

## **How can we engage practitioners, managers and policy makers with the research process and its outcomes?**

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### **Abstract**

The relationship between educational research, practice and the making of policy has always been complex. Policy makers have tended to utilise research findings when they have fitted with the political ideology predominant at the time. Where this has not been the case research findings have tended to be ignored or, in extreme cases, vilified. Practitioners, unless they have been studying for a higher degree, have tended not to engage with research. Their involvement in large scale research projects has generally been restricted to their participation as data providers. They have rarely been involved in the planning or monitoring of research. Generally, they do not have access to academic journals and when they do, academic genres have often made the content inaccessible. Historically, academic journals have been perceived as the most appropriate forum for the publication of research findings. Recent exhortations to academics to publish in forms and places which are accessible to practitioners have had limited success because the Research Assessment Exercise gives little credit for such publications. This discussion group will consider how practitioners and policy makers might be more involved in the planning of research and how research findings might be made more accessible to the wider educational community.

### **Background**

The relationship between educational research, practice and the making of policy has always been complex. While logically one might expect that research would inform both policy and practice the evidence suggests that this is an oversimplification. There are complex relationships between the political and social 'climate', the kinds of research undertaken and the extent to which findings are implemented in relation to either policy or practice (Barnes, 1985).

Recently in the UK there has been an increased interest in making educational research more useful in the determination of policy and practice. In 1996, in his Teacher Training Agency Annual Lecture, Professor David Hargreaves criticised educational research as being 'poor value for money in terms of improving the quality of education provided in schools' (Hargreaves, 1996a). He went on to argue that unlike medical research it was 'non-cumulative' and of little relevance to classroom teachers, remote from educational practice and often of indifferent quality.

This lecture had a major impact and served to raise awareness of the issues. Its publication was followed by much debate (Budge, 1996; Hargreaves, 1996b; Gray et al, 1997). The DfEE commissioned a report on educationalists' perceptions of the value of educational research and OFSTED commissioned a critique. Although the overall expenditure on educational research constitutes less than 0.2% of government spending on education (Bassey, 1997) there was a clearly perceived need by policy makers to explore its value, perhaps because total public spending on educational research is in the order of £70 million per annum. Ninety percent of this is funded by the government, the majority through HEFCE on the basis of the RAE (Hargreaves, 1996a, 1997; Bassey 1997, Hillage et al., 1998; Tooley, 1998).

To inform the debate, analysis of the kinds of educational research being undertaken was carried out. Two investigations suggested that much of the research was relevant to classroom practice. Examining the research submitted to the Higher Education Funding Council's 1996 Research Assessment Exercise, Bassey and Constable (1997) found that curriculum issues accounted for roughly one third of the articles submitted while a further one fifth was devoted to school/teacher/child and teaching and learning issues combined. Kerr et al. (1997) identified 10 categories calculating the percentage of research falling into each: educational policy (47%), subject-based enquiry (31%), teaching (28%), education management (26%), education in general (24%), learning (24%), key skills (15%), assessment (12%), institution effectiveness and improvement (8%), and factors affecting education (7%). Some research fell into more than one category. The authors concluded that there was a considerable concentration of research effort on pedagogy and related issues. However, the Ofsted critique (Tooley and Darby, 1998) was less positive, although there has been considerable criticism of its methodology, particularly the sampling.

In response to these concerns, in 1998, the DfEE commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to conduct a review, the main aim of which was to undertake an analysis of the direction, organisation, funding, quality and impact of educational research, primarily in the schools' field; and then to produce recommendations for the development and pursuit of excellence in research relating to schools. The report was based on:

- a literature review;
- interviews with 40 key stakeholders;
- a call for evidence from the research community, local education authorities and trade unions which generated responses from 46 researchers and research units, 13 local education authorities, and two trade unions;
- focus groups and interviews with 28 school teachers, advisors and inspectors.

The findings raised a number of concerns regarding:

- the fragmented nature of the research community;
- the lack of co-ordination among research funders;
- aspects of the research commissioning and funding process;
- the lack of involvement of teachers in the research process;
- the influence of the RAE which some felt did not sufficiently value engagement with policy-makers or practitioners in research content, design, process or dissemination;
- the quality of the research process in some cases.

The issue of dissemination was seen as crucial, in particular:

- the use of academic journals as the main research output and their inaccessibility to non-academic audiences;
- the lack of encouragement given to dissemination to practitioner and policy-making audiences by many research funders;
- the absence of time and intermediary support available to both policy-makers and practitioners to help them access research.

