

From Research to Policy and Practice: Some Issues in Knowledge Transfer

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Policy-makers in Scotland and elsewhere are looking for more effective ways of using research evidence to support policy-making and to build good practice in schools and other educational organisations. This *Briefing* looks at some of the wider issues about the relationship between research and policy raised by such developments; discusses some possibilities and problems in what is coming to be known as 'Knowledge Transfer' from research to policy and practice, and reviews developments aimed at improving knowledge transfer in education.

- ▶ Policy-makers seek a closer relationship between research, policy and practice: to achieve this they are steering research towards problem-solving and towards consolidating knowledge about 'what works';
- ▶ Policy for the development of the teaching profession is intended to support more research-informed practice (for example through the Chartered Teacher Programme), and through performance measurement and review;
- ▶ Practitioners themselves seek closer links between research and practice, particularly where research can support productive interventions that challenge inequalities;
- ▶ Research on the transfer of knowledge from research to practice in fields other than education suggests that transfer is complex and dependent on particular conditions that may not be easily met in education;
- ▶ Educational research is difficult to transfer to practice because its findings may vary with context, or they may be interpreted differently, or they may contradict policy directions;
- ▶ The critical role of practitioners in the process of knowledge transfer in education needs to be recognised and developed;
- ▶ Current developments linking research to policy and practice pay insufficient attention to the complexity of relationships between policy-makers, researchers and practitioners and the extent to which they pursue different agendas.

Introduction: research, policy and practice

In February 2003 CES organised a conference on the theme of *Measuring Performance: Challenging Inequalities*. The conference brought practitioners, policy-makers and researchers together to explore the extent to which performance measurement in education supported practitioners in challenging entrenched inequalities in educational attainment that are associated with various forms of disadvantage. Researchers presented findings on the interrelated and cumulative effects of various forms of disadvantage, and practitioners and policy makers contributed experiences of combating structural inequality in schools and in the system. The discussion recognised the need for more and better data on individual pupils and schools, but also concluded that data in themselves were not sufficient as a guide to or an enabler of good practice. It was felt that researchers and practitioners need to develop more of a shared understanding about such data, and that practitioners need the opportunity to develop expertise in interpreting data and how to translate the lessons into programmes of intervention within their own schools. (A summary of the discussion is available at <http://www.ed.ac.uk/ces/conferences/KT1/summary.htm> *Briefing nos 26 and 27* also provide relevant material.)

The analysis of conference feedback suggested that practitioners had some concerns about the feasibility of using research to guide school or classroom practice and policy. Particular areas of difficulty were the interpretation of performance data; making sense of current theorising about the impact of social background on performance; and identifying and understanding variation within and between schools. The complexity of research findings poses a particular problem – how are professionals to design effective interventions when research often produces complex or mixed messages?

This difficulty in the process of *transfer* of knowledge from research into practice is not unique to education, though it has been suggested that other fields (for example medicine) are better at it. Policy-makers are currently seeking ways of making knowledge transfer in education more effective and more like the transfer process in medicine. This *Briefing* looks at some of the wider issues about the relationship between research and policy that are raised by the evidence-based approach; discusses some possibilities and problems in knowledge transfer from research to education practice, and reviews some current developments aimed at improving knowledge transfer in education.

Research and policy: a new relationship?

There has been a very considerable increase in interest by policy-makers in educational research in recent years. This follows from policy-makers' concern that research should support improvement in the performance of the education systems of the UK, in the face of increased international competition in global market economies.

Research should identify 'what works' in a context where policy-makers claim to be no longer bound by ideology and thus free to act on the basis of the best available evidence.

A number of policy initiatives support the apparently enhanced role for educational research. These include the establishment of the international Campbell Collaboration (<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/>) and the creation of the Evidence for Policy and Practice Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) at the Institute of Education, London (<http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk>). Educational research and policy are becoming closer through specific funded programmes such as the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (<http://www.tlrp.org>).

Research and Knowledge Transfer in Scotland

In Scotland there are indications of similar developments, for example the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council and the Scottish Executive Education Department have collaborated in the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS) designed to enhance capacity in research in education in Scotland to support schools' efforts in achieving the National Priorities in Education. In addition the Knowledge Transfer grant is intended to support Universities in translating research-based knowledge into benefits to the wider society. These may be – and often are – commercial benefits, as commercial spin-offs are developed in areas such as medical research or Information and Communication Technologies. However the Knowledge Transfer grant combines an emphasis on economic competitiveness with a wider agenda in which research 'plays an increasing part in Scotland's economic and social well-being, delivering the most gains possible for the Scottish economy and quality of life' (Scottish Executive 2003:40). Knowledge Transfer in education is likely to become increasingly significant given the importance of education to economic and social well-being.

The development of Knowledge Transfer connects to the overarching theme of this *Briefing* – the search for more systematic transfer from research to policy and practice. Policy-makers increasingly expect researchers and practitioners to be active in this process. This may require researchers and practitioners to change the ways in which they think about their work. The Chartered Teacher (CT) Programme, which requires the presentation of evidence of professional development in order to achieve CT status, may be seen as part of policy to support this trend.

Issues and problems

There are a number of issues that arise from the discussion so far. The first has to do with the processes and mechanisms through which research-based knowledge may be transferred into policy and practice;

the second has to do with the wider question of appropriate relationships between research, policy and practice.

