



## Teachers' Engagement with Educational Research: Toward a Conceptual Framework for Locally-Based Interpretive Communities

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**Abstract:** In this article, I re-visit the gap between educational research and practice, by reviewing some initiatives that have been taken to bridge the gap. I argue that most of these initiatives do not pay due attention to local contexts of research use. They tend to focus more on the *management* of researchers' theoretical knowledge than on the *generation* of teachers' pedagogical knowledge. For the development of meaningful pedagogical knowledge, I recommend that teachers be provided with appropriate opportunities to engage directly with educational research. However, I note that such engagement with research is not without challenges and constraints. Borrowing from Denzin and Lincoln (2005), I discuss three challenges – of representation, legitimation, and praxis – to teachers' engagement with research. To overcome these challenges, I propose that teachers work as locally-based interpretive communities, in which they negotiate a communicative validity of research findings through dialogue with one another.

**Keywords:** research-practice gap; knowledge management; triple crisis; interpretation; community of learners

### **Participación Docente en la Investigación Educativa: Hacia un Marco Conceptual para las Comunidades Interpretativas de Base Local**

**Resumen:** En este artículo exploró la brecha entre la investigación y la práctica educativa. Luego de revisar algunas iniciativas que se han tomado para reducir la brecha, sostengo que la mayoría de estas iniciativas no prestan la debida atención a los contextos locales de uso en investigación. Esos trabajos tienden a centrarse más en la gestión que los investigadores hacen de los conocimientos teóricos mas que en la generación de conocimiento pedagógico por parte de los docentes. Para el desarrollo del conocimiento pedagógico significativo, recomiendo que se generen oportunidades adecuadas para que los docentes puedan participar directamente con la investigación educativa. Sin embargo, quiero señalar que esta participación en la investigación no está exenta de dificultades y limitaciones. Siguiendo los aportes de Denzin y Lincoln (2005), discuto los tres desafíos de la representación, legitimación y praxis para el participación de los docentes en la investigación. Para afrontar estos retos, propongo que los docentes trabajen en comunidades interpretativas de base local, en las cuales se negocien la validez comunicativa de resultados de investigación a través del diálogo con los otros.

**Palabras clave:** brecha de investigación-práctica; gestión del conocimiento; triple crisis; interpretación; comunidad de estudiantes

### **Participação dos Professores na Pesquisa Educativa: Para um Quadro Conceitual de Comunidades Interpretativas de Base Local**

**Resumo:** Este artigo explorou a lacuna entre investigação e prática educacional. Após análise de algumas iniciativas que foram tomadas para reduzir a lacuna coloco que a maioria dessas iniciativas não prestar a devida atenção aos contextos locais de uso em pesquisa. Esses trabalhos tendem a se concentrar mais na gestão do conhecimento teórico dos pesquisadores mais que geração do conhecimento pedagógico pelos professores. Para o desenvolvimento do conhecimento pedagógico significativo, eu recomendo gerar mais oportunidades adequadas para que os professores possam participar diretamente na pesquisa educacional. No entanto, observo que a participação na pesquisa não é sem suas dificuldades e limitações. Seguindo as contribuições de Denzin e Lincoln (2005), se discutem os três desafios de representação, legitimação e praxis para a participação dos professores na investigação. Para enfrentar esses desafios, proponho que os professores que trabalham em comunidades interpretativas base locais em que a validade comunicativa dos resultados da investigação negociados através do diálogo com os outros.

**Palavras-chave:** lacuna pesquisa-prática; gestão do conhecimento; tripla crise; interpretação; comunidade estudantil

## **Introduction**

In the 2012 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Presidential Address, Arnetha Ball (2012) challenged educational researchers to not only generate knowledge, but also “promote the use of research to improve education and serve the public good” (p. 284). This challenge is important and timely because there has been a wide gap between research and practice in the field of education (Broekkamp & van Hout-Wolters, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Sharp, 2003; Kennedy, 1997; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). More than a decade ago, Mitchell (1999), among others, observed that most published research had little or no influence on classroom practices. Although a variety of initiatives have been taken in the past decade to disseminate educational research (e.g., Levin, 2011), empirical studies indicate that “school practitioners continue to make little use of research” (Dagenais et al., 2012, p. 285). Realizing the detrimental consequences of the

split between research and practice, Ball (2012, p. 284) warns educational researchers against what Howard Zinn characterized as “publish while others perish.” My article is a dialogical response to Ball’s challenge. In the pages that follow, I first explore the nature of research-practice gap in education. Second, I review some recent strategies of research dissemination and identify two problems in them. I argue that most of these initiatives focus on the management of researchers’ theoretical knowledge than on the generation of teachers’ pedagogical knowledge, and that they treat teachers as passive consumers of research-based knowledge. In order to resist such tendencies, I argue for teachers’ direct engagement with educational research. Then I draw on Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005) framework of triple crisis of research (with regard to representation, legitimation, and praxis) to discuss potential challenges to teachers’ direct engagement with research. Finally, I propose a pedagogical innovation that may be helpful to support teachers’ engagement with educational research, and I describe this innovation as *locally-based interpretive communities of learners*.

### The Nature of Research-Practice Gap in Education

Educational researchers and scholars have examined and commented on teachers’ engagement with university-based research or a lack thereof. For example, Zeichner (1995) described “a situation where many teachers feel that educational research conducted by those in the academy is largely irrelevant to their lives in schools” and they rarely “look to educational research conducted by academics to inform and improve their practice” (p. 153). In a comprehensive review of literature, Hemsley-Brown and Sharp (2003) identified numerous barriers to using research by practitioners and found that there was a lack of organizational culture which valued and supported the use of research knowledge in the public sector. For example, Shkedi’s (1998) case study with Israeli teachers found that very few teachers used educational research to develop their professional knowledge. This study also revealed that research literature was unavailable to most practitioners, and that those who occasionally read research reports faced difficulty in understanding the abstract language and statistical data. Similarly, Papatotiriou and Hannan’s (2006) study with Greek primary school teachers found that few teachers read educational research. Those who read hardly applied their reading to classroom practices. Nassaji’s (2012) survey with ESL and EFL teachers in Canada and Turkey found that about half of the participants had never or rarely read research-based articles (p. 354). Borg’s (2009) international study with teachers from 13 countries around the world also found teachers’ low level of engagement with educational research.

