Putting Research Evidence into Practice

Policy directions and professional futures

Putting research evidence into practice is high on the contemporary policy agenda, but we still know relatively little about how best to put research findings into practice – and into policies guiding practice. This article looks at current ideas and approaches in this area and points to future policy directions.

Introduction

Putting research evidence into practice is high on the list of priorities on the contemporary policy agenda. Although considered a desirable goal of educational reform both internationally (Malin et al., 2020) and in the Irish context, it is not without controversy or debate (Brown and Zhang, 2017). We still know relatively little about how best to put research findings not only into practice but also into policies guiding such practices (Gorard et al., 2020). This creates challenges for policymakers and practitioners alike.

It is now widely purported that informing practice with research evidence, broadly conceived, can help us figure out challenges we face as education professionals rather than simply relying on hunch, intuition, or experience alone. Common-sense use of research evidence (Gordon and Conaway, 2020) helps us surmount such challenges in more reasonable ways, even if it is not always conclusive.

Lingard and Gale (2010, p. 23) urge that 'all education practitioners, policy makers and teachers, should be interested in research and knowledge production and see themselves as participants in the field of educational research broadly defined. Educational professionals should be research-informed, but also research-informing.' This inclusive position – one emphasising the importance of what they call a 'researchly disposition' – dissolves the often-divisive practice and research evidence boundaries, seeing them as porous and mutually constitutive.

A classic definition of research is 'systematic enquiry made public' (Stenhouse, 1981, p. 104). Brooks et al. (2017) suggest that evidence is broader than research but not limited to data, highlighting that quality of evidence ought to be judged in connection with its intended use. Brown and Zhang (2017, p. 383) describe evidence as 'a combination of practitioner expertise and knowledge of the best external research, and evaluation-based evidence'.

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In these definitions, pluralistic ideas abound about engagement with, use of, and generation of research evidence. They reflect what has been learnt from global contexts where systems had become too technocratic, too narrowly focused on data, where they offered too little agency to teachers or leaders pursuing research or enquiry, and where quality use of evidence has not been sufficiently considered (see Monash University's Q Project).

Brown et al. (2017) note that engaging with research evidence guards against automatic judgements, informs critical thinking, and promotes sense-making. Conaway (2019, p. 7) writes that 'the research community's contribution operates as much through its structured approach to learning as through any specific knowledge it generates'. Researching, at the desk or in the field, therefore helps us to learn: to wonder, to question, to examine similar as well as alternative perspectives, to critique, to theorise, and to be or act with greater purpose and in a more informed manner in our practice and more expansive consideration of challenges encountered in practice. Research done well, conducted ethically and with care, helps those of us engaged in its generation or who use its results in our professional practice (or both) to do good in and for the communities we serve as educators.

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De Paor and Murphy's (2018) conclusions about teachers' views on research as a model of professional learning in Ireland are also important to mention. De Paor and Murphy identified two main issues when teachers engage with, use, or generate research through professional learning activity: (1) assuring and empowering teachers to ensure it is relevant, and (2) the necessity to provide more support, particularly when generating research, although lessons can also be learnt for engagement and use of research.

Policy directions

Observations of note include, but are not limited to:

- establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
- Department of Education and Skills' (DES) cornerstone framework 'Looking at Our Schools' and the process of school self-evaluation (SSE), involving evidence-gathering and evidence-based planning
- Centre for Effective Services: 'Using data to inform decision-making in education' with the DES
- Teaching Council's CROÍ (Collaboration and Research for Ongoing Innovation), *Using Research In Our School* resource, FÉILTE, Cosán
- Teachers' Research Exchange (T-REX)
- Network for Educational Action Research in Ireland (NEARI)
- Centre for School Leadership, and its Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership, with focus on professional enquiry connected to 'Looking at Our Schools' and SSE
- reform of initial teacher education and the notable use of research in compound forms, such as research-rich environment, research-based approaches, research capacity, student research, and research-based profession, in Sahlberg (2019)
- Student Teacher Educational Research (STER)

- Economic and Social Research Institute
- Educational Research Centre
- activities in Education Centres
- ResearchEd Dublin
- private data analytics companies, such as companies that help schools to interpret assessment and tracking data.

In perusing documents connected to the above, many terminologies – all centred on varying ways of putting research into practice, and practice into research – are clear, including: reflective practice; self-study; action or practitioner research; evidence-informed, evidence-based, or inquiry-led practices; data and decision-making; and improvement science (such as plan, do, study, act cycles) embedded in networked improvement communities.

