

11 Improving research-policy-practice engagement: Lessons learnt and ways forward

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This chapter summarises the main lessons learnt from the volume. It begins by connecting the themes discussed in the publication with wider societal challenges. It then summarises six key lessons. Two relate to conceptual developments: The need for shared understanding, vocabulary and conceptual clarity; and a call to view policy and practice as two parts of the same whole rather than separate contexts. Three pertain to enabling systematic and high-quality production and use of research: The need to improve research quality and use it well; the need for deeper and more meaningful collaboration between researchers, policy makers and practitioners; and enhanced governance through renewed leadership, stronger incentives and appropriate funding. Finally, a last message calls for a greater focus on understanding “what works in what works”. The chapter ends with a proposal to advance this agenda in two concrete ways.

Introduction

Viewing the pale blue dot (Sagan, 1994^[1]) – our planet – in the vastness of space raises a razor-sharp awareness of what matters most for humanity: To protect life. Education also needs to respond appropriately to what is already happening: The scarcity of resources and energy, large-scale migration due to climate change and the changing landscape of our planet. Responding appropriately requires a relentless effort to build cumulative knowledge of how we can best empower children not just to cope in life and with the coming challenges but also to become active and responsible agents of change. Continuously generating relevant research and ensuring its quality use in education policy and practice is fundamental to keeping education systems agile, relevant and efficient.

Evidence-informed decision making is not a new idea nor a new movement but its importance and complexity are becoming increasingly more visible not just to experts, policy makers and practitioners but to the general public. This increased awareness, particularly in the health and environment sectors, presents a window of opportunity for other sectors such as education to rethink research use in policy making and practice. Inversely, understanding how we can reinforce the dynamics of research production and use in education might also inform other sectors.

This volume set out to map recent developments in knowledge mobilisation in education policy and practice. Leading experts brought new perspectives on evidence-informed policy/practice through recent research. The OECD *Strengthening the Impact of Education Research* policy survey provided initial insights into how countries are tackling the challenge of reinforcing research use. The introduction chapter pointed to two *conceptual considerations*:

- Recognising complexity in the way we talk about “knowledge mobilisation”.
- Connecting policy and practice.

It also outlined *key questions* related to enabling a more systematic and high-quality production and use of research in policy and practice.

- How can we think about the quality and relevance of research and its use?
- What structures, processes and relationships support this? (see Table 1.1).

While there are no straightforward answers or recipes to respond to these questions, a number of messages have emerged from the chapters of this volume that can take us forward on the path.

What have we learnt about the conceptual considerations?

Naming the game: From brokerage to engagement

The first conceptual consideration was that the terms we use to talk about knowledge mobilisation do not appropriately recognise complexity. The chapters in this volume demonstrate just how scattered our vocabulary is when it comes to capturing the dynamics of research production, mediation and use. In fact, the OECD team has been struggling from the beginning of this project to decide what term to use. Just the introduction above uses four different expressions: Knowledge mobilisation; evidence-informed practice/policy; strengthening the impact of education research; and reinforcing research use.

Terms that suggest clearly linear thinking – knowledge transfer, transmission, dissemination, knowledge-to-action – are no longer “trendy” in literature, precisely to avoid narrowing the problem to a push/transfer one. Mediation and brokerage evoke a two-way process and are used more frequently, particularly when the focus is on the “in-between” of research and decision making. In this volume, David Gough, Jonathan Sharples and Chris Maidment, speak about “knowledge brokerage initiatives” (Chapter 7). Tracey Burns and Tom Schuller (Chapter 3) explicitly point to the contested nature of terminology and use brokerage

agencies to signal continuity with previous work that looked at institutional brokerage efforts. As Gábor Halász (Chapter 8) underlines, the term “knowledge mobilisation” is increasingly popular because it turns away from linear thinking and brings into focus the idea of co-creation. This means that researchers and practitioners / policy makers are not simply connected but work together to come up with new solutions.

Mark Rickinson and colleagues (Chapter 9) focus on a particular aspect: The quality of research use, which they define as the “thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence”. Annette Boaz, Kathryn Oliver and Anna Numa Hopkins (Chapter 6) use “research-policy engagement initiatives”, which draws attention to the importance of mutual engagement to reinforce research production and use. Engagement is described as ultimately the key element in several of the opinion pieces in Chapter 10 as well (e.g. Tine Prøitz, Vivian Tseng, Emese K. Nagy), and appears central in the most recent “evidence ecosystem” models by David Gough, Jonathan Sharples and Chris Maidment (Chapter 2 and 7).