If we look at the split between research and practice through a North American historical lens, we see that, after periods of pessimism, there was much optimism about the role of educational research during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Kennedy, 1997). However, this brief period was followed by another pessimistic turn. Researchers and practitioners were both worried and skeptical about the usefulness of educational research. Kaestle’s (1993) article “The Awful Reputation of Educational Research” summarized many of these concerns and worries, for example, the lack of influence educational research had on classroom practice. Nevertheless, the second phase of pessimism was different from the first one (i.e., pre-1960s) in the sense that researchers now began to investigate the gap between research and practice as a topic in its own right. Educational researchers also developed a distinct body of work that focused on why research “failed” to influence practice. Kennedy (1997) identified four hypotheses that were put forward as reasons for this failure:

- (a) The research itself is not sufficiently persuasive or authoritative; the quality of educational studies has not been high enough to provide compelling, unambiguous, or authoritative results to practitioners.
- (b) The research has not been relevant to

practice. It has not been sufficiently practical, it has not addressed teachers' questions, nor has it adequately acknowledged their constraints. (c) Ideas from research have not been accessible to teachers. Findings have not been expressed in ways that are comprehensible to teachers. (d) The education system itself is intractable and unable to change, or it is conversely inherently unstable, overly susceptible to fads, and consequently unable to engage in systematic change. (p. 4)

More than a decade later, most of these reasons still hinder the use of research in the field of education (Dagenais et al., 2012). For example, Ball (2012) has identified some similar reasons for the research-practice gap. First, research reports are inaccessible to many practitioners. Second, there is a lack of professional norms for practitioners to engage with research. Third, very few practitioners and policy makers carry out research. Fourth, educational researchers, policy makers, and practitioners seldom work in collaborative forums. Finally, research findings are rarely used to formulate new policies; they are rather used to support political decisions already made. These points raise serious concerns about the practical value of educational research. If this existing gap between research and practice continues to widen, critics such as Ball (2012) suspect that students will *perish* while educational researchers *publish* their findings.

Nevertheless, educational researchers have paid attention to how this research-practice gap may be bridged. Generally, they call for greater cooperation among researchers, policy makers, and practitioners (see, for example, Wagner, 1997). Governments, ministries of education, and policy think tanks have also devised a variety of models for the dissemination of research. Broekkamp and van Hout-Wolters (2007) discuss four such models: (1) the research development diffusion (RDD) model, (2) the evidence-based practice (EBP) model, (3) the boundary-crossing practices (BCP) model, and (4) the knowledge communities (KC) model. The first model – RDD – emphasizes the importance of translating research results and transmitting them to practitioners. This model is based on the assumption that very few practitioners pay attention to research. Therefore, it assigns a central role to mediators who select, adapt, and distribute research findings. The second model – EBP – focuses on careful application of research evidence to practice. Unlike the RDD model that includes evidence from diverse research traditions, the EBP model focuses exclusively on empirical evidence obtained through randomized studies employing quantitative methods. These two models, which advocate a one-sided push for research use, are often contrasted with the third and fourth models, both of which emphasize collaboration and interaction between researchers and practitioners. The third model is called Boundary-Crossing Practices (BCP), which values “combining tasks from different professional domains;” for example, a teacher may “carry out research in his [*sic*] own teaching practice” (Broekkamp & van Hout-Wolters, 2007, p. 209). The fourth and final model is called Knowledge Communities (KC), which is based on the assumption that a strong link can be established if individuals participate in professional networks. In these networks, they are expected to share interest and passion, benefit from each other's expertise and thus to generate new knowledges.

Working within or outside the models mentioned above, some take an information approach to bridging the research-practice gap. For instance, Williams and Coles (2007) have called for developing individual teachers' capacities to successfully use educational research. They examined teachers' lack of research engagement from the perspective of information literacy – defined as “the capability of individuals to locate and critically evaluate information, and to make effective use of information in decision-making, knowledge creation and problem-solving” (p. 188). They concluded that “teachers' use of research evidence is likely to be enhanced by greater development of [their] information literacy” (p. 186). While authors such as Williams and Coles (2007) underscore the importance of developing teachers' information literacy, others have suggested that information and

communication technologies be incorporated in the processes of research dissemination. For example, Cooper (2014) discusses how research brokering organizations can use various online strategies and social media, in addition to their official websites, to disseminate research knowledge to practitioners.

Additionally, there is a body of literature that focuses on knowledge management in education. Broadly speaking, knowledge management draws ideas and inspiration from business organizations. It argues that “the concepts, tools, and techniques of organizational knowledge management can be applied to the professional practices and development of teachers” (Carroll et al., 2003, p. 42). For example, David Hargreaves (1999) recommends that schools deploy “middle managers” for effective knowledge management. He puts forward his argument through the following analogy:

Top managers are too far from front-line experience to have the current ‘hands-on’ knowledge that is crucial to the generation of new knowledge and practices. On the shopfloor, the work is too narrowly conceived or demanding to allow the distancing needed in knowledge creation. Middle managers, however, serve as a ‘strategic knot’ between top managers and the front-line engineers, a bridge between the company’s vision and the chaotic reality of its implementation, between ‘what is’ and ‘what should be’. (p. 133)

In recent years, this idea of knowledge management has been taken up by several programs that aim to increase the impact of research on practice. One strand of work within the field of knowledge management is now known as knowledge mobilization (KM), which “refers to the multiple ways in which stronger connections can be made between research, policy and practice” (Levin, 2011, p. 15). This is a growing area of study as governments, universities, schools, and other organizations are looking for new ways of applying research knowledge to professional practice (Levin & Cooper, 2012).