Although it is not the primary focus of this article, it is important to flag these different approaches to putting research into practice (and, as I have implied, practice into research). As Dyson (2020) states: 'The existence of different versions of inquiry, with different traditions, is rarely acknowledged'. Each of these traditions has a distinct approach, pointing to two important observations: there is no singular approach to putting research evidence into practice; and there is a nuance of values between each approach. Putting research into practice is not just a prescriptive or technical task, because value systems frame its conduct, including our own values as researchers and the values of the tradition from which particular approaches to enquiry emanate.

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Professional futures

It is worth considering how we are 'adopting and adapting' (Young et al., 2018) in order to determine our professional future and not to let the act of putting research into practice become too narrow, burdensomely technocratic, or accountability-driven (reflecting what Gorard et al. (2020) term policy-based evidence making). Taking this route would likely squander the generative opportunities presented by these policy advances to enhance professional learning and would miss the opportunity to enhance the profession's status.

Therefore, in planning for our professional future, I argue that we should:

- carefully consider the various traditions of research highlighted above, and question sources of research that we consume carefully
- be explicit about the role that values play in putting research into practice
- work to promote time, space, and joined-up thinking about, and focus on, putting research into practice across initial teacher education, induction, mentoring, professional learning, school leadership preparation and development, and coaching
- ensure continued focus on improving the educational infrastructure to foster engagement, use, and generation of research

- demonstrate system leadership that is imaginative, focused on the developmental potential of putting research into practice, and subscribes to promoting and supporting professional agency
- display committed, courageous, curious, and supportive school leadership practices spanning system, senior, middle, and teacher leaders who demonstrate a 'researchly' disposition
- foster reimagined opportunities for teachers and school leaders within and beyond their schools to take up roles focused on research collaboratively in teams, rather than the tokenistic solo research lead role common in many educational organisations
- adopt a renewed vigour and purpose, particularly but not singularly because of Covid-19, to focus on issues of equity as well as excellence when putting research into practice.

Conclusion

I concur with the (inter)national moves that perceive research-informed practice as desirable. I am nonetheless aware that there are many challenges to achieving this ideal, and I suggest that – as it stands – how our professional future is determined is up for grabs. With the considerations highlighted here, I argue that it is up to those of us working in and alongside the profession to determine this 'researchly' future, to ensure it is in our best interests – but fundamentally in the best interests of those we work with and serve.

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Irish Diaspora Leaders receive SFI St Patrick's Day Science Medal in Washington DC

l–r: Prof Mark Ferguson, Director General of SFI and Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government of Ireland, with Prof Neville J Hogan, Sun Jae Professor of Mechanical Engineering and Professor of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Dr Ann B Kelleher, Senior Vice President and General Manager at Intel, both recipients of the SFI St Patrick's Day Science Medal for their significant scientific contributions to academia and industry.

On 11 March 2020, in Washington DC, the SFI St Patrick's Day Science Medal was awarded to Prof Neville Hogan, MIT Robotics Pioneer, and Dr Ann Kelleher, Intel Senior Vice President and General Manager, in recognition of their outstanding contributions to academia and industry.

Now in its seventh year, the SFI St Patrick's Day Science Medal is awarded annually to US-based scientists, engineers or technology leaders with strong Irish connections, as chosen by an independent selection committee. The Medal recognises Prof Hogan and Dr Kelleher's significant roles in supporting and engaging with the research ecosystem in Ireland.

"I am honoured to accept the SFI St Patrick's Day Academic Medal, which not only recognises my work, but also the strong Irish connections across the research community in the U.S., Professor Hogan said.

"Working at the forefront of robotics to progress knowledge and discovery with the potential to transform our societies and economies, I am very proud of my Irish roots. The strong Irish commitment to education is a major factor in the success of Irish people everywhere.

Welcoming her award, Dr Ann B Kelleher said:

"I am honoured to accept the SFI St Patrick's Day Industry Medal for my work at Intel. I am a firm advocate for industry collaboration between Ireland and the United States, given my career with Intel began in Leixlip. The benefits and positive impact of this collaborative relationship are considerable. This is evidenced by the long and fruitful collaborative research engagement between Tyndall, multiple SFI Research Centres and US multinationals.