The report did find some interesting forms of dissemination and some researchers who placed great emphasis on involvement with teachers and other practitioners.

With few exceptions however the overwhelming impression the researchers found was one of 'rampant ad hocery'. There was little evidence of a comprehensive dissemination strategy by researchers, funders, policy-makers and those acting on behalf of practitioners, and no evidence of a concerted approach.

## **The discussion**

The ESRC Teaching and Learning Programme has placed the dissemination of findings and their implementation in practice as a key aspect of the research enterprise. The aim of this discussion group is to consider ways that change in practice based on research evidence can be brought about. The particular questions to be addressed are set out below.

1. How can the academic community as a whole generate change to increase the involvement of practitioners and policy makers in the planning and monitoring of substantial research projects?
2. What changes would be necessary to encourage the academic community to disseminate their findings in ways which would be more accessible to practitioners and policy makers?
3. How can the media and information technology be better utilised by researchers to present research findings to a wider audience?
4. What opportunities could be developed which would enable researchers and policy makers to meet regularly to share concerns and emerging issues in an environment which would allow a free exchange of ideas and be non threatening for both groups?
5. What kinds of opportunities need to be developed to enable researchers and practitioners to share ideas and concerns to generate research which will improve educational practice?

## **Starting points for the discussion**

The projects funded under the ESRC Teaching and Learning Programme address very different research questions and have very different audiences: teachers in school, FE and HE, those interested in work place learning and professional development. What is common to these user groups?

- they all work under enormous pressures and have many competing demands on their time;
- their practice in teaching is constrained by the systems within which they have to operate;
- the systems sometimes operate in ways which encourage professional practice which is detrimental to the learning of the participants;
- most do not have easy access to academic journals;
- some are distrustful of research findings and see their professional knowledge as superior.

How then are researchers to persuade time pressured professionals of the veracity of their research and to implement it in their practice?

An initial difficulty for researchers is that research findings are often complex and cannot communicate a simple 'soundbite' message. It may however be possible to provide guidance which takes account of particular conditions, e.g. In-school centres for the prevention of exclusion from school in at risk children can be successful **providing that** they are fully supported by the senior management team in the school and all of the school staff; the at risk pupils begin to take responsibility for their own behaviour; and their parents are actively involved in the process of change. Setting out the parameters of the findings may be the first important stage in transforming the research evidence into a form which can be easily adopted by practitioners.

Following this, the findings need to be transformed into practical activities which practitioners find meaningful and with which they can identify. The most appropriate mediators for this process are likely to be those practitioners who are involved in the research itself. In this process the key issues to be considered will be the extent to which:

- the suggested practices fit with practitioners belief systems about the nature of learning;
- it is possible to incorporate the newly developed practices into existing institutional practices;
- the suggested practices satisfy the requirements of external assessors of teaching quality and those monitoring standards.

If the findings challenge strongly held beliefs, the process of engendering change will be more difficult. It will be facilitated where there is strong compelling evidence that the changes are effective in improving learning and standards and the practice has the support of high status and credible advocates who are themselves practitioners

Where the research findings do not sit within accepted national, institutional or quality assurance frameworks the process will be more difficult. If this is the case those frameworks will need to be adapted before change can be generated. Those engaged in teaching will be very reluctant to adopt new teaching practices if they are not perceived as appropriate by inspection agencies. In schools, for instance, teachers are less likely to adopt innovative within class grouping practices if Ofsted inspections emphasise the importance of whole class teaching and structured ability grouping through setting.

Once these initial challenges are faced and resolved the focus may move to the means of dissemination. This may involve consideration of a range of factors including:

- how the materials can be presented in forms that can be easily digested by busy professionals;
- the choice of language which is clear and free of jargon but does not misrepresent the findings;
- how illustrations, examples, diagrams, etc. can be best adopted to aid communication;
- what communicative tools are most appropriate, e.g. articles in professional journals, the press, pamphlets, books, web-sites, video materials, etc.
- how the media can be used to draw attention to the findings, e.g. educational and national press networks, TV, radio;
- what structures might best support face to face dissemination, e.g. a series of conferences nationwide which are supported by government;
- how already established national networks can be utilised to enable teachers to contribute to the dissemination process.

What is outlined above is proposed only as a means of generating discussion. No claims are made that it is in any way a blue print for success. What is clear is that how the process of transformation of research findings into workable practices for teachers develops and how successful the projects are in changing practice in the very different environments within which the research is being undertaken are themselves worthy of research.

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