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## **Chapter 10**

### **Educational research for democracy**

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#### **Introduction**

The chapter adopts a broad conception of democracy, one that goes beyond recent conceptualisations that align democracy with ‘the freedom of individuals [or governments] to decide on their own on actions to pursue their own purposes’ (Nikolakaki, 2016:87). Dewey (1922) suggested that democracy is more than the pursuits of individuals or governments. It is also a process whereby individuals and government partner each other as they work toward optimal conditions for societal growth. As such:

A democratic society is precisely one in which the purpose of education is not given but is a constant topic for discussion and deliberation... [however] the current political climate in many Western countries has made it increasingly difficult to have a democratic discussion about the purposes of education (Biesta, 2007:18).

Accordingly, educational research should contribute to the common democratic process by advancing understanding through thought and action (Biesta & Burbules, 2003; Dewey, 1922). Democracy, however, is not the only philosophical position that influences educational research. Beder (2008) questions whether market values of competition, salesmanship and deception interfere with notions of democracy. According to DuRand (1997), such values are far removed from the historical core of democracy. Further, some authors (Nikolakaki, 2016; Freire, 2004) suggest that market forces contradict the normative practices of education and educational research. Kemmis (2014:31) adopts the Aristotelian view that education should strive ‘to form people so that they can live well in a world worth living in’.

In this chapter, educational research for democracy is understood as research that is conducted through interactions with people and in particular the educational community. This definition resists the notion that educational research can or should be conducted in a vacuum, purely or primarily concerned with the advancement of science. This does not suggest that educational research automatically advances democracy, yet positive societal impact should be visible in the formulated aims of the research as well as the sharing of research findings. At its best, educational research should support democracy, lead to deeper understandings of education and educational practices, arrive at recommendations for practice, and generate models that contribute to citizenship and societal participation.

At a European level, the Magna Charta Universitatum (1988) defines academic freedom as ‘the foundation for the independent search for truth and a barrier against undue intervention for both government and interest groups’ (<http://www.magna-charta.org/marga-charta-universitarium>). Other organisations (European Council: Recommendation 1762, 2006) have highlighted the role of research in solving the fundamental and long term problems of society. However, it is not possible to fulfil this societal mission without ‘strong public funding’ (EHEA ministerial conference, 2015) directed at long-term research projects with a societally relevant focus. Hence it is important to look at the ways in which the societal mission of research is perceived and supported through policies and national strategies and what possibilities and channels of communication are available for the dissemination of research. Indeed, different European nations have responded to the Magna Charta Universitatum in different ways. In Spain, for example, educational researchers compete for funding in response to national or regional calls. The centralizing tendency in Hungary, however, has ended national calls and competitive bids for research funding. The focus of this chapter considers how educational research is constructed in Finland and England as a framework for critical thinking about wider European research environments.

### **A three-dimensional model**

Educational research has increasingly been transformed into *schooling* research, which potentially reduces the scope and humanizing potential of education and undermines connections with rich educational heritages (Kemmis, 2014). For example, superficial notions of democratic research focus on individuals and efficacy, rather than individuals-in-relation and critical understanding. Such notions risk undermining the conditions that enable participation in democratic research communities. According to Kemmis and Smith (2008), these conditions may be conceptualised as shared 1) *cultural-discursive understandings*, 2) *material-economic arrangements*, and 3) *social-political commitments*. These categories are referred to as ‘sayings’, ‘doings’ and ‘relatings’. The *sayings*, then, are shared ways in which language is used within and about education. The *doings* relate to mutual actions and resources that belong to and are available for education. Finally, the *relatings* are the mechanisms that surround and connect education as a practice and that influence the provision and normative function of education and educational research.

This chapter applies these three dimensions to educational research in the contemporary democracies of Finland and England. Research policies and frameworks are drawn on to discuss the ways in which educational research aligns with notions of democracy. Using the three dimensions outlined above, it is possible to construct an overview of and identify synergies between what is said and done in the two contexts, as well as the relationships that enable or disable educational research for democracy. Each of the different dimensions is presented in turn before considering to the wider implications for educational research for democracy.

