

**ISSUES IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN THE
NETHERLANDS: THE GAP WORLDWIDE BETWEEN
RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

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The universities in the Netherlands finance about 20% of the educational research in the country and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research finances only an additional 5%. Universities primarily use these funds for conducting fundamental research. In addition to this money, 75% of the funds for educational research come directly or indirectly (e.g. via schools) from the Ministry of Education. These last funds mostly have to be used for applied research by institutions for teacher education, for educational development and consultancy, and by schools, private companies, etc.

Despite this emphasis on funding applied research, there is a continued debate in the Netherlands as elsewhere in the world about the usefulness of educational research for practice. At the same time, however, frequently complaints can be heard about the quality control of applied research, among others because of a lack of transparency in criteria for funding applied research by the Ministry. Recently, a committee installed by the Minister of Education and Sciences evaluated this state of affairs and concluded that educational research is under threat because of:

Insufficient interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary work in educational research; it is thought that educational researchers do not sufficiently orient themselves on other disciplines, e.g., insights from cognitive and neuroscience are not used sufficiently,

Lack of coherence and continuity in the content and funding of educational research.

The diminishing numbers of students in educational

sciences; educational sciences are not popular among students in higher education.

The committee further asserted that knowledge developed in educational research doesn't reach practice despite the existence of special institutions with the task to help disseminate results of educational research to schools and policy makers. This gap between educational research and practice is not only a result of lack of good dissemination activities but also of the pressure on university staff to publish internationally in high ranking journals and of insufficient knowledge in practice to articulate good research questions and use insights available from research.

The Minister of Education accepted not only the conclusions of the committee about the state of affairs of educational research and the gap between research and practice, and adopted the plan of action the committee proposed based on a paper produced by among others the Netherlands Educational Research Association (VOR). The plan of action includes establishing an organisation that will allocate and monitor all funds for educational research. This organisation will be governed together by practitioners and researchers and will be responsible for both educational research activities and all actions needed to get a good information flow from research to practice and vice versa. Actions are for example:

- Creating or strengthening academic schools where teachers, student teachers and academic staff together will work on research and school improvement
- A funding programme for teachers to pursue a PhD (in education)
- Funding review studies on practical educational issues
- Include dissemination activities in research projects
- Installing research projects advising committees of practitioners.

Other activities to be started are the development of nationwide and university specific policy plans for educational research and plans for professional development of teachers in order for them to become better able to conduct and use educational research and to articulate researchable questions. A debate has been started whether all teachers should have a master degree. All these measures, even if executed completely and coherently probably will not be sufficient to bridge the perceived gap between research and practice.

I think that the common perception of the relationship between educational research and practice is more negative than the actual state of affairs implies. A lot of research world wide in the long run has yielded improvements of education as we can see from research in educational psychology on e.g. motivation and learning, from research on ICT and education, cross-national comparative studies of the different ways to organise education in countries, from studies in social psychology and not the least in special education. On the other hand the relationship between research and practice is fundamentally difficult. In order to study practice in a scholarly way, such as to yield knowledge that has some value over different situations, data gathering, analyses and theory building need to some degree de-contextualisation. That makes results of research hardly ever immediately applicable in a specific context. On the other hand when research focuses on solving directly practical problems the knowledge produced may have little to say to other situations. When we look at the questions that evolve from educational practice it is clear that hardly ever research can give clear-cut answers. Practical problems are usually more complex than any one theoretical approach alone can account for. Thus, practitioners to some degree are always on their own to interpret situations from different theoretical views and to act accordingly. Even, the whole concept of application of research to practice is questionable and the quandary of having scholarly work that is at the same time theoretically sound and practical

relevant may need drastically different approaches. One is the road to more collaborative work of researchers and practitioners acting as co-workers.

To conclude, although the gap between research and practice may be less deep than sometimes claimed, it is important to try and improve this relationship between research, theory and practice.