In order to increase the impact of research on practice, Levin (2004) proposed a model consisting of three contexts: context of research production, context of research use, and the social context. Moreover, there are mediators of various kinds who make connections and interactions between the first two contexts, and their mediation is heavily influenced by the third context. Examples of such mediators include, but are not limited to, media (mass and professional), think tanks, lobbyists, and policy entrepreneurs (Levin, 2004). Levin (2011) claims that this model of knowledge mobilization has proven “reasonably practical” and been used by other scholars and the European Commission (p. 16). However, this model does not provide clear understandings of what “mobilizing knowledge” means to classroom teachers. How does the mobilized knowledge help teachers who are always bound by their unique context and its nuanced cultures? Like Fenwick and Farrell (2012), I wonder, “why a predominant focus on applied research – with linear associations of knowledge being piped from one site to another – has become a desirable aim of educational research” (p. 1). I further argue that Levin’s (2004) reliance on third party mediators is similar to Hargreaves’ (1999) recommendation for deploying middle managers. In this sense, Levin’s project takes a knowledge dissemination approach that may be described as “circulating or presenting research findings to potential users....[which] assumes a one-way flow of information from research to practice, and views research users as relatively passive consumers of evidence” (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2009, p. 554).

## Two Problems in the Initiatives Described Above

My review of the literature reveals two significant problems in the initiatives taken thus far to mend the split between research and practice. The first problem is that most approaches to knowledge management/mobilization highlight the administrative dimensions of knowledge use. They prescribe what roles each party involved in the knowledge management process should play. For example, Levin's (2004) model of research impact describes the roles of individuals in the contexts of research production and research use, as well as those who work as mediators between these contexts. Although I recognize the value of this model and its emphasis on the administrative, I argue that it focuses more on the *management* of researchers' theoretical knowledge than on the *generation* of teachers' pedagogical knowledge. It fails to pay due attention to the complex nature and various sources of teachers' pedagogical knowledge (Morine-Dershimer & Kent, 1999). I argue that only a managerial focus on knowledge mobilization is not sufficient "because the kind of knowledge that [university-based] research can offer is of a very different kind from the knowledge that classroom teachers need to use" (McIntyre, 2005, p. 359). Therefore, we need to understand how teachers may interrogate and interpret researchers' theoretical knowledge to develop their practical pedagogical knowledge.

The second problem is that most knowledge management strategies follow the principles of traditional professional development (PD) activities. Rather than encourage teachers' direct engagement with research, they just *tell* teachers about research (Greenleaf & Katz, 2004). As mediators between researchers and practitioners, trainers and professional developers choose, summarize, and convey research findings to teachers. As a result, teachers get to know research-based recommendations that are selected by their trainers and/or knowledge brokers. This is best exemplified by the training model of PD, which "is generally 'delivered' to the teacher by an 'expert', with the agenda determined by the deliverer, and the participant placed in a passive role" (Kennedy, 2005, p. 237). I argue that the way research-based knowledge is delivered to teachers through traditional PD and various knowledge management initiatives reinforces "a discourse that focuses on the professional as deficient and in need of developing and directing rather than on a professional engaged in self-directed learning" (Webster-Wright, 2009, p. 712). Like the training model of PD, knowledge management strategies often portray teachers as incapable of self-directed professional learning. Therefore, I propose that teachers engage directly with educational research and develop their context-specific pedagogical knowledge.

## Challenges to Teachers' Direct Engagement with Research

As the above review of literature indicates, there are numerous barriers to teachers' direct engagement with published research (Ball, 2012; Hemsley-Brown & Sharp, 2003; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). For example, a lack of time is an oft-cited reason for teachers' low engagement with research (Borg, 2009). A lack of institutional supports is another prime reason why teachers do not usually read and use research (Anwaruddin & Pervin, 2015). In addition to these barriers, there is another set of challenges that come with research itself. In discussing such challenges, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe a triple crisis of research. Although they use the concept of triple crisis to discuss qualitative research, I believe that these crises are relevant to all approaches to research in social and human sciences. Therefore, I extend Denzin and Lincoln's triple crisis framework to educational research in general, regardless of specific approaches such as qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), the first crisis – the problem of representation – is concerned with the idea that "researchers can no longer directly capture lived

experience” of their participants (p. 19). The second crisis involves re-thinking of legitimation, i.e., evaluating and interpreting research texts. The third crisis – concerned with praxis – asks: “Is it possible to effect change in the world if society is only and always a text” (p. 20).

I shall now briefly describe the triple of crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis. First, representation – a key concept in the social sciences – is used in many forms: delegation, replication, substitution, duplication, repetition, and resemblance (Rosenau, 1992). Postmodernists and poststructuralists reject the modernist notion of representation, which maintains that there is “truth” out there in the world and it can be accurately represented. In educational research, the concept of representation is often used as a crisis, which questions the ability of the researcher to adequately describe social realities. As Schwandt (2007) states, “the crisis is part of a more general set of ideas across the human sciences that challenge long-standing beliefs about the role of encompassing, generalizing (theoretical, methodological, and political) frameworks that guide empirical research within a discipline” (p. 48). In other words, “the crisis of representation is about the inability of...researchers to present in their written reports the lived experiences of those they study” (Willis, 2007, p. 155). Critics question the researcher’s ability as well as his/her moral right to represent the researched. Thus, researchers are challenged “to negotiate a balanced view that incorporates not only the ‘facts’ of the lives of the individuals under scrutiny, but also the ‘facts’ of the researchers’ own lives” (Cooper & White, 2012, p. 60). In light of this first crisis, teachers ought to explore how best they can interpret what is “represented” in research texts. In other words, how can a teacher make sense of what a researcher (as a “knowing” subject) represents in/through a text?

