

Chapter 15

Evidence-based Policy: Yes, but Evidence-based Practice as Well!

Maria J.A. van der Hoeven, Minister of Economic Affairs, Netherlands¹

In this chapter, Maria van der Hoeven from the Netherlands develops her argument for an evidence-based approach to education: the high social importance of education, in combination with limited resources, demands that policy and practice are based on the best possible insights into “what works”.

Introduction

A surprising request! For this publication on evidence-based policy research into the field of education policy, Ministers were invited to share their views on this issue. Alongside the vision of researchers, civil servants and other specialists, the political point of view was also considered to be of importance. And that is quite understandable: a combination of the various standpoints would deliver the best for education. It is for that reason that I would hereby like to respond to the request.

After many years as a member of Parliament, I have been Minister of Education, Culture and Science in the Netherlands since 2002. When developing policy I have always tried to strengthen the development of an evidence-based approach, assisted, among other things, by the activities of the OECD in this area. In this respect, I consider myself particularly lucky to have the combination of education and science in my portfolio. I can therefore dare to say that I speak from experience.

My argument for an evidence-based approach to education is simple: the high social importance of education, in combination with limited resources, demands that policy and practice are based on the best possible insights into “what works”. This already applies within national borders but even more so across borders. I am therefore pleased with an international initiative such as this one that enables us to learn from the experiences in education (policy) of other countries. The Ministry of Education is pleased to have acted as host for one of the conferences in this OECD project.² I have, however, also encountered limits to this approach; reason enough to examine these as well.

¹ From 2002-February 2007, Maria van der Hoeven served as Minister for Education, Science, and Culture.

² “Linking Evidence to Practice: Continuing Discussion on Evidence-based Policy Research in Education”, The Hague, The Netherlands, 14-15 September 2005, www.oecd-conferences-ocw.nl/

I begin with a brief outline of the policy context for the benefit of the readers. The next paragraphs concern a more solid knowledge base for national policy and educational practice respectively. In my closing section I draw up the provisional balance.

Brief outline of the policy context

The main objective of every Minister of Education and of all education policy is to improve the quality of education. Education, being a human activity, can always be improved. I do not want to achieve this by regulating the sector more stringently but by doing precisely the opposite. I would like to encourage the ambitions of teachers and pupils/students and allow room for professionalism. This would not of course be obligation-free: education institutions must be directly accountable for their efforts and outcomes to the stakeholders – pupils and their parents, other youth institutions, students, the business community and the government, mainly through the Education Inspectorate. This choice is not so much based on evidence as on values like responsibility, freedom of choice, encouraging people to make the most of their talents – in short, a social vision as politicians can be expected to have. I am convinced that this vision will benefit the sustained quality of education.

Against this background, I am trying to encourage evidence-based working at two levels: more evidence supporting national education policy and more evidence supporting educational practice. In the title I tried to stress the importance of evidence-based practice. In the Dutch context this is very important, because education development takes place less at the national level and more at the level of the practice of education itself.

More solid knowledge base for national policy

A realistic vision

I am a firm supporter of a more solid knowledge base to support our national policy. That said, I would add that attention is needed for a realistic view of the issue. It is perhaps at the national level that the limits of an evidence-based approach are felt most strongly. I would like to list the four major limits that I perceive to policy development.

The first limit: education is an extremely complex world. The question is whether we are always capable of properly understanding the causal relationships. A familiar example of this is the question of whether the uniform reduction of class sizes across the entire line would lead to better learning outcomes for pupils. This is a subject on which the specialists find it difficult to agree.

The second limit: are we always capable of identifying possible unintentional side effects in advance? What would happen, for example, to the labour market for health care and the police force if (only) teachers were to be awarded significantly higher wages?

The third limit: education is not a laboratory in which you can experiment with various groups of children in a controlled environment. Parents want to have the best education for their children *now* and are not always prepared to participate in experiments or to wait for their results.

And this brings me to the fourth limit: do the often critical citizens of today really want to wait until politicians have gathered sufficient evidence before improvements are implemented? In my experience, politicians are often not given enough time.

Despite these limits, I remain a dedicated supporter of a more solid knowledge base for education policy under the motto: everywhere where it can be done, it should be done. Below, I will outline a number of concrete initiatives that I have taken over the past years. These initiatives are for the long term: they involve changing the attitude of many stakeholders and guaranteeing an adequate knowledge infrastructure. This international OECD project and a recommendation from the Netherlands Education Council (experts in educational practice and education science³) were welcome sources of inspiration in this respect.

