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Educational Research

Chapter 7 - The Eternal Search

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In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in the use of research in schools. This has particularly been the case where effect sizes are concerned, the work of John Hattie being the most well-known. The reliance on effect sizes is part of a wider 'what works' approach to research which appears to be gaining popularity in schools. A 'what works' approach rests on the assumption that certain research methodologies can be used to unearth optimal ways of teaching, or the best way of approaching a particular pedagogic activity.

In the present educational environment this has a ready appeal. In a system that expects constant improvement and progress, coupled with a data driven approach to professional development, the idea of being able to identify pedagogic activities that are 'proven' to make a difference is attractive. However, this perspective on research makes two important assumptions: firstly, that there is an identifiable 'best' way of teaching and, secondly, that teaching is a reductive pursuit with little, or no, ethical or professional input, reducing the teacher to a technician.

In a 'what works' agenda, where are judgement and context located?

Whilst a 'what works' approach to research might be perceived as positive because it can take up little or no teacher time to embed in school planning, it also means that research outcomes might become blindly accepted, with little understanding of the methods used or critical engagement to assess the arguments made. There is a danger that the results of research become 'imported' into practice with little reflection or critique. This lays teachers open to the possibility of embedding poor research as they have little foundation on which to assess the validity and utility of research findings.

Hopefully the aim of engaging with research is to extend and improve practice through critical engagement and understanding, thereby fostering positive reflection and judgement in how research findings are enfolded into action. If this genuinely is the focus of engagement with research, there is a need to establish and generate research literacy within schools. Yet research literacy is not a simple or universally defined term.

I would argue that it has three elements. Firstly, a knowledge and understanding of research methods and data analysis/interpretation. Secondly, a conceptual dimension which underpins the other aspects of research literacy. This includes an understanding of concepts such as 'methodology' and 'ethics', which are central to designing and carrying out research projects as well as engaging with the research account of others. Finally, there is the practice of research. After all, one of the best ways of developing an understanding of research is to carry out research yourself, thereby gaining practical experience of how research fits together and makes sense.

To make critical use of research findings we need to invest in gaining knowledge, understanding and a conceptualisation of the breadth of educational research traditions. We need to be able to assess the interpretations of data in relation to the methodology of the project. We need to have a good level of knowledge if we are to make such claims with any certainty. But to really understand how research methodologies fit together and how they relate to data analysis and interpretation, as well as the inherent practical complexity of completing a research project, we need to undertake our own research. Only experience can help us understand how to create, conduct and critically engage with research. Therefore, if schools really want to make positive use of research, they need to undertake their own work – work that has meaning and utility *in their own context*.

Remember that research can only ever inform and offer insights into possible practices. If you believe research can present a set of perfect tools and immutable practices, a rulebook for pedagogy, you'll be sorely disappointed, because that is not its aim. It is a framework to help question, explore and gain insights into educational problems and issues, to offer ideas and starting points for better practice. It cannot do more than this in the eternal search for the perfect pedagogy!

QUESTION:

Should we all be involved in small scale research or enquiry activity in our schools to kick start and develop a culture of evidence-informed practice?