The second crisis is concerned with legitimation. It is one of four crises in advanced capitalism that Habermas (1975) identified (the other three are economy, rationality, and motivation). In general, legitimation becomes a crisis when the political or administrative systems impose instrumental rationality on the traditions or normative bases of a society (Ewert, 1991). In educational research, it is used to imply the issues arising from the concept of authority that “refers to the claim a text makes to be an accurate, true, complete account of experience, meaning, a way of life, and so forth” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 46). Many scholars and practitioners question the researcher’s ability to claim “objective truth.” Therefore, the crisis of legitimation is about warrant, i.e., “what warrants our attention and why” (Willis, 2007, p. 155). On the other hand, educational research is sometimes criticized for its subjective and non-conclusive claims. Ultimately, the crisis of legitimation in research may be described by what Britzman (1995) characterizes as the impossibility of *holistic account* due to “the partiality of language – of what cannot be said precisely because of what is said, and of the impossible difference within what is said, what is intended, what is signified, what is repressed, what is taken, and what remains” (p. 5). With regard to this crisis, any initiative for research engagement shall focus on teachers’ interpretations and understandings of legitimation of what is re/presented in research texts.

The final crisis is about praxis. The concept of praxis can be traced in the works of many scholars from Aristotle to Marx to Gramsci, and others. In the field of education, Freire (1970) popularized the notion of praxis through his work with illiterate peasants. Freire realized that people accepted power structures and oppression as inevitable and the marginalized became oppressors once they climbed up the power hierarchy. He was concerned about this vicious cycle of oppression, and argued that liberation can be achieved “only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 33). A key feature of Freire’s praxis is to engage in dialogue with others because dialogue, as a process, challenges the hierarchy between the oppressor and the oppressed, between the teacher and the student, and between various forms of knowledge (Freire, 1970). In addition to Freire, I draw upon Gadamer’s notion of praxis. As he (2001) argues:

...our praxis does not consist in our adapting to pre-given functions or in the thinking out of suitable means for achieving pre-given purposes. That is technology. Rather, our praxis must consist in prudent choices as we pursue common goals, choices we arrive at together and in practical reflection making concrete decisions about what is to be done in our present situation. (pp. 83-84)

Praxis – conceptualized as making “prudent choices” – becomes problematic when all projects of knowledge (creation) suffer from the crises of representation and legitimation. These crises seem to be a characteristic feature of the present time, which Bauman (2000) describes as liquid modernity. The present is marked with “the absence of guaranteed meanings – of absolute truths, of preordained norms of conduct, of pre-drawn borderlines between right and wrong, no longer needing attention, of guaranteed rules of successful action” (p. 212). Meanings and truths are now fluid. Unlike solids of modernity, they constantly melt and lose their shapes. This liquid modernity does not take “legitimate knowledge” for granted. It refuses to view knowledge from epistemological terms alone because knowledge is always *political*. For some, research findings “are no more than a text that was created by the researcher and we have no established way of deciding which of many texts – views, perspectives, and understandings of human behavior and social life – warrants our attention” (Willis, 2007, p. 155). In light of this crisis, we need to ask: If there is no guaranteed meaning and if knowledge is always politically contested, how can teachers reflect and act upon the knowledge produced by educational research to inform their practice and make *prudent* choices?

Now the question that we are confronted with is: How can teachers overcome the challenges of these triple crises? As I discussed above, the literature on knowledge management does not seem to address this issue. Most knowledge management initiatives are interested in various ways of making strong connections between research, policy, and practice. Such initiatives tend to take a one-size-fits-all approach and treat research knowledge as universally valid and effective. This approach ignores the contextual realities of schools where knowledge is supposed to be used for educational improvement. Moreover, knowledge managers often treat teachers as passive, uncritical consumers of research knowledge. Such treatment views teachers as merely practitioners who are *not-yet-professionals*. Furthermore, most knowledge managers focus on developing teachers’ individual capacity to use research knowledge to improve their practice, rather than creating a collaborative organizational culture conducive to sharing, personalizing, and utilizing research knowledge. In addition to these problems of contemporary knowledge management work, there are challenges that come with educational research itself. One set of challenges is what I have described above as three kinds of crisis. Below I delineate my proposal for locally-based interpretive communities that may be helpful sites for teachers to overcome the challenges of triple crisis and to meaningfully engage with educational research. This proposal emerges from my international experiences in working with teachers, a study that a colleague and I conducted to understand teachers’ engagement with research (Anwaruddin & Pervin, 2015), and an extensive review of relevant literature.

### **A Locally-Based Approach**

In the literature on knowledge management, various types of dissemination process have been discussed. For example, Klein and Gwaltney (1991) describe four types of dissemination: spread, choice, exchange, and implementation. The first type – spread – is a “one-way diffusion or distribution of information” (p. 246). In this type of dissemination, knowledge producers share and promote the use of knowledge among target audiences. Compared to the first, the second type – choice – is more reactive and responsive because it “helps users seek and acquire alternative sources



of information and learn about their options” (p. 246). This type of dissemination is usually carried out by clearinghouses, libraries, data bases, and information centers. The third type of dissemination is called exchange, which “involves interactions between people and the multidirectional flow of information through such media as conferences, forums, computer networks, feedback systems, and so on” (p. 246). The fourth and final type of dissemination is implementation or use of knowledge, “which includes technical assistance, training, or interpersonal activities designed to increase the use of knowledge or R&D or to change attitudes or behavior of organizations or individuals” (p. 247).