## Research ‘sayings’ in Finland and England

Many universities in both Finland and England belong to the Magna Charta Universitatum (1988), as well as national policies and priorities relating to educational research. Governments, boards of education, and national funding bodies, such as the Academy of Finland or the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in England issue statements regarding the purpose and practice of educational research. In addition, local research policies are published by universities and funding organisations. Scrutiny of these documents provides an overview of what is *said* about educational research within particular national contexts. It is possible, for example, to establish how research is directed at universities in general, how money is distributed and funding applications evaluated. These ‘sayings’ are considered in this section in order to identify research priorities and funding streams and to evaluate notions of democracy in research practice.

Educational research in Finland is regulated on several different discursive levels. The University Law (FINLEX, 2009), provides a broad vision of the mission of Finnish universities and the role of research stating that universities are:

...to advance free research and scientific and artistic education, to give research-based higher education and to raise the students to serve their home country and humankind. By taking care of these tasks the universities should promote lifelong learning, act in active interaction with the whole society and promote the societal impact of the scientific and artistic activities (FINLEX, 2009, trans. Ruohotie-Lyhty).

This goes back to the historical origins of Finnish universities as part of the nation-building project in the mid-nineteenth century. The welfare state project that began in the 1950s aimed to develop services and well-being across the nation. As part of the welfare state project, universities were required to serve different regions of Finland in order to improve the quality of the lives of communities and the nation as a whole (Välimaa, 2004). These democratic aims remain current today. However, a neoliberal discourse has emerged that couches education in terms of commercialization, digitalization and efficacy. Education is constructed in a utilitarian sense, whereby it prepares individuals to make a contribution to the economy (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2012). The commercial value of Finnish educational research is recognized; its role, however, in attaining the outlined democratic goals remains less clear. Nevertheless, the policy of Finnish universities partnering the government in the formation of the goals for education continues today (FINLEX, 2009).

This vision has been interpreted at a regional level as a mandate ‘to rapidly recognise and respond to new research and education needs arising in society’ (University of Jyväskylä, 2015). The University of Jyväskylä’s strategy (2015-2020) states that:

...through education and research, the University participates in solving national and global problems. Global responsibility and sustainable development are emphasised in all activities. (University of Jyväskylä, 2014, <https://www.jyu.fi/hallinto/strategia/en/strategy-of-the-university-of-jyvaskyla-201520132020>).

These discourses acknowledge the visionary ideals of universities as nation-builders with global responsibilities and democratic values. Such open-ended frameworks provide educational researchers with freedom and opportunities to develop initiatives that uphold these values (e.g. CITE: Critical Model of Integrative Teacher Education, Osaava Verme: Peer Group Mentoring network). Although policy documentation provides space for these initiatives, the more restrictive doings of funding potentially compromises this rather ideal environment.

Whereas Finnish educational research comes under the rubric of the Finnish University Law, English educational research is subject to the *Research Excellence Framework* (REF). As a system of expert review that assesses the quality and impact of research in UK universities for the allocation of funding and driving up standards, what the REF says with regard to educational research is of the greatest significance to academics in the UK. The assessment criteria of the REF states that ‘quality, significance and rigour’ (REF, 2014:4) are of the utmost importance with research impact judged according to ‘any social, economic or cultural impact or benefit beyond academia ... underpinned by excellent research produced by the submitting institution within a given timeframe’ (REF, 2014:4). Arguably the aims of making a contribution to economic prosperity, national well-being and the expansion and dissemination of knowledge are the conditions of democracy adopted within this framework.

