uso de los resultados de la investigación educativa como fuente de información para la toma de decisiones sobre la reforma educativa ha sido recientemente considerado como área de estudio. A nivel nacional, en el Reino Unido la mayor parte de políticas y estrategias son dadas a conocer a través de la investigación educativa y a través del proceso de aplicación que influyen a los docentes en las escuelas. Estudios recientes han demostrado cómo los profesores de las aulas y escuelas pueden usar y tomar parte en investigación para su propio uso y crear, de esta manera, nuevo conocimiento. No obstante, se necesita entender mucho más sobre estos procesos y cómo apoyar a los docentes en dichos intentos.

Palabras clave: influir el cambio, testimonios clave, investigación educativa, prácticos, informar decisiones, cambio educativo, nuevo conocimiento.

Summary

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Introduction

In a career in education spanning three decades I have been involved in educational research in a number of different capacities all with the intention of bringing about change in some way. Sometimes the research focus involved examining new approaches to teaching and learning at other times the research was an attempt to better understand some aspect of education. As a teacher, I took advantage of opportunities to try out different ways of teaching. Originally my research involved collaboration with other teachers as part of the local branch of the National Association for the Teaching of English. We

explored the teaching of writing, poetry, media education and information and communications technology. Later I was involved in local authority led research into speaking and listening supported by the Centre for Applied Research at the School of Education and Professional Development in Education at the University of East Anglia. As a local authority adviser I led the Norfolk Oracy Project that sought to develop speaking and listening for learning and contributed to the National Oracy Project. When I subsequently led the Norfolk National Curriculum Team I ensured that an element of the work involved action research to support the development of the new curriculum in schools. As an officer of the National Association for the Teaching of English I participated in research into teachers' perspectives of newly introduced examinations and tests that was reported to and used to lobby the then government Department of Education and Science. Recently as an educational researcher I worked collaboratively with research teams of teachers to coordinate actions and to assist in investigations that would help us to better understand the nature of students' disaffection from school and their perspectives of the school and classroom contexts. As an educational publisher and writer I have worked to make educational research more accessible to practitioners in printed and electronic form. These experiences, most gained while working outside of the academy although in collaboration with members of the academy, have shaped my thinking about educational research.

My view of educational research is essentially a pragmatic one. Initially, I became involved with educational research because I wanted to motivate and re-engage in learning the disaffected learners in my classes. I was not formally associated with a university and did not feel constrained by this lack of official backing for my independent investigations. I chose to join a local group interested in the teaching of English—a voluntary group comprising primary and secondary teachers, lecturers from the University of East Anglia and local authority advisers. This network of professionals helped me to connect with other educational professionals in the UK. Later as a member and officer of the National Association for the Teaching of English I was involved in research that sought evidence to counter claims made by government agencies and to represent practising teachers' views and experiences. The outcomes of research projects that I have been involved with have been disseminated through conferences and publications and some even used to lobby politicians and government officers. I would be delighted if the findings of any of the research projects that I had involvement with had a direct influence on practice in schools or government policy. However the main contribution of my research collaborations must be in adding a practitioner's perspective to the on-going debate about educational issues.

What stimulates educational changes at a micro or macro level?

It is worth considering the types of research that can inform or influence educational changes. Before designing a possible intervention it would seem desir-

able for policy makers and practitioners to understand the characteristics of the phenomenon they are examining and to explore relationships between variables. In an ideal world they would evaluate existing practices, examine the results of interventions and choose an appropriate way to implement their plans. They may be able to learn from a review of previous research.

Different types of research using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, large and small scale have value and have the potential to help influence educational changes in a number of different ways. The following list of different types of research illustrates this point:

- *Descriptive studies*: research that aims to produce a description of a state of affairs or a particular phenomenon, and/or to document its characteristics.
- *Exploration of relationships*: studies that examine relationships and/or statistical associations between variables in order to build theories and develop hypotheses.
- *Evaluation (1) naturally occurring* in the sense that the researcher makes no active attempt to control which groups of people are «introduced» or «exposed» to the experience, or situations, of the study, but rather observe phenomenon which would have occurred without their presence.
- *Evaluation (2) researcher manipulated* where there is an attempt as part of the research to change people's experience and as a consequence have control over which groups of people are 'introduced' or 'exposed' to the experience.
- *Methodological* studies which focus on the development or discussion of methods.
- *Reviews* that is studies that aim to bring together information, findings, opinions or conclusions from a range of previous reports.