Processes and mechanisms

- ▶ *Effective Knowledge Transfer needs preparation from both partners in the process:* we know that transfer of knowledge from research to practice is not straightforward. Research on Knowledge Transfer suggests that the capacity to absorb new knowledge is heavily influenced by preparedness, prior knowledge and openness to change. There is also a need for the partners involved in transfer activity to share knowledge bases, cultures and agendas.
- ▶ *Effective Knowledge Transfer is not linear:* much of the research on Knowledge Transfer points out that while policy-makers assume that Knowledge Transfer works by giving the knowledge to the group that needs it, this is not the best approach. Knowledge Transfer works better through processes that encourage discussion, problem solving and joint development.
- ▶ *Teaching is a practical rather than a technical activity:* teaching is more about making judgements than following rules (Hammersley 2001:22). It has multiple goals and its resources include experience, judgement and local knowledge as well as research. Moreover, teachers deal with difference not uniformity. While research can and does make a valuable contribution in identifying what has worked in some contexts, it is less able to identify a universal solution to a specific problem.
- ▶ *Research in education may not always produce 'actionable knowledge':* the Conference feedback discussed above exemplifies some of the issues. Practitioners drew attention to problems of transferability: education research may not produce clear-cut findings to inform practice; and it may reflect the situations in particular schools or classrooms. This is not just the result of much research in education being small-scale, qualitative, case study work, it also has to do with the point made above about contextualisation, and the point made below about replication.
- ▶ *What works in education is better understood as 'what works for whom in what circumstances':* critics of the evidence-based approach suggest that it makes incorrect assumptions about replicating successful strategies. *Systematic review* is the preferred technique of the evidence-based approach. It operates through the classification of programmes/interventions and maps their effects, looking for the maximum impact on the widest scale, so that these powerful impacts can be duplicated by replication of the appropriate programme. The causes of the impact are not explicitly examined. However an intervention

strategy often works because of a particular combination of factors. These include shared assumptions among teachers and researchers and policy-makers about why and how something should be done. So repeating the programme without attention to its 'underlying reasons and resources' (Pawson 2001:4) will not necessarily lead to repetition of the impact identified in the systematic review.

All of these points indicate complexity in what is sometimes taken to be a relatively simple transmission process. More work needs to be done on a number of issues, including on the ways in which we review research in order to arrive at a synthesis, and on working with practitioners in order to better understand the role of context and judgement in knowledge transfer.

Appropriate relationships between research policy and practice

- ▶ *Policy-makers pursue policy agendas: researchers pursue knowledge:* policy-makers and researchers have different agendas. These may overlap or coincide at times, but they are fundamentally different. Policy-makers implement policies in order to bring about change; they are accountable to the electorate and to other powerful stakeholders. Researchers may be increasingly concerned about the approval of funders and policy-makers, and they may pursue knowledge that has practical use, but they are also seeking knowledge in accordance with the rules of scientific enquiry and as part of a community of practice.
- ▶ *Technical solutions are not appropriate to questions of value:* the evidence-based approach relies heavily on the assumption that ideological difference in policy is no longer relevant, but education policy remains at least as much ideologically driven as evidence-driven. Research is asked to provide solutions to problems that used to be addressed through democratic debate because they involve value judgements and choices. It is not clear that research can provide such solutions but it is also doubtful whether it *should* do this.
- ▶ *Research comes after policy: should it be the other way round?* the logic of the evidence-based policy approach suggests that researchers should advise policy-makers about a particular problem on the basis of the evidence, a programme is then designed to address it and is subsequently implemented. In fact programmes or policy initiatives are designed by policy-makers on the basis of what they want done, and may only involve researchers in the implementation phase.
- ▶ *What happens to practitioners?* evidence-based policy and practice do not recognise practitioners' role in Knowledge Transfer. Indeed practical experience, craft knowledge and professional

judgement may be interpreted as barriers to transfer. Given that effective Knowledge Transfer is not linear but requires partnership, this may be problematic and it may also have consequences for teacher engagement and morale. Practitioners seem to be recipients of research, rather than interpreters or producers of actionable knowledge.

Conclusions

This *Briefing* has looked at the evidence-based approach to policy-making in education and its consequences for research and practice. It is not the intention to suggest that there is no room for improvement in relations between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. Nor is the intention to suggest that there is no possibility of improving transfer from research into educational practice, with beneficial results. The point is more to stress that a technical definition of transfer is inappropriate, and that there should be recognition of the distinctive strengths and purposes of policy-makers, researchers and practitioners. Finally, a good deal more work needs to be done on the processes that seek to support Knowledge Transfer in education, if its potential is to be realised.

Further reading

Croxford, L (2003) Measuring Performance – Tackling Inequalities? *CES Briefing no. 26*, CES, University of Edinburgh.

Ozga, J (2003) Measuring and Managing Performance in Education, *CES Briefing no. 27*, CES, University of Edinburgh.

References

Hammersley, M (2002) **Educational Research, Policymaking and Practice**, London: Paul Chapman.

Pawson, R. (2001) Evidence-based Policy: in search of a method, *Working Paper 3*, ESRC Centre for Evidence-based Policy and Practice (www.evidencenetwork.org).

Scottish Executive (2003) **A Framework for Higher Education in Scotland**, Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.

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