Klein and Gwaltney’s (1991) typology of dissemination is similar, in many ways, to a framework proposed by Lavis, Robertson, Woodside, Mcleod, and Abelson (2003). This framework highlights types of dissemination such as producer push, user pull, and exchange of research knowledge and information. Lavis et al. (2003) ask five questions that guide their framework:

What should be transferred to decision makers (the message)? To whom should research knowledge be transferred (the target audience)? By whom should research knowledge be transferred (the messenger)? How should research knowledge be transferred (the knowledge-transfer processes and supporting communications infrastructure)? With what effect should research knowledge be transferred (evaluation)? (p. 222)

Many organizations and institutions of education have been using models of knowledge dissemination such as the two mentioned above. However, studies have suggested that very few teachers actually use research-based knowledge to improve their pedagogical practice (Anwaruddin & Pervin, 2015; Ball, 2012; Borg, 2009, 2010; Hemsley-Brown & Sharp, 2003; Shkedi, 1998). In keeping with scholars such as Anderson-Levitt (2003), Steiner-Khamsi (2004), and Guthrie (2011), I argue that a key reason for why these models fail to promote the use of research knowledge is that they do not attend sufficiently to the complexities of local contexts where knowledge is used and applied to practice.

After a careful review of literature, it appears that most of the knowledge dissemination initiatives take what I call a “copy-and-paste” approach. I understand that this approach tries to bring the “best” research-based knowledge to the context of practice (Bennet & Bennet, 2007). However, it adopts one-way communication strategies and overlooks the local contextual realities and sociocultural factors and, thus, it hinders teachers’ meaningful engagement with research knowledge. As Fischman and Tefera (2014) write, “a unidirectional model for research communication has contributed to a broad perception especially among practitioners that scholars impose research-based knowledge on them leading to a failure to recognize the knowledge teachers, principals and policy makers, for example, do possess” (p. 2). This copy-and-paste, unidirectional approach is conceptually similar to the argument of the world culture theorists who believe that schools around the world are becoming similar by adopting common educational principles and practices (Myer & Ramirez, 2000). A central argument of the world culture theorists is that the contemporary global model of mass education originated in Europe as a part of the nation-building process. After the World War II, when new nation-states were being created, the rest of the world adopted the European model of education (see Anderson-Levitt, 2003). This theory of converging school culture might have influenced researchers, knowledge managers, and policy makers who take a universal approach to applying research knowledge to all contexts without paying due attention to the sociocultural aspects of knowledge use.

In contrast to the world culture theory’s universal approach to research and practice, many scholars have examined various forms of transfer of pedagogical methods and approaches. In fact, this issue of transfer, also known as educational lending and borrowing, has been a recurring theme in comparative and international education (for details, see Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Educational

policy makers across the world are under pressure to attain high international “standards.” This pressure often results in uncritical adoption of foreign theories and methods of education, which are not always suited to the culture and heritage of the host countries/schools. For example, Nguyen, Elliott, Terlouw, and Pilot (2009) investigated the application of cooperative learning, a Western method of education, within an Asian context. Their investigation found “a complex web of cultural conflicts” in the application of the Western method to an Eastern educational context (p. 109). It also highlighted “the potential for mismatch when educational approaches are transferred across cultures without sufficient consideration of the norms and values of the host society” (pp. 123-124). Therefore, I propose that we take a locally-based approach to bridging the research-practice gap. This proposal is inspired by the works of those scholars of comparative and international education who point to diverging cultures of schooling by showing variation – not only from nation to nation, but also from school to school (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). They argue that although educational discourses such as decentralization, teacher reforms, and student-centered pedagogy are spreading around the world, these discourses have different meanings in different contexts.

Furthermore, a locally-based approach to knowledge management is necessary because any effort to transfer research knowledge needs to cater to specific contextual realities. In most educational contexts, the rhetoric of the use of new knowledge does not match with the socio-economic realities of school and community. Practitioners are not always provided with the necessary time and resources to utilize the knowledge they learn in the seminar halls or professional development workshops. For example, Jennings (2001) explored teacher education and training programs in selected Commonwealth Caribbean countries and found that various infrastructural constraints prevented teachers from applying knowledge and technologies to their instructional practice. In addition to infrastructural constraints, there are issues of appropriateness of research knowledge borrowed from other contexts. Some scholars of comparative and international education have discussed the complexities of educational borrowing, which may lead to the de-contextualization of educational practices. To gain legitimacy of “imported” knowledge, governments and policy makers often adopt a process known as *externalization* – “referring to existing models outside the educational system and appropriating the language that goes along with these borrowed models” (Steiner-Khamsi & Quist, 2000, p. 277). By pointing to the educational success outside their own system, they tend to ignore the fact that success is dependent upon particular educational contexts.

Some scholars argue that every context is so unique that research knowledge and educational policies borrowed from another context are likely to prove ineffective (Guthrie, 2011). In India, for example, District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) were established as a response to the call for integrating local knowledge in the curriculum of teacher education and development. In order to explore how local knowledges were being utilized in the DIET programs, Dyer et al. (2004) conducted a study in six districts of India, two from each of the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat. The study found “a weak link between in-service training and local contexts” (p. 41). Taking a one-size-fits-all approach to teacher training, the DIETs used an urbanized model of teacher education, which was not suited to the local conditions. Their training approaches reflected top-down, centralized views of knowledge-and-skills-based teacher education. In summary, Dyer et al. (2004) found that the DIETs did not critically consider teachers’ local knowledge and the contexts in which they worked. Drawing from these examples, I argue that dissemination initiatives should select research-based knowledge, which is appropriate to a given context and has practical implications for teachers and students in that context. To select research-materials, policy makers and knowledge managers ought to listen sincerely to teachers’ opinions about the appropriateness of

research-knowledge in their local contexts. A thorough examination of the context where knowledge will be used has to be a priority for any effort to bridge the research-practice divide.

