Introduction

Much of the discourse surrounding research in education sets up a false dichotomy between 'applied' and 'pure' research (Stokes, 1997). One result of this discourse is that those who advocate a 'what works' approach are seen as 'pragmatists' (Furlong and Oancea, 2006), while 'theorists' are positioned in opposition to this

practical stance as those who pontificate about ideas but do not have much to say about what a teacher should do on Monday morning. The authors in this book challenge this dichotomy, and show how an explicit theoretical stance can be combined with a practice-based, practice-informed and practice-informing approach to educational research. As they apply contextually sensitive theories to account for the local and situated enactments of practice, from the micro level of the classroom to the macro level of national policies, they also reveal the many impracticalities of several assumptions of the 'what works' agenda. Together, the arguments developed by the authors

policy and practice. However, theory is viewed as necessarily linked to practice, dialectically, so that they both inform and enhance one another. As such, the authors point out what theory can do for practice (and indirectly, policy), but also reveal the ways that practice can inform advances in theory, which can then in turn feed back into practice. 'Research use' is portrayed as a recursive cycle rather than a one-directional relationship of research informing practice and policy.

Our aim in developing this book, as editors, has been to provide a foundation for a dialogue about alternative ways of framing a research agenda which, while it shares the aim of

developing greater synergies between research, policy and practice in education, still recognises the complexities of teaching, learning and educational contexts. What is distinctive about this book is its focus on the use of theory, filtered through the lens of practice. That is, the authors both *apply* theory to make sense of complex issues of education reform, and *develop* theoretical understandings of practices in education as a way of extrapolating what our research findings mean (or don't mean) for other apparently similar contexts and practice goals.

The book was developed out of a series of seminars held at universities across England in 2009, funded by the

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The seminars were structured to enable those engaged in education, research and theory to systematically and collaboratively examine the ways that theory could inform understandings of teaching and learning practices. Our objectives were:

- to better understand theoretical perspectives in terms of their relevance for questions about practice in education; and
- to better understand practice questions that could be addressed from various theoretical perspectives.

The series provided structure for these

discussions by focusing on two theoretical perspectives at each session (e.g. activity theory, communities of practice theory, Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), Bernstein and Bourdieu) in relation to a level of the educational system (e.g. individual, classroom, school, district and national levels). These theories were chosen because they typically take 'learning environments' and systems as the unit of analysis, as opposed to individual learners and teachers. Activities and practices, from these perspectives, are thus understood to take place in social, cultural and/or historical contexts: educational practices are fundamentally socioculturally situated. Our starting

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assumption was that such an approach not only foregrounds those aspects of education that are most amenable to redesign by education practitioners, managers and policy makers (e.g. by reconfiguring classroom, institutional or policy environments), but also provides a way of capturing and understanding the complexity of education contexts, without which change can only be superficial.

Seminar participants were asked to put these theories to the test, using them to address macro-level policy concerns about equity and access, as well as microlevel questions regarding pedagogy and curriculum. This book brings the various issues discussed to a

wider audience, with a focus on re-presenting the perspectives that we, as editors, thought could contribute to a dialogue about how research can play a role in improving teaching, learning and equity in education. While some chapters are versions of papers presented at the seminars, others have been written specifically for this book in order to engage directly with the problematic assumptions of a 'what works' research agenda and to propose alternative directions for research. The book is divided into four parts, or 'dialogues', each representing at least two 'voices' or perspectives on the issue and hence following a particular line of argument with regard to 'what works'.

Together the chapters initiate a much-needed dialogue around the purpose of and expectations for educational research.

The 'what works' agenda

In this book, the 'what works' agenda refers to a movement still strong in the US and UK, following years of distinct but interlinked histories of government involvement in educational research. Such involvement is not surprising given that the topic we research – education – is widely considered a public good. What is of concern, however, are the ways in which the links between research, policy and practice

have been framed in discourses on education. Central to this framing in the US have been the numerous government reports and policies (National Research Council, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 2002; U.S. House of Representatives, 2000) which call for the use of quality research in education, often characterised through the call for 'evidence-based practice'. First promoted in medicine and proliferated through the Cochrane Collaboration, the term 'evidence-based' was applied to social scientific research by the Campbell Collaboration (Bridges, Smeyers and Smith, 2009). In the UK, the importance of 'evidence-based practice' has been amplified by the

Hillage report, commissioned by the Department of Education (Hillage, Pearson, Anderson and Tamkin, 1998), and a critique of educational research in a report (Tooley and Darby, 1998) commissioned by OFSTED, the UK's educational quality assurance agency.

We use the term 'what works' because we see this as the current dominant construct used to frame a research agenda for those concerned with education. We add our contribution to the heated debates that have ensued since the publication of these US and UK government sponsored reports (e.g. Atkinson, 2000; Biesta, 2007; Erickson and Gutierrez, 2002; Feuer, Towne and Shavelson, 2002; Hammersley, 1997,

2000, 2003; Oancea, 2005).

Resisting 'what works': shifting the debate to a dialogue

A fundamental critique of the 'what works' agenda relates to beliefs and expectations for research, and we turn here to a brief consideration of these issues. First, we note that biases are inherent in the nature of social research when the topics of study are complex and changing (Scott and Shore, 1979). Such biases can be revealed, for example, through researchers' choices of the object of study and their research questions. The questions that drive

research in the first place are founded on ontological and epistemological beliefs about the world and ways of knowing it, which are privileged according to the researchers' philosophies, as Anna Sfard notes in her chapter. The bias of the researcher leaves no guarantee that an important variable will not be left out of a given study. Thus, a single study cannot tell 'The Truth' about what works or doesn't work in education. Moreover, given the various actors and stakeholders involved in education, who are all positioned in different ways to carry out different goals and with different practice histories, there will always be more than one way to 'see' a problem

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and its solution, as Tim Deignan's chapter demonstrates. In summary, subjectivity as well as politics are inherent aspects of education, as Julian Williams and Julie Ryan note in the final chapter of the book.