If we believe that discourse shapes how we think about “the impact of education research” and ultimately what we do to reinforce its use, then we must make deliberate efforts to improve the clarity of that discourse. Research today seems robust on the importance of the collective engagement of different actors – primarily but not limited to researchers, practitioners and policy makers – in both the production and use of research. In fact, engagement of latter two increasingly overlap from a co-creation perspective. Thus, **research-policy-practice engagement** seems a promising new phrasing. (Although to note the beauty and hazard of the conceptual nature of the English language: One can put everything and nothing in a condensed expression. Such expressions are also often untranslatable into other languages.)

Policy and practice: Putting the pieces together

The second conceptual consideration set out in the introduction chapter aims to recognise and elaborate on connections between policy and practice. While there are distinctive differences between policy and practice (e.g. in terms of structures, the number of actors and the nature of work), there are also fundamental similarities, particularly in terms of practitioner and policy maker professionalism, including research competences. Not recognising the link between research use in policy and practice ultimately hampers the capacity of both policy and practice to improve student learning. As pointed out by Tracey Burns and Tom Schuller in Chapter 3, it has been difficult to shift the focus from evidence-informed policy to evidence-informed practice in education. When this happened, the discussions shifted too much and almost “left policy off the hook”.

This phenomenon is apparent in several instances across this volume. When it comes to deeper forms of engagement in education, in particular research co-production (or more broadly, knowledge co-creation), most chapters talk about research-practice partnerships (see e.g. Emese K. Nagy, Tine Prøitz and Vivian Tseng). But there is a general lack of discourse on policy-research partnerships (although some examples are given by Gábor Halász in Chapter 8). Recent research such as that conducted by Mark Rickinson and colleagues has advanced the understanding of research use in practice but this has not yet been translated/applied to policy. Similarly, as pointed out by Annette Boaz, Kathryn Oliver and Anna Numa Hopkins, we now have a decent amount of evidence on teachers’ professional learning but policy makers’ capacity building has not been widely evaluated. To avoid shifting emphases and parallel but disconnected developments, the first step would be to connect research use in policy and practice at the abstract level.

The second step is unfolding what research-policy-practice engagement means in practice. Jordan Hill (in Chapter 4) argues that policy organisations should have strong relationships not just with research producers but also with organisations that work across the contexts of research and practice. Linking policy with practice-oriented research intermediaries can create a unique channel in which research “travels” across these interconnected contexts. Some interesting examples were given in various chapters such as the Policy Innovation Research Unit that works with the United Kingdom’s Ministry of Health to pilot policies and co-produce early-stage research with healthcare stakeholders at both the policy and practice levels

(in Chapter 6). The OECD survey shows that some ministries of education solicit university-school partnerships to facilitate research use in policy, which suggests that there are examples for the threefold nature of research-policy-practice engagement. Understanding how such partnerships work exactly and what their potential is in increasing research dynamics and improving learning should be on our research agenda in the future.

What have we learnt about the key questions?

Research yes, but quality research! And, also values...

Reinforcing the use of research in decision making is only desirable if we have good research and if that research is used well. Quality is a recurring theme in this volume. Chapter 7 stresses that brokerage initiatives must attend to the quality of research by establishing clear standards for evidence. What this involves is exemplified by the standards of the United States Institute of Education described by Mark Schneider in Chapter 10. Dirk Van Damme (Chapter 10) suggests that this is not just about methodology but about establishing a disciplinary identity for education research; overcoming ideological dispositions and biases; and acknowledging limitations.

Tracey Burns and Tom Schuller (Chapter 3) stress the need to collectively create a cumulative knowledge base in education that is “quasi-universally acknowledged as well-founded”. A consolidated body of knowledge requires research to be replicated in different contexts and the growing evidence to be regularly synthesised. The authors suggest that brokerage organisations should be working more closely together to advance the science of evidence synthesis.

