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SEMINAR REPORT

"Teachers, Teaching, and the Relevance of Educational Research: Reflections from the Front Line"

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Introducing context, theme, and protagonists

The *Institut Français de l'Éducation* (IFÉ) organised a one-day seminar on "Research and Practice: Towards what Kind of Relevant Research for Teachers?" with the key issue being the extent to which educational research impacts on classroom practice, if at all. The seminar took place in Lyon, France, on the 31st March 2017, and was attended by several teachers from a number of European countries.

A few words about the IFÉ to start with. The research institute knows its origins to the *Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique*, which till 2011 was located in rue d'Ulm, Paris. The INRP was transferred to Lyon, where it became an institute forming part of the city's *École Normale Supérieure*. All the holdings of the INRP became part of the Diderot library at the ENS, which now offers access to 500,000 volumes and 100,000 journals on education.

In addition to that, the *Centre Alain Savary* at the IFÉ makes available a range of educational resources to support policies and projects implemented in the Educational Priority Areas – called *Zones d'Éducation Prioritaires* or ZEP for short in French – where teaching has to take place in a challenging environment, and where it is expected to compensate for a number of economic and social difficulties.

The IFÉ also offers a *Service Veille et Analyses* – which sets out to scan and highlight the most pressing issues in education, and to provide food for thought about them by drawing on international research. A short report on

each of these themes is published on a regular basis, with readers having the possibility of accessing the material on the institute's website free of charge (http://ife.ens-lyon.fr/vst/). The most recent research briefing note (No.117, April 2017) authored by Marie Gaussel), for instance, focuses on the place of the oral in teaching and learning.

Another aspect of the IFÉ's outreach is a series of international seminars that staff organise related to the theme "International and multidisciplinary approaches to issues in collaborative educational research". The seminar I attended was part of this series, which is driven by a commitment to increase teacher awareness of the contribution that research makes to educational practice. The IFÉ thus aspires to bridge the divide between theory and research on the one hand, and policy and practice on the other. The point is not simply to communicate new knowledge and insights generated by research, but also to develop a deeper understanding of the way such research-based insights are appropriated or ignored by teachers. An important step in bridging the divide is to see teachers not just as consumers and appliers of research, but as co-producers of new knowledge, and as co-designers of – and partners in – research endeavours.

The seminar I attended – the 13th in the series – focused on school and classroom practice that is informed by research evidence, and on the factors that influence the use of research by practitioners. There were five speakers at the seminar, and I outline the points from their presentations that struck me the most after a brief introduction of each scholar.

Dr *Chris Brown*, senior lecturer at UCL Institute of Education, London Centre for Leadership in Learning, has led a range of funded projects seeking to help practitioners to identify and scale up best practice, and was recently awarded a grant by the Education Endowment Foundation to work with over 100 primary schools in England to increase their use of research. He is also evaluating England's progress towards an evidence informed school system. Dr Brown's presentation addressed the theme: "New tools for an old problem: how might we achieve evidence informed practice in education?"

Dr *Georgeta Ion*, associate professor at the Universitat Autónoma de Barcelona, currently leads a project on research-based policy and practice in education. Her paper, based on research conducted at the Centre for Development and Training in Higher Education of the University of Bucharest, discussed "Academic perceptions of the factors influencing the use of research in education policy and practice". *Dr François Taddei* has a background in engineering and genetics, and is the co-founder of the *Centre pour la Recherche et l'Interdisciplinarité* (CRI). In September 2016 the French Minister of Education entrusted him with the task to promote research and development

in education. His paper at the seminar spoke to the theme "Towards a learning society?"

Professor *Sølvi Lillejord*, who is Director of the Knowledge Centre for Education at the Research Council of Norway, and Honorary Research fellow at the University of Oxford's Department of Education, focused her address on asking the provocative question as to whether 'evidence and education' were 'oil on water'. The last speaker was *Tim Cain*, who is professor at Edge Hill University, where he directs the Centre for Schools, Colleges and Teacher Education (SCaTE), and where he conducts research into how teachers use research findings and collaborative research methods to develop their practices. His paper tackled "The conceptual use of research by Secondary school teachers in England".

Teachers, teaching, and making educational research relevant

As a participant in this rich and stimulating seminar, what did I remember and learn? How does the teacher in me react to what I heard?

