
Evidence-based Reform in Education: a response to Robert Slavin

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Where Robert Slavin and I are, I think, in Agreement

I think we are both agreed, first, that we need to have a properly considered and argued view of what kind of knowledge and understanding *ought* to inform educational policy and practice (though note that this fundamental question is not one which can be resolved simply on the basis of 'evidence').

Secondly, there are a lot of things which we can probably both agree *should not* provide the basis for educational policy and practice. These might include:

- fads (i.e. short-term fashions);
- slick marketing;
- the vested interests of commercial undertakings;
- the personal political ambitions of policy makers.

Thirdly, we are both agreed on the importance of properly researched *evidence* as a basis for policy and practice, though I prefer to talk of *reasons, evidence and argument* – and herein may lie the seeds of some disagreement. On what sort of knowledge should we be content to rest belief?

Belief, that sacred faculty which prompts the decisions of our will, and knits into harmonious working all the compacted energies of our being, is ours, not for ourselves, but for humanity. It is rightly used on truths which have been established by long experience and waiting toil, and which have stood in the fierce light of free and fearless questioning. Then it helps to bind men together, and to strengthen and direct their common action.

(Clifford, 1879, pp. 182-183, but see also James, 1937, and McCarthy, 1986)

Fourthly, we are both agreed that, for example, the powerful and influential What Works Clearinghouse in the USA, by insisting on the 'gold standard' of the double blind controlled experiment, adopts an unhelpfully restrictive view of what might count as evidence for educational policy and practice.

I am nevertheless left with profound unease about Robert Slavin's paper and about the kind of influence his ideas have been exercising on the educational research and policy communities – and I am not alone in this. There are a number of scholars whose critiques of Slavin's views have hitherto gone unacknowledged and unanswered. Here are just a few of these criticisms.

Some Points of Disagreement

Failure to Distinguish the Requirements of Decision Making at National and Local Levels and, with This, Over-confidence in Centralized Direction

Slavin fails to distinguish between what might sensibly inform policy decisions at a very local level (in a school or classroom) and what might inform policy at a national level.

Even if, for example, large population studies can provide a basis for some general recommendations at national level (if these are required) you cannot logically derive lessons for a single specific instance from such generalizations. They always have to be linked to consideration of local conditions, which might very well point to a different recommendation. Forty years ago, Lawrence Stenhouse used to describe national curriculum proposals as 'hypotheses which required testing against the experience of the individual classroom' – and thus gave birth in the United Kingdom at least, to the classroom action research movement.

Similarly, a teacher or school may successfully test out different teaching strategies in their own environment and find out 'what works' for them. The fact that this enquiry was small scale and local does not invalidate it as a reliable basis for their local practice, even if it might be regarded as an unreliable basis for national policy without some further work.

In brief, you can't treat local and national decisions as if they have exactly the same requirements.

Underestimation of the Importance of Local, Contextual Knowledge and Understanding

This relates to my second point, which is that Slavin underestimates the importance to educational decision making of local, contextual knowledge and understanding. Yet the evidence from, for example, school improvement studies, indicates that school leadership, school ethos, school context, teacher competence and conviction, the composition of the students – all of these are pertinent to the success or failure of different educational practices or to the adaptations of those practices that are necessary if they are to succeed. This is why case studies, 'thick descriptions' in Bob Stake's term, are so important as a source of understanding of educational practice – but are these included in the 'evidence' to which Slavin attaches such importance?

Too Narrow a Conception of What Might Count as Evidence

While Slavin rightly accuses the What Works Clearinghouse of too narrow an interpretation of what might count as evidence (restricting this to the double blind controlled experiment), how wide a variety of 'evidence' would Slavin himself embrace? His references to medicine and agriculture [1], to 'proven' programs' and 'replicable programs and practices with strong evidence of effectiveness', and his own work in his Success for All program based on 'a national randomized experiment' all indicate a predilection for a narrowly empiricist and as far as I can see, quantitative evidential base.

Meanwhile, the educational research community has developed an increasingly wide and diverse view of the kind of intellectual resources that can and should inform educational policy and practice. So is the *history* of educational innovation part of the evidence we need? And small-scale *ethnographic* studies? What about educational *biography* and *autobiography* and other *narratives*? Do *phenomenological* studies of educational experience have a role to play? And what about *practitioner and action research*? And what is the role of social or indeed critical theory in this? The contemporary university – and indeed the contemporary world of educational research – offers an extraordinary range of insights into education. It was in his 1993 Presidential Address to the American Educational Research Association that Elliott Eisner – who among other things encouraged educational researchers to embrace the creative arts – urged:

If there are different ways to understand the world, and if there are different forms that make such understanding possible, then it would seem to follow that any comprehensive effort to understand the processes and outcomes of schooling would profit from a pluralistic rather than a monolithic approach to research. (Eisner, 1993, p. 8)

It is not clear to me that Slavin is of the same opinion, nor why he – along with many others in the 'evidence-based practice' movement – chooses to exclude whole swathes of high-quality research in different traditions of enquiry.

Failure to Consider 'What Should Count as Working'

Slavin still basically operates within the What Works frame, i.e. seeing the problem as being exclusively one to do with the means which will secure certain given ends. Evidence-based practice offers an essentially under-labourer view of the role of research and systematically ignores the question which many critics have posed: 'What will count as working?'