At a macro level these types of research have the potential to influence the development of national policy and strategies. At a regional level research they can inform local policy-making for instance by illuminating local phenomenon, evaluating interventions and reviewing relevant research. In England, local education authorities for instance conduct detailed audits to establish the socio-economic context, performance of pupils and use their findings to make plans and set targets for improvement.

At the micro level, within schools in England educational change is influenced by the implementation of these national policies and strategies and local authority initiatives. For instance the national literacy and numeracy strategies, education action zones and local drives to improve pupils' attendance are all applied by practitioners in the context of their own school's circumstances. It is also the case, that in the pursuit of improvement, school leaders in the UK have increasingly become adept at using research methods for instance using pupil performance data to assess the effectiveness of their provision and to identify groups of pupils for specific support.

How can educational research be conducted and disseminated?

There are several different interest groups that have a potential stake in engaging in and using research to inform practice. Representatives of these groups often have a part to play in deciding the focus of research projects and assessing their quality through their representation on bodies that award funding for educational research. Expert researchers working within the academy from different research backgrounds bring to this endeavour the knowledge and experience of conducting research and are able to judge its quality. Practitioners in schools, teachers, school leaders and governors and those who support them may be interested in defining the focus of or engaging in research particularly where it has the potential to shape approaches to improving practice in schools. Educational advisers, school inspectors, consultants and lecturers who have more of an overview of schools also have a perspective on the issues surrounding school improvement and the elements that need further examination. Policy makers at national and local level too have a vested interest in deciding the focus of educational research and in the findings both to help define the most significant problems and to evaluate solutions to them.

Educational researchers can in practice be involved in research in a variety of ways depending on the focus of the research and the funding body. The following examples have been found in England in recent years.

- A. Educational researchers working *independently* in the academy and using schools as sites for research or using statistical data to identify research questions based predominantly on the research literature, designing investigations and publicising findings at research conferences and in educational journals.
- B. Educational researchers working *co-operatively* with practitioners to identify research questions that are relevant to them and designing investigations that are conducted by the researcher and feeding-back to and discussing findings with practitioners and the educational community at research conferences and in educational journals.
- C. Educational researchers working *collaboratively* with practitioners to identify research questions that are relevant to them; designing investigations that are conducted by the researcher and practitioner and presenting feeding-back to and discussing findings with colleagues in school and the educational community at research conferences and in educational journals.
- D. Practitioner researchers, *supported* by a researcher, identifying research questions that are relevant to them and designing investigations that are conducted by the practitioner and feeding-back to and discussing findings with colleagues and the educational community at research conferences and in educational journals.
- E. Practitioner researchers identifying research questions that are relevant to them and designing and conducting investigations *without the support* of educational researchers and feeding-back to and discussing findings with col-

leagues in school and possibly a wider audience of practitioners in other schools and possibly the educational community at research conferences and in educational journals.

These scenarios present the educational researcher with very different ways of working from virtually independent to collaborations with practitioners to little or no involvement in school-based research projects. Where educational researchers are involved and there is an intention to influence practice it would seem imperative that thought be given to how to engage practitioners in appropriate ways, perhaps by considering practitioners' perspectives, firstly when forming research questions and methodology and secondly when planning both for communicating findings and the possible implications for practice.

Currently, many published research articles do not describe whether or not practitioners were involved in designing research studies or their response to the findings or implications. Recently I have reviewed twenty-five research articles potentially of interest to teachers to find out if teachers were involved in these ways. Researchers report little or more often no involvement by practitioners in sixty percent of the articles compared with just over forty percent having a significant practitioner involvement.