I was certainly struck by the commonalities in the themes and arguments presented by the speakers. A number of key concepts and words stood out, and in what follows I will try to synthesise the learning points that challenged me to think, and to react, setting these out schematically to promote opportunities for further critical reflection and discussion.

Continued professional development of teachers

As a practising teacher, the first key word/phrase that resonated with me is 'lifelong learning', about which so much has been said over the past years, particularly given the EU's aspirations to make Europe economically competitive. In the context of this seminar, however, the challenge that was raised refers to the need to constantly remain up-to-date with the knowledge produced by research in order to be a professional educator worthy of this name. *Lillejord* drew an interesting parallel with an American series – *The Knick* – that portrays a hospital in the 1900s, staffed by innovative surgeons and nurses who enthusiastically and impatiently struggled against the limitations of the prevalent medical knowledge and practice. Lillejord claims that education is where medicine was in the early 1900s, arguing that teachers should be moved by the same impatience to overcome the boundaries of learning. In her view, teachers should not just be happy with getting trained and moving into a classroom where they will teach in the same way till retirement age. *Brown* also emphasised the notion of self-improvement that comes not just from personal critical reflection on one's practice, but also in confronting what one does in the classroom with insights provided by formal research. In his view, one should move beyond superficial sharing of advice

to something deeper, more structured and thus more effective in terms of attaining learning goals.

School-university partnerships

A second point that struck me was the need for a partnership between schools and universities, with groups of researchers and teachers working hand in hand to promote the quality of schools. According to *Lillejord*, there is a problem in the way teachers relate to knowledge, since they often do not discriminate between insights arising from their own experience, from discussions with experienced colleagues, and from courses they follow. They also tend not to distinguish between the general information they read in popular, magazine-type publications on the one hand, and formal research on the other. *Cain* echoed such a concern in his presentation, arguing in favour of a culture among teachers that encouraged reading research papers, and learning from them.

Remaining open to research evidence

As the discussions during the seminar suggested, however, the invitation to practitioners to engage with research is not necessarily as appealing as one would imagine. Teachers and school principals might consider that formal research challenges their authority and/or their professional autonomy. Sometimes they dismiss research as being obvious, or incorrect. School staff, however, should be prepared to question themselves, as well as their pedagogy, their class practice, and their school policy, opening themselves up to alternative viewpoints and critical insights that research can provide.

Such openness to research can prove difficult because empirical evidence sometimes informs us not so much about what works, but about what does not work. And yet teachers often insist on keeping on doing things that do not work. This is where research can – or at least should – be quite powerful. *Lillejord* here gave the example of France, where the policy of class repeating still prevails, when it was removed from Norway about 50 years ago after research proved it was simply not having the desired educational effect. *Cain* provided another example in this direction. The latter referred to the common practice of having academically gifted children who finish their class work before the others help the weakest student in class. However, research has shown that such a strategy does not benefit the gifted child. The outcomes are more positive if the latter works with a classmate who is performing only a little less well, of if he or she is given a stimulating task to do, alone or with another gifted student who also finishes the set task early.

Other examples were given by the different speakers to show how research can be of practical use to teachers. Reference was made, for instance, to a

study carried out in the 1970s, which found that if teachers allowed students 30 seconds before responding to a question, their answer was superior. However, despite robust evidence that such a strategy supports learning, teachers generally ignore this finding and have not integrated it in their pedagogical repertoire.

Cain provided yet another example of educators persisting in repeating actions that research has shown to be ineffective. Cain referred to schools that organise coffee mornings for hard-to-reach parents of children with reading difficulties. Common sense suggests that such a strategy pays dividends, and yet, while parents are happy to attend such social functions, the measured impact on children's learning tends to be nil. Research evidence thus helped schools to explore alternative initiatives, including giving parents books and teaching them how to teach their children to read at home. Buying books was somewhat more costly than purchasing coffee, but the returns on the children's reading abilities made it all worthwhile. In this case, as in many others, research can help the school evaluate whether the action they are implementing actually helps it achieve the goals it has set for itself. Thus, while teachers have every right to be critical of research, they should not shy away from learning from it, for there is much to learn.