### Teachers as Community of Learners

Taking a locally-based approach to research-based knowledge, teachers need to work as a community of learners. My recommendation for a community of learners is grounded primarily in the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) who, departing from the more familiar psychological theories of learning, proposed a social theory of learning. In this theory, learning is not viewed as mere reception of factual knowledge and information. Instead, learning occurs in a social world through participation in communities of practice. One of the analogies that Lave and Wenger (1991) use is apprentice tailors who first observe their masters, then learn to sew a garment, and later learn to cut clothes in different and perhaps more innovative ways. In this way, the apprentice moves from being a peripheral member to being a fully participating member of the community. This exemplifies the notion of *community of learners*, which is based on the argument that:

learning occurs as people participate in shared endeavors with others, with all playing active but often asymmetrical roles in sociocultural activity. This contrasts with models of learning that are based on one-sided notions of learning – either that it occurs through transmission of knowledge from experts or acquisition of knowledge by novices, with the learner or the others (respectively) in a passive role. (Rogoff, 1994, p. 209)

Grounded in this social theory of learning, my proposal emphasizes that the producers, managers, and users of knowledge work collaboratively in a community of learners. This emphasis on the notion of community is also inspired by the “exchange” type of dissemination proposed by Klein and Gwaltney (1991) and Lavis et al. (2003). In this type of dissemination, individuals interact with one another for a *multidirectional* flow of knowledge and information. As a community, they benefit from each other's expertise and generate new pedagogical knowledge (Broekkamp & van Hout-Wolters, 2007). Empirical studies have chronicled how communities of learners may facilitate dialogues among educational researchers, policy makers, and practitioners (e.g., de Vries & Pieters, 2007; Edwards, Sebba, & Rickinson, 2007; Ion & Iucu, 2014).

The idea of community of learners is also congruent with some literature on knowledge management. For example, Coakes (2002) argues that successful knowledge management for innovation requires a culture that fosters creation, sharing, learning, and using of new knowledge within a collaborative culture. Therefore, I propose that teachers be provided with opportunities to collaborate with one another and work as a learning community. I emphasize the need to involve researchers in this learning community so that they can learn from practitioners about how the knowledge they generate can be useful for others. This will facilitate a reciprocal relationship and a two-way exchange between researchers and practitioners. This reciprocity is important because studies have demonstrated that knowledge management efforts often fail to address the subtle and complex ways of how research is used in practice contexts such as schools. This is why it is vital that researchers get involved in communities of learners. As Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) observe, “knowledge management systems seem to work best when the people who generate the knowledge are also those who store it, explain it to others, and coach them as they try to implement the knowledge” (p. 21). Hence, the community of learners that I propose shall involve researchers and practitioners where both parties learn from each other. This argument may be further supported by the concept of professional learning community.

In general terms, a professional learning community (PLC) is composed of collaborative individuals who “work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 3). According to Newmann and Associates (1996), PLCs have five essential characteristics. First, there are shared values and norms regarding issues such as the group’s collective “views about children and children’s ability to learn, school priorities for the use of time and space, and the proper roles of parents, teachers, and administrators” (p. 181). Second, PLCs focus clearly and consistently on student learning. Third, PLCs capitalize on reflective dialogues leading to “extensive and continuing conversations among teachers about curriculum, instruction, and student development” (p. 182). Fourth, PLCs aim to deprivatize practices in order to make teaching public. Finally, PLCs prioritize collaboration for both teachers’ professional development and students’ increased learning.

PLC as a model of teachers’ professional development is based on the idea that schools as institutions of formal education should ensure that students learn what they are expected to learn. As such, all teachers in a school work as a collaborative team with the aim of helping each student learn. Researchers such as Harris and Jones (2010) have documented how PLCs support changed professional practice that may contribute to system-wide improvement. Similarly, Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008, p. 88) have found that “participation in learning communities impacts teaching practice as teachers become more student centered. In addition, teaching culture is improved because the learning communities increase collaboration, a focus on student learning, teacher authority or empowerment, and continuous learning.” In summary, PLCs require that teachers collaborate with one another in order to help each of their students achieve desired educational goals.

Nevertheless, the community of learners that I propose goes beyond the notion of PLC described above. In a traditional PLC, teachers collaborate with one another and school administrators support such collaboration. However, for teachers’ successful engagement with research-based knowledge, we need to involve researchers who can directly communicate their research to practitioners. This exchange of knowledge does not necessarily require mediation by third parties such as lobby groups and knowledge brokers as described in Levin (2004). An organic and unmediated exchange of knowledge is likely to have a number of positive outcomes. First, researchers may learn the contextual realities in which their research is used in day-to-day activities. Second, they do not have to depend on mediators who – as researchers often suspect – might distort their research findings during the course of translation and transfer. Third, teachers can inform researchers about the applicability of (or a lack thereof) research knowledge to their particular contexts. Finally, through their direct communication and interaction with researchers, teachers may be able to select research knowledge that they think is most relevant to their needs and meaningful for their professional development. Thus, the opportunity to directly interact with researchers will enable teachers to become informed and critical consumers of research-based knowledge.

### **Teachers as Interpretive Communities**

No one is likely to deny that interactions between practitioners and researchers will prove helpful. In fact, some researchers have studied such interactions and found that user engagement not only produces more socially acceptable knowledge, but also increases the use of research-knowledge in practitioners’ professional activities. For example, Edwards, Sebba, and Rickinson (2007) found that user engagement in research “provided an unrivalled opportunity for the public to ‘speak back to science’ in pedagogic research, and enabled an emerging reciprocity where the public

understand(s) how science works but equally science understands how its publics work” (p. 647). Consequently, these authors argue that practitioner engagement will make research-knowledge more acceptable to teacher communities, and thus it will inform and guide their practice (Edwards, Sebba, & Rickinson, 2007). However, we have to keep in mind that practitioner engagement in research and regular interactions between researchers and practitioners (what I have discussed in the preceding section) may not be always feasible due to various constraints.