The array of possible scenarios described above presents the educational researcher with the possibility of a range of different roles adviser and supporter to practitioner researchers, lead researcher and active disseminator. There are implications therefore for the range of expertise needed by educational researchers to fulfil these roles and the practical constraints of time and resources to carry them out. For instance communicating findings and considering the implications with practitioners are likely to be particularly time consuming and therefore a significant cost.

How can educational research influence changes in the education system?

There is a growing interest in the use of research evidence to inform the improvement of practice not just in education but in other public services and private organisations as well (Nutley, 2002; Desforge, 2001; Choo, 1998). This intention to make use of research implies that it needs to be communicated to stakeholders in a way that can be easily understood and accessed.

At the level of bringing research to a wider audience there are developments in the UK. Over the last few years there have been initiatives that bring research outcomes and practitioners into contact through research websites that provide digests of recent research reports (UK websites include: DFES, GTC, NCSL).

There is also a need for individuals to cross institutional boundaries to raise awareness of research and ways of working (Choo, 1998). In the educational context for example, more interactions between schools, the academy and policy makers are needed. There is some research to suggest that headteachers,

while not seeking to replicate studies, do use research to provide background information about issues pertinent to their school for instance to illustrate that problems can be approached in different ways or to illuminate issues (Stoll *et al.*, 2002). Other research shows that some teachers do use research to inform their practice in the classroom and adapt the findings to suit their circumstances (McGrane, 2001).

Educational researchers need to follow through their research to a dissemination phase if they are serious about influencing educational change. To do this they need to better understand how research can be used to inform decisions by practitioners about improving practice and to devise ways of working with practitioners that allow transferable ideas to be examined in new contexts.

How can school-based research consortia engage researchers, practitioners and policy makers?

Although only found in a small number of schools, practitioner researchers either independently or in collaboration with researchers in the academy have influenced educational changes within individual schools and sometimes this has reached other schools as well (Cordingley and Bell, 2002). In England the School-based Research Initiative led by the Teacher Training Agency, a government agency, funded four consortia in Norwich, Newcastle, Leeds and Manchester and Salford. Each consortium comprised schools, local education authorities and university departments committed to engaging in and with research. The project was overseen by a steering group of representatives from government agencies, teachers, headteachers, the research community and the four consortia. The role of this group was to advise and to monitor the work of the project. It brought together a range of perspectives from the academic to the practical that crossed institutional boundaries and helped to demonstrate through the working of the group the challenges faced by all parties engaged in this complex enterprise. The research community found out more about the pressures on schools that inhibited or helped the research activity. Practitioners from schools became more aware of the time restraints on researchers and the expertise that they brought to the enterprise. Local authority advisers were able to work with schools and university departments in a very different way to their normal school improvement role. Civil servants too were made cognisant of the complexities of engaging in research across institutional boundaries.

The School-based Research Initiative provides four examples of educational researchers working collaboratively with practitioners, in a supporting role and co-operatively. Several research projects from the Norwich Area School Consortium's (NASCs) research into students who were disaffected or disengaged from learning illustrate these ways of working.

— For instance in the first phase of the work each secondary school undertook its own exploratory studies in order to describe disaffection and to

create a shared understanding among staff in their school. Individual schools were supported by someone from the School of Education at the University of East Anglia who provided support for the research. In one instance a doctoral research student helped a school research group to conduct exploratory enquiries into teacher's perceptions of disaffection and to prepare, administer and analyse a survey of the views of all members of staff. This study enabled the school's research group to develop an insight into the range of views held by staff and provided them with sufficient information to design further investigation into the causes and possible ways of tackling the problem of students' disaffection with school (Gutteridge, 1999).

- In the second phase of the research, cross-school research groups sought to understand the issue from a wider perspective. In these groups teachers and researchers worked collaboratively to identify research questions, review relevant research literature, design research methodologies, analyse data and draw out findings. In the case of a study of effective systems of rewards and sanction in seven secondary schools this was achieved by research that sought to describe the phenomenon and to explore relationships between variables (Shreeve and Boddington, 2002). The result of the enquiry helped practitioners to better understand what worked under what circumstances. In a subsequent project one school undertook its own research and used the findings to inform plans for a new system of rewards and sanctions.
- Following the official end of the project a very experienced educational researcher led an enquiry into the attitudes and achievements of some students who become disengaged from mathematics. The research team worked co-operatively with practitioners to identify research questions. The team designed an investigation, carried out the enquiry and reported findings to teachers (Nardi and Steward, 2001).

