

Gregson, M., & Spedding, T. (2018). Learning together: Evaluating and improving further adult and vocational and education through practice-focused research. In C. Nägele & B. E. Stalder (Eds.), *Trends in vocational education and training research. Proceedings of the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER), Vocational Education and Training Network (VETNET)* (pp. 165–172). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1319661>

Learning Together: Evaluating and Improving Further Adult and Vocational and Education through Practice-focused Research

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Abstract

This paper argues that the relationship between educational research and educational practice cannot be reduced to the simple application of knowledge gained from research conducted by others. It contends that far from teachers being passive consumers of knowledge produced by others, often in the form of ‘blueprints’ or ‘recipes’ for good practice, teachers are in fact creators of new educational knowledge as well as potential generators of and contributors to educational theory. It asserts that the new learning involved in putting an idea, concept or theory from educational research into educational practice *is* a process of inquiry and therefore an important and legitimate form of educational research. The paper discusses how an approach to the continuing professional development of teachers, based upon practice-focused educational research and inquiry-based pedagogy, coupled with a programme of dedicated research support, can enable teachers to produce significant, well-theorised and systematic educational research, leading to improvements in educational practice. This paper concludes that a practice-focused and inquiry-based model of educational evaluation and improvement offers education and policy professionals in the Vocational Education and Training sector (and potentially in the schools sector) an alternative to current technical-rational, top-down approaches to inspection and improvement in educational contexts.

Keywords

educational evaluation, educational improvement, educational research, further, adult and vocational education (FAVE).

1 Introduction

Political, policy and educational professionals responsible for the evaluation and improvement of Further Adult and Vocational Education (FAVE) in England are currently faced with a number of challenges. The first is that top-down, micro-managed approaches to the evaluation and improvement of teaching, learning and assessment in FAVE system, such as those currently

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used widely in the England by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), incur expensive overheads. These are becoming increasingly difficult to justify in terms of empirical and robust evidence of educational improvement. The second is that despite significant levels of public investment in the continuing professional development of teachers in the FAVE sector, the return on this financial outlay has not yielded discernible value for public money in terms of actual improvements in the form of raised levels of achievement for learners. The first challenge points towards potential systemic problems in current approaches to the external evaluation and improvement of educational practice in the sector, suggesting they are in urgent need of review. The second draws attention to how educational improvement within organisations, through taken-for-granted approaches to the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers, often based upon 'CPD days' and other management-led 'CPD events' might also be failing. We argue that these problems place a duty upon those currently responsible for educational evaluation and improvement and the provision of widely accepted approaches to teacher CPD to investigate what is going wrong and why with the aim of identifying how these issues might begin to be addressed.

Problems of evaluation and improvement in systems of professional and vocational education based on blunt measures of educational outcomes are not new. Indeed, they have been widely criticised in the literature on the grounds of their rationalist technological concept of knowledge which seeks to separate ends from means and theory from practice (Carr, 1995; Dunne, 1997). From a technical-rational perspective, theoretical, disciplinary knowledge can and should be separated from practical skills, creating a systematic separation of the theoretical from practical in which the theoretical always dominates the practical in circumstances where the former is routinely imposed from the top-down *by* those who 'know better', *upon* those whom it is assumed 'know less' (Carr, 1995).

Coffield (2017) draws attention to the high financial and human costs of expensive, flawed, top-down, technical-rational systems of educational evaluation and improvement. He notes how they divert scarce resources away from pressing educational issues creating a climate of fear, fuelling an impulse, towards what Ball has described a kind of 'preformativity' (Ball, 2008). For Ball, conditions for 'performativity' are brought about through the introduction of new policy technologies. These policy technologies he argues are devices which change the meaning of practice and social relationships in education and in other public sector activity. The same policy devices he contends, introduce forms of control linked to the language of the market, competition, outcomes (targets) and accountability which 'articulate new ways of thinking about what we do, what we value and what our purposes are', reducing 'education to a commodity rather than a public good' (Ball, 2008, p. 42). A key factor in all of this is that these new policy technologies are not only internalised but also realised by teachers and education leaders by way of the production of evidence demonstrating compliance and adherence to bureaucratic measures of quality (Sennett, 2008; Coffield, 2017).