A 'what works' agenda that fails to recognise these aspects of research gives the false impression that educational research can be a substitute for democratic, moral debate about important education decisions that affect learners at all levels, ages and disciplines (Hammersley, 2003). These unfounded assumptions of objectivity, together with a tendency to conflate science and methods that make 'scientific research' a code word for

randomised experiments (Berliner, 2002), unnecessarily limit the possibilities of what research can tell us about teaching and learning and what research is worth doing. Moreover, only in taking account of external factors, such as the politics of education (Apple, 1996), through our theories and methods, will we take notice of the ways in which educational policies 'work' to produce unintended consequences, an issue demonstrated by both Sue Webb and Geoff Wake, or begin to understand why particular interventions don't 'work' in accordance with a blueprint, as Yvonne Barnes, Fiona Cockerham, Una Hanley and Yvette Solomon argue.

The authors in this book show us that

research can offer theoretically informed interpretations of practice that bring critical issues to the attention of decision makers and provide principles for curricular design, as exemplified in Erica McAteer, Mary Thorpe and Cormac Lawler's chapter. The complexity and situated aspects of curriculum design, teaching and learning that are insightfully portrayed through all the chapters point to a particularly problematic assumption of the 'what works' agenda – the false expectations of research providing confirmed results on what works in educational practice. This expectation carries with it the 'transfer' metaphor which expects research to be 'translated'

into 'evidence-based practice'. An alternative expectation, argued by Valerie Farnsworth in her chapter, is that theorising in the context of empirical research enables the extraction of principles and perspectives on a specific phenomenon which can then be 'transferred' to other contexts.

As the chapters progress through the book, we develop an alternative conceptualisation for research that positions it more directly in relation to practice. The case for theoretically informed, practice-based research is made from a variety of angles and in relation to various aspects of a researcher's practice. For example, Etienne Wenger-Trayner reflects on the

job of a theorist who makes decisions about the application of theory in relation to practice. In their chapters, Seth Chaiklin and Anna Sfard consider the importance of educational practice and epistemology, respectively, in relation to achieving one's research agenda. Policy makers are not left out of the dialogue, as Tim Deignan shows how research can be a channel through which the multiplicity of voices – such as those of practitioners and students – are identified and can be accounted for in policy decision making.

Many of the chapters in this book illustrate that the 'what works' agenda tends to restrict research to addressing certain kinds of questions – questions

about what pedagogy or innovation 'works best', following the line of questioning in medicine 'what is the best treatment for condition x?', as Emma Pearson, Janine Carroll and Tim Dornan's chapter reminds us. But this approach excludes examinations of a historical, philosophical, sociological, political and economic nature. The 'what works' focus may also exclude or divert attention from questions about *how* things work as well as how things *do not* work (and hence maybe should be reformed), or how things work for some people and in some contexts, but not for all or in all contexts. The exclusions constructed by this discourse are highlighted in this book by asking:

'what kinds of questions about education are researchers driven to ask if they take a practitioner perspective and/or a particular sociocultural theoretical perspective?'

This approach engages with the alternative 'enlightenment' model of research use (Hammersley, 1997; Lindbloom and Cohen, 1979; Weiss, 1995) whereby research does not tell teachers what to do, but instead provides resources that practitioners can use to make sense of their situations and behaviours. Thus, a better expectation for research is that it 'calls attention to the existing conflicting positions, sometimes elaborates them, and sometimes generates new issues

altogether' (Cohen and Garet, 1983, p. 315). In this model, research is positioned as one voice in 'the debate about social problems and their solutions' (Cohen and Garet, 1983, p. 315). As Harry Daniels' chapter illustrates, one important contribution that research can make to such debates is the development of a common language and concepts for discussion.

The value of contextually sensitive theories becomes particularly salient to discussions of research use where the assumption is that their application will improve educational practice. To initiate sustainable and deep change means taking account of the dynamic relationships between individual agents,

school structure, school culture and the larger structures and cultures of which they are a part (Datnow, Hubbard and Mehan, 2002). Given the sense-making processes involved in a teacher's implementation of a policy or practice (Spillane, Reiser and Reiner, 2002), it follows that a more effective approach to educational reform is one that allows for 'mutual adaptation, or the adaptation of a project and institutional setting to each other' (McLaughlin, 1991). The implication is that research needs to be contextualised and systemic in order to identify the different layers at which resources might be relevant to promoting change, and how (Talbert and McLaughlin, 1993). Action-oriented

at which resources might be relevant to promoting change, and how (Talbert and McLaughlin, 1993). Action-oriented research projects, such as those described by Mel Ainscow and Harry Daniels in their chapters, demonstrate the ways theory and practice can be integrally connected in ways that reform practice and transform institutional contexts. The 'research path' idea proposed by Seth Chaiklin and the suggestion made by Julian Williams and Julie Ryan that we design 'hybrid activities' also provide ways we might improve the relationship between research and practice. However, as James Avis points out, even a theory such as CHAT, which can support

radical changes where such change is needed, may simultaneously downplay wider structural relations of capital and production.

The underlining argument presented in the book is that research can be both practice based and theoretically sophisticated, and that such research holds greatest potential for being used in educational practice. Together, the chapters build a reconceptualisation of how we do research, how we envision evidence-based practice 'working' and how we find value in educational research. The book ultimately calls on the social science research community to continue the dialogue that has been initiated here.