



Promoting a Research Agenda in Education within and beyond Policy and Practice*

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Abstract

Educational research should both inform policy and practice and be forward looking, anticipating the future questions of policymakers, teachers and the community. This paper uses one research organisation, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), as a case study to illustrate possible strategies for promoting research through utilising and building upon research-policy-making and research-practice linkages. It highlights some of the issues, opportunities, and risks for research resulting from the demand for evidence-based policy and from the trend for practitioners to be integral to the research team as research partners and as researchers. It also raises some challenges for research organisations if they are to work effectively both within and beyond the policy and practice parameters of the day.

Key Words: educational policy; educational practice; educational research; research organisations; researcher-practitioner partnerships

Introduction

The theories, practices and current priorities of policymakers and practitioners are central to educational research. In recent years policymakers have placed greater emphasis on seeking an evidence-base for their work as governments have sought to justify their spending with “proof” of positive outcomes for their investment. A key area of interest for policymakers in education has been to seek an evidence-based understanding about the characteristics of quality teaching that promotes learning for all students. The research informing the development of knowledge about teaching and learning is drawing upon the expertise of both researchers and practitioners, often with practitioners working in collaboration with researchers.

This paper explores these connecting and changing networks between educational research, policymaking, and practice. It highlights opportunities for promoting an educational research agenda that interacts with, informs, and possibly leads, current and future policy and practice interests. The paper begins by providing the background context, that of New Zealand and the New Zealand Council for Educa-

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tional Research (NZCER). It then discusses some of the issues, opportunities, and risks for research organisations working within a policy or practice framework.

Background

New Zealand is a small country of about 4 million people, 2,694 schools, 33,963 school teachers, and 35 tertiary institutions. Current educational concerns are similar to those common internationally such as: school self-management; school leadership; innovation in schools; teacher quality, recruitment and retention; ICT and learning; assessment and qualifications; and student achievement. The major challenge for education, reflected in the primary goal of the Ministry of Education, is identifying the factors that contribute to improving student achievement, particularly of those students who are currently not finding success at school. A disproportionate number of these students are Māori¹ and Pacifica. A related concern is the equitable provision of quality early childhood education, given that this has a significant impact on later success at school (Wylie, Thompson, and Lythe, 2001). There are similar concerns about access to, and participation in, future education and training (McLaughlin, 2002) and the factors that are known to have an influence on retention, completion, and achievement.

The New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), established in 1934, is an independent, national research organisation. Its mission is to support learning and teaching through quality educational research, resources, and information. It is partially funded through a non-contestable contract with the Ministry of Education (about a quarter of its income), the remaining income being generated from the winning of contestable research contracts² and from sales of research-based books, journals, and tests. The authors of these publications are NZCER research staff and other New Zealand academics and, while they are used by the education community, including policymakers, parents and the media, the primary audience is teachers.

Research and Policy

Researchers have always anticipated that the findings of their work would inform the development of policy but the way this occurred through the early 1990s in New Zealand was more random than planned. In recent years, however, a much more interactive relationship between researchers and policymakers has developed. Such relationships have developed as policymakers and politicians have taken more interest in having evidence-based policy, and in achieving an understanding of how to bring about sustainable improvements in educational practice (Wylie, 2003). This has led policymakers to more directly drive the research agenda as they have sought information to both guide ongoing policy initiatives and to support their

current investment. Of the four kinds of research the Ministry of Education is currently funding two are directly policy related: strategic policy research and evaluative research (Ministry of Education, 2000). The first is designed to assist in the identification of key influences on educational outcomes and it plays a critical role in setting national policy priorities. The second involves research in relation to design and evaluation and is intended to inform the design or refinement of specific programmes, policies, and resources. The third research focus is the monitoring of system performance to identify performance and trends in New Zealand educational outcomes (this includes participation in international studies such as PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS). The fourth involves the support for participatory research, collaborations between teachers and researchers.

As an organisation seeking to win research work in education the work programme of NZCER is obviously influenced by these policy priorities. We do have the opportunity to undertake some contestable strategic policy research. Examples include the longitudinal Competent Children project, which has gathered information on the development of some 500 children since 1993, when the children were nearly five, until the present where they are 14. The main aims of the project are to describe children's progress over time, and to chart the contributions made to that progress by some of the key experiences and elements of their lives: family resources, early childhood education, school experiences, interests and activities in the home or outside school, and relationships with peers (Wylie, Thompson, and Lythe, 2001). Another recent example of strategic policy research is a synthesis of the current evidence of what constitutes quality professional development as it relates to learning opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for children within early childhood education (Mitchell and Cubey, 2003).

