"What Works" Doesn't Work:

The Problem with the Call for Evidence Based Practices in the Classroom

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Abstract

A commonly proposed, but naïve approach to solving the debates over curriculum and pedagogy would be to merely go with what the research says "works," but educational debates are not so easily solved. Educational decisions are at the heart value judgements, and to claim that research can tell us what to do represents an ethical and moral "cop-out" to these crucial decisions. The term "evidence," as well, tends to mean randomized, controlled, experimental studies; there are myriad other forms of evidence that we encounter in schools that gets pushed to the side. Ultimately, this white paper concludes, research can only tell us what did work; the only way to know "what works" is to look at what is working for a given teacher in the context of their own classroom.

Introduction

As rank and file educators, there are many people who are not teachers who attempt to tell us how and what we should teach. Administrators, parents, bureaucrats, politicans, pundits, and other so-called "experts" on education all have their ideas on how to teach. In reading, mathematics, and special education, there have been huge schisms between different educational schools of thought; in reading, the battles have been between whole language instruction vs phonics instruction; in mathematics, the math wars of traditional vs. reform; and in special education the divide between the traditionalists vs. the radical inclusionists.

One response to this plethora of opinions comes out of academia, where scholars in the field of education have issued a clarion call for teaching "based on evidence," for "evidence-based practices." and that we should (only) use "what works" in the classroom based on the research. What works has been seized upon by politicians and bureaucrats as a way of solving these intractable differences in education. The US Department of Education founded the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) in 2002 as part of the Institute of Education Sciences. The WWC decides what constitutes the criteria for quality research. This sounds reasonable on the surface, except that teachers are not the ones that get to make these determinations; Davies (2003) reminded us that "we can be sure that it is not the teachers who are being asked to judge what is worthwhile, nor what might be regarded as the 'best possible way'" (p. 97). The WWC, having decided what quality research is, then generates comprehensive reviews of a multitude of reading curricula, mathematics curricula, and pedagogical techniques and then pronounces whether or not a program or technique works. Schoenfeld (2006) refers to the WWC's pronouncements as the Good Housekeeping seal of approval for the field of education (p. 13).

Schoenfeld (2006) believed that to conduct controlled trials of traditional versus reform curricula was problematic and raised numerous technical objections to the project in his role as a senior

content advisor. Unfortunately, as Schoenfeld described, the Department of Education worked actively to censor his critique of their approach, not only deleting his chapter from a report that he helped write, but cancelling an entire special issue of a journal to prevent his work on the topic from being published.

The concept for this white paper was inspired by Biesta (2007) who in an oft-quoted article, famously concluded by stating that "from the point of view of democracy, an exclusive emphasis on 'what works' simply will not work" (p. 22) and that educators are in the business of making value judgements, judgements that can be supported by research, but that can never be replaced by objective scientific enterprises. The goal of this white paper is to advocate for looking at more expansive definitions of evidence and how to appropriately use research in practice. By doing so, both researchers and practitioners can begin to see the myriad ways that evidence is already incorporated in their practice and how to contest the claims from policymakers that their practice and/or research is not evidence-based.

What is "evidence-based practice?"

Evidence-based practice, although initially developed in the field of medicine, has become near ubiquitous in other fields, such as social services and education. Writing about the field of health services, Burton and Chapman (2004) wrote that "a new orthodoxy appears to rapidly be taking shape concerning the relationship between research and practice…" (p. 56). This orthodoxy that they warn about, they state, has influenced funders and policy-makers, and funds are being directed almost exclusively towards this style of research.