One such constraint is the disproportionate ratio between researchers and practitioners. It is most likely impossible for educational researchers to accommodate and involve all teachers in research projects. However, what is feasible for all teachers, if given appropriate opportunities, is to engage with published research texts of various kinds. These texts may work as an effective conduit between researchers and practitioners. Yet, it should be noted that “the great majority of published research has [had] little or no influence on teaching practice” (Mitchell, 1999, p. 44). Most teachers participating in empirical studies report that they are not provided with opportunities to connect with relevant research to improve their practice. As Borg (2009) found out, “A lack of time is the predominant reason cited [for teachers’ low engagement with research].... A perceived lack of practical relevance was also a common hindrance, as was the inaccessibility, both physical and conceptual, of published research” (p. 370). To overcome these barriers, I have recommended that teachers work in communities of learners in which they choose and engage with relevant research for their professional learning and development.

However, one major challenge for teachers working in this community of learners is to interpret research texts. Although proponents of what is now pervasively known as “evidence-based practice” tend to take a universal approach to research findings, others argue that research findings are always context-specific. I have addressed this issue above in my argument for a locally-based approach to research engagement. In general, I concur with those who argue that “every successful classroom event is totally idiosyncratic with no generalizable lessons for other classroom situations” (Mitchell, 1999, p. 46). However, this does not mean that we cannot learn from the findings of a research study that was conducted in another context. Rather, I argue that research findings become educative when teachers employ appropriate and critical lenses to interpret, adapt, and personalize them. I emphasize that the purpose here is not to discover the “objective” meanings that researchers try to convey through their texts. Teachers should not aim for one “right” meaning of these texts. On the contrary, they should *re-experience* the research texts in order to create meanings that are meaningful for them, in their teaching context, and at the present time. For this kind of research engagement, Gadamer’s (1975/2013) theory of interpretation may provide teachers and school administrators with helpful lenses. For Gadamer, “the understood meaning of the text is an event which is always the product of a ‘fusion of horizons’ that a reader brings to the text and that the text brings to the reader” (Abrams & Harpham, 2005, p. 137). However, it is important to note that this fusion – of meanings that both the reader and the text bring to each other – is shaped by the reader’s fore-understanding. The fusion does not necessarily make “understanding easier, but harder, since the fore-meanings that determine my own understanding can go entirely unnoticed” (Gadamer, 1975/2013, p. 281). This difficulty necessitates the need to have dialogues with others because dialogues enable us to know shared norms and conventions, which are helpful to be aware of the kind of fore-understandings that inhibit or facilitate our understanding of texts and their practical implications.

Dialogues that enable such “fusion of horizon” may occur if teachers work in what Fish (1980) describes as interpretive communities. Fish’s central argument is that it is neither the text, nor the reader, but interpretive communities that produce meanings. As Fish (1980) writes:

Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. (p. 171)

Fish's delineation of interpretive communities has made a major contribution to reader-response criticism, which is generally interested in how meanings of texts vary according to differences in social, historical, and cultural contexts as well as in readers' previous experiences. In short, reader-response criticism focuses more on the reader and the process of reading than on the author and the text. This tradition of criticism, which has gained prominence in literary studies since the 1970s, views reading as a transactional process in which both the reader and the text play important parts. As Fish (1980) argues, "meanings are not extracted but made and made not by encoded forms but by interpretive strategies that call forms into being" (pp. 172-173). From this perspective, the reader's primary role is to actively interpret the text because meanings are constructed in active, back-and-forth transactions between the text and the reader (Rosenblatt, 1994).

This transactional relation between teachers and educational research texts, I argue, may become meaningful in locally-based, context-specific interpretive communities. Fish's reader-response theory provides a valuable conceptual frame for teachers' interpretive communities. By arguing that readers create textual meanings, Fish does not reduce interpretive reading to "subjective whim." Instead, he shows that readers create meaning "by reflecting the culturally transmitted expectations, predispositions, and biases that produce readers themselves and program them to read one way rather than another" (Graff, 2004, p. 28). From a Fishian perspective, "the meaning of responses [to texts] is relative to the shared conventions, attitudes, and discourse practices of a particular community" (Beach, 1993, p. 163). Working with his students, Fish (1980) illustrated how "a poem is not a poem until an interpretive community recognizes it as such; and, the interpretive community, once compelled into action, will work collaboratively to maintain and provide evidence for its views" (Dudley-Marling & Murphy, 1999, p. 288). For this *collaborative action*, I argue, teachers need to work as interpretive communities in order to engage with research-texts. This community will likely provide teachers with particular reading strategies and certain community assumptions (Fish, 1980) that will enable them to make sense of the idiosyncrasies of successful pedagogical events described in published research-texts (Mitchell, 1999). Thus, Fish's reader-response theory builds a strong foundation for my argument for teachers' work in interpretive communities, in which they draw upon culturally transmitted expectations and fore-understandings, and make meanings (of research findings) that are relevant to them, in their context, and at the present moment.

One criticism against Fish's notion of interpretive community is that "it is difficult to clearly distinguish between interpretive communities – that readers' responses may reflect membership in, or allegiances toward, a range of different interpretive communities" (Beach, 1993, p. 163). Although such criticism might be true in the case of texts addressing a broad range of audiences (for example, a novel), it may not be applicable to specialized texts such as reports of educational research. In the case of educational research, it is possible to clearly distinguish certain interpretive communities. Examples include, but are not limited to, a group of students who participated in a study, a number of parents who read the findings of this study, a group of researchers who examine the validity of the findings, a group of teachers who read the report to find pedagogical implications, and a committee of administrators who aim to gain insights from the study to inform policies.