On a project-by-project basis, however, the majority of the contracts undertaken are related to the evaluation of existing initiatives, increasingly of a formative kind, and so these form a significant component of the NZCER annual research programme. Over the past year a number have focused on the evaluation of programmes to support the professional development of teachers, some have been curriculum based such as a recent project in environmental education, and others have focused on evaluating the effectiveness of a specific initiative. One example of the latter was the evaluation of resources offered to secondary schools (the School-Tertiary Alignment Resource – STAR), a programme that aims to improve retention in the senior secondary school and to facilitate the transition and access from schooling to further study and/or work (Vaughan and Kenneally, 2003). Another project evaluated a programme of interventions designed to reduce the stresses associated with excessive workloads, to build professional capability, and to improve the teaching practices of Māori secondary school teachers (Waiti, Manipoto, Bolstad, and Wylie, 2003).

NZCER does have some scope to set its own research agenda through the non-contestable component of its funding. The projects within this category link to, but are not directed by, the policy issues of the day. A current example is a three-year

study that is exploring the way in which student subject choice at Year 11 and Year 12 changes in response to the implementation of a new senior secondary school qualification regime (Hipkins and Vaughan, 2002). Another project is analysing innovative programmes offered by seven schools, which are designed to assist students to develop pathways to further study and work (Boyd, McDowall, and Cooper, 2002). The aim of these projects is to contribute to the knowledge base in areas of educational significance and to inform the debate of the day and future policy-making through the dissemination of substantive, independent research findings.

Issues, opportunities, and risks for the research agenda

While all these projects are of inherent interest, and do contribute to knowledge in the respective areas, the findings, presented in individual reports, are insufficient on their own. Commonly, the timeframes, funding constraints, and contract specifications lead to work that can be under-theorised and not adequately linked to related studies and/or to knowledge in the field. With the policymakers being the initiators of much of the research, and their focus on seeking “proof” of positive outcomes for their investment, the evaluations tend to be narrow in scope and so limit the opportunities for the researchers to ask important questions. The STAR evaluation described earlier, for example, was premised on the aims of the programme being a good thing for students³.

It was only when that focus of the evaluation was extended that these outcomes could be questioned to some extent, revealing the aims of the programme were in conflict, especially in certain contexts.

Further, frustratingly for researchers, there is a tension between presenting research findings in such a way that readers can check the validity of the conclusions reached on the basis of the data reported, and writing a report that is engaging, and of use, to a wider community of interest.

Another issue for research is that while there is a call for evidence-based policy, the evidence presented within published research reports is viewed by policymakers as just one source of possible evidence. In education, too, there is no consensus on what constitutes appropriate research evidence, and knowledge of “what works” tends to be influenced by the questions asked, and is largely provisional and highly context-dependent (Nutley, Davies, and Walter, 2002). As Nutley et al. (2002) also argue, if we are to be successful in developing an agenda where research evidence is more influential we need to be more explicit about the role of research compared with other sources of information, be clearer about the strengths of the various methodological approaches, and emphasise methodological pluralism and complementary contributions from different research designs rather than epistemological competition.

Given these cautions and challenges, at NZCER we are utilising a co-ordinated strategy to promote the research agenda within, and beyond, the policy priorities of the day.

The first step involved the identification of key research themes enabling synergies between diverse projects and so, over time, the development of extensive knowledge and authority within these selected areas. The current themes include: early childhood education; Māori education; assessment; curriculum and learning; school improvement; the senior secondary school and transition to further study and/or work; and ICT and learning. Even within these broad themes priority is given to specific sub-themes. For example, in the context of early childhood education, research has focused on constructive contexts for promoting learning and expanding knowledge about pedagogy and using this knowledge as useful criteria for policy evaluation.