A few new initiatives

The development of knowledge for policy and education is not a new phenomenon. The Ministry and the education sector naturally have a long history in this area. However, from time to time it is sensible to review its organisation and yield. This has been happening for several years now and it will still take some time before a new working method is firmly rooted and can bear fruit.

The first step is to formulate explicitly the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science's need for knowledge at a central level. In addition, there is a need for a greater focus on the social issues of education policy for the years to come.

A second step is needed to fulfil the Ministry's need for knowledge. The so-called *Kenniskamer* ("Knowledge Chamber") was established to strengthen the relationship between policy and research. Advisory Boards, planning offices and research institutions meet within this Knowledge Chamber to focus their programming more explicitly on the knowledge needed to develop policy and to introduce more cohesion into the development of knowledge. For those of you who are interested: more details of this Knowledge Chamber are provided in Chapter 8 of this volume.

Although intended for local educational practice, at the national level the knowledge infrastructure of education also needs to be adjusted to fit the role that will be assigned to this professional group in the chosen governance approach. If we ask school managers and teachers to base their practices as far as possible on proven effectiveness, then we have to ensure that they are actually able to do so. Does education research answer their questions satisfactorily? We want evidence to be practice-based just as practice should be evidence-based. And how is the knowledge gained communicated? This is why we are reviewing the way in which knowledge is produced and made accessible. This involves both knowledge originating from scientific research as well as knowledge from validated educational practice. There is currently no blueprint for a single large institute or a digital desk. Rather, this is more likely to become an organic growth towards a better harmonisation of supply and demand in programming and towards the improved accessibility of knowledge.

³ Recommendation "*Naar meer evidence based onderwijs*" ("Towards more evidence-based education"), Education Council, 2006. For an English summary visit: www.onderwijsraad.nl

More solid knowledge base for educational practice

The heart of educational practice

From the governance approach outlined above, in the Netherlands the heart of education development lies in educational practice: in schools, with school managements and teachers who consider this as part of their profession. However, they must be able to provide the choices they make in this regard with a knowledge base that is as solid as possible. The improvements they wish to adopt must have already proven their effectiveness in scientific studies or as good practices at other schools. Schools often pursue this end, but do not always succeed in achieving it. It is definitely not always the case that there is correct and sufficient knowledge available in a smart way. And not all school managements and teachers have developed this attitude to a sufficiently high degree.

In the past years, therefore, I have taken several initiatives aimed at furthering this development. These initiatives involve changing attitudes so that school managements and teachers can reflect more on the impact of their choices, on producing the relevant knowledge and improving access to it.

A few new initiatives

Pilots have been implemented with what we term “academic training schools”. At these schools, it is not only “ordinary” teachers who are trained in cooperation with teacher training programmes, but a link is also established between teaching and carrying out research within the school aimed at the further development of the school. These pilots could lead to a new position of “research teachers” with the responsibility of strengthening the knowledge base of the development of their own schools. This would involve both the systematic gathering of practical knowledge from their own and other schools as well as scientific knowledge. These research teachers could add impetus to the contact between educational practice and education research; in this way they could contribute to a more evidence-based approach to the development of education at their school. An additional but no less important consequence is that this would offer senior teachers a new career opportunity. And that is an enormous benefit in a time of teacher shortages.

As a general measure, we have introduced the position of “lector” into universities of higher professional education. Lectors act as a link between the universities of professional education, businesses and other knowledge institutions. The teaching sector can also benefit from this. The education world has access to these lectors from teaching training programmes. Together with schools in the region, they form so-called *kenniskringen* (“knowledge networks”) for teachers to pass on practical experiences and to link up with research. The teachers who are trained as research teachers at the academic training schools described above play an important role in this respect. There are several lectors now in the secondary vocational education branch who are working towards encouraging a more research-oriented attitude among teachers as well as working on the relationship between school and professional practice. With these two initiatives we are promoting a more evidence-based professional attitude and concrete work is being done on producing and communicating the relevant knowledge.

