

The contested relationships between educational research, theory and practice: Introduction to a special section

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The question of the relationship between educational research and educational practice or, in more general terms, the question of the relation between theory and practice, is one of the enduring questions of our field (see, e.g. Blankertz, 1978; Broekkamp & Van Hout-Wolters, 2007; Bellmann & Müller, 2011). The question is, in a sense, an artefact of the institutionalisation of educational scholarship and the professionalisation of educational research. After all, it cannot be doubted that teachers have always been and continue to be *thoughtful* practitioners. Their actions are never a matter of blind trial and error but are informed by a potentially wide range of theories and theoretical considerations. There has, in other words, always been theory-*in-action*. Along similar lines we could say that education is to a large extent an experimental practice. Teachers will have good reasons for doing what they are doing, but how students will respond to what teachers offer them is a fundamentally open question. Over time, experienced teachers will build up an understanding of approaches and strategies that have worked, but this never offers guarantees for the future. Such knowledge can, at most, make their actions, judgements and decisions more informed or more ‘intelligent’, as John Dewey put it.

However, when educational scholarship ‘moved’ to the university and other institutionalised settings—which happened, for example, in Germany in 1778 when Ernst Christian Trapp became the first professor of ‘Pädagogik’—the question emerged as to how such scholarship can still ‘reach’ educational practice. Similarly, when educational research became a specialist undertaking, conducted by educational researchers in educational research institutions, the question emerged of how such research can keep its connection with educational practice, both with regard to its ‘input’ and with regard to the communication of findings and conclusions.

Some see the persistence of questions about the relationship between research, scholarship and practice as a frustrating state of affairs that indicates the fundamental weakness of the field of education. This perception indeed has haunted the field of educational research and scholarship for a long time (on this see Condliffe Lagemann, 2000; Labaree, 2006). There have, therefore, been ongoing calls for ‘closing the gap’ between educational research and educational practice,¹ either by bringing research closer to practice—think, for example, of the British tradition of action

research—or by bringing practice closer to research—for example expressed in the call to make education (more) evidence-based.

However, instead of thinking that the gap between research and practice is a problem that needs to be solved, one could also conclude—to begin with because of the sheer persistence of this gap—that it actually *belongs* to the field of education. One important reason for this has to do with the importance of the autonomy of the practice of education—Friedrich Schleiermacher even referred to this as the ‘dignity’ of educational practice (*‘Dignität der Praxis’*). A thoroughly practical field such as education may be *informed* by scholarship and research, but it should not be subsumed under it or become incorporated in it. A degree of distance may actually be beneficial for the very sake of what is at stake in the practice of education. A case can be made, in other words, for a degree of critical distance (Biesta, 2007, 2020; see also Korthagen, 2007).

It is obvious, then, that the question of the relationship between research and practice, and also of the relationship between educational theory and education action, remains at the forefront of discussions about the field of education. Such discussions are first of all important for educational practitioners who are at the heart of the educational endeavour. They are also important for educational researchers, not least because the work they do generally comes with the intention to make education better which, as we have argued elsewhere, is not just a matter of solving problems but sometimes of creating problems as well, that is, to identify problems where they were not seen before (Biesta *et al.*, 2019). And they are important for policy makers who seek to develop policies that can support and enhance the quality of educational research, educational practice and their relationship.²

For all these reasons, then, it is commendable that these questions are also a key concern of the British Educational Research Association, particularly because matters concerning this complicated discussion are not settled and it is also not likely that they will be settled. It is not just that the state and nature of educational research *is* contested. We think that in a healthy discipline such matters should *remain* contested (Aldridge *et al.*, 2018). Over the past years BERA has worked towards a statement on what is referred to as ‘close-to-practice-research’ in order both to inform discussions about the relationships between research, theory and practice, and to provide a reference point for such discussions.³ This initiative was partly spurred by the most recent UK research assessment exercise—the Research Excellence Framework (2014)—which identified not just a large proportion of research of high-quality but also a significant amount of research close to educational practice that was considered of rather low quality, at least in the sense that it did not attract any research funding for the universities where such work was conducted.

Because questions of the relationships between research, theory and practice are so important and so persistent in our field, we were fortunate to receive a manuscript from Jim Hordern in which he raises a number of important questions about these issues, also in relationship to the BERA initiative. One particular issue he raises—and in this regard there may be an echo from Schleiermacher—is the question of how educational practice itself is actually understood in these discussions, particularly with regard to what makes such practices *educational*. Some time later we received an equally welcome manuscript from Dominic Wyse, Chris Brown, Sandy Oliver and

Ximena Pobelté, which documents work involved in the development of BERA's statement, thus shedding light on the many dimensions of the research, theory, practice interface.

Because of the crucial importance of these discussions for our field, we invited three other authors to write a brief reflection paper in response to the contributions by Hordern and Wyse. In doing so, we were particularly keen to have contributions from outside of the UK. This was first of all because traditions of educational research are to a significant degree nation or region specific; British action research is, for example, quite different from German 'Aktionsforschung'. It was also because even the very configuration of the 'field' of educational research differs significantly in different countries and regions, with a rather fundamental distinction between the configuration in the Anglo-American world and the ways in which education has established itself as an independent academic discipline rather than an applied field of study in Continental Europe (see McCulloch, 2002; Biesta, 2011). And thirdly we are also aware that the particular policy environment in the UK creates a setting, and also pressures and incentives, that are quite different from policy contexts in other countries. In this special section we present the two original papers and the three reflections. In addition, we invited Wyse, Brown, Oliver and Pobleté for a brief response to the whole set of papers.

Readers will see that the discussion about research, theory and practice is complicated and also that the discussion is far from settled. We see it as an indication of the vigour of our field that these issues remain debated and that they remain open to contestation. We leave it to the readers to draw their own conclusions from what is presented here and are grateful to all contributors for their generous engagement with what is and will remain a persistent issue in our field.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, the contributions in the special issue of *Educational Research and Evaluation* (volume 13, issue 3), edited by Pieters and De Vries. See also Pieters & De Vries (2007). For a discussion from the 1970s see the contributions in Blankertz (1978).

² We are taking the optimistic view that policy may stem from such an intention, although much policy research reveals that policies often interfere unproductively in educational practices and educational research.

³ <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/bera-statement-on-close-to-practice-research>

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