There is perhaps good reason for this, for 'what will count as working?' is not a question which can be answered with the basis of the sort of evidence on which Slavin wants us to base policy and practice. Although he wants to keep politics out of education, he seems content, nevertheless, to allow politicians free play in providing the policy direction to which the evidence-based research he is calling for acts as handmaiden. Many would argue, however, that the educational research community has a public duty of critique of educational policy (and that implies critical engagement with the political underpinning of that policy) and not just its 'delivery'.^[2] We are not Pizza Express! Slavin may of course disagree with me on this, but to do so he will certainly have to quit the restrictive domain of 'evidence-based practice' and join in a different form of educational and policy argument.

*Failure to Acknowledge the Intrinsicly Normative
Character of Education and Educational Decision Making*

Education is at least partly about the overall aims that society has for itself and how these aims are realised in practice. It cannot, therefore, be a neutral technical exercise, but is invariably a deeply ethical, political and cultural one bound up with ideas about the good society and how life can be worthwhile. (Winch & Gingell, 2004, Preface)

Education ... has some particular characteristics that affect the role that research can play. It is a value laden activity, inextricably connected to our broader aspirations for society. (Levin, 2004, p. 2)

The point which Slavin seems either to fail to recognize or to sweep aside is that education is an intrinsically normative activity. It is essentially connected to notions of human excellence, of the kind of society we want to build, of the forms of human engagement and activity which we regard as worth passing on to a new generation and of the ethical considerations which should govern relations between teachers and taught. You cannot strip educational policy and practice of these ingredients and render them as merely technical tasks.

Moreover, we must, surely, apply similar demands for rigour in investigating these normative questions and developing what Phillips has called 'intelligent argumentation' around them, as with the empirical requirements of policy. Of course, these will draw on different disciplines of educational enquiry – on philosophy, ethics and perhaps political science in particular – but they need to be dealt with well rather than badly. This is entirely in the spirit of Slavin's requirements but he seems totally to ignore this fundamental feature of policy.

Nor can these issues be disposed of by placing them to one side as about ends rather than means to ends. This dichotomizing of means and ends has been discredited for centuries. The normative principles and vision of the good which is contained in any statement of educational aims are equally present in the ways we go about securing those ends.

What we do to achieve certain ends in education itself has to be subject to principled regulation: how we organize our classrooms; how we speak to our students; how teachers relate to each other; what gets displayed in the classroom; what sorts of interaction we encourage between students – all carry powerful educational messages independently of other more narrowly functional purposes they may serve.

*Failure to Understand the Complex Character of
Argument in Support of Educational Policy and Practice*

You will observe, I hope, that I am not seeking to exclude good empirical evidence or indeed, where these are possible, randomized controlled experiments. I am, however, saying that there is very much more to developing an argument in support of any particular educational policy or practice than either of these – or anything which Slavin describes in his paper – convey. D.C. Phillips writes – much more convincingly I think – about

a competently produced web of argument embodying evidence that resulted from the deployment of many methods. What needs to be judged [argues Phillips] is the overall case that is made – the cohesion and convincingness and rigour of the often-complex argument ... how well the evidence that is appealed to is woven into the structure of the argument (and how rigorously this evidence was gathered), how well counter-arguments and counter claims are themselves countered or confronted with recalcitrant data. (Phillips, 2007, p. 328)

The notion of ‘evidenced-based practice’ is quite insufficient to capture this interplay between normative and empirical considerations woven together in a dialogic argument which is, at least on a matter of any great educational significance, rarely done and dusted but always part of an ongoing public debate, even if we have from time to time to take action on the basis of its current but always provisional conclusions.

Failure to Take Account of Criticism

Finally, nothing I have said is new. It is all there in the educational research literature. There have been major debates around these issues in the journals *Qualitative Enquiry* (2004), *Educational Researcher* (2002), *Educational Theory* (2005) and *Teachers College Record* (2005) – all of these published in the USA. Nearer to home, I might also refer to the book edited by Paul Smeyers & Marc Depaepe of the University of Leuven under the title *Educational Research: why ‘what works’ does not work* (2006). What is worrying is that Slavin seems to be either ignorant of the criticisms which have been laid against his position (and others of the same genre) or determined stubbornly to ignore them as his bandwagon moves on. Indeed, this bears many of the characteristics of that ‘faddishness’ which Slavin is so ready to criticize in other approaches to educational policy and practice.

This is a shame. An educational research community must share Slavin’s desire to improve the quality of educational policy formation and to ensure that it is well founded in the best that the education community *in all its diversity* can provide, but to do this we need (i) to recognize policy in all its complexity and (ii) to acknowledge the wider rather than the narrower range of resources which the academy has to contribute.

Notes

- [1] We should note that ‘evidence-based practice’ is not without its critics in medical practice, including doctors who now feel unable to exercise intelligent professional judgement on individual cases in the face of, for example, National Institute for Clinical Excellence recommendations for fear of being sued. We should observe too in the developing world the challenges to science-based agricultural practice from indigenous knowledge systems which have developed over centuries much greater sensitivity to local ecology than industrialised science (often conducted out of context) has been able to provide.
- [2] Theodore Roszak’s 1967 essay ‘On Academic Delinquency’ should be compulsory reading for all researchers!

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