In a policy climate in England in which the lines between educational practice, educational theory and educational research are becoming ever more firmly drawn, and where approaches to educational research are increasingly based upon randomised control trails and the elevation of 'research intensive' universities above their more lowly 'teaching' counterparts, this thinking is on the rise. This movement appears to be founded on at least three rather dubious assumptions. The first is that teachers are passive consumers of knowledge gained from research conducted by others. The second is that the role of teachers is simply to apply this knowledge in their practice. The third is that theory comes from research (not practice) and that knowledge gained from practice is somehow inferior or 'second rate'. The implications here are that educational practice, educational theory and educational research can and should be developed in separate contexts, by different groups of people, for different purposes. This paper argues that such separatist ideas are not based upon an adequate understanding of how educational practice

is constituted and how it develops but are instead founded in questionable technical-rational epistemic perspectives. One-sided rationalist understandings of how educational practice is constituted and developed, it is argued, are not only misplaced and inadequate, they also lead to serious problems in the evaluation and improvement of education. Sarason (1990) describes this tricky technical-rational bind as the 'predictable failure of education reform'. He notes how systems of education based on a technical-rational world view, lock power relations in place in which teachers are expected to act as if experience is not real. In this situation he argues fabrications of truth and reality are demanded and supplied on demand. Nothing really changes because it cannot. The conditions of the transaction are not there to allow truth and reality to 'appear' because this might cast doubt upon/question how 'rational' and how 'technical' the approach really is. In this way, Sarason claims education reform based upon technical-rational approaches to educational evaluation and improvement becomes locked into predictable failure.

By challenging the basic epistemological assumptions which separate educational practice, theory and research, this paper invites consideration of alternative ways of going about all three. However, changing the way that we tackle the evaluation and improvement of educational practice in the FAVE sector in England is unlikely to be easy. Voices from across the field of educational research warn that such developments are hard won and that what appear to be 'quick fixes' seldom, if ever, 'fix' anything and never quickly. Furthermore, the relationship between educational research, the improvement of educational practice and the development of educational theory is complex and contested. In the UK, recent proposals to reshape the landscape of educational research and its connections to teaching, place increasing emphasis upon identifying the impact of research upon educational practice. In addition, expensive shortcomings of approaches to the improvement of educational practice developed remotely by educational researchers/policy/political professionals, imposed upon teachers from the top-down and evaluated in terms of outcomes-based metrics have become well-documented in the literature over the past twenty years, bringing this debate into sharper focus and the therefore more open to public scrutiny (Elliott, 2001; Ball, 2008; Coffield, 2017).

Of particular concern here, is the way in which top-down approaches to educational evaluation and improvement are based upon a particular kind of technical-rationalist logic which overlooks the importance of context and undervalues the role of teacher judgement. Such technical-rationalist approaches tend to oversimplify educational problems and enduring educational issues regarding what can and should be measured and valued in education. They do this in order to reduce educational outcomes to what can be easily and instrumentally measured. It is argued that this approach is operating to inhibit real improvements in educational practice by overlooking subtle, complex and crucially important aspects of the realities of how educational practice is constituted, how professional knowledge is 'transferred' and how a practice actually improves.

Research conducted in England in the schools sector (Fielding et al., 2005; Ball, 2008) and in the FAVE sector (Gregson & Nixon, 2009; Coffield, 2017), indicate that the imperatives of highly prescriptive, top-down systems of accountability, performativity, inspection, league tables etc., introduce a climate of fear and distrust between teachers, education leaders and evaluators and that this in turn encourages and increases tendencies towards instrumental behaviour and fabrications of compliance discussed above. In a climate of austerity, responsibility for and the costs of educational improvement are laid firmly at the door of teachers and education leaders. At the same time, overall levels of funding are being reduced, budgets are getting tighter and teacher workloads are increasing. There is a deep irony here. While the Ofsted inspection regime in England controls the field of judgement, what is judged and what criteria for measurement are used, the work of collecting performance data, monitoring and reporting in order to produce and supply the volume of information needed by inspectors and the inspection process to make those judgments (for the purposes of monitoring and controlling the sector), the

weight of this work is placed upon the shoulders of teachers and education leaders. Elliott (2001) and Coffield (2017) point out how the burden of this activity consumes so much time, morale, energy and resources that in fact this it is operating to seriously limit and even debilitate the sector's capacity to make real improvements in practice. Elliott observes the seductive and fatal flaw in technical-rational systems of education is that ends can masquerade as means while real educational needs remain unmet.