In addition to these two national initiatives, I would also like to mention here the Dutch contribution to the “Schooling for Tomorrow” project which is also being run by the OECD/CERI. We chose as our theme: *Kennis delen voor innovatie* (“Sharing Knowledge for the Purpose of Innovation”). We invited both the primary and secondary education branches to indicate themselves how the interaction between research and education, and the sharing of knowledge between schools could be improved. A number of the initiatives referred to above were brought together in the Dutch contribution to this project: working with the knowledge networks built up around lectors/researchers, the development of education by schools and a knowledge institution together, and the academic training school for research teachers. At the end of 2007, the study group will draw up the balance of these activities in order to arrive at a number of recommendations. The answer to the question of what the education sector itself thinks about a well-constructed and properly-functioning knowledge infrastructure is important to education policy in the Netherlands, but it could also be of interest to the education systems of other countries.

As Minister for scientific policy I consider it my job to link education research with educational practice and to improve the use of research outcomes. This puts me in the position of being able to allow more room for disciplines other than the traditional education sciences. In particular, for example, promising initiatives from the fields of neuroscience and cognitive science could provide a more solid knowledge base for a number of aspects of learning and teaching. I expect that when setting priorities for future research these disciplines will have a greater chance of success as they increasingly demonstrate that they take questions from educational practice seriously and devote attention to the applicability of research results.

In conclusion

Collaborating on this publication has been a learning experience for me and I would like to compliment the OECD/CERI highly for offering us this platform for sharing knowledge. The request to provide a political point of view regarding a more evidence-based approach to education and education policy was a welcome motivation to re-examine our own approach in this area. All things considered, over the past years in the Netherlands a lot has been set in motion to promote and better facilitate an evidence-based approach. Both objectives are of a long-term nature. The spheres of educational practice and education research do not know one another very well and they only change slowly.

This publication will hopefully work in two directions. The combined experiences of different countries could soon be the source of a further strengthening of our own approach. Similarly, the Dutch approach as I have outlined above could be a source of inspiration to other countries.

Biography

Adrienne Alton-Lee is the Chief Education Adviser for the New Zealand Ministry of Education's Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) Programme. Her role is to strengthen the evidence-base informing policy and practice in education and to provide medium term strategic advice to government. Dr. Alton-Lee is a Fellow of the International Academy of Education. She was formerly a teacher, classroom researcher, Professor and an Associate Editor of *Teaching and Teacher Education*. She has published in leading educational journals including the *Harvard Educational Review*, the *Elementary School Journal*, the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* and the *American Educational Research Journal*.

René Bugge Bertramsen is the Deputy General Director for the Danish University and Property Agency within the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation. Since 1999 he has been involved in reforms aiming at enhancing the quality of the Danish educational R&D system (such as the establishment of the Danish Pedagogical University – DPU – and the R&D centre Learning Lab Denmark). Mr. Bertramsen was responsible for the University Act of 2003 which gave Danish universities a new governance system, *i.e.* boards with external majority and employed rectors, deans and department heads. In 2006-2007 he was responsible for a merger process where government research institutes were integrated with the universities and a number of single-faculty universities were merged with larger multi-faculty universities, including the merger of DPU with multi-faculty University of Aarhus.

Robert Boruch, Professor, University of Pennsylvania (USA). Dr. Boruch is current co-chair of the Steering Group of the International Campbell Collaboration, and principal investigator for the Institute of Education Sciences What Works Clearinghouse, which is designed to be a central and trusted source of information on evidence about what works in education. Dr. Boruch is an elected Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Statistical Association, and the Academy for Experimental Criminology. He has received awards for his work on evaluation policy, randomised trials, and on privacy of individuals and confidentiality in social research. Dr. Boruch's academic background is in psychology, statistics, and mechanical engineering, with degrees from Iowa State University and Stevens Institute of Technology.

Satya Brink is currently Director, National Learning Policy Research, Human Resources and Social Development Canada. She and her team are responsible for developing evidence in support of policy development for lifelong learning for the Government of Canada. This work includes analysis on outcomes for each age group and type of education as well as the impacts of earlier learning on subsequent learning. In her previous post, she was responsible for research on human development based on two major Canadian longitudinal surveys. During this time she and her team produced a major body of evidence based on the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth which influenced major new initiatives of the Canadian government in support of children and their families.

Tracey Burns is a research and policy analyst for the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, OECD, Paris. Previous to this she worked on social determinants of health across the life-span with Charles Ungerleider & Associates in Vancouver, Canada. As a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of British Columbia, Dr. Burns led a hospital-based research team investigating newborn infants' responses to language. Tracey Burns holds a BA from McGill University, Canada and PhD from Northeastern University, USA. She is the recipient of various awards and honours, including the UBC Post-Doctoral Fellowship, a student-nominated university teaching award, and the American Psychological Association Dissertation Research Award.