Even if we do have high-quality education research, using it *well* adds another dimension to quality as explored by Mark Rickinson and colleagues in Chapter 9. The authors unpack the term “thoughtful engagement” with research and identify its key ingredients. These include individual enablers (skills, mindset and relationships), organisational ones (leadership, culture and infrastructure) as well as systemic elements.

As stressed by José Manuel Torres in Chapter 2, values and the ultimate objectives of producing and using research should not disappear into the distant horizon. Learning needs to be at the centre of all efforts. Research is not and should not be deprived of values. Vivian Tseng reminds us to not forget marginalised groups, and to work with them instead of treating them as research objects. Makito Yurita also draws our attention to the dangers of marginalising research groups and methodologies, and even entire systems if we narrow the focus and methods of education research too harshly.

Unpacking engagement: Dialogue is not enough

The meaning of high-quality research-policy-practice engagement is not straightforward and must be unpacked.

As research evidence rarely gives clear instructions for practice, teachers and policy makers need to be active in interpreting and implementing it. Engaging with research does not necessarily involve interaction with researchers. For Rickinson et al. (Chapter 9), “thoughtful engagement and implementation” means that teachers critically engage with research evidence, collectively deliberate about its meaning, and effectively integrate aspects of the evidence within practice. Such direct research use remains important.

However, to strengthen the link between research, policy and practice, scholars have been encouraging more dialogue between researchers, practitioners and policy makers. The OECD policy survey shows that almost all countries have projects that encourage interactions between various actors and ministries often have extensive relationships with a number of actors. Still, many countries perceive the lack of relationships as a main barrier to research use. It seems that *speaking to each other is not enough*. Research has shown

that interaction needs to be accompanied by capacity building (see Chapter 5). As Gábor Halász describes in one of his personal experiences: Researchers have to learn to listen. The language and stories of teachers and policy makers is not a scientific discourse but carries the deep knowledge of students, schools, teaching and learning. Without understanding their experience and unpacking their knowledge, it is more difficult to ask relevant research questions, formulate meaningful hypotheses, and design appropriate research. A good conversation between the different actors requires genuine curiosity, respect and active listening.

There seems to be consensus across the board that teachers' and policy makers' involvement in research is important to make research more relevant and reinforce its use. However, *the nature of involvement is significant*. Emese K. Nagy (Chapter 10) demonstrates how research can be useless for a school when teachers and students are mere objects of study. Vivian Tseng (Chapter 10) goes beyond that, pointing to the deep disrespect of communities, particularly marginalised ones, when research does not originate from their needs and does not feed its results back to those groups. John Bangs and Martin Henry (Chapter 10) emphasise the role unions can play in bringing research and practice closer to each other, both through advocacy and direct involvement in research production.

Teachers and policy makers need to recognise the hypotheses studied as relevant to problems. Developing appropriate hypotheses is easier when researchers and practitioners / policy makers work closely: Teachers / policy makers can help refine the hypotheses to be relevant, while researchers can make sure they are suitable for research. Similarly, collective engagement in the subsequent phases of research production – research design, interpretation and dissemination of findings – can also strengthen the relevance and usefulness of research. Yet, the OECD policy survey finds that teachers and school leaders are primarily involved in restricted ways in research production: Most often in data collection, i.e. as objects of study. The situation is not much better for policy makers who may be more involved in asking questions and communicating results but rarely have a say in research design and interpreting the findings.

There are promising initiatives that explore deeper forms of engagement and genuine co-creation (as the Swedish research-practice partnerships described in Chapter 10). But there is still a need to understand how such partnerships can produce relevant and high-quality research. Tine Prøitz (Chapter 10) points to key elements such as having a space for co-creation, understanding how the specialised knowledge of all participants can be best capitalised on, and producing suitable deliverables for all parties. Research in this field is only in its infancy and has, until now, been largely confined to a handful of countries where research-practice partnerships have existed for a while (Coburn and Penuel, 2016_[2]). We have limited understanding of how engagement between researchers, practitioners and policy makers works exactly; what the necessary ingredients and the current barriers are to it.