Furthermore, I believe that Fish's (1980) theory of interpretive community does not cancel out the possibility of our membership to multiple communities. As Wenger (2009) writes, we all belong to more than one community of practice. Our membership to various communities is not

static and permanent. We may choose to leave old communities and join new ones. In some communities, we may act as core members while in others as peripheral members. Therefore, I believe that the argument against Fish's theory of interpretive community is weak because permanent membership to a particular interpretive community should not be desirable in an enterprise as dynamic as education. The interpretive community that I propose for teachers' engagement with educational research should have flexible boundaries with a good deal of give and take. While teachers participate in one such community, they are encouraged to bring their knowledge and experiences from other communities that they belong to. Such a pluralist view of community is in alignment with Bellah's (2006) argument that

...all of us belong to more than one community and there is no community to which we belong exclusively without having some of our roles outside of it. This means that we are constantly shifting between being insiders and outsiders with respect to all the significant communities to which we belong. In principle that allows for openness and flexibility. (p. 307)

Therefore, participating in an interpretive community, teachers may be able to capitalize on certain reading strategies and shared conventions that are helpful to overcome the triple crisis of educational research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). To a certain extent, my proposal for teachers-as-interpretive-community shares the spirit of the Knowledge Community model of research dissemination. This model assumes that strong links between research and practice may be established when a group of people share an interest, learn from each other, and strive to benefit from the wisdom of the group (Broekkamp & van Hout-Wolters, 2007).

In such interpretive community, teachers may overcome the triple crisis by aiming for what Kvale (2002) describes as communicative validity, which "involves testing the validity of knowledge claims in a dialogue" (p. 313). When teachers are able to have dialogues with one another within their interpretive community, they can make pragmatic meanings of research texts by reflecting not only on culturally and institutionally transmitted expectations, but also on their shared conventions, fore-understandings, and biases. A communicative validity of meanings emerging from research texts will be helpful to overcome the crises of representation, legitimation, and praxis. Obtained through true dialogues, communicative validity of teachers' interpretations is likely to allow them "to move between the two limits of dogmatism and skepticism" (Kvale, 2002, p. 314), between the modernist search for objective knowledge and the postmodernist "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 3). In this interpretive community, teachers must be open to the interpretations of one another. As Palmer (1987) – in summarizing Gadamer's idea of dialogue – writes:

in a true conversation I do not simply seek to find out what you think..., but to understand the truth you are uttering and to place my own prejudices at risk through my openness to what you have to say. (p. 101)

Therefore, the communicative validity of the meanings of research-texts that teachers achieve through dialogic participation in interpretive communities may enable them to address the crisis of praxis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It should allow them to carry out praxis as- and through-dialogue. Such a conceptualization of praxis is akin to Aristotle's idea of *phronesis*, which is "concerned with the timely, the local, the particular, and the contingent (e.g., what should I do *now*, in *this* situation, given *these* circumstances, facing *this* particular person, at *this* time)" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 243, italics original). Thus, a locally-based interpretive community may enable teachers to construct meanings of research-texts that are helpful for their praxis, i.e., making morally-committed and prudent pedagogical choices.

Before I conclude, I shall mention that there are organizational factors that are likely to affect teachers' ability to access relevant research literature and to collectively engage with them. Addressing all these factors was beyond the scope of this article. However, it is important to note that scholars in fields other than education have suggested that effective utilization of research knowledge is dependent upon a supportive organizational culture that encourages researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to collaborate and assist each other in improving practice (e.g., Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). This observation holds implications for the field of education. For example, Coburn, Honig, and Stein (2009) examined research use in district central offices and found that the use of research was influenced by "the structure and organization" of the office, as well as by "the pressures and priorities in the environment" (p. 86). Other writers have also made similar observations. For example, Hemsley-Brown (2004) believed that "the main barriers to knowledge use in the public sector...were not at the level of individual resistance but lay in an institutionalized organizational culture that did not facilitate learning through the use of research" (p. 542). Therefore, it is important to have an organizational culture that supports teachers' community-oriented, dialogic engagement with educational research.

Furthermore, I shall note that teachers use different kinds of knowledge in their teaching and that they of course acquire knowledge from many different sources. Therefore, it is not my intention to argue that knowledge emerging from university-based research will always be "translated into pedagogical knowledge" (McIntyre, 2005, p. 359). In fact, the literature on teacher knowledge identifies multiple sources and kinds of knowledge. In a broad sense, there are two kinds of teacher knowledge: propositional knowledge (i.e., knowing that...) and performance knowledge (i.e., knowing how...). Examples of other kinds of teacher knowledge include local, craft, situated, and tacit knowledge (Fenstermacher, 1994). Similarly, Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991) make a distinction between research knowledge and local knowledge. Teachers' local knowledge comes from their direct experiences with how things work in their teaching contexts. Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991) argue that research knowledge "cannot have a direct bearing on practice because it is oblivious of compelling local issues that frame the thinking and drive the behavior of practitioners in a particular locale" (p. 2). Therefore, these authors believe that the success of "schools depends on a better understanding of the interplay between research knowledge and local knowledge" (p. 2). Understanding the dynamics of this interplay is important for the utilization of educational research as a public good. The locally-based interpretive communities that I have proposed may be helpful to understand such dynamics. The interpretive communities are likely to serve as a venue for dialogic and multi-directional knowledge exchange between university-based researchers and school teachers.

## Conclusion

Although discussions about the gap between research and practice are not new (Huberman, 1994), an increasing push for "evidence-based practice" warrants our renewed attention to such discussions. Governments around the world are calling on teachers to use research-based knowledge to inform and guide their practice. However, governments' definition of "strong" evidence (for example, taking a positivist approach to "objective" knowledge) and uses of quantifiable student outcomes to hold schools accountable upset many teachers. Such push for evidence-based practice not only contributes to teachers' stress and burnout, but also threatens their sense of professional efficacy. Though various initiatives are being taken to bring research-based knowledge to teachers' professional practice, as I have discussed in this article, most of them do not pay due attention to local contexts where research-based knowledge is applied. Therefore, I have recommended teachers' direct and unmediated engagement with research-texts. I have also noted some challenges for



teachers to interpret and utilize research-based knowledge. One set of such challenges is what Denzin and Lincoln (2005) described as the triple crisis. In order to overcome these crises, I have proposed that teachers work in locally-based interpretive communities in which they engage in dialogues with one another and come to understand university-based research in ways that will be supportive of their context-responsive praxis. Thus, working as locally-based interpretive communities, teachers and researchers may learn from one another and be able to contribute to the project of mending the research-practice split in education.

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