Trust: a precondition for research partnerships

The themes of 'partnership' and 'critical reflection' raise the issue of 'trust', which *Brown* argues is a crucial component in the relationship between researchers and practitioners. Developing a culture of trust and enquiry is essential because, as Brown notes, one exposes oneself to the scrutiny of others when one is involved in research. That scrutiny should be marked by a spirit of mutual understanding and support, rather than judgmental. The teachers or school principals who open up their classrooms and schools to fellow teachers place themselves in a position of vulnerability. This has to be acknowledged and the person being observed has to be respected, with the session viewed as an opportunity for mutual improvement. A good example of collaborative learning from research, where trust is a paramount quality, involves teachers jointly planning three lessons, for instance, with each taking turns to teach while the others observe the learning process – possibly also using video recording in order to focus on particular segments of the lesson for the purpose of analysis. This type of classroom research has been very productive, showing, for instance, the importance of focus in planning and observation. However, such research is impossible if trust does not prevail between teachers, and between teachers and external researchers who might be invited to participate.

School leadership

Research in schools, with teachers and between teachers, requires strong leadership, because, as Cain took pains to point out, leaders showcase the culture they want to have in their schools. The process of opening oneself up to observation and reflection requires the courage of somebody to go first, to set the ball rolling and to set the tone. However, for school-based research to take place, the collaboration and example of the principal are not enough. Schools also have other leaders, who can be called 'brokers' or 'gatekeepers' – what in French would be referred to as '*passeurs*'. These are the individuals who stand out when a researcher carries out the 'school mapping', which identifies individuals who are ready and willing to talk about themselves, are frequently turned to for advice, and who offer support to colleagues gracefully and with modesty. Good school leadership requires capable people at the top, as well as people able to connect with others across the whole staff spectrum. The presence of exemplary principals and supportive brokers facilitates the kinds of research partnerships that the seminar promoted.

Institutional goal setting

The commitment to research needs to be motivated by goals to which the whole school is committed. Such goals are often related to improving learning achievement, but can also be related to aspirations that are social or political in nature. Brown, for instance, described a school for autistic children where the goals dove-tailed with the overall policy of inclusion adopted at higher political levels. When goals such as these, whether educational or social, are clearly articulated and linked to broader political aspirations as expressed in policy documents, for instance, then the drive for evaluative research becomes more meaningful.

Linking schools, researchers, and policy makers

It is a known fact that countries often have more capacity to produce research than to use it effectively. In her presentation, *Ion* in fact noted that research evidence often fails to travel from the institution that produces it to the sites of policy making and to classrooms. One of the reasons for this is that researchers hardly ever work with policy makers. However, bridging that gap is easier said that done: issues of trust arise again, with policy makers often not taking researchers seriously, arguing that different researchers come up with different and incompatible results, and that research results are often inconclusive, unclear, difficult to decipher, and fail the test of timeliness. Researchers, on their part, often complain that politicians only use their work when it suits them, i.e. to back up policies that have already been decided, rather than to inform thinking about policies that are being developed – a

case, therefore, of policy-based evidence rather than evidence-based policy. Such problematic relationships between the policy-making community on the one hand, and researchers on the other should perhaps not be surprising, given that their agendas are not necessarily the same.

Making research results accessible

The fact that researchers and policy-makers operate in different contexts, and are subject to different agendas, pressures, time frames, and expectations, does not exonerate the former from producing work that is accessible. Producing policy briefings that are informed by the best available research, in language that is clear and readable, and which is succinct and offers reasoned and reasonable conclusions goes a long way in ensuring the dissemination and impact of scholars' efforts. This would be of benefit to all, whether policy makers, who often have to make difficult decisions and require the reassurance that they have truly considered the options available, as well as teachers and school leaders. While it is fair to require policy-makers and educators to be aware of the evidence provided by research, it is equally fair to require researchers to write up their research in ways that can be readily disseminated and understood.

Islands of partnership

Making research accessible is not, however, just a question of language, or of timely and effective communication between the producers and consumers of knowledge. For both epistemological and strategic reasons, the model needs to change from one that is top-down and broad-based, to one that privileges the formation of islands of partnership, where grass root groups of teachers and schools work together collaboratively around specific projects and goals, developing knowledge that is context-specific in response to local challenges. Educational research developed in this manner needs to be designed in ways that respect the knowledge, insights, and expertise of the different players. Researchers who participate in these 'islands' are not a separate breed that has the esoteric knowledge that they bring to bear on the 'poor' efforts made by teachers. Rather, the different perspectives, perceptions, and skills – including in-depth knowledge of a particular context – are brought together in a partnership that strives for the co-production of knowledge that works in the best interests of the student.