Governing the system: Leadership, incentives and funding

Research-policy-practice engagement is not a simple triangle with three groups of actors. Research dynamics (production and use) is a complex sub-system of a complex education system. Systems thinking – as laid out by Best and Holmes (2010_[3]) and discussed across various chapters in this volume – requires a good understanding of the landscape of mechanisms and the network of actors. David Gough, Jonathan Sharples and Chris Maidment point out in Chapter 7 that mapping this landscape and developing a theory of change based on its understanding is largely missing in the work of brokerage institutions. The OECD policy survey attempts an initial mapping across countries. The survey data presented in Chapters 4 and 5 show the diversity of this landscape. Some key findings are:

- Overall, a large number of organisations are active in producing research and facilitating its use in policy and practice, with universities and teacher education institutions dominating the landscape in many systems. However, the number and type of organisations active across research production and mobilisation varies considerably across systems.

- Brokerage agencies (i.e. institutions with an explicit mission to facilitate research use) exist in less than half of the systems. Some systems did not report any connection between ministries and brokerage agencies despite the latter being active in research production and facilitating its use in policy and practice.
- The number of mechanisms that facilitate research use in policy and practice vary greatly across systems.
- Around 40% of systems do not synthesise and disseminate educational research findings through user-friendly tools, and less than a quarter of them have a system-wide strategy for facilitating research use in policy/practice.

While there is no one approach that can suit such diverse landscapes, there are elements that all countries and initiatives aiming to reinforce research dynamics need to consider. There are also many opportunities for shared learning, which can result from comparing and contrasting these different contexts.

First, *strategic leadership* – within and across organisations and at the system level – is necessary to drive the dynamics of research production and use. Annette Boaz and colleagues (Chapter 6) found that only less than half of research-policy-practice engagement initiatives have an explicit focus on strategic leadership and this is mostly limited to advocacy. The analysis of David Gough, Jonathan Sharples and Chris Maidment (Chapter 7) echoes this finding for the United Kingdom What Works Centres. Going beyond leadership of brokerage initiatives, leadership at the central level remains important in governing complex education systems, notably in providing a strategic vision, clear guidelines and feedback (Burns and Köster, 2016^[4]).

Second, *incentives* for a good research-policy-practice engagement need to be in place for practitioners, policy makers and researchers. The OECD survey shows that teachers, school leaders and policy makers are encouraged to use research but do not have formal incentives such as allocated time, salary supplement and formal recognition to do so. Some promising initiatives include research co-production built into teachers' career development (e.g. a “researcher teacher” status in Hungary that requires completing doctoral studies and regularly conducting research); public sector PhD schemes; and various researcher roles in government (e.g. embedded researchers, research fellows). It will be important to evaluate and compare these initiatives to understand their impact and the conditions under which they work. In addition, traditional academic incentives, such as publishing in high-impact journals, seem to be a major obstacle to researchers engaging with practitioners and policy makers more deeply. This point appears across the chapters.

Finally, *funding mechanisms* need to respond to the nature of research-policy-practice engagement. Dirk Van Damme (Chapter 10) reminds us that, despite growing investment, funding for education research remains much lower than in other comparable sectors. Importantly, Vivian Tseng calls for rethinking funding schemes and aligning criteria, timeframes and deliverables to adjust to the needs of high-quality research-policy-practice engagement. In particular, funding needs to take into account all of the above points. It should provide appropriate incentives, recognise the time it takes to create trustful relationships, reward skills and capacity building as one of the outcomes of such partnerships, and emphasise outputs that serve the needs of users and ultimate beneficiaries.

What works in what works? More meta-research is needed

The ultimate objective of the OECD project *Strengthening the Impact of Education Research* is to understand how we can effectively reinforce the use of research in education practice and policy. This meta-level in education research has been termed as “What works in what works” (Gough, Maidment and Sharples, 2018^[5]) or the Science of Using Science (Langer, Tripney and Gough, 2016^[6]).

The good news is: This has become a vibrant field of study across countries and sectors, and it has brought important insights already as demonstrated by numerous chapters in this volume (some of which have been summarised above). As stressed by José Manuel Torres in Chapter 2, conceptual development is important because it helps frame discussions in new ways and drive our thinking on research-policy-practice engagement forward. However, mental gymnastics are not enough. The study by David Gough, Jonathan Sharples and Chris Maidment (Chapter 7) was one of the first efforts to build evidence on brokerage initiatives. The chapter underscores the need for these initiatives to become evidence-informed themselves. The systematic investigation and evaluation of existing efforts aimed at reinforcing research impact are critical to improving such efforts. However, Annette Boaz, Kathryn Oliver and Anna Numa Hopkins (Chapter 6), and Tracey Burns and Tom Schuller (Chapter 3) point to the striking lack of such evaluations.

