PRACTITIONER RESEARCH: A HIDDEN SECRET FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
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OVERVIEW
A. PRACTITIONER RESEARCH AND PRACTICE-ORIENTED RESEARCH AS A STRATEGY FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
   • A THEORETICAL EXPLANATION AND ARGUMENTATION
   • A PRACTICAL ILLUSTRATION (CONTEXT OF TEACHER ED.)

B. THE NATURE AND THE RELATIONS BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND PRACTICE
   • FROM PROBLEM ANALYSIS TO SCENARIOS
   • ADDING NUANCES IN THE DEBATE

LET’S GO BACK IN TIME… TO 2006
1. NATURE AND RELATION BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

"Which teaching method should I use in my classroom? I want to innovate my teaching. Please tell me what works and what doesn’t work!"
"That's not possible. It's too complicated. There are too many influencing factors!!"

"Okay, but I want to take a decision now!"

"We'll have to test the teaching method first in an experimental group, and then compare the results with results of a control group …"

"… and through a longitudinal design we'll look for sustainability and retention effects …"

PESSIMISTIC VOICES IN THE LITERATURE

- Kesslde (1993): “awful reputation of educational research”
- Berliner (2002): “the-hardest-to-do-science of all”
- Burkardt & Schoenfeld (2003): “no credibility”
- Bedley (2003): “educational research is in crisis”
- Kennedy (1997): “the main thing we have learned from educational research is that we have not learned much from educational research”
WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?

Educational research...
- yields only few conclusive results
- yields only few practical and useful results
- is underfinanced

Practitioners...
- believe that educational research is not conclusive or practical
- make little use of educational research results and are not competent enough to do

Researchers...
- have little possibilities to publish in practitioner journals and are forced to publish in international peer-reviewed journals

PESSIMISTIC?

“In the outlined debate, reports and position papers bemoaning the lack of value of research in education have appeared in a number of countries over the years. Despite these publications, a lack of empirical research data on this topic can be observed.”
(Levin, 2008)

“It’s time to move from problem analysis to concrete scenarios that have a potential to bridge the gap between research and practice.”

NUANCES HAVE TO BE ADDED IN THE DEBATE

1. CONCEPTS
- WHAT IS ‘RESEARCH’?
- MORE FINE-GRAINED CONCEPTS

2. ACTORS
- WHO ARE THE ACTORS AND STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED?
- MORE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ACTORS & FACTORS

3. FACTORS
- WHAT ARE SUPPORTING AND HINDERING CONDITIONS?

1 ST NUANCE: WHAT IS RESEARCH?

POLICY-ORIENTED RESEARCH
- Instrumental knowledge
- Conceptual knowledge

FUNDAMENTAL RESEARCH

PRACTICE-ORIENTED RESEARCH

2 ND NUANCE: WHO ARE THE ACTORS?

Elements of Research Impact

Title

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Title
3 RD NUANCE: HINDERING AND SUPPORTING CONDITIONS

Barriers
- Lack of applicability
- Ambiguity of research material
- Technical and complex language of research publications
- Descriptive research is valued as un-useful!

Facilitators
- Descriptive research is valued as un-useful!
- Research with practical applications
- Time to read and use research
- Pressure from the government to use specific research

2. SCENARIOS TO BRIDGE THE GAP

NEW TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT

MODE 1
- Problems proposed and resolved by a specific community
- Disciplinary
- Homogeneity
- Hierarchical organization
- Permanent
- Peer quality control
- Less socially accountable

MODE 2
- Problems proposed and resolved in the context of applications
- Trans-disciplinary
- Heterogeneity
- Hierarchical organization
- Transitory
- Quality control by diverse actors
- More socially accountable and reflexive

PRACTICE-ORIENTED RESEARCH

Practice-oriented or practice-based research is research that is relevant to the practice field, whether the practice is situated in schools or in higher education institutions. Practice-oriented research is research that aims at supporting decisions or at developing new knowledge that contributes to solving practical problems.

PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

Practitioner research is research where the practitioner is the researcher and it is assumed that there are close links between knowledge, knowers and knowing. The contexts for study are professional practice which frames communities of practice and collaboration, and as such the boundaries between inquiry and practice are sometimes blurred.
Some of the main benefits that practitioner research and practice-oriented research (can) have in common (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Smith, 2015)

- Bridge the gap between education research and practice (Vanderlinde & van Brakel, 2010)
- Developing new knowledge (e.g., Loughran, 2014)
- Solving practical problems (e.g., Bleijenberg et al., 2011)
- Promising professional development strategies (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Tack, 2017)
- Enhancing collaboration between different actors (Willegems et al., 2017)

Specific (additional) benefits of practitioner research

- Improving professional practice (Kersten et al., 2013)
- Contributing to the knowledge base in teacher education (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009)
- Contributing to one’s professional development (Smith, 2015)

Specific (additional) benefits of practice-oriented research

- School improvement based on school specific research results (Schenke, 2015)
- Collaboration between teachers and higher levels of interdependence (Meirink, Imants, Meijer and Verloop, 2010)
- Data literacy in teachers and school teams (Schildkamp, Lei, Earl, 2012)

3. FOCUS ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Number of consecutive steps

1. (Student) teachers experience PD through interventions
2. The PD increases (student) teachers’ knowledge and skills, and/or changes their attitudes and beliefs
3. (Student) teachers use their new knowledge and skills, attitudes and beliefs to improve the content of their instruction or their approach to pedagogy, or both
4. The instructional changes foster increased student learning

BASIC CONCEPTUAL MODEL

- A theory of change: relations between characteristics of PD activities and teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, identity and practice
- A theory of instruction: influences of changed teaching practices on students’ learning and achievement
- A theory of improvement: the influence of school organisational conditions on successful learning of teachers
**EXTENDED CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

**DESIGN PRINCIPLES**

Content focus
- Focus on student learning and informed by evidence on student learning

Pedagogical knowledge
- Focus on enhancing the knowledge and skills to teach in these content areas, which also means considering students' prior knowledge

Coherent and evidence-based
- Aligned with teachers' goals, standards, and current reforms, and informed by theory and meaningful research evidence

Ownership
- Responding to teachers' self-identified needs and interests

**DESIGN PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE ORIENTED RESEARCH**

- Content focus
- Pedagogical knowledge
- Coherent and evidence-based
- Ownership
- Duration
- Collective or collaborative participation
- School- or site based
- Active learning

**Duration**
- Extended and intensive programs

Collective or collaborative participation
- Through collaboration with internal and external peers

School- or site based
- Incorporated into teachers' daily work

Active learning
- Inquiry-based through continuous inquiry of practice and reflection on professional and academic knowledge
4. ILLUSTRATION: TEACHER EDUCATORS

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Teacher educators’ researcherly disposition

- The habit of mind to engage with research – as both a consumer and a producer of research – to improve your own practice and to contribute to the knowledge base on teacher education.

Four inter-related dimensions (measurement instrument TERDS)

1. Valuing research
2. Being a ‘smart’ consumer of research
3. Able to conduct research
4. Conduct research


CONTEXT

Teacher educators’ professional development

- A neglected area in research, policy and practice (European Commission, 2013; Loughran, 2016)

Teacher educators

- ≠ Teacher in primary, secondary or higher education (Eurydice & Mene, 2009)
- Unique responsibility as “teacher of teachers” (Eurydice & Mene, 2009; Loughran, 2011)
- ‘Second-order teaching’ – ‘teaching about teaching’ (Loughran, 2011)
- ‘How I teach is the message’ (Russle, 1997)

CONTEXT

Across Europe (Czerniawski et al., 2017; European Commission, 2013)
- No formal training
- Only ad hoc and local initiatives
- Only short-term Professional development of teacher educators
- Start from the actual teacher education practice (Kelchtermans, 2013; Vanassche et al., 2015)
- To become a teacher educator-researcher: Focus on the development of a researcherly disposition (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Tack, 2017)
- Practitioner research as a promising strategy (Dinkelman, 2003; Loughran, 2014)

