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An Appraisal of the Criticisms of Educational Research in Recent Years

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Abstract

According to Hodkinson (2001) educational research in the UK has been passing through 'a crisis of confidence' in the last decade as a result of several attacks upon its quality. The scope of this paper is to briefly highlight these 'attacks' on educational research and then focus on one of its primary criticisms for an in-depth analysis. I mainly draw upon the work of Hargreaves (1996), Hammersley (1997) and Hillage, Pearson, Anderson and Tamkin (1998) but allude to other sources as well.

An Appraisal of the Criticisms of Educational Research in Recent Years

Background

Research in education has come under increasing fire in the last decade or so. One of the chief protagonists of this attack was Professor David Hargreaves (1996) who is of the view that educational research was poor value for money, divorced from educational practice and often of an indifferent quality. He attributed the shortcomings of educational research to its 'non-cumulative' aspect and the fact that it had not produced sufficient 'practically relevant' knowledge. As a solution, Hargreaves advocates that educational research would be more practically relevant if it were conducted by practising teachers.

Critique

Hammersley (1997) disagrees with Hargreaves' (1996) claim that educational research has not produced sufficient practically relevant knowledge and argues that the latter is adopting a 'narrowly instrumental view' of practical relevance where research tells practitioners the best technique for dealing with particular problems. This line of thought is consistent with the 'engineering model' of the relationship between research and practice, which envisages research as finding solutions to technical problems in teaching (Hammersley, 1997).

I believe that teaching does not comprise of a situation of *technical* versus *practical* activities but is more of a continuum where "some educational problems ... are open to technical solution, even though many are not" (Hammersley, 1997, p. 148). I think that research has the potential to open up avenues into alternative ways of thinking about teaching such that it might be an illuminating and insightful experience for teachers. However, this is not through prescriptively providing solutions to the complexities in teaching, other than offering practitioners general guidelines for their pedagogical practices. A similar line of thinking appears to resonate in the Hillage report (1998) where practitioners, in general, feel that research does not impinge much on practice due to the "result of the complex web of influences that affect the development of ... practice" (p. 11).

Research undoubtedly ‘informs’ practice but more careful thought needs to be given before it can be claimed with conviction that it is of relevance to practice. For example, if ‘relevant’ implies indicating appropriate techniques to use in particular situations then this claim is, at best, a cautious one. This is because of the ‘practicalities of teaching’ (e.g. dealing with human interactions, contextually specific issues, critical incidents in classrooms) and the teacher’s need to rely on contextual decision-making which make it virtually impossible for educational research to state with perfect precision, what will work and when, in diverse classroom contexts. Lessons learnt from research must not be slavishly adopted by teachers in their pedagogical practice; instead, teachers need to adapt the lessons learnt from research to suit the uniqueness of their teaching contexts. Hence, research may be used to ‘inform’ a teacher about his/her practice but its findings should not be taken (or mistaken!) as an instant ‘prescription’ for effective teaching – a view that Sylva (2000) seems to concur with:

Educational research informs teaching and learning by ‘improved understanding’ of practices where ‘improved understandings’ may not provide instant advice to teachers; instead, and gradually, they will filter through teacher education, curriculum materials . . . and bring about more informed and insightful practice (Sylva, 2000, p. 293)

Similarly, Pring (2000) reiterates the difficulties of directly applying the knowledge gained from research findings in teaching contexts because, “Human beings (and the social life in which they interact) are not the sort of things where there can be simple causal relationships between specific interventions and subsequent behaviours” (p. 5).

Another critique of educational research is that the majority of it is either reported in language that would ‘alienate’ many practitioners or addresses topics that do not engage their interest (Tooley & Darby, 1998). For example, even simple ideas are “... spelled out in such convoluted passages, that they fall into the danger of obscuring the issues raised” (ibid., p. 70). Thus, research articles might often come across as ‘too dry’. This implies that even if teachers do read research-based articles, understanding the content of those

(let alone applying the findings in context) is likely to be a daunting task. Could educational research, then, be considered relevant to practice? I think not, for to be relevant to practice, research must be in simple language so that teachers could easily grasp the issues being discussed and implement their understanding of these in an informed way in their teaching.

Furthermore, I find Hargreaves' (1996) argument – one which suggests that more educational research should be carried out by practising teachers in order to enhance its practical relevance – open to critique. Hargreaves appears to be making a fundamental assumption that teachers are competent researchers when this, in the first instance, may not be the case. Moreover, I disagree with the view put forth by Tooley and Darby (1998) which upholds that, “if teachers are given research opportunities, the quality and/or relevance of research will ... improve” (p. 66). Research is a profession, just like teaching is (Hammersley, 1997), and hence educational research entails the gradual acquisition of research skills and knowledge over time.

It does not necessarily mean that being an effective teacher ‘automatically’ implies that one is a skilled researcher and vice versa. Therefore, there is no reason why one may assume that a practising teacher *is* a skilled researcher (as Hargreaves' argument seems to be signifying). Providing teachers with some autonomy – in terms of decision-making and sharing experiences of classroom issues – and creating opportunities for them to work with a panel of researchers are perhaps some ways forward to make educational research more relevant to the unique contextual realities of the classroom.

Conclusion

In this paper I argued whether educational research *could* be considered relevant to practice because of the idiosyncratic nature of teaching. I raised further doubts about the relevance of educational research to teachers owing to the academically rigorous way in which it is written. Finally, I questioned the effectiveness behind designating teachers to undertake research on the premise that it would make it more practically relevant ... I am inclined to a less favourable view!

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