IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Research is increasingly being used as a basis of enhancing knowledge about educational theory and practice. We live in a time of rapid change in most aspects of our culture. The knowledge explosion, the population explosion, automation, the invasion of technology, the rising ambitions of young men and women and several other such factors have made the task of the planner, the administrator, and the teacher more challenging. My name is Kit Field, and I am Dean of the School of Education. The school is dedicated to improving all learning experiences, and I wanted to explain why I think research is important component of this! This involves a brief introduction and then briefly addressing three questions:

1. On what would the learning and teaching experience be based without underpinning research? (i.e dogma, theory, ideology, convenience, prejudice)

2. What forms of research suit policy makers, planners and implementers of policy?

3. How does research benefit the practitioner?

SO A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Research is not always a concept practitioners, managers and policy makers respect. Too often it is seen as an academic activity conducted by others – to the profession not with the profession. I don't believe it should be. In fact I'd say education professionals are always learning, finding out things, analysing information, adapting their behaviour according to information received, looking to improve, adapting to modern demands. All these constitute research, whether professionals want to call it that or not. Let me explain by trying to describe myself…

Two words used to describe my professional persona are **academic** and **professional.** Both can be nouns or adjectives. The word order is important

I'd like to explain the differences between the concept of an **academic professional**, as opposed to a **professional academic**.

- **Professional academic** – Employed to conduct research at the behest of the profession. Earns income through research projects, and profile through dissemination of findings and development of new theories

- **Academic professional** – First priority is professional performance and practice, and therefore guided by professional mission and ethics.

I choose to describe myself as an **academic professional**, and research is an integral part of both concepts

Research is a way to appraise performance and to improve policy and practice. It is integral to a way of working. Let's briefly imagine the world of education without research

1   On what would the learning and teaching experience be based without underpinning research?

Following the arguments of David Hargreaves (please see recommended reading), if education is not based upon research and evidence it runs the risk of being based upon one or more of the following:

1. **dogma**

2. **theory**

3. **ideology**

4. **convenience**

5. **prejudice)**

Please alow me to unpack these…

1. Education is a political football, and can be used for propaganda and political purposes. I believe thereis a moral dimension to the profession – and to follow**dogma** blindly is wrong. Education should serve to liberate, and promote democracy and equality of opportunity. To follow dogma as in totalitarian states is not an option

2. Similarly i**deology** can be dangerous. Teachers have a social responsibility – to develop active citizens. To guide one's practice around an ideology means that evidence can be selected to score points. Following an ideological route restricts choice, which is the opposite to the real purpose of education.

3. Given we have all been to school, we all have views on how and what we were taught. Trouble is we were taught in an age gone by – new theories and technological advances have taken and are taking place. Basing our practice solely on our leaning **experiences**, without reflection mean education runs the risk of being outdated and not being forward looking. Teachers prepare people for the future, and future projections need to based upon an understanding of what happened in the past, with a view to creating a better future for all

4. Theories come and go. Any single **theory** cannot operate in isolation. Learners and learning are complex, and success is influenced by a multitude of factors, social backgrounds, family background, personality, age, gender, location etc etc. Theories needs to be combined, tested and challenged in order to allow us to adapt to suit local and personal environments

5. **Convenience** and manageability are important, but the question is whose 'convenience?   Teachers can occupy and even control pupils as well as entertain them. But we have to ask if 'learning' takes place. Learning new things and new ways of behaving can be uncomfortable. It is not enough to base teaching and learning around convenience

Research, enables all of the above to be challenged. Basing decisions upon evidence is morally sound. Research can help teachers to understand what works and why, what short and long term implications are, provide a justification and rationale for decisions and actions, help to build a repertoire to help deal with the unexpected, identify problems, inform improvement and so forth…

2   What forms of research suit policy makers, planners and implementers of policy?

There are so many forms of evidence.

1. Performance data,

2. contextual information

3. Qualitative 'stories behind statistical data'

4. Informed interventions for improvement

5. Impact studies

Some are more useful to some professionals than for others. Large scale studies into pupil performance can help to identify trends, and enable educational outcomes to be related to social and economic needs. **Policy makers** want to have a overall, big picture. On the other hand **practitioners** will want to know why some projects work and why others don't. Can practices be transferred and transposed? **Planners** want to assess the manageability of projects and approaches

All professionals need to be able to trust the source of information – and strict research ethics provide that assurance.

A feature of being a profession is to enjoy a sense of responsible autonomy. So should professionals only respond to others, or be part of the information generating or research community? Should professionals just do as they are told, or be part of a sharing and knowledge generating community? After all, it is the knowledge and information that shapes practice. I'd rather be involved than be a victim!

Eric Hoyle distinguished between restricted and extended professionals. Given teachers have to build professional relationships with individual learners; we must place faith in them to be extended, but accountable professionals. Research enables this

No interaction is the same as another. Teaching does involve creative thinking and experimentation. Individuals and professional groups need to know what works and why. Does a teacher's action lead to improved pupil performance, increased motivation, commitment, Meta skills, behave better – and the list goes on? All teachers reflect (we do that anyway)– but research is more formal as Stenhouse says it is "rigorous enquiry made public"

The profession as a whole needs access to a range of data/evidence types

Not everyone can, nor would want to do everything. However, these all need to be connected, and too often resersahis conducted in isolation of others. Let's not all duplicate effort, but combine to build on each other's findings.

Government did have a project 'Best Practice research Scholarships' in the naughties. Teachers were funded to conduct small scale practice focussed research. The problem was all the projects were disconnected. Useful as they were to individuals, the projects were not cumulative. The profession needs a combined effort, outcomes of which serve us all -

3   How does research benefit the practitioner?

From my managerial perspective – what can research do….

1. purpose and direction borne from policy,

2. disseminate relatable experiences,

3. give justification for decisions and actions,

4. provide explanations

5. generate new ideas,

6. enable conclusions,

7. Develop and identify experts....'

Let me explain:

Practitioners do have to comply to policy, but that does not mean following a prescribed formula. Teachers adapt policy to meet the needs of their own learners

Teachers are accountable. The public must have faith in the profession – and attitudes to education vary across many social groups. The performance of teachers can be demonstrated through the publication of research findings

Teachers project their own personality upon learning experiences. Sometimes this is intuitive. Intuitive decisions can be successful or fail. Research methodologies give teachers the tools to analyse and make informed decisions about their practice.

It also helps teachers to share with colleagues.

Too often research looks backwards – there are lessons to learn. However, what I want is invention and innovation. Medical researchers invent new ways to cure disease. I'd like to invent new ways of learning. The risk is the 'recirculation of old and stalk ideas' research should be future oriented and designed to benefit learners rather than the researchers themselves. I believe this is the duty of academic professionals!

I am the Dean of the School of Education at the University. I would say research is important – wouldn't I. My views though are less about justifying my on role, but they are passionately held beliefs on how we can make education better. I hope you can see why I value research!