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENT ‘RESEARCHERLY DISPOSITION’

CFI = .96, TLI = .95, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .047

20 items
Likert-scale from 0 to 5
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RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

“To advance insight into the impact of a one-year intervention in practitioner research on teacher educators’ researcherly disposition”

Practitioner research is the intervention context

RESEARCH DESIGN

A mixed-method embedded intervention study
- With intervention group (n=21) and control group (n=17)

Quantitative
- Pre-test, post-test, delayed post-test (8 months after participation)
- Teacher Educator Researcherly Disposition Scale

Qualitative
- Interviews before, after, and 8 months after participation
- Observation of the group session, field notes and email conversations with participants

RESULTS (1)

Diversity of research projects to deal with concrete practical problems of teacher educators
- How to deal with a growing diversity in my student-teacher population?
- What are my professional roles of a beginning teacher educator?
- How to implement a new assessment methodology in my English classes?
- How to stimulate historical reasoning of last year student-teachers?

RESULTS (2)

Conducting Research
“I am going to continue this practitioner research. I still have to finish a follow-up interview with my students to evaluate the syllabi I have developed during the intervention. If possible, I would be very willing to present my study to other teacher educators who also have an interest in differentiated instruction.”

BUT

“Our further professional development and engagement in research should be a formal part of our job responsibility. ‘Dedicated’ research time should be timetabled because this would help me preserve research time and actually give me ‘permission’ to conduct research.”
RESULTS

`SMART` CONSUMER OF RESEARCH

"It already changed my teaching practice during the intervention. My students even noticed. I try to ground my lessons in research literature and provide them references of scientific articles and documents afterwards."

"I read an article about how to motivate large groups of students during the lessons. Even though it is not the subject of my own practitioner research, I became interested in the topic because of the practitioner research of X (who is conducting a practitioner research related to that topic)."

ABLE TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

"I thought it was only a matter of refreshing previously acquired skills and knowledge, but I was wrong. Conducting practitioner research requires specific methodological skills. I have learned how important it is to take time to formulate a good research question. […] I learned about alternative data collection methods I had never heard of before."

"It's like getting out of your comfort zone. I really feel unsure about what I am doing and where I am going to…"

"Afterwards, when reflecting upon my participation, I saw the bigger picture. And I really believe all different steps are important—even though they are accompanied with doubts and struggles…"

VALUING RESEARCH

"We live in the 21st century, and teacher education is continuously changing and the demands for future teachers are continuously changing. Research is a useful instrument to keep teacher education up-to-date about these changes." (intake interview)

"I need to keep abreast of research literature on innovations in teacher education and explicitly study my own decisions in practice, based on the belief that—as a teacher of teachers—I am responsible for the quality of the education of future teachers." (exit interview)
CONCLUSION OF THE ILLUSTRATION

Practitioner research to solve practical problems
- Representing a broad variety of topics
- All aimed at improving teacher educators' professional practice

Practitioner research as a strategy for professional development
- Teacher educators become researchers: as producer and consumer (see results measurement instrument TERDS)
- Teacher educators learn about their role of 'second-order teachers'

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSIONS

(1) During the last 10 years, we moved with the ‘research and practice’ field in education from problem analysis consisting of pessimistic voices to concrete scenarios containing new forms of knowledge production, knowledge translation and knowledge use in education.

(2) Thanks to organisations as EAPRIL we have a more nuanced view on how research impacts the educational professional practice. We do not only know that this relation is influenced by different actors and supporting/hindering factors, we were also able to create a common language to describe these processes in a more appropriate way.

(3) When looking at the literature on professional development in education, we see that this literature describes several features or design principles for effective professional development. These features or design principles are exactly what practitioner research and practice-oriented research is about. In other words, practitioner research and practice-oriented research is the only strategy for professional development that really matters.

(4) Concrete research studies - like the professional development initiative with Flemish teacher educators - illustrate the added value of practitioner research for professional development. Practitioners do not only formulate solutions for their professional practice, they also become a ‘better’ researcher, both as consumer and as producer.
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