In education, that call for evidence-based practice has become associated with a rather narrow notion of evidence. Randomized, controlled field styles have become the "preferred—if not prescribed—methodology for educational research," according to Biesta (2007, p. 3). Not everyone arguing for research-based educational practice is content merely with being the research that is valued and funded by policymakers. Some scholars, Biesta contends, "go as far as to say that any practice not based on scientific knowledge is inferior and should ultimately be banned" (p. 3). This should be of major concern to educators, as in this era of decreasing professional autonomy and increased district, state, and national mandates, these calls to ban practice that's not evidenced based would tie teachers' hands and prevent them from using strategies that *teachers* know work in *their* classroom. Instead of research creating a mandate, it should merely be a guide. In the hands of policy makers, however, the call for evidence-based practice becomes yet another excuse to devalue practicioner knowledge as inferior (Clegg, 2005, p. 426) and to impose neoliberal strategies of surveillance (Davies, 2003, p. 100) on already besieged classroom teachers.

Teaching as the Solving of Problems

Research, in Biesta's schema, can only tell us "what *worked*, not what works or will work" (p.18); teachers as professionals face complex problems, and every case they encounter of a student, a classroom, a curriculum, or a school, has its own unique complexities. More than just "a cookbook" (Oancea and Pring, 2008), research offers possibilities, but not clearcut answers. These complexities of what teachers face mean that professional autonomy is essential. Burton

and Chapman (2004) offered the following list of what an effective practitioner draws upon (slightly abbreviated here): "experience; appraisal of current situation; values, attitudes, and beliefs, theory, knowledge; imperatives; and judgement" (p. 62-63). As educators, we draw upon all of these things when we decide what to teach and how to teach it; we draw upon our previous experiences, our knowledge, and our values in order to solve complex problems and challenges that we face within our schools.

These situations we face on a daily basis as educators are not solveable merely with scientific knowledge and protocols. Schwandt (2000) believed that there is much more to professional decision-making than mere application of science; he wrote that "the corrigibility, ambiguity, and circumstantiality of everyday evaluative judgment cannot be eliminated, replaced, or refined by relying on scientific method and its associated rationality" and that when people believe we can replace judgement with objective research, they "mistakenly believe that such knowledge is sovereign with respect to practice" (p. 228). In other words, research can tell us the state of knowledge in the field and provide us with theories, facts, and data to help us make sense of it, but researchers should *not presume* to tell teachers how to deal with the situations they face.

In fact, Schwandt (2000) argues, we have complex moral and ethical decisions to make as professionals, and to claim to have technical solutions to them is to abdicate our responsibilities for having to make decisions, decisions that do not have one clear answer and which reasonable colleagues might disagree (p. 228). In a similar vein, Biesta (2007) argued that education is (always) a moral practice and that what we decide to do in schools is based not just on technical decisions but on the ends we wish to achieve. We have to decide, Biesta says, "whether particular interventions are desireable" (p. 9) not just if we can do them and if they (might) work.

Generating Research that is Useful for Practice

Moreover, research, for it to be useful to teachers, needs to consider the situation under which the research was conducted and the situations to which it might be applied. As Burton and Chapman (2004) argued, "it is unlikely given the complexity of the person-environment-practice systems" that there will be simple solutions to problems faced in professional problem solving scenarios. Rather, "useful knowledge," they stated, "will capture the complexity in the context of applications via provision of an account of the relationships among at least the following elements: contexts, participants, practices, causal mechanisms, regularities, and outcomes" (p. 59).

In addition to this contextualization of research, it is necessary to expand the definition of what counts as research beyond merely quantitative experimental studies for this research to be useful in the classroom. The What Works Consortium's methodology is heavily weighted towards quantitative studies with randomized controlled studies, and many other similar ways of evaluating studies share the same bias. (Odom, et al., 2005, p. 143).

Ayres, Meyer, Erevelles & Park-Lee (1994), in a landmark study exploring why the promises seemed most promising in the research seem to be quite difficult to implement in actual classrooms, believed that we could close the gap between current practices and those practices in the literature by rethinking our ideas of research. They suggest using strategies such as "action

research and participatory research approaches—those that involve practitioners as co-researchers—and critical theory/pedagogy and problem-based methodologies" (p. 92).