A culture of sharing

Partnerships in the co-production of knowledge require a culture of sharing. As *Taddei* noted, such a culture goes counter to the highly individualistic ethos that pervades contemporary life… and yet sharing is key to overcoming the challenges the world is currently facing, including environmental ones.

Taddei tried to capture what he meant by this culture shift by referring to two inspirational examples. The first honours Louis Braille, who, when still a young student, overcame the limitations imposed by his blindness by inventing a system that allowed him to read, and shared this invention with others, thus opening up education and learning for countless more. Babar Ali, a student from West Bengal who, at the age of 16, was called 'the youngest headmaster in the world' by the BBC, provides the second inspirational example. Starting at the tender age of 9, Babar got into the habit of teaching in his back garden what he had learnt at school in the morning. He now has nine other teachers – all of them students from the school he attends – helping him teach 800 children from poor backgrounds for free.

Sharing helps us get closer to the ideal of a 'learning planet', with different people providing building blocks towards the finding of solutions in specific environments. The knowledge of researchers combines with the knowledge of practitioners in order to generate powerful insights and signposts for the way forward. The story of the three blind people trying to describe an elephant is instructive in this regard: each touching a part of the elephant, thinking they are touching a spear (the tusk), a rope (the trunk), and a carpet (the ear). It is only when they share their perceptions that they realise they are all facing the same elephant!

Sharing creates knowledge, and yet education is still too often embedded in practices that isolate students from each other, and schools from wider society. In the past, such insularity was expressed in all sorts of ways, including in the physical locations in which knowledge was produced – such as universities. Today, however, knowledge is at everybody's fingertips, circulating through cyberspace, with smartphones carrying more data than the scientists had in the 1960s to go to the moon. The interaction between research and practice, and between researchers and practitioners, thus needs to be seen in a very different light, where symbiotic sharing is the order of the day.

We are all scientists

The idea that teachers should research their own practice is actually not as outlandish as it might sound at first. As *Taddei* reminded us, we are all born scientists: infants go about their baby lives making observations ('What is this?' when coming across some strange 'thing' on the floor for the first time), forming a hypothesis ('Is it good to eat?'), performing an experiment (eating it), analysing the data ('It's disgusting!'), reporting the findings (crying), inviting others to reproduce the results (offering it to eat to the baby brother). When we argue that teachers should produce knowledge through researching their own practice, all we are saying is that they should carry on being scientists throughout their teaching lives, committing themselves to lifelong

learning, planning and mapping strategies for knowledge exploration according to needs. *Lillejord* highlighted the fact that such behaviour is typical of professionals: medical doctors, for instance, carefully document the work they do, and share their learning with others in both formal and informal ways. Generally speaking, teachers do not seem to have developed similar habits, though there is a move in a similar direction. In Norway, for instance, teachers share their experiences on a web-based platform, and while that does not in itself constitute robust research, it is a start. Formally trained researchers can play a role in working with these important experiences, helping make connections with insights provided by international research, bringing in relevant themes, and working collaboratively to make sense of the complexities of teaching and learning situations.

Schools as networked learning communities

Another example of the approach to research promoted at the seminar, exhibiting the qualities of collaboration, sharing, and partnership that have been highlighted above, was provided by *Brown* in his description of 'research engaged schools' and 'networked learning communities' in the UK. Here, schools identify their problem areas and look for potential solutions, with the help and support of university researchers. Those belonging to networked learning communities have the opportunity of meeting teachers and principals from other schools, to discuss and learn from each others' efforts, also guided by the best available research evidence.

Needless to say, while such ideas seem interesting and exciting – and in many ways even self-evident – they are unlikely to be implemented unless the relevant structural and cultural conditions are put into place. Timetables, for instance, have to be rethought in ways that frees up time for teachers to be together. Collaboration with university-based researchers requires a culture shift that addresses prejudices and misunderstanding on both sides.

