Why does Research Evidence have So Little Impact on Education Policy?

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INTRODUCTION

This brief paper looks at the challenges of using research evidence to help formulate education policy. Over the last 30 years, governments and funders worldwide have sought to improve the quality of primary evidence produced by publicly-funded research (NRC 1999). And understanding of effective interventions to inform education policy (and practice) has improved somewhat since the creation of the US Institute of Education Sciences, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in England, and other initiatives. There has also been progress in methods of synthesising research results, with the work of Evidence Centres and others (Davies and Silloway 2016). Evidence of what apparently works in real-life, or not, is increasingly available to research users for the first time. However, there is a long way to go, and many problems remain. Education policy-makers generally say that they want, and use, good evidence, but do not always act correspondingly (Gallway and Sheppard 2015). The paper looks at some of their problems and then at some possible ways forward.

Research quality

Despite improvements, most education research is not good enough to have any policy impact. Multiple systematic reviews of education research have revealed that much of what is described by its authors as being "research" is nothing of the sort. In addition, many reports of apparent research are indecipherable even to other professional researchers, and most of the remaining clearer reports portray research that is fundamentally flawed and should not be trusted or acted upon. Therefore, it is tempting for some potential users, like policy-makers, to adopt an apparent heuristic of simply ignoring all research evidence. Worse, they might either select or even generate "research" to support what they planned to do anyway for other reasons.

However, there clearly <u>are</u> good studies relevant to education policy and, where found, these could be aggregated to provide a basis for evidence-led policy-making. This aggregation is necessary because one study, however robust, is not usually a sufficient basis to make a real-life decision (about spending money or risking people's futures on). Aggregation leads to an immediate problem of how research of differing quality can be summarised fairly, and to a subsequent problem of how the results are best conveyed to their intended real-life users.

It is clear that synthesis of the evidence on any topic will lead to invalid, and therefore potentially costly and dangerous, results if it is not calibrated for the quality of the underlying evidence. Effect sizes tend to be larger for weak studies, and so distort the true picture if naively included (Gorard and Chen 2025). This raises the question of who makes the quite complex judgements about which studies can be trusted, and how (Gorard 2021).

Some of the other barriers to evidence use

Influencing policy appears relatively easy, and is achieved routinely but not justifiably by advocacy groups and others with a vested interest in policy outcomes. Influencing policy justifiably though research evidence is less likely to succeed when competing with tempting advocacy claims. And policy stakeholders might find it hard to distinguish the two anyway. Advocates can always find or produce some "evidence" to support their claims, and too many of those employed as academic researchers also act as agents or advocates for their causes. Policymakers and advisers need to be helped to see why using evidence is much more justified, and more ethical.

Policy "impact" or similar can take a long time, and policy actors may not be prepared to wait. Impact will often involve actors stopping doing something because it is not working (this is hard to admit), or not doing something or indeed anything. This kind of evidence-based inaction is even harder for policy-makers, especially new ones, and extremely hard to assess as being an impact of evidence.

Research evidence is not the only justifiable influence on policy. Politicians are beholden to their manifesto promises, and to their values and principles. Viewed in this way, evidence is perhaps not so much about what a policy-maker should try to achieve, and more about how something can best be achieved. Other suggested barriers to greater use of good evidence include the time needed to engage with the often volatile research on any topic, users' lack of skill in finding, interpreting, and implementing evidence (Myracle 2019), individual, team, or system attitudes and behaviour (Harvey and Kitson 2015), rapid staff turnover, and administrative changes (Rose et al. 2017). Potential users may also be unaware of the evidence that is available (Sparks 2018), feel unable to act in accordance with evidence because they lack the authority or resources to change existing practice (Gerrish and Clayton 2004), or have other priorities and pressures.

How to get evidence into use

A major problem is that the improvements in substantive education research have not been matched by an equivalent growth in knowledge of how to get that research into widespread use (Powell et al. 2017). Structured reviews of research evidence tell us that more is known about how to get research evidence into use in educational practice than about policy. Instead of robust research about how best to get evidence into use, hundreds of theories and frameworks have been proposed supposedly explaining evidence use, but few if any have ever been tested (Langer et al. 2016). "Evaluations" are largely limited to asking those involved how research use happens, rather than providing robust evidence on the effectiveness of any routes/models. A review of translational work for early-years education found no RCTs, for example, among 231 pieces (Booher et al. 2020).

Most approaches have never been tested, and the few trials that have been done are not encouraging (NFER 2017). The relative paucity of causal knowledge about how to get that evidence into use is neither efficient nor cost-effective. We must apply the same standards to research use as we do, quite properly, to generating the substantive findings in the first place. There is an unacknowledged double-standard here.

A recent review found a total of 33 studies that addressed, with at least minimal quality, the causal question of how to get evidence into use for both policy and practice in all fields (Gorard et al. 2020). Hardly any were from education. There is little robust causal evidence on the types of intervention that actually encourage educators to take account of research in their decision making. Most studies do not even assess whether practice changes after dissemination, let alone whether student (or patient) results improve as a consequence.

It is clear, however, that simply making evidence available to users is not an appropriate method of general transfer, whether access consists of full open access to research articles, or where the results are combined and modified into a research summary. These essentially passive approaches reach only a subset of their intended audiences and do not promote regular or sustained use of evidence. There is no evidence yet that linking users and researchers in research projects, perhaps via user groups as encouraged by research funders, is effective. Although training and workshops are popular, they do not generally promote research use (Ilic and Maloney 2014). Studies have also found that research leads make no difference to student attainment or future teacher behaviour (University of Bristol 2017).

There is some evidence that top-down audit and feedback is an effective way to get evidence into use in practice, not policy (Siddiqi et al. 2005). Another is population level interventions, such as the fluoridation of water. Such interventions are so heavily engineered that their evidence-base is no longer clear to users. Wow would this work with education policy? What is urgently needed is good evidence of what works in getting policy-relevant evidence into contention to influence policy actions. But funders like the ESRC have repeatedly refused to support this, claiming that we already know the answers.

What are the implications for evidence use in policy?

Ethically, for research evidence to be used in real-life its implications for policy need to be warranted, with an audit trail to the details that would convince a careful reader and justify affecting people's lives. It is probably not feasible for research users, in general, to decide which studies are robust in any area, and then to synthesise their findings. However, for all users including researchers, it would help greatly if there was less research to sift through. We need to agree quickly on some basic standards for education research, so that the task of sifting is made easier by excluding much of the majority "research" that is largely a waste of time and money. And research funders need to stop funding research that will be nowhere near trustworthy, and instead to help build up libraries of successfully tested ideas. These would all increase the proportion of potentially useful substantive research that is available.

What is more likely to work for both policy and practice, is identifying high quality evidence, engineering into fairly a more usable format, and presenting it actively or iteratively. We need trusted conduits to do this job (trusted to do it without fear or favour). Identifying and agreeing these is a major task.

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