This clarion call has been taken up by the field of qualitative research, and many such tools are now in the toolkits of most qualitative researchers, and yet, federal funding, research grants, and the right to declare "what works" seems to still only be associated with quantitative, experimental studies. Furthermore, the "what works" movement favors studies that support the intellectual status quo, failing to account for the possibilities of "destabili[zing] taken-for-granted concepts and frameworks" (Oancea and Pring, 2008, p. 22); as Brantlinger (1997) observed, neutrality and objectivity are deployed by those with an interest in preserving education research as it is (and to preserve their own careers). Thus, Brantlinger argues, those who hold the banner of neutrality and objectivity verbally attack and work to marginalize those who want to challenge oppressive systems. As teachers committed to fighting oppression, it is essential that we challenge (much like Brantlinger does) those in education research, administration, and policy who claim to be neutral and objective while actually promoting their own interests.

There are well-known problems with research dissemination to practicioners, as well; Burton and Chapman (2004) discuss how academic researchers' incentive structures privilege publication in research journals over those used by practitioners and discuss the paywalls and other barriers to practitioners accessing research. Davies (2003) likewise points out how teachers are not given the time to read and make sense of research, even if the research were made accessible to them (p. 100). Research should be written in terms and venues accessible to practitioners, but in order for this to happen we need to shift the reward structure of the academy and the conditions of work of the classroom teacher to facilitate this interaction.

How Teachers Should Respond

The problem here is not with the oft-delivered call to bridge the gap between research and practice. Clearly, there is a lot we can do as both researchers as teachers to bridge this gap and build more of a collaborative culture.

The problem is when the practices that the quantitative, experimental literature show "work" are imposed upon teachers without considering that studies are contextual; they cannot simply be imported from one context and expected to work in another context without the application of professional judgement. Teachers may not know how to write up and publish in a strict, rigorous fashion but they know what works in *their classrooms*, for *their students*, in *their context*.

Teachers base these judgements not just on opinion but on theory, empiricism, knowledge, and values. By theory, we mean not just academic theories of teaching, but more importantly, vernacular theories (in McLaughlin, 1996's sense); these vernacular theories help teachers to make sense of what is happening in their classrooms and to communicate it with their colleagues. In terms of empiricism, all teaching is empirically based; teaches observe their students, take notes on what happens in their classrooms, engage in formative assessment practices, listen to student feedback, and engage in self-reflection about their experience in the classroom. And in terms of knowledge, teachers' knowledge encodes "value stances," which, as Sanderson (2003) argued, "result[s] in a de facto privileging of the normative commitments of academics,

managers and policy makers" (p. 341). The values of teachers are different than that of administrators, school boards, state and federal bureaucrats, politicians, and researchers, and if we allow our knowledge to be devalued, we also lose the battle for our values to be acknowledged.

This is the true "what works" in the classroom; not the "what did work" of the research literature, but rather the what is working—right now—in this particular classroom with this particular teacher. What "is working" is "what works," not what the literature said of another time, another place, and another classroom." As teachers, we read literature, we take courses, we attend professional conferences, we reflect on our practice, we dialogue with colleagues; we do use what works for us, and we need to push back against those who seek to devalue this knowledge, whether they are a researcher, an administrator, a policymaker, or even a fellow teacher.

About the Author

James Sheldon is an instructor in the Schedule for Success program for Beginning Algebra, a program that teaches college freshmen mathematical problem solving and study skills. He is currently working on a PhD in Teaching and Teacher Education / Math and Science, at the University of Arizona. He holds two Master's degrees, in Special Education and in Equity and Social Justice in Education, respectively. He is an unabashed union activist and a member of the National Education Association BAT Caucus, the Arizona Education Association (AEA/NEA), the National Writers' Union (UAW Local 1981), and the Industrial Workers of the World Industrial Union 620. He can be reached through email at jsheldon@jamessheldon.com.

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