Thomas D. Cook is the Joan and Serepta Harrison Chair in Ethics and Justice and Professor of Sociology, Psychology, Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University, where he is also a Faculty Fellow at the Institute for Policy Research. He has a BA from Oxford University and a Ph.D. from Stanford University. He is interested in causal methods for the social sciences and in the joint effects of neighborhoods, schools, peers and families on how young people develop socially and cognitively. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Margaret Mead Fellow of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. He has been awarded the Myrdal Prize for Science by the American Evaluation Association, the Donald Campbell Prize for Innovative Methodology by the Policy Sciences Organisation, and a Distinguished Research Scholar Prize of the American Psychological Association. He is the author or editor of 10 books and over 150 chapters and articles.

Jane Davidson is the Assembly Member for Pontypridd and former Deputy Presiding Officer for the National Assembly (Wales, United Kingdom). Since October 2000 she has been the National Assembly Education and Life-Long Learning Minister responsible for all aspects of education, training and lifelong learning. Educated at Malvern Girls' College, Birmingham University and the University of Wales, Jane has taught English, Drama and Physical Education. She is also an experienced youth worker and former Cardiff City Councillor. She was a member of the Arts Council for Wales and its Lottery Board, and Head of Social Affairs at the Welsh Local Government Association before her election to the Assembly. Jane has had a keen interest in education and youth work and is enjoying the challenges of the Education and Life-Long Learning portfolio.

Stephen Gorard holds the Anniversary Chair in Educational Studies at the University of York (United Kingdom), and directs the Centre for Research into Equity and Impact in Education. He is currently leading an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded project promoting the use and understanding of randomised controlled trials in public policy (<http://trials-pp.co.uk/>), and was the originator of the ESRC's Research Capacity-building Network. He has published widely about the research process in social science, but his substantive work focuses on issues of equity, especially in educational opportunities and outcomes, and on the effectiveness of educational systems. Recent books include "Teacher supply: the key issues", "Adult learning in the digital age", "Overcoming the barriers to higher education", and "Schools, markets and choice policies".

David Gough is Professor of Evidence Informed Policy and Practice and Director of the Social Science Research Unit (SSRU) and its Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating (EPPI) Centre, Institute of Education, University of London, United Kingdom. Previously he worked at the University of Glasgow and Japan Women's University. He directs the Methods for Research Synthesis node of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Node and research projects for the Department of

Education and Skills, the Teacher Training and Development Agency, the Social Care Institute of Excellence, and the Department for Work and Pensions. Dr. Gough is editor of the journal *Child Abuse Review* and associate editor of the journal *Evidence and Policy*.

Rebecca Herman, a principal research scientist at American Institute for Research (USA), specialises in setting standards for the quality of educational research and reviewing research based on those standards. As the project director for the What Works Clearinghouse, she is responsible for the US Department of Education's flagship project to identify effective educational programmes and practices. Dr. Herman was project director of the *Educators' Guide to Schoolwide Reform*. She provided congressional testimony and many invited presentations on this and related work. Dr. Herman holds an M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from Johns Hopkins University.

Maria J.A. van der Hoeven is the Minister of Economic Affairs (Netherlands). Maria J.A. van der Hoeven was born in 1949. She was trained as a primary teacher and taught at schools of home economics and junior secondary commercial education. Thereafter she was head of the Adult Commercial Vocational Training Centre in Maastricht and of the Limburg Technology Centre. From 1991 to 2002 Ms. Van der Hoeven was a member of the House of Representatives for the Christian Democratic Alliance (CDA). She has held a variety of social and cultural posts. Ms. van der Hoeven served as Minister of Education, Culture and Science from 2002 until February 2007. She was appointed as Minister of Economic Affairs in early 2007.

David Hogan is currently Professor and Dean of the Centre for Pedagogy and Practice at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Between 2004 and 2006 he was Vice Dean for Research at CRPP. Prior to that he was Professor of Education at the University of Tasmania in Australia, and before that he held appointments as Assistant and Associate Professor at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He completed his PhD in the history of education at the University of Illinois in 1979. His current research interests focus on the intersections between research, policy and practice, pedagogical theory, curriculum theory and design, the design of knowledge management of innovation systems in schools, multi-level and longitudinal modeling of student outcomes, citizenship and education, and education and social theory.

