



EDITORIAL

Revisiting strategic directions in educational research: Does research actually lead to improvement?

Dimmock (2017)

Towards the end of last year I came across an unpublished paper written by John Hattie in 2003 (Hattie, 2003) in which he outlined major strategic directions for school-level education research in New Zealand. Hattie identified 11 major issues facing education, which at the time of writing had not been satisfactorily addressed. Reading this paper 18 years after its writing is fascinating. For while there have been a number of changes in school-level education at the levels of policy, practice and research over the intervening years, it is hard to escape the continued relevance today of nearly all of the challenges and unanswered questions identified by Hattie.

The responsibility that Hattie places on educational research in playing a key role in addressing the issues he identifies raises fascinating questions for education: What role should educational research be playing? What responsibility does educational research and by extension educational researchers have for addressing issues of policy direction and problems of practice? Are the structures and systems governing educational research fit for purpose? This editorial takes the apparent lack of progress over the past two decades in addressing the 11 issues Hattie identified as a starting point for exploring some of these questions.

Changes in the educational research landscape

The lack of progress in addressing Hattie's strategic directions in educational research must partly be viewed in light of the changes that have taken place in New Zealand and around the world in educational research over the past twenty years. The world of educational research looks very different in 2021 compared to 2003. Perhaps the most obvious difference is the rise in the number of research-active educators in New Zealand. Much of this change relates to the mergers of Colleges of Education and teacher training institutions with universities over the late 1990s and early 2000s (n.b. Auckland College of Education was amalgamated with the School of Education at the University of Auckland, where John Hattie was an academic, in 2003). As well as the drive to increase the number of research active faculty members teaching in faculties of education there also has been a dramatic increase in the number of Master's and PhD students in education across New Zealand, particularly over the past decade. There are a multitude of reasons for the growth – degree inflation, greater interest in research in education, universities' desire to increase student numbers and therefore revenue. The result is that there is a lot more educational research currently being conducted compared to 20 or even just 10 years ago. However, it is important not to conflate quantity with quality, and as the following paragraphs will explore, there are a number of factors

influencing academia which push researchers towards what has been referred to as “fast academia” (Berg & Seeber, 2016).

Like many countries around the world, New Zealand has experienced the rise of performance reviews, quality evaluations and a publish or perish culture in academia. The Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF), which is similar to the UK’s REF, began in 2004 in order to assess the research performance of tertiary education organisations and to fund them on the basis of their performance. This has helped to accelerate a focus on journal impact factors and individual scholar citations, leading at times to what has been termed reverse plagiarism – that is, the inclusion of spurious references in order to increase citation counts (Peters, 2021). Building from this publishing culture, there has been a rise globally in the number journals both in education and other fields. This, in many ways, has made it easier than ever to get a paper published (although it must be noted that with the rise in the number of journals, the quality of some journals and the research they publish is dubious). However, despite this push to publish and demonstrate impact, educational research funding remains limited, at least in New Zealand. While the annual education budget is over \$11 billion, it is estimated that government funded educational research from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative fund, Ako Aotearoa, and evaluation and research from the Ministry of Education is estimated to amount to only around \$15 million per annum (McNaughton, 2016).

The past two decades also have seen the rise of new research methods being utilised in educational research as well as new and competing paradigmatic approaches. Perhaps the most notable is the so-called what works movement, which began in the late 1990s and took hold in the 2000s. Inspired by the medical model, it advocates for a scientifically oriented approach to educational research, in which the primary purpose of research is to determine “what works” in practice in order to drive improvements in [narrowly defined] outcomes. While undoubtedly influencing education across policy, practice and research, the what works movement has also faced serious critique for its overly positivistic approach and reliance on randomized control trials as the so-called “gold standard” in research, its interventionist or treatment view of teaching, and its lack of appreciation for the practical craft-based knowledge and expertise of teachers (see for example Biesta, 2007, Hammersley, 1997, Hood, 2017). The result is that while education could never have been considered a unified field, it currently is highly polarised. While differing perspectives and informed debate are undoubtedly healthy, it seems that the level of polarisation currently present in education is actually preventing progress towards addressing the major challenges that currently face the education system.

In light of the changes to the educational research climate and context over the past two decades, it is worth exploring the progress (or lack thereof) that has been made in addressing some of Hattie’s strategic directions.

How do we attract/retain great teachers?

New Zealand certainly is not alone in asking or struggling to answer this question. Many English-speaking countries, as well as others, are grappling with similar issues. It is an issue frequently discussed – among educators, the general public, in initial teacher education institutions, and to a lesser degree by policy makers. However, despite broad recognition of the challenge, currently there exists limited empirical evidence, at least in the New Zealand context, to truly understand what is happening or how to develop solutions. While it would be possible to look to other countries, which do not appear to face the same challenges (primarily, it seems, because the status of teaching as a profession is much greater and the profession is structured in ways to facilitate multiple promotional pathways), to find potential routes forward, it still is necessary for researchers to play a role in unpacking how these different approaches might play out in the New Zealand context.

For instance, it seems that there are some hugely important questions waiting for high quality research studies to address them. How could we structure new career pathways for teachers so that we are not penalising (from a financial perspective) our most effective practitioners who want to remain in the classroom rather than advance into managerial and administration roles? What would it take to improve the status of teaching? How should we approach our continuing teacher shortage, particularly in subjects such as maths, science and Te Reo? What is it that motivates people to consider a career in teaching and what are the barriers? How can we retain more teachers after their first few years in the classroom? How could we offer greater flexibility to teachers to work across different contexts, such as in a school and at the university or at another business or organisation?