NZCER is a relatively small organisation and so to enable it to undertake work within all these selected themes a growing number of projects are of a collaborative nature. To pursue the early childhood education programme, for example, a policy evaluation was completed in partnership with the Kōhanga Reo National Trust.⁴

Another evaluation that is focused on improving outcomes for children through involving parents and whānau⁵ in early childhood education is a collaboration between researchers, professional development advisers, teachers, and parents. This strategy has also enabled NZCER to provide opportunities for other researchers, who have the relevant expertise, but who are unlikely to win contestable work on their own. In a small way, this contributes to developing capability within the New Zealand research community. In the future NZCER will be looking for opportunities to support the development of educational research capacity and capability through networking with other educational research institutes and to collaborate on parallel or joint studies where there are shared research questions.

The second step has been to allocate annual funding from the NZCER reserves to writing that draws upon the findings of research with the intention to either contribute to ongoing thinking about a particular area by taking a more scholarly and theoretically informed approach to a particular issue, or to comment upon an issue of the day. An example of the former is a project that will lead to the publication of a monograph on alternative education that considers the various ways alternative education is being conceptualised both inside and outside mainstream education and how these views shed new light on ideas of diversity, choice, and pathways. An example of the latter is an occasional paper that analysed relationships between ownership and quality in early childhood education centres (www.nzcer.org.nz).

Unfortunately, the scope to undertake such work is very limited. NZCER has few resources to allocate in this way and on a national basis the main avenue for research funding that is largely curiosity driven, that is basic or blue-sky research, is the highly contested Marsden and Public Good Science funds. Both these funds allocate a relatively small amount to the social sciences. Further, the country does not have a history of sponsorship or patronage for research, in education or any

other areas. In fact the research and development investment in New Zealand is very low relative to other OECD countries (OECD, 2001). However, it is research of this type that moves out of the fields of policy and practice into the universe of education as an academic field (Lingard, 2001) and that has the potential to make a difference by contributing new understandings and new ways of thinking about educational issues. It is research being undertaken within an academic context that is, for example, challenging research working within a policymakers agenda in the area of school-to-work transition. Research being undertaken outside a policy framework tends not to view young people as objects of study but places young people, their experiences, how they make decisions, and the significance of these decisions to them, central to any study and as a result has identified some mismatches between current policy and lived experiences.

An authoritative, independent, and critical voice is a fundamental role of research and any research organisation, but not one without challenges. The occasional paper I mentioned earlier that examined the relationships between ownership and quality in early childhood education showed that, in New Zealand, staff in privately owned childcare centres were less qualified than those within community owned centres or those within public institutions. Using evidence from research in New Zealand and overseas of the links between qualified teachers and the quality of early childhood education it was argued that this had implications for standards of care and education in New Zealand. While these findings were positively received by many early childhood educators, private service providers saw it as a *“hatchet job on our sector”* (Mitchell, 2003). It led one of the opposition political parties to ask questions within Parliament about the funding of NZCER and to cast aspersions about our independence from the current government, which is placing considerable emphasis on early childhood education. However, despite the risks involved in taking a stance on an important educational issue, I believe that to be a research organisation requires us to “make” and “take” problems to study, to seek opportunities to undertake research of a curiosity-driven kind, and to act as a voice of dissent and critique so that the research contributes to the future and is not just reviewing the present or reflecting the past (Lingard, 2001).

Research and practice

Just as researchers have been hopeful that policymakers would be responsive to the findings of their work there has also been an intention to influence the thinking and actions of practitioners. However, as research reports need to be sound academically so that they are viewed as creditable to policymakers and other researchers, these are often lengthy and dense. For research to speak to practitioners the findings need to be transformed and translated into accessible forms. Short, readable summaries in hard copy or web-based, and presentations at teacher subject association

conferences are strategies that we are currently employing. However, a great deal more needs to be done to build the dialogue between researchers and practitioners.

Teachers are the main audience for many of NZCER's publications including *set: Research information for teachers*, a journal published three times a year. The circulation of this journal continues to increase, indicating NZCER's success at dissemination as well as practitioners' growing interest in research that informs their work. Also, as researchers have recognised the need for this work to be more useful to practitioners, they have used advisory groups and networking with educational sector groups, including teachers, to ensure that their research proposals cover questions which are important to these groups, and that research designs are realistic given early childhood education and school workloads (Wylie, 2003). It is certainly no longer acceptable for research to be "done to" teachers and there is a growing focus on research being undertaken in some form of partnership between researchers and teachers. Research involving such partnerships, while potentially fruitful, raises a number of issues, particularly in terms of actually establishing and implementing successful partnerships. It also provides both opportunities and risks for research.

