

Research and Practice: Bundled Bedfellows

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Research and practice seem antithetical to one another. A schism exists between research professionals and teaching professionals. While researchers and teachers have much to learn from one another, often they do not find common ground for their respective endeavors until a study requires researchers to look closely into schools. Even then, researchers and teachers have little to do with each other and generally do not interact in ways that inform either group's practice (Baker & Herman, 1983; Gullickson, 1984; Rudman, 1987; Rudman et al., 1981). Since researchers, especially measurement experts, do not do much in the way of on-site school research, their literature is often obscure to school practitioners (Baker & Herman, 1983). What we have is a curious problem. Teachers do not make much use of research products in the conduct of their practice, and researchers do not discuss the implications of their research with teachers. In fact, it would seem that practitioners talk to practitioners about the craft, and researchers talk to researchers about their craft. This is a two-sided problem that seems significant. It can be thought of in the same vein as the Puritan practice of "bundling." In winter, Puritan teenage couples were over dressed and wrapped separately in tightly wound blankets. Then they were laid in a bed where they could talk and spend time together, but not touch. In the case of practitioners and researchers, there seems to be an academic "bundling," where they occupy the same bed of endeavor but enjoy no real contact.

Why is this bundling problem significant? The first answer is that both practitioners and researchers exclude critical antecedents from their work. Teachers must master multiple bodies of knowledge to be successful in their craft-general education literature, and the literature for the discipline in which they practice, and a psychological literature concerning learning. Elementary teachers have a harder job because they teach all multiple subjects to their pupils. The antecedents missing from teachers' work, are a thorough understanding of the research literature surrounding within the bodies of knowledge that frame their work in classrooms. On the other hand, the antecedents missing from researchers' work seem to be a thorough understanding of the conduct of teaching. While measurement professionals do not typically do research in classrooms (Baker & Herman, 1983), if they were to understand the context and the work that teachers do in classrooms, that understanding would go a long way toward informing researchers about better ways to measure the performance of students. While this may not be applicable to all disciplines, many of us would agree that the practitioner end of a discipline and the research end are distinct from one another. However, many researchers and practitioners will hesitate to acknowledge that there are beneficial and direct connections between research and practice.

Another reason this problem is so significant is that future knowledge advances may be delayed or lost because teachers are unable to supply students with the



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Finally, Mr. Durrah's University of Chicago connection began in 1992 as a Ph D cohort member in the Department of Education. His academic interests focus on the connections between assessment and instruction at the classroom level, and how teachers use assessment to reframe their instructional inputs. Mr. Durrah will complete his doctoral studies within the year.

most current knowledge. If teachers are not privy to cutting edge technologies, or the nuances of a particular research literature, it is unlikely they will be able to introduce students to the most current knowledge available. Consequently, when students begin to pursue serious intellectual studies, they have to master greater amounts of information than they might have if they had been exposed to the most current information all along. The earlier students get current information, the more familiar they will be with particular disciplines when they begin their university careers. Rather than having to survey an entire body of information and familiarize themselves with all of it, they would be equipped to pursue new bodies of knowledge from an advanced state of acculturation and familiarity. It may be optimistic, but students so informed would be able to pursue new knowledge at the limits of what we know sooner rather than later, and they could push our knowledge beyond those limits more readily.

A caveat to this bundling problem shows up when we consider researchers who make discoveries and attempt to push the knowledge base of their discipline forward. These professionals tend to report their discoveries in research literature that is disseminated primarily amongst professionals like themselves. We do not normally recognize this as problematic, but the language of research literature tends to address the concerns of other researchers in their particularistic language. Teachers on the front lines, who could benefit directly from new knowledge, do not gain access to this new knowledge because it generally is not written for or disseminated to them.

This new knowledge could enhance teachers' work with students, and add to the knowledge base that students take with them into undergraduate institutions. Currently however, when practitioners get new information about their practice, it comes through additional university course work, in-service activities, district initiatives, or at the hands of a research-literate building administrator. One problem with accessing new information in these ways is that teachers do not always avail themselves of the opportunities for many reasons. In the case of course work, costs may be prohibitive. The information teachers can get from in-services and district initiatives can be limited or shallow. School district initiatives often require teachers to buy-in to the process or face sanctions. Sadly, while teachers may get some level of exposure to new knowledge, it is unlikely they will receive the kind of support necessary to implement the new knowledge. Finally, the opportunities teachers have to enhance their knowledge base can vary tremendously. With all the research knowledge available, the kinds of problems cited above prevent teachers from gaining access to it. Consequently, attempts to disseminate research knowledge to teachers seem about as effective as draining a water tower through a straw. Access to high quality pertinent and readable research information must be ongoing. If that access is short-circuited, the world as well as practitioners and researchers lose, and we lose unnecessarily so.

Given these problems, some readers might try to determine who is responsible. Blame fixing is inappropriate, but we do need to recognize that if we were to choose to do nothing about the problems, we would be directly responsible for them. We must focus our attention on the obvious and serious detriments to our attempts to advance knowledge. The division between practitioners and researchers hinders true collaboration between them.

Consequently, the price we pay for this disconnect between practice and research, between practitioners and researchers has been and continues to be a steep one. Because of this schism, increased preparation is required for students who would survey the breadth and depth of a research literature. That preparation very likely consumes resources that could be used to advance knowledge in the field. On the front line where teachers impart knowledge, their work is handicapped because they are unable to make use of the research that has been conducted. Because of bundling, the most crucial thing we lose is the ability to understand and expand knowledge in both the disciplines and the professional practices that rely upon those disciplines. We could abate this loss if practitioners and researchers were to work together to collaborate about both ends of the education business—practice and research.

In conclusion, practitioners and researchers are both in the same field of endeavor—education. They both are attempting to share what is known about life with the world at-large. However, knowledge disseminated only amongst the knowledgeable is of little benefit to the world at-large. How will the world benefit from research if researchers write it for themselves and share it with themselves, or practitioners discuss the practice only with one another? The answer seems simple. The world cannot benefit from knowledge in a vacuum, and knowledge in a vacuum can never be popular. The most effective research will focus on practice while the best practices will be informed by research. This is a laudable goal, one that will only be realized when practitioners and researchers achieve true collaboration; however, even a simple dialogue between practitioners and researchers would begin to bridge the great expanse of bundled knowledge that separates them.

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