2 Methods: Beginning with ourselves

Hunt (1989) argues that the quality of human experience is a neglected aspect of educational research and that the starting point in the change process is personal and practical knowledge rather than theoretical knowledge. Following Hunt, this study began with problems in a practical setting, namely the practical experiences of teachers (our own and those of others) in relation to approaches to educational evaluation and improvement in England. It is important to note that we encountered this troubling aspect of educational practice *before* we came to see that it called for and could not adequately be addressed without engaging in critical consideration of the epistemic relationship between educational practice, theory and research and the assumptions about this relationship inherent in technical-rational approaches to educational improvement. This eventually led to a co-operative search by policy professionals in the ETF, practitioner-researchers from across the sector and researchers at the University of Sunderland to explore an epistemic alternative to current approaches to educational evaluation and improvement based upon pragmatic rather than technical-rational epistemic perspectives. We did not begin with an understanding of what the epistemic conditions for this alternative might be. These have come to light in the course of this study. They are still emerging.

We did begin however with some assumptions of our own which are worth reiterating here. Our own experiences of educational practice and educational research had helped us to see that that the relationship between educational research and educational practice cannot be reduced to the simple application of knowledge gained from research conducted by others. Our own work in the fields of educational evaluation and improvement and studies of reflective practice, originated in problems we encountered in putting these and other educational theories and ideas from educational research into practice. This helped us to see that far from teachers being passive consumers of knowledge produced by others, often in the form of 'blueprints' or 'recipes' for good practice, teachers are in fact creators of new educational knowledge as well as potential generators of and contributors to educational theory. Finally, we came to see, through the work of Dewey (1933), Carr (1995), Eraut et.al. (2004) and Fielding et. al (2005) that the new learning involved in putting an idea, concept or theory from educational research into educational practice *is* a process of inquiry and therefore an important and legitimate form of educational research. What follows is an outline of some emerging guiding principles which seem to be important in realising an alternative approach to educational evaluation and improvement in practice. These guiding principles are offered by way of an invitation to the reader to help us to improve them. Please contribute to their development by adding your ideas to ours and pointing out what we may have misunderstood something or key issues that we may have underestimated or overlooked, by contacting us at: maggie.gregson@sunderland.ac.uk and trish.spedding@sunderland.ac.uk

2.1 The ETF-SUNCETT practitioner research programme

The ETF-SUNCETT PRP is an extensive national programme of practitioner-research in England which aims to develop understandings of the practice-focused educational research, its role in improving educational practice and its potential to contribute to theory. The PRP aims to open up pragmatic epistemic conditions in which teachers, education leaders, policy professionals and University research active staff can systematically co-operate in identifying,

planning, carrying out and critically evaluating a research investigation designed to explore and improve an aspect of educational practice identified by teachers as being in need of improvement. Depending upon the scale and scope of the research this includes documenting the investigation and its contributions to knowledge, through the production of 5000 word written assignment at Masters Level or an MPhil thesis. Other research outcomes include the production, presentation and justification of the findings of the research in the form of a research poster and a research presentation at the Foundation's Annual Research Conference in London. These research outputs are providing important sources of evidence of the results from the PRP. In addition to the above, different forms of quantitative and qualitative data are being collected in terms of research impact grids and evaluations of residential PRP Research Development Workshops.

Research Development Workshops are used in the ETF-SUNCETT PRP project to investigate how various stakeholders experience and respond to challenges in conducting, completing and reporting their practice-focused research, including sharing the findings of their research with their colleagues, wider stakeholders, policy professionals and other researchers in the field. The current cohort of the PRP research population consists of forty-five practitioner-researchers from across the FAVE sector in England. According to their previous research experience and qualifications, practitioner-researchers are allocated to either an MA Short Course or MPhil programme of customised research support. The overarching purpose of the PRP is to create epistemic conditions in which teachers, education leaders, policy professionals and university researchers can talk openly about problematic aspects of educational practice from a teacher's perspective and in the context of direct experience. PRP practitioner-researchers aim to address a number of questions including the question of, if/how educational practice and the development of educational theory can be improved through practice-focused educational research. The study employs a number of research methods. These include the analysis of a variety of research outputs produced by practitioner-researchers (including scholarly research posters, MA Short Course assignments, MPhil theses, case studies, critical incidents and other reported measures of impact in the form of case studies). These data sets are being supplemented by data from evaluations of Research Development Workshops.

2.2 Six guiding principles of the PRP

Direct, practical, co-operative and mutual engagement in practice-focused research appears to be a central principle in the ETF-SUNCETT PRP. This suggests that a starting point for educational research should be an issue or concern in educational practice identified by the practitioner in the context of their own professional experience.

The second principle is that each PRP participant should have the support of a research active mentor from a University who has previously worked as a teacher in the FAVE sector and who still has direct contact with the sector.

The third principle is that attending a number of residential Research Development Workshops where practitioner-researchers work alongside a research-active mentor of the SUNCETT team, helps practitioners to begin to engage in the research process by enabling them to talk openly about the 'problem in practice', think about it more carefully in order to try to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of the problem and the extent to which the work of other researchers might contribute to helping to address the problem.