Further research is needed to understand how we can make research-policy-practice engagement more effective. As the authors of Chapter 7 emphasise: Neglecting research on research use jeopardises the credibility and effectiveness of efforts aiming to increase research impact. The different chapters point to a number of questions that remain to be explored, including, but not limited to the following:

- How can we conceptualise and measure the impact of education research?
- How successful are initiatives that support knowledge production by non-researcher actors (e.g. governments) in generating high-quality research and reinforcing its use?
- Under what conditions are partnerships (research-practice, research-policy and research-policy-practice) most effective in generating high-quality research and reinforcing its use?
- How should the various types of brokerage efforts be prioritised, sustained and funded?
- How can we coordinate efforts at the system level more effectively? What sort of leadership, incentives and funding are needed?
- How should education research as a discipline improve to produce higher quality and more relevant findings?

It must be recognised that “what works in what works” research is unlikely to produce a simple checklist approach or prescriptive recipes for solving the problem. Such checklists or recipes would either be too general (and thus not operational) or overwhelmingly detailed with myriads of conditions and dependencies (and thus not operational). This is because the research production-use system is in constant evolution and it is hard to predict what patterns will be emerging. A complex system cannot be geared towards a particular idealised state in a straightforward way by fixing some parameters at a certain point of time. In addition, Annette Boaz, Kathryn Oliver and Anna Numa Hopkins (Chapter 6) remind us that context-specific solutions will always be fundamental: A top-down, “one size fits all” approach will not work.

However, complexity does not mean we are unable to act. Further investigation of the above questions and continuous reflection on the state of the system is critical for building a cumulative knowledge base on what works in what works – as underscored by Tracey Burns and Tom Schuller (Chapter 3). It is possible to steer the system by finding “triggers” that make an impact, understanding what structures and processes are effective under what conditions, and scaling them.

What’s next?

This volume’s primary focus was to provide an overview of recent research and an initial mapping of structures, processes and relationships aimed at reinforcing research use. The introduction chapter outlined a number of questions around the key dimensions for strengthening the impact of education research: Quality and relevance of research; culture and mindset; and skills and capacity necessary for high-quality, systematic research production and use. This report helped specify what we already know and what elements of those questions remain to be explored (see the list of questions above for example).

The next step in developing a more robust knowledge base on research mobilisation – or research-policy-practice engagement – in education is to systematically explore these dimensions.

The *Strengthening the Impact of Education Research* CERI project will continue to advance this agenda in two main ways.

First, through research and analysis. The policy survey conducted in 2021 offers insights into aspects not yet explored in this volume. In particular, building individual skills, and organisational and systemic capacity for better research production and use is critical for countries. This will be the main focus of the next volume. The policy survey represents the perspectives of one group of actors only – policy makers at the level of education ministries. As such, it paints a partial and one-sided picture of the landscape. The next phase of the project will focus on collecting data from other actors. In particular, it will target intermediary organisations, including not only brokerage agencies but other types of intermediaries that can reveal various facets of what works in research-policy-practice engagement, and how it works.

Second, through building a network of key actors in the field and providing extensive opportunities for peer learning. These actors include academics and experts, a range of intermediary organisations, and, of course, regional and national authorities across OECD and partner countries. Several of the chapters in this volume point to the untapped but immense potential of peer learning in these areas from a number of different angles:

- Learning from other contexts: Discussion and debate about education research should not stay within closed cliques – confined within the walls of academia, public authorities, schools or funding institutions. We have already seen how much policy and practice could borrow from one another's developments in the field of research use.
- Learning from other countries and systems: Our survey demonstrates the diverse landscape of research production and use across systems. This diversity provides fertile ground for sharing good and bad practices, and exploring what works and how.
- Learning from other sectors: This volume provides an initial glimpse into the vastness of research and experience accumulated in other sectors from which education could benefit.

By developing a platform for mutual learning, the OECD can play the role of an independent broker of brokers in education, as advocated by Tracey Burns and Tom Schuller in Chapter 3 in this volume. By collecting and analysing data from OECD and partner countries, it can contribute to developing a robust knowledge base in the field.

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