The scenarios described above raise many practical issues for educational researchers in the academy and practitioners. For instance, where research is undertaken collaboratively, who takes ownership of the research? Pressure points occur, in my experience, at the points of data collection and analysis especially when this involves a large amount of data and report writing. It requires a high degree of commitment and motivation from individuals for these activities to be completed. Issues relating to the quality of the research particularly the research method also arise. In the case of the Norwich Area Schools Consortium there was an element of peer review and feedback to researchers. There were flaws in this approach as not all of the reviewers felt confident about contributing to this exercise. In my experience it is not just researchers who do not have time to disseminate findings. Practitioner researchers have considerable demands on their time. Often they do not have the resources available to share their work with others. Research is time consuming and some participants' lose interest before the work is concluded.

Schools have shifting priorities and opportunities for dissemination can be missed if those involved in the research leave or get drawn into other work. Disseminating findings can also be difficult if there is a lack of funding or appropriate opportunities for sharing outcomes and processes. During the NASC project there were opportunities to do this in Norfolk and nationally through conferences.

What are the implications for involving researchers, practitioners and policy makers in productive research partnerships?

The educational research sector needs to be more accessible to other educational professionals and the potential contribution of educational research to school improvement better understood. Educational research is predominately the domain of researchers and policy makers but it can be occupied by practitioners seeking to develop their own understandings in ways that seem appropriate to them. The contribution of different types of research needs to be better appreciated. Not all research studies lead directly to outcomes that can influence changes. Some precede the designing of interventions and help practitioners or policy makers understand the situation and the relationships between variables.

Research can influence practitioners and others both by directly adding to their knowledge of educational phenomenon and indirectly by suggesting to the reader an alternative way of tackling an issue. There would appear to be a growing interest among academics, policy-makers and practitioners about the contribution evidence informed practice can make to school improvement. It seems to me that the recent history of school improvement initiatives spanning the last fifteen years has encouraged reflection on what has worked and what has not and the factors affecting success and failure. In England and Wales there is a growing evidence base from national data sets and school inspections to inform a more detailed analysis of the success of national initiatives and schools' performance. The debate can therefore be based to some degree on evidence rather than opinion and speculation and practitioners can bring their perspectives to the interpretation of the evidence.

If school improvement through evidence informed practice is a way forward there is a need for structures to make it viable. In England and Wales at the present time there are conflicting demands on practitioners, researchers and local education authorities that make collaborative working difficult. There is little time available and limited funding for research studies to flourish. Educational research centres need to be funded so that they can bring different stakeholders together to engage in and with research. This would enable researchers to co-operate and collaborate with practitioners and local authority advisers to create knowledge and influence practice.

More attention needs to be given to how research can be disseminated. More outlets need to be found for the dissemination of educational research particularly websites that make studies immediately accessible. The medium is

available to all practitioners and has become the obvious starting point for enquiries. We need to know more about how practitioners and others access and use research. The process of acquiring knowledge and whether or not it is applied is not yet well understood. If we knew more it could influence our approach to dissemination.

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Websites for practitioners:

Department for Education and Skills - The Research Informed Practice Site
<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/>

General Teaching Council - Research of the Month - pages

<http://www.gtce.org.uk/research/romhome.asp>

National College for School Leadership – research and development – pages

<http://www.ncsl.org.uk/>

Norwich Area Schools Consortium - pages

http://www.uea.ac.uk/care/nasc/NASC_home.htm

Websites of organisations promoting or investigating the use of research in education

Centre for Applied Research in Education

<http://uea.ac.uk/care>

Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education

<http://www.curee-paccts.com/>

Research Unit for Research Utilization, St Andrews University, UK

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~ruru/home.htm>