In England, both the government (Department for Education, DfE) and academics (e.g. *The Cambridge Primary Review*: Alexander et al, 2010) emphasise the importance of educational research for democratic development. The DfE (2013), for example, says that the aim of social research is to provide high-quality evidence to inform policy development and delivery. It states that:

...building evidence into our services is crucial to improving the education and children’s services we provide. We have ... set out research priorities and questions ... for the research community ... we hope these papers will encourage researchers ... to discuss research needs and contribute to the development of policy and practice (DfE, 2013).

Furthermore, government research priorities cover a wide range of topics: academies, assessment, curriculum and qualifications and capital funding for schools. Government priorities also incorporate children in care, early education and childcare, funding for disadvantaged

children ('pupil premium'), school behaviour and attendance, special educational needs and disability, teachers and teaching, and educational governance. In a similar vein, academics, as represented by the Cambridge Primary Review Trust (2013), explicitly state the importance of a more democratic approach to education, giving voice to all stakeholders and addressing issues of inequality, poverty and social deprivation. Significant differences exist, however, between the *sayings* of the DfE and academics with regard to who *does* the research that is to inform policy and educational development and the purpose of educational research. The *doings* of educational research are the focus of the next section.

### **Research 'doings' in Finland and England**

A recent national evaluation of educational institutions in Finland highlighted a disjuncture between the *sayings* and the material-economic arrangements or practical *doings* of research at the University of Jyväskylä

... it is in praxis visible in the fact that the societal impact is seen to emerge as part of the research and teaching activities, but the evaluation indicators of these activities do not include the aspect of societal impact. In addition the staff feels that the model for distributing resources does not support engaging in and developing the aspect of societal impact, because these activities are not directly given money (Seppälä et al., 2015, trans. Ruohotie-Lyhty).

This seeming contradiction between the vision and realization can be better understood when looking at the national funding bodies and the competitive processes Finnish universities engage in to receive research funding.

Finnish universities became independent in 2010, adopting a financial model based on potential and demonstrable productivity (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015a, 2015b). Two primary national bodies, the Ministry of Education and the Academy of Finland, exist to provide this funding. The Ministry of Education provides basic funding for universities with thirty four per cent of the distributed money based on research, including funding for doctoral degrees, international publications and securing external funding for research. There is no expectation, however, that research activities address wider societal needs. The Academy of Finland (2015) states that:

...in principle, a project to be funded *must in some way* contribute to Finnish research and society *or* international collaboration. The review process in calls by the Strategic Research Council includes reviewing the proposed projects both for their societal relevance and impact and for their scientific quality (Academy of Finland, 2015, *italics*)

added, <http://www.aka.fi/en/review-and-funding-decisions/how-applications-are-reviewed/review-criteria/>).

The criteria used to review and evaluate applications in Finland are based on the merits of the applicant, the research team and the scientific innovativeness of the project. There is no reference to societal impact. One possible interpretation is that these criteria are more aligned with the priorities of the current government with its commercial, economic priorities. It is also common practice for individual researchers to compete with each other and to build strategic alliances, focusing on journal publications and meeting university funding criteria as outlined in the publication forum (Publication forum, 2015) rather than prioritising the core values as articulated in the University Law.

There are some examples, however, of funded projects and programmes in Finland that are deemed to be of societal relevance and go beyond the competitive strictures outlined above. These projects include Education for Global Responsibility (2007) the LUKIMAT project (Ronimus & Lyytinen, 2015) designed to develop reading skills and strategies, and the Osaava Verme project (Korhonen et al, 2015) for teacher mentoring. Whether these projects can establish themselves as permanent features of the Finnish educational landscape once funding has ceased remains unknown, thus highlighting the problematic nature of short-term funding projects.

There is an abundance of research in teacher education contexts in both England and Finland. Student teachers conduct research during their undergraduate and postgraduate studies supervised by academics and professionals. In Finland, educational research conducted within or beyond the vicinity of the university campus feeds back into teacher education and the ongoing development of education. In England, there is an emphasis on practitioner research, and universities play an increasing role in supporting teachers in schools with this aspect of their work.

The *sayings* of educational research within the English context are largely prescribed by the *Research Excellence Framework* (REF, