

The move towards relevance and practice orientation may go too far.


So says Professor and Head of the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), DIRK VAN DAMME. The tale of economic researchers who lost their reputation after the financial crisis may be cautionary for education researchers.

IS THE MOVE OUTSIDE THE IVORY TOWER TOO SUCCESSFUL?

By TORBEN CLAUSEN

* The financial crisis dealt a blow to many venerable institutions of modern society. Not only long-established banks and financial gurus suffered a harsh fate in the public esteem. Economic researchers have been blamed for not seeing the gathering clouds before the financial storm erupted over all of our heads.

As times were good, economic researchers merely went along with financial engineers on Wall Street, as they developed still more complicated financial products, and “confident in the theoretical underpinnings of their [the financial engineers’] inventions, they reassured any doubters that all this activity was not just making bankers rich. It was making the financial system safer and the economy healthier. That is why many people view the



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financial crisis that began in 2007 as a devastating blow to the credibility not only of banks but also of the entire academic discipline of financial economics,” as *The Economist* summed up the position in its 16 July 2009 issue.

Should this story be a cautionary tale for education



researchers as well? Yes, according to the Head of the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), Professor Dirk Van Damme.

Great expectations

Education research has been working hard to become more relevant to politicians and more oriented towards practice. This move out of the 'ivory tower' has been successful, according to Dirk Van Damme.

"I think there was an 'ivory tower' situation a few decades ago. There has been a very strong reaction against that both from the education research community, from governments and from sponsors of education research to have more relevant research. My fear is that this reaction went too far. The problem no longer is the ivory tower."

Van Damme fears that – in moving too close to the worlds of policy and practice – blindness may strike

education research in much the same way that financial economists may have been blinded by the success of Wall Street.

"This is a risk for social science in general when it tries to be relevant. The main problem is not that economists are subservient to the dominant system. Rather social science in general has a tendency to stay within the dominant paradigm of the present situation."

When this is the case, research can fall prey to the conventional wisdom of the present day institutions, whether it is ministries and interest groups in the political system or the institutions of practice, e.g. the schools. The move to engage with the world of practice does not have to lead to subservience to any current administration. Van Damme sees the same danger with researchers who take the opposite view and spend a lot of energy on attacking a perceived, so-called 'neoliberal' consensus

✘ Economic researchers have been blamed for not forecasting the financial storm because they were blinded by the success of Wall Street. Dirk Van Damme fears that – in moving too close to the worlds of policy and practice – blindness may also strike education researchers.

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in education policy which to his mind does not exist. All are manifestations of the same basic tendency: to become relevant, not in its own right as research, but instrumental to other purposes.

“These thoughts come across my mind often when I browse the education literature. There is a tendency among schools and representatives of schools to state that most of the research produced is not helpful to practitioners. This may be true, but the challenge is not just to produce practical, useable research. We need much more research. It’s simply a basic quantity problem. I am afraid of using the little opportunities we have to focus on the practical needs of practitioners or the immediate needs of policy makers.”

In other words, there are competing demands on education research, and right now the most important task for education research is to have more and better research that can match other large welfare sectors such as health and social policy.

“I am not at all against the fact that policy makers or practitioners are expressing their needs in terms of knowledge and research. That is valid and important. But they often have exaggerated expectations of the possibilities of research to meet their demands.”

Add to this that the relationship between research and practice is not so benign all the time.

Stepping outside the consensus

Dirk Van Damme tells the story of one of the most influential sociologists of education in the Netherlands, Jaap Dronkers. In his research, he came to the conclusion that mixing native children and migrant children in classes in many cases had a negative impact on the quality of the learning experience for both groups. In a rather polarised political climate, this finding has made proponents of educational reform from a progressive pedagogical world view very uneasy.

“In the past, he was seen as belonging more to the left. He worked on equality in education, and he has published a lot of good research. I don’t know if he has himself become a conservative in his thinking, but his research is excellent regardless of his opinions. He is not giving policy advice. He is not trying to make it relevant. He is just telling us what his research has shown. Policy makers and practitioners can take up the research in developing their own answers, but the answers do not automatically follow from the research itself.”

Van Damme also tells of work in the Netherlands by a committee that was set up by the Ministry of Education. The premise was a ‘blunt statement’ from the Ministry: that most education research is not useful. The commit-

tee was tasked with coming up with a development plan for education research in the country.

The Ministry’s intention was not to dictate the outcome of the research, but there is a risk that this is where you might end up when making a research plan based on this political premise, according to Van Damme. In the end the committee came up with a very valuable report, proposing to develop a development plan for education research, based on dialogue and interaction.

Coming of age

Education research should not head back to the ‘ivory tower’. Relevance in itself is not a bad thing. But the way forward for both research and practice is for research to focus on its own conceptual and methodological core.

“We need much more research. The education system is not knowledge intensive enough. In a reform perspective, we have to make the education system more knowledge intensive. Teachers should become intensive knowledge users, schools should become knowledge centres and learning organisations. We can only do that by producing much more valid research.”

This calls for better knowledge management and knowledge systems in the education sector in order to integrate knowledge from both research and other sources. And education research is well on the way.

“The education researchers of today who have been trained in research methodologies are much better than the researchers of my generation. The quality of research is rising, and not only the quantitative research. So education research has the capacity to become a really mature sector within social sciences. The overall trend is positive, but there are still many needs to meet if you compare education with the health system, where you have an enormous amount of research. We are not anywhere near to talking of a learning science, comparable to, for example, the life sciences,” says Dirk Van Damme. ■

DIRK VAN DAMME

Head of the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) at the OECD in Paris, he holds a Ph.D. degree in Educational Sciences and has been Professor of Educational Sciences at Ghent University since 1995. He has been professionally involved in educational policy development for many years, most recently as director of the cabinet of Mr Frank Vandenbroucke, Flemish Minister of Education from 2004 to 2008.

At the annual IALEI conference at OISE, University of Toronto, Dirk Van Damme chaired the World Bank and OECD seminar ‘The Role of Knowledge Mobilisation for Raising the Quality of Education around the World’, along with Elizabeth King, Director of Education at the World Bank.