Issues, opportunities and risks for the research agenda

There are two significant drivers in the call for researcher-practitioner partnerships. First is the recognition of the importance of classroom-based research. As we have learnt from research about the factors that affect learning, educators want to know more about: the nature of learning itself; the significance of the interactions between teachers and students, and between students and peers, and students and parents and family; and to understand how these dynamics change at different levels of education, from early childhood to tertiary (Wylie, 2003). If such research is to enable the building of new knowledge about the dynamics of teaching and learning that will inform the development of policy and lead to different practices, then teachers need to be central to the focus of any project, as well as centrally involved in it. This does not deny the importance of systemic and institution-based policies for achieving the desired outcomes from education but I agree with Lingard and Mills (2002) who argue that: "*Top-down imposed change that under-values teachers does not work, at least for achieving improved student outcomes. Such imposed change works with a different logic of practice from that of classroom teachers – usually pedagogical considerations are absent with a focus on structures and teachers are 'done to' rather than enabled* (p. 65)."

The second driver promoting researcher-practitioner collaborations is the argument that constructive and critical engagement in research – their own and others – is increasingly the way for teachers to structure their professional learning, and to learn to reflect on their practice (The General Teaching Council for England, 2002). It is argued that a "*vibrant professional culture depends on a group of practitioners*

who have the freedom to continuously reinvent themselves via their research and knowledge production" (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 19). The actual role of the teacher(s) in research, however, is somewhat contentious. Strong advocates of teacher action research argue that if such research is co-ordinated and integrated it will provide the kind of coherent, research-validated body of professional knowledge that teachers need (Hiebert, Gallimore, and Stigler, 2002). Nuthall (2002), however, takes a view that: *"Working on their own, teachers can only see the classroom through their own eyes, and can only occasionally see what students are learning. They lack information about the other factors affecting student experiences, especially hidden peer influences. In general, what is going on in a classroom that leads to student learning is more complex and difficult to disentangle than a teacher has time to record, analyse, and interpret* (p. 55).

While this has some truth, Labaree (2003) draws attention to the limitations of teachers working in professional isolation and of the importance of them having a theoretical mirror which they *"can hold up to their own problems of practice in order to see the ways their problems are both similar and different from those facing teachers in other settings"* (p. 20).

As with most arguments in education there is not one answer but different solutions depending upon the nature of the teaching- and learning-related problem being investigated and the personnel involved in the investigation. There are a multitude of ways that collaboration between researchers and practitioners can be implemented in practice but they are not without some inherent difficulties, as they require an equal valuing of the perspectives of both teacher and researcher and this has not been a position commonly taken by researchers in the past. However, establishing and maintaining effective partnerships is key to many educational initiatives, and as two New Zealand researchers who have worked for several years on a Ministry of Education school improvement initiative suggest, this needs to be viewed in a multi-dimensional manner. Timperley and Robinson (2002) argue that partnerships are about relationships that include, but are not completely determined by, the way in which power is shared and that they need to be task-orientated as in the absence of a task, there is little motivation for the participants to act in partnership. They suggest that *"if partnerships are to realise their potential benefits, both the relationship and task dimensions need to be integrated in ways that establish processes for the partners to work together and to learn from one another about how to achieve the task"* (p. 14).

It is this kind of collaboration between researchers and practitioners that the New Zealand government is seeking to promote with its new Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI).⁶ NZCER has been contracted to co-ordinate this research initiative, to provide leadership, and to build awareness of the initiative, its research programme, and findings. The TLRI aims to build knowledge and understanding about teaching and learning in order to improve outcomes for learners in the early childhood, school, and post-school sectors through:

- building a cumulative body of knowledge linking teaching and learning;
- enhancing the links between educational research and teaching practices and researchers and teachers, across early childhood, school, and tertiary sectors; and
- growing research capability and capacity in the areas of teaching and learning.

Each year there will be a call for research proposals and the following principles will guide the final selection:

Principle One: The research projects within the TLRI will address themes of strategic importance to education in New Zealand.

Principle Two. The TLRI will draw on related international work and build upon New Zealand-based research evidence.

Principle Three. The TLRI research will address the strategic themes and be forward looking.

Principle Four. The TLRI research will be designed to enable substantive and robust findings.

Principle Five. The TLRI will recognise the central role of the teacher in learning.

Principle Six. The research projects within the TLRI will be undertaken as a partnership between researchers and practitioners.

