What Matters in Education? Briefing Note #2

Practical policies or bright ideas? How particular topics get to the front of the policy queue

Introduction

The second seminar in the **What Matters in Education?** panel discussion series focused on the important topic of how research, policy and practice can best interact in the interests of education as a whole. The seminar featured a diverse panel of experts who offered unique perspectives on the intersection of politics, research, and practice within the education sector.

Key questions for the debate

How are education policy priorities currently determined?

Do political priorities align with on-the-ground realities?

What are the alternative ways in which research, policy, and practice can interact to create an education system that works for all?

A summary of the panel discussion

Opening topics	Speakers
The sometimes difficult relationship between education and politics.	**Baroness Estelle Morris**
A research funder's perspective: how best to make a difference in the real world.	**Josh Hillman**, Director of Education at the Nuffield Foundation.
Finding ways forward when researcher, practitioner and policymaker perspectives diverge.	**Gemma Moss**, Professor of Literacy, UCL Institute of Education and Director of the ESRC Education Research Programme.
Why we need to find an assessment system that works both for our students and our educators.	**Kulvarn Atwal, Ph.D.**, Headteacher and author of "The Thinking School: Developing a dynamic learning community".

Panel discussion chairs : **Dr Becky Taylor,** Head of Impact and Engagement at IOE; **Professor Lynn Ang,** IOE Pro-Director and Vice-Dean Research.

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What we heard: key challenges in the interactions between policy, research and practice

Changing education is complex

- The number of factors that influence education and the range of potential solutions, make choosing the best ways forward challenging.
- Differences in the roles and perspectives of politicians, researchers, and practitioners can hinder clear agreement on the issues that matter most.

Why collaboration is difficult

- Managing short-term political risks can hamper investment in effective long-term policy.
- Research-policy tensions can arise when research findings contradict policy intentions. Without allowing sufficient time to seed a new approach, this can push policymakers away from the evidence and hinder innovation.
- The jargon used by researchers, the different timelines of researchers and policymakers, and the limited investment in researcher dissemination and engagement skills impact on research influence.
- Local policy implementation in real-world conditions differs from controlled research settings. Too few feedback mechanisms mean practitioner perspectives are often neglected in policy and research development.

Balancing Local and National Priorities:

- Challenges arise in distinguishing between issues that can best be addressed at the local level and those that require national-scale solutions.
- Frequent shifts in research and policy priorities mitigate against sustainable change on the ground.

Questions the audience raised

The role of the media: How do the media influence politicians' perception of research, and what is its role in reporting research?
Research impact: Why do universities struggle with research impact?
Change in education: Should we focus on fundamental school system change or small adjustments within the current system?
Working together: How can we create time and space for practitioner, policymaker, and researcher dialogue?

Note: Selected questions have been edited for brevity.

Ways to bring about change

The panellists agreed that better communication and collaboration amongst diverse education stakeholders was imperative. Key recommendations for improving the interactions between policy, research and practice included:

Policy

For more transformative education policy

- Distinguish more clearly between local- and national-level education issues and the stakeholders best placed to address them. Politicians should focus on the bigger vision, not classroom details.
- Encourage long-term, ambitious policymaking over short-term political gains, where possible based on cross-party agreement for sustainable results.
- Foster a culture that values creativity, experimentation and adaptation as key ways to tackle educational challenges.
- Communicate policies realistically and allow time for interventions to seed and generate impact.
- Involve educators, students, and community members in policy design.

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Research
To ensure greater research impact

- Invest in longer-term research enquiry, avoiding frequent shifts in research focus.
- Orientate research more closely to real-world challenges, encouraging critical thinking and more engaged discussion.
- Promote collaboration between researchers and practitioners to create a virtuous cycle between research. knowledge and its practical application.
- Facilitate dialogue and engagement between researchers and policy makers throughout the policy cycle.
- Communicate research more effectively to the media, policymakers, and the public.

Practice
To empower educators and students

- Encourage educators to adapt research findings and interventions to local contexts in ways that take account of the different needs of students and schools.
- Prioritise student input and ensure their perspectives and needs are considered within the school and classroom.
- Promote distributed leadership in schools that fosters teacher agency.
- Work with local partners to address specific educational challenges facing different communities.

In brief
To create conditions for more effective collaboration between policy, research and practice, all those involved in bringing about educational change need to listen more attentively to one another.

To find out more about the issues discussed, follow these links:

Bates, J. and O'Connor Bones, U. (2018) *A Community Conversation Toolkit*

FED (2023). *National Education Consulation Report: Towards a long-term plan for education.*

OECD (2023). *Who Really Cares about Using Education Research in Policy and Practice?*

The Royal Society (2022). *Future of Education conference summary.*

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References

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