Bill Kilgallon, OBE, has been the Chief Executive of the UK's Social Care Institute of Excellence since 2003. Prior to that he was Chief Executive of St Anne's Community Services from 1978 to 2002, an organisation he founded in 1971, which works with single homeless people and people with learning disabilities, mental health problems and alcohol and drug problems across Yorkshire and the North East. He was Chair of the Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, the largest NHS Trust in the country from 1998-2002 and Chair of the Leeds Community & Mental Health Services NHS Trust from 1992-1998. Bill Kilgallon served as a member of Leeds City Council from 1979-1992 where he chaired the Social Services, Housing and Environment Committees. He has led independent inquiries, including one into alleged abuse in a local authority children's service and one into the management of an NHS hospital for people with learning disabilities.

Hannele Niemi is Professor of Education (1998-) and Vice-Rector for academic affairs at the University of Helsinki, Finland (2003-). She has been Professor of Education in Oulu, Turku and Tampere Universities (1987-1998). She has been a member of the Standing Committee of Social Sciences of ESF, the Council for Society and Culture in the Academy of Finland, and the Scientific Council of the University of Helsinki. She is a Steering Committee member of the British national research programme on teaching and

learning (TLRP). She was Director of the Finnish national research programme “Life as Learning” 2002-2006. Dr. Niemi has been Chair or a researcher in many national and international evaluation projects for development of educational research and teacher education. Her main research interest areas are teachers’ professional development, moral education and technology-based learning environments.

Johnny Nilsson is the Former Secretary of State for Education in Sweden.

Andrew Pollard is Director of the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme (www.tlrp.org), the UK’s largest coordinated initiative for educational research. As a teacher, his career started in Yorkshire primary schools and he has worked in teacher education or research at Oxford and Bristol Polytechnics and the Universities of the West of England, Bristol, Cambridge and London. He is presently based at the Institute of Education London. Andrew Pollard has published widely, including work on longitudinal ethnography and analysis of social factors in teaching and learning, learner perspectives, and resources for teacher education and school practitioners. He is at present working on an analysis of learning experiences through secondary education.

Rien Rouw is senior policy advisor at the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (Department for General Strategic and Economic Advice). He is secretary of the Knowledge Chamber.

Tom Schuller is Head of the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), OECD, Paris. Formerly Dean of the Faculty of Continuing Education and Professor of Lifelong Learning at Birkbeck, University of London, his latest books are *The Benefits of Learning: The Impact of Education on Health, Family Life and Social Capital* (RoutledgeFalmer, 2004) and *International Perspectives on Lifelong Learning* (edited with David Istance and Hans Schuetze, Open University Press, 2002).

Hans Stegeman is senior policy advisor at the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (Department for International Policy). He is member of the OECD’s Education Policy Committee.

Charles Ungerleider is Director of Research and Knowledge Mobilisation for the Canadian Council on Learning. From 1998 until 2001, Dr. Ungerleider served as Deputy Minister of Education for the Province of British Columbia, Canada. Prior to this he was Associate Dean for teacher education (1993-1998) at the University of British Columbia. Dr. Ungerleider has studied and written about educational policy and governance, student assessment, inter-group relations, and the impact of media on Canadian society. His most recent book *Failing Our Kids: How we are ruining our public schools* provides a critical analysis of the state of public schooling in Canada, the key part schooling plays in fostering Canadian values, and how public schools are treated by parents, professionals, and politicians.

Jerzy Wiśniewski is a consultant in education, and public administration and an expert of the Center for Social and Economic Research (Poland). From 2003-2006 he served as head of Strategy and Structural Funds of the Ministry of Education. He was also Director General of the Polish Ministry of National Education at the time of launching the reform of the education system, as well as the head of the International Department of the Ministry of Education and project manager in the Foundation for Public Administration Development. He was a member of the CERI/OECD Governing Board as well as the OECD team reviewing the educational system in Lithuania, advised the Ukrainian Ministry of Education on the reform of the system, and led the team reviewing the VET system in Croatia (with the European Training Foundation).

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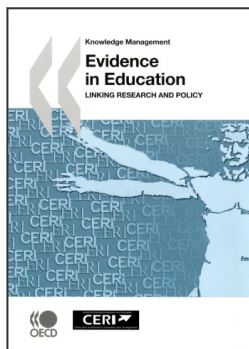
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