A partnership approach is expected at all stages of the research process from the design of the research to communicating the results to teachers and other educators who can use them to make a difference to practice. While the underpinning view of partnership is consistent with that proposed by Timperley and Robinson (2002) it is expected that the nature of the actual partnerships will develop and change over time. One aim of the initiative is to build educational research capacity and capability and this includes the capability of researchers to undertake quality research in the context of teaching and learning and the capability of teachers to teach better by engaging with the findings of research. Equally, it could be viewed as researchers developing a deeper understanding of teaching and learning through engaging with teachers, and teachers gaining expertise as teacher-researchers, supported by researchers.

This year was the first year of the TLRI and 180 Expressions of Interest were received, 30 were short-listed, and 14 funded. The short-listed proposals were those that aligned most strongly to the aims and principles of the TLRI. While most of the short-listed projects provided evidence either of an understanding of collaborative partnerships and/or were able to demonstrate how the practitioners within the project team would be able to influence the design and implementation of the proposed project, the partnership between researchers and practitioners was lacking or weak in many of the 180 Expressions of Interest. Frequently, practitioners appeared to be subjects of, or participants in, the research, rather than partners. Many of the proposals in this category were limited as research projects, and were essentially potential teacher development projects with a focus on developing teacher content and/or pedagogical content knowledge. On the other hand, teams with a strong

practitioner base often lacked research experience and this was reflected in proposals where the link between the research aims, research questions, and methodology was unclear, or where the scope of the project was unrealistic, with the aims of the project being too broad or too diverse in focus.

There is obviously considerable scope for promoting research through these researcher-practitioner partnerships but if the ultimate findings of the research are to be robust enough to inform practice there needs to be more widespread understanding within the educational community about what constitutes a well-designed, relevant, and achievable project. As the co-ordinators of the TLRI, NZCER will be offering workshops in research methodology for those interested in developing proposals in the future, and seminars for interested researchers to meet with practitioners who are keen to be involved in research. NZCER will continue to disseminate information to support practitioner-researchers with resources to assist with research design (see Cardno, 2002; Jenkins, 1999).

If research-practitioner collaborations are to be productive, there also needs to be a deeper understanding of the notion of partnership, as well as of the ethical issues associated with researchers and practitioners working together within the context of teaching and learning. Again, dialogue within the community of interest is required, dialogue that addresses ideas of effective partnerships and the ethical issues and dilemmas of practitioner research and research that is practice-focused. There is a growing consensus, for example, that practitioner-researchers must not only provide evidence that the students involved will be protected and that there is an adequate plan conforming to ethical guidelines, but also that they should engage in a dialogue about their personal values and about the impact of proposed study (Zeni, 2001). Zeni also argues that a researcher working in collaboration with practitioners has an ethical obligation to write up the findings in a style that communicates to both researcher and practitioner audiences, so that stakeholders can understand the results and contribute to any critique (2001, p. xviii).

Concluding comments: Promoting a Research Agenda

In this paper I have used NZCER as a context for exploring the connecting and changing linkages between educational research, policy and practice and attempted to identify some research-policy and research-practice issues that may be of general interest. I have argued that a research organisation needs to take a multi-faceted approach to its research programme. There is a need for research to link to current policy and practice issues, and for researchers to be responsible for purposefully disseminating the findings to a range of target audiences. It is also vital that researchers are pro-active in talking with policymakers and practitioners and communicating in a manner that is accessible to the different audiences. The growing focus on practitioners as researchers, in whatever form that takes, provides a further opportunity to extend the impact of research on the educational sector.

Again, researchers have a responsibility to contribute their expertise to ensure that the work undertaken within this context focuses on questions of value, is well designed, and addresses agreed ethical guidelines.

I have also argued, however, that it is not enough for a research organisation just to work within the policy and practice parameters of the day. Researchers have a responsibility to question and critique current wisdom and to be forward looking when posing questions for exploration.

In the context of NZCER, as an independent body that relies on generating most of its income, the research programme needs to contribute to building a sustainable business, while being set within a clear vision that a substantive, robust and focused research programme can contribute knowledge that will make a difference to education today and in the future.

Notes

¹The indigenous people of New Zealand.

²Mostly from the Ministry of Education.

³The aims being to retain students at school and facilitate their transition beyond school.

⁴A national Māori early childhood organisation.

⁵Extended family.

⁶Refer <http://www.tlri.org.nz>

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