What actually is happening in NZ classrooms?

Currently, we know very little about what actually is happening in classrooms across New Zealand. Given the devolved nature of New Zealand's school system, each school has the autonomy to determine how they want to structure much of their teaching and learning. As a result, gaining a broad (and detailed) understanding of the nature of schooling in New Zealand is remarkably challenging. Much of the research on what is happening in schools is small scale, primarily captures data on [teacher and sometimes student] perceptions, and tends to focus on discrete areas of teaching and learning, e.g. use of texts in Year 12 English classrooms or maths anxiety among seven year olds. While valuable, it does mean that we have little understanding of the diversity of pedagogy, curriculum design and implementation, or assessment practices across New Zealand's schools, or the relationship between what is happening at the classroom level and outcomes for students. Consequently, too many decisions at all levels of the education system are made on assumption, anecdote or personal ideology, rather than evidence. Hattie further connects this question to issues of student transience (something that is all too common in our school system), understanding the effects of the decile system, and the increasing bureaucracy faced by teachers and schools, issues that are as relevant today as they were two decades ago.

How should we design the curriculum?

Interestingly, the issues Hattie identifies are the opposite of those currently being discussed in New Zealand education. Hattie, writing prior to the release of the current New Zealand Curriculum, was concerned with how to simplify an overcrowded curriculum, which he believed focused predominantly on subject content knowledge. He was interested in the notion of interdisciplinarity and an integrated curriculum, a current interest for many New Zealand schools, and an area that is certainly under researched (McPhail, 2018). While the specific nature of curriculum discussions may have changed since Hattie wrote this paper, it strikes me that a fundamental curriculum issue has not: that there is very little empirical evidence about effective curriculum design or implementation. Currently, much of the curriculum scholarship remains theoretical in nature, or if empirical, largely small scale and not directly linked to student outcomes.

What is the purpose of education?

Hattie suggests that in 2003, New Zealand was yet to have a deep and considered national conversation about the purpose of education, and in 2021 that still remains true. Given that every decision made in education stems (consciously or unconsciously) from the answer to this question, the absence of efforts to build a collective view is troubling. The result is that too often we engage in reform without first deeply interrogating our response to this question or building consensus as to the answer with those involved in the design and implementation of the reform.

It is a question that lies at the heart of the philosophy of education and has been the subject of much scholarship and debate across history. And while it would be fair to say that philosophers are yet to arrive at a consensus, one cannot help thinking that greater engagement with educational philosophy by those engaged in education at various levels would be beneficial. Educational philosophy remains vibrant, as PESA Agora is testament. However, it remains something of a marginalised area within educational research and lacks integration or regular points of connection with other aspects and areas of education.

How do we address the tail between our highest and lowest performing students?

Most data suggest that New Zealand has made very little progress overall towards addressing the inequities in our education system over the past two decades (May et al., 2019). While there have been individual examples of success – at a classroom, school or programme level – of reducing the gap between our highest and lowest performing students and the impact of socio-economic status on achievement, progress has not been achieved at scale or with any degree of sustainability. The lack of progress is particularly troubling given that there is growing consensus among researchers about the factors and conditions that lead to effective teaching and learning in schools. What currently is lacking is the infrastructure to facilitate the dissemination and implementation of this research in practice.

So, what does all of this mean? Hattie wrote his list as an agenda for research. It is true that research could play a more vital role in the improvement of New Zealand's education system. However, it would seem that several things are needed for that to happen. It is necessary to ensure that:

1. the nature of the research that is occurring (while always remaining diverse) is addressing key questions and issues arising from practice and policy. While it is unlikely that we want to go as far as what David Hargraves proposed back in 1996 (Hargraves, 1996), it seems that more could be done to identify priority areas and questions in education and to incentivize and facilitate research into these areas.
2. the research is high quality and robust (while still ensuring pluralism in paradigm and methods), providing, among other things, data that are representative of what is happening across the education system. While small scale studies are valuable, it is essential that all of these are complemented by much larger studies that provide a much broader account of what is happening in New Zealand.
3. the amount of funding for educational research as well as what that funding is spent on is examined.
4. that research is not only conducted but also communicated in a way so that it routinely and meaningfully influences policy and practice (as well as the ongoing research agenda).

This would require far greater collaboration and cooperation than currently is occurring. There is a need for more large scale and ambitious research projects, which bring together diverse academics from education as well as other fields. We need more research that explores the relationship between, on the one hand, policy decisions and elements of practice – pedagogy, school leadership and school culture, curriculum design, and assessment – and on the other, outcomes for students. We need to build true research practice partnerships (RPPs) that enable practice-oriented research, which occurs in collaboration with teachers. And we need to develop a greater focus on education implementation, understanding what it takes to effectively implement effective education in different ways and in different contexts. If we want meaningful change in education, we need to ensure that that change is informed by strong evidence and that there is ongoing research occurring alongside reform initiatives which monitors and iteratively improves the nature of the changes being made.

While the article above focuses very much on the New Zealand context, none of these challenges are unique to New Zealand. Different versions of them are found all over the world. Given this, it seems that discussions and thinking about the future of educational research must traverse national boundaries, with collaboration and knowledge sharing encouraged across nations. For while education is deeply contextual, that does not preclude there being common lessons that can be applied in a range of different countries.

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Notes on Contributor

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