The challenges facing ‘evidence’ in educational research: its production, dissemination and utilization in a knowledge-based society

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Abstract

The word ‘evidence’ is used to mean substantiated scientific grounds. This word has recently attracted attention as interest in, and discussion about, making use of convincing evidence-based research findings when formulating policy. As background to the appearance of the word evidence in educational policy discussions, an OECD policy document notes three strands: the increasing importance of education and knowledge as factors in innovation and economic growth in developed countries; the emergence of awareness of accountability, in terms of the cost-effectiveness of education expenditure; and the movement to increase the quality and effectiveness of educational research.

As a result, evidence-based policy research is now required as a means of proposing more rational choices when formulating policy and responding to new policy-related problems which arise. The ideal situation for incorporating research results into policy is when conclusions based on high-quality science are used. However, in practice with educational research there is little investment in policy promotion, and attention has been drawn to the low levels of research ability, especially in quantitative research, and to the weakness of the links between research or policy, and innovation. Hence we have discussion over raising the quality and effectiveness of educational research which can contribute to policy, and the issues which this discussion throws up need to be dealt with. Also, even if we produce substantiated evidence from research based on high quality science, whether or not it will influence policy and practice is another question entirely. It is not at all transparent whether evidence would be incorporated into the policy making process.

In practice, when it comes to putting forward policy proposals, political considerations would carry more weight than evidence about the efficacy of particular measures.

Against this background, this paper looks at the quality and effectiveness of educational research, organizations for disseminating research results, the researchers who produce evidence and their relationship with policy makers. Collating the latest research reviews, I have put together a systematic framework for the production, dissemination and utilization of evidence, and offer some theoretical considerations.