The classroom as a research laboratory

Once the notion of research-led teaching and learning becomes embedded in the institutional culture of the school, classrooms – as well as other material or digital spaces designed to enhance learning – will increasingly be seen as the place where experimentation takes place in order to evaluate which pedagogical approach is most effective with which learner. Such experiments need not be very elaborate – but when well designed and carefully executed, even minor efforts can lead to significant achievement gains for learners. *Taddei* mentioned Singapore as a good example of the way schools have adopted research groups within schools, which involve staff and pupils alike. Student involvement in designing and researching learning encounters is important not just for pedagogical reasons, but for political ones as well. As

Lillejord noted with reference to the Reggio Emilia tradition, the notion that the learner is competent and has something important to offer to the learning encounter is deeply embedded, and arises from a concern by parents and teachers when they developed their pedagogical model in the 1950s that never again did they want to have to face fascism. Giving voice to the student, and making the learner an active researcher of his or her own development, has important implications for the development of the qualities required by an active citizenry.

Reflections from the front line

I have been a teacher for more than 35 years. A constant throughout my career is the interest I noticed teachers have for their job, and commitment to their students. But teachers are alone in the classroom. Yes, I enjoy teaching. Yes I discuss students and teaching methods with some colleagues, and exchange material on occasions. But all in all I am alone. So, I welcomed the main idea that came through during this seminar at the IFÉ of Lyon: yes I am sure I can benefit from the help of researchers in education and I welcome it. While listening to the various speakers, however, there are some points that prompt me to react:

First, education was sometimes compared to a science. I accept the idea that it is important to approach educational practice with a scientific mind, and one benefits from experimenting in class, discussing other teachers' experiences, and learning from researchers' experiences, but I am not sure education is a science – at least not in the sense we normally use that term, with connotations of control over variables in order to establish predictability, validity, and generalisability. It would be simpler if it was, but would it be better? Times change, civilizations differ, and human matter is a complex mix… and perhaps the key characteristic of our species is precisely its unpredictability.

Linked to this is my puzzlement at the example cited by *Lillejord*, where she found it surprising that France still makes weak students repeat a class when research has 'proved' that such a strategy is not effective. Coming as I do from a French background, I have witnessed this practice of repeating classes while growing up. I acknowledge that in many cases it did not work. However, there were some students for whom it proved successful. What works for one person might not work for another. What does not work in one context might work in another. I expect more flexibility from researchers if they want me to trust them.

By saying this I am not claiming that teachers have little use for research: I acknowledge the value of keeping up to date with scholarship and the evidence it provides. However, I must admit to feeling overwhelmed by two

things: by the 'information explosion' mentioned by *Lillejord*, and by the complexity of some research articles that I have attempted to read. Teachers and school leaders would benefit from articles that are readable and not overly technical or filled with specialised jargon. It is one thing to write a paper meant to be read by specialists, and other if the audience targeted are teachers and school leaders. Researchers have to make their own effort too in order to disseminate their knowledge and expertise.

I appreciate the effort my own school makes in order to keep us teachers aware of the social changes occurring in our society, and the scientific advancements, via regular conferences by specialists, annual seminars as well as in-service courses. We are lucky to live in a special school environment that gives us teachers enough free time to attend these meetings and read. I have also personally reached the age that liberates some of my time for commitments other than family. But I do not think adding more work onto teachers working in a 'normal' school with 'normal' school hours, who have started a family, are buying a home, sometimes doing overtime to manage financially, is realistic. They have little if any time for after-school meetings, and no time to read. They are in 'survival mode'. I know because I have been through it. Maybe the research-engaged schools should leave it optional for those mature teachers, or teachers without major family responsibilities, who are at a stage in their lives when they can dedicate time and energy to such worthwhile activities.

Finally, it must be said that researchers often present themselves as if they 'know-it-all'. It becomes evident in the phrases they use, and they do sound somewhat condescending towards teachers (e.g. "teachers need help from researchers"; "teachers do not distinguish between general information in magazines and research"). Such statements may not be wholly unjustified, and besides, some researchers are more hands-on than others … but some, I am sure, have lost touch with classrooms. Teachers have all their experience and expertise to offer, and this is not to be neglected. A good collaboration between teachers and researchers, and modesty on both sides, is needed for a fruitful collaboration that will benefit the students.