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Putting the truth into teaching

The importance of educational researchers in informing the practice and policy of lifelong learning cannot be underestimated, believe EERA's Lejf Moos et al...

What role can educational research play in getting 'Europe back on track'?¹ Educational research is already playing an important part in the advancement of individuals and nations as well as Europe as a region – to mention only a few examples:

- Educational researchers develop new and deeper understandings in close collaboration with other social scientists of how students with challenging social backgrounds are, and can be, prepared for education and learning;
- Educational researchers collaborate with linguists to develop better understanding of the preconditions for learning a second language;
- Networks of neurological researchers and educational researchers are developing new methods and ground breaking knowledge about relations between perception, emotions and learning;
- Educational researchers together with economists and statisticians have formed research teams that look into relations between student outcomes and parental careers in order to find correlations or causal relations that can help us understand why so many youngsters disengage from education.

Educational researchers also connect their research findings with their teaching. They investigate many forms of educational practice and develop good ways of teaching in schools and universities; they analyse specific areas of education because politicians and policy-makers need evidence, knowledge or arguments for political initiatives and they investigate new and often unspoken-for areas, problems or themes related to education out of curiosity and an urge to know.

Educational researchers are thus engaged in a very broad and complex spread of activities in cross-cutting research within traditional areas such as educational philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, and anthropology as well as in more generic areas like economics, statistics and neurology. Educational researchers who engage in research across national borders find that something is opened up for them, something that offers new possibilities, and we believe that these possibilities have not yet been fully explored for the benefit of society. Educational research traditionally reflects a very strong national foundation and orientation, but engaging in cross cultural and trans-national European research projects offers opportunities for 'hybridisation' that in turn can help to develop stronger European educational research.

Educational researchers are used to serving many stakeholders: students, parents, local community, scientific communities, policy-makers, administrators and managers. This fact is becoming more explicit in the new European policy vision: 'Europe 2020: A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growths'². The strategy builds on a number of analyses and forecasts of the societal and economical development in Europe and outlines strategies to address these changes:

- **Smart growth:** developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation;
- **Sustainable growth:** promoting a more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy;
- **Inclusive growth:** fostering a high employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion.

One can read this strategy as an acknowledgement of the importance and necessity of educational research since education is the foundation of the economy, and therefore

of society, and is dependent on the renewal of knowledge and the development of innovation. This links educational research as knowledge production and innovation directly to policy-making. This is in line with tradition: policy-makers have often made use of educational research when they have developed educational politics and programmes and have used educational research and knowledge to legitimise or rationalise political decisions. What may be new is that the EU strategy is so explicit on this link: research to be used for developing society and economy.

Let us first state that the quest of research is to seek the truth of the matter, whatever the implications may be. Researchers have a slightly different agenda in comparison to politicians and practitioners who are more pragmatic in their search of what works. Practitioners, such as teachers and other education professionals, need knowledge that can help them in their practice. Practice is complex and in need of immediate action. Practitioners always need to interpret the actual situation and choose actions intuitively. Research cannot produce a knowledge that can govern practitioners. At best we can develop a knowledge that can serve as an inspiration or a guide to practice.

Likewise, politicians need knowledge that can help them gain a wider perspective for making political decisions. Research knowledge cannot tell them what to decide, but it can serve as a key factor in determining policy options. Other premises are political ideals, stakeholders' interests, and strategic considerations. Connections between research and policy-making/policy practice cannot be straightforward and linear, even though that is often implied in the phrase 'evidence-based practice'. What educational research and knowledge gained through this kind of research can help to develop is a better understanding of the social, economic and relational aspects of European educational challenges and possibilities.

As already illustrated, we know that educational researchers are often trying to serve all three interests: truth, policy-making and practice. This is not a problem. Since the EU 2020 strategy is explicit on the need for politically useable and interdisciplinary research, it runs the risk that other uses and purposes will be neglected and forgotten. That is actually the main purpose of writing a short term strategy: to highlight some initiatives and perspectives and to forget others.

We risk forgetting areas of research that are not sub-disciplines of social science but only of education: eg. educational history, educational philosophy, educational ethics, didactics, pedagogic, education in the global society, and teacher education. Furthermore, recent policy developments are alarming:

- The downgrading of socioeconomic and humanities research in DG research from a department to one single office from 1st January 2011;
- The plan to abolish broader, long-term integrated projects and the like in social sciences and humanities in the 8th Framework Programme, and instead focus on 'grand challenges' with topics that are more applied than basic research and are supposed to foster

European competitiveness in global markets (social science as an 'auxiliary' discipline to be mainstreamed into the other sciences);

- The downsizing of funding for socioeconomic and humanities research projects in the 8th Framework Programme;
- The invisibility of educational research in programmes.

We know that research in social science, humanities and education is a pivotal aspect of analysing dangers and problems in society – to detect threats to democracy, cultural cohesion, dialogue and integration at both the national and the European level. Those sciences can deliver foundations and perspectives for research and implementation of research and initiative concerned with the 'grand challenges' as mentioned in European Strategy: 'Europe 2020'. We also know that educational research gives indispensable knowledge that can inform practice and policy of every step in lifelong learning.

It is a paradox to us, that while lifelong learning has been for some time, and is still, a central concept and initiative of the Commission, the underlying, founding educational research seems to be downgraded or even forgotten. We are also concerned that the Commission's genuine care for integration of all citizens in Europe is not accompanied with funding of education – one of the most important institutions for integration.

¹ Barosso 2010

² Ibid

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