

EDITORIAL [for first issue of 2019]

Why educational research should not just solve problems, but should cause them as well

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As we move into the second year of our tenure as editors of the *British Educational Research Journal*, we offer some reflections on the state of educational research in the UK and beyond, particularly in relation to recent developments in research policy and research practice. We argue that in addition to enhancing the usefulness of educational research, that is, its capacity for *solving* problems, there is an ongoing need for research that *identifies* problems and, in that sense, *causes* problems. This kind of research challenges taken for granted assumptions about what is going on and what should be going on, and speaks back to expectations from policy and practice, not in order to deny such expectations but to engage in an ongoing debate about the legitimacy of such expectations – a debate that crucially should have a public quality and hence should take place in the public domain.

If there is one recurring theme in the discussion about educational research, it is the idea that such research should contribute to the improvement of educational practice. Ernst Christian Trapp (1745-1818), first professor of education in Germany (University of Halle, 1778), made a case in one of his earliest publications for the development of effective knowledge about and for education (see Trapp 1778). In his inaugural lecture from 1779, he added to this that education should be studied on its own terms and not from perspectives that are alien to it or that are unable to grasp the unique character of the ‘art of education,’ as Trapp called it (see Trapp 1779). Views about what education actually is, what is unique and distinctive about it, and even whether it can be characterised as an art or not, are far from settled. This is one important reason why we have argued that the nature of educational research should remain contested (Aldridge et al., 2018). Yet it is only in function of our answer to such questions that we can begin to ask which approaches are ‘alien’, and which approaches are ‘proper’ and ‘appropriate’.

Although the ambition to improve education is widely shared, and has been widely shared for a couple of centuries already, the question of how research can ‘reach’ the practice of education remains a topic of ongoing concern and discussion. References to an alleged ‘gap’ between research and practice are widespread, as are proposals for and attempts to narrow or even close this gap. There are two developments in relation to this that are currently prominent in the field of education, not just in the UK but also in many other countries. The first development focuses on research as it is being conducted in universities, research institutes and similar settings. Here there are increasing questions about how research is making an impact on educational practice, questions that in themselves are entirely legitimate, particularly when public monies fund such research. But there is also a strong steer that research should focus on generating knowledge about ‘what works’, so that the very production of research knowledge is geared towards producing *useful* knowledge which is able to answer the questions practice asks. (To frame this in terms of a demand for useful knowledge suggests, at least rhetorically, that there is too much research that, at least on this definition, is seen as useless.)

The second development is not aimed at changing the shape and form of educational research itself, but focuses on changing the location of research and the identity of the researcher. Here the idea is that the most useful research is research conducted *in* – or close to (see Wyse 2018) – educational practices themselves and, most importantly, *by* practitioners in those settings. Partly with reference to older traditions of teachers as researchers and educational action research, but also strongly motivated by a desire to conduct research about ‘what works’ at the level of the classroom, this development is often also presented as an attempt to (re)claim ownership of educational research by teachers and other educational professionals. This forgets (conveniently perhaps) that, in the UK, academic research has always operated quite closely to educational practice, particularly in the context of teacher education (see, for example, McCulloch 2018; Richardson 2002; Biesta 2011).

It is, of course, wonderful to see that so much is happening in the field of educational research, which is a strong sign of its vibrancy. It is also a sign of the ongoing ambition to contribute to the improvement of education, from the level of national, regional and local policy through to schools, colleges, universities, and workplaces, and the work of teachers and other educational professionals in such settings. But what is perhaps a reason for some concern is the almost exclusive focus on usefulness, and the idea that the improvement of education is best served by research that tries to address the problems of policy and practice, provides answers and, most explicitly, helps to find out what really ‘works.’ The rhetorical power of the idea of ‘what works’ is immense, and one could argue that this is the key question that is at the forefront of the everyday practice of teachers and, perhaps, also the key question that is at the forefront of what policy makers are concerned about.

Yet the rhetorical power of the idea of ‘what works’ – and similar notions such as evidence-based practice or evidence-informed teaching – should not make us forget that things never work in an abstract sense and never work in a vacuum. Alongside asking ‘What works?’ one should also ask ‘What does it work *for*?’ – and here it is not difficult to see that what may work for, say, increasing test scores or pushing national education systems higher up the PISA ladder, may not work that well or may not work at all for giving children and young people a meaningful orientation for their lives and their future participation in society. And in addition to the question of what particular approaches, strategies, policies or techniques work *for*, there is always also the question of what the costs are of making something work. Again, it may be relatively easy to gear education towards measurable progress, but if that becomes an aim in itself it can easily lead to a perversion of what education is supposed to be about (for a penetrating analysis of such developments see Ravitch 2011).

While the vibrancy of the educational research field is definitely positive, the underlying push in the direction of a purely *functional* definition of the task of educational research – educational research as problem solving – is worrying. After all, problems are never just ‘there,’ so the whole question as to what actually counts as a problem and who should define this is an important one for ongoing scrutiny. In addition, where some – either from the angle of policy or the angle of practice – don’t see any problems at all, research may actually be able to bring problems to the light. Rather, therefore, than just solving problems, research should also identify problems, problematise what is not seen as a problem, and in that sense *cause* problems – for example by showing, to refer to some historic examples from the fields

of inclusive education, social reproduction research and work on educational (in)equality, that not all children and young people are benefiting in equal measure from particular educational arrangements.

Educational research that operates in a problem-posing rather than a problem-solving mode is, in this regard, not just research on or about or for education, but is, in a sense, itself a form of education as it tries to change mindsets and common perceptions, tries to expose hidden assumptions, and tries to engage in ongoing conversations about what is valuable and worthwhile in education and society more generally. It is, to stay with the line of thought, educational research that does not only try to give students, parents, politicians and society what they ask for, but brings in new, different and sometimes difficult questions, in order to show that perhaps there's something else that should be asked for or aimed at. In addition to an educative stance toward educational policy and practice itself, it also remains important for educational researchers to educate everyone who wants something from it about what research can achieve, what can legitimately be asked or expected from research, and what lies beyond its scope, so that the expectations about research remain realistic.

These are not private or instrumental discussions about the technicalities of educational research – although such discussions remain tremendously important for the field of research as well – but are ultimately public questions about the societal roles and responsibilities of educational research in relation to its ongoing ambitions towards the improvement of educational practice. In this regard we conclude with the highly insightful and still highly needed definition from Lawrence Stenhouse of research as “systematic inquiry made public,” which highlights that inquiry into education can become better if it is conducted in systematic and transparent ways, and that what makes such inquiry into research is ultimately to do with the ways in which it opens itself for ongoing public scrutiny.

This is where there lies an important role, but also an important challenge, for ‘academic’ research – not so much because of its alleged technical superiority (which can, of course, always be debated) but because of the fact that it takes place in public institutions such as universities that, in principle, should be concerned about the freedom to ask inconvenient questions and cause problems, rather than just solving them. Similarly, there lies an important role, and challenge, for academic journals - not, again, because they publish research of superior quality, but because they can contribute to making the various inquiries from the wide field of educational research available for the widest public scrutiny. Peer-review remains a crucial dimension of this, but the ongoing development towards open access and even open research, will be of vital importance in relation to this.

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