The fourth principle is that the mentor and the practitioner-researcher embark on process of co-operation and mutual engagement in identifying an intervention which may potentially address the 'problem in practice. The practitioner-researcher then implements the intervention and examines the consequences of the intervention in practice in collaboration with their mentor. It is important to note that this is not a one-way process in which teachers simply applies the ideas and theories of others to their own practice, or where the mentor simply tells them

what to do. On the contrary, it is a process through which teachers and their mentors question and challenge theory and published research in the light of and with reference to their experiences of practice. In this way, teachers use practical experience to contribute to the development of theory and develop the courage, care and qualities of mind to critically examine and challenge ideas from research conducted by others in practice.

The fifth principle is that each residential workshop is designed to reflect relevant stages in the research process. At each workshop, University mentors provide stage relevant research training for PRP participants. It is important to note that this involves SUNCETT and other invited research mentors sharing their own experiences of research with PRP participants at each stage in the research process (including, mistakes made, and lessons learned). Residential Research Development Workshops are designed to provide time and space where PRP participants can talk openly with their mentor and other PRP participants about what is really happening in practice. Workshops also provide time to think, time to read and time to write about what is happening in practice with reference to the work of others who have thought, read and written about the same issues in educational (and other forms of) practice.

The sixth principle is that each practitioner-researcher is expected to prepare and present and justify the findings of their research in the form of a research poster and an assignment/thesis, depending on their pathway.

3 Results

Results from previous PRP cohorts and data from the current cohort support the claim that teachers in the FAVE sector do not routinely have enough time, space, support or resources to conduct systematic research into their own practice with a view to improving it. The same data indicates that they are also increasingly limited by time and space made available to them for their continuing professional development. This lends further support to the argument that current technical-rational approaches to educational evaluation and improvement in England, based on the assumption that it is enough just to tell teachers about the good practice developed by others, is failing to enable teachers and education leaders to realise educational improvements in practice. Practitioners repeatedly cite these problems as being a direct result of the financial and human costs involved in providing data for real and anticipated short notice Ofsted inspections. According to the teachers in the current cohort, the lack of opportunities to engage in research into their own practice in order to improve is made difficult by the lack of supported opportunities to systematically investigate and address aspects of their practice which they already know are in need of improvement. Teachers and education leaders who do get opportunities and support to engage in practitioner-research through the PRP, report that traditional approaches to CPD based upon management organised 'events', together with historical and socially constructed divisions between educational practice, theory and research, which routinely elevate theory and research above practice, have in the past discouraged them from engaging directly in research practice-focused research and from using practice to interrogate, challenge and extend ideas generated from theories and question research conducted by others (Duffy-McGhie et al., 2018).

Results from the PRP to date suggest that co-operation between practitioner-researchers and their research-active SUNCETT Mentors, coupled with mutual engagement in a research project designed to investigate an educational problem identified by teachers in the context of their work, is crucial in developing research capacity across the sector, building appropriate levels of scholarship, capturing 'hard' and 'soft' evidence of impact and securing real improvements in practice. Almost all (98%) of the practitioner-researchers who begin the PRP see their research through to completion and present the findings of their research at the ETF Annual Research Conference. Around the same number (96%) successfully submit written accounts of their research in the form of an MA assignment or MPhil thesis. To date one practitioner-

researcher from a previous cohort has completed a PhD and co-authored a book with her SUNCETT mentor. A further three from the current cohort are beginning to pursue their research at PhD Level. Eight PRP participants from current and previous cohorts are contributing chapters to a book edited by their SUNCETT Mentors and the policy professional who is ETF Head of Partnerships.

4 Conclusion

The alternative to technical-rational approaches to educational evaluation and improvement outlined above, attempts to draw upon what we know about how the incremental ways in which a practice is constituted and how it develops through problem-finding, problem solving and critique (Sennett, 2008). It criticises current technical-rational approaches for their expensive and time-consuming shortcomings in practice. It is motivated by a desire not to idly criticise but to constructively challenge systems of educational evaluation which make intelligent people do stupid things in the name of the kind of unintelligent accountability which accompanies technical-rational approaches.

We have argued above that experience, learning and the development of knowledge happen through participation in practices and that it is in practice that theory is tested through the processes of inquiry involved in putting an idea into practice.

Following Elliott (1996) and Coffield (2017) the alternative approach and emerging guiding principles discussed above, aim to make educational evaluation and improvement more democratic and educational for those participating in a wide variety of practices including the practices of education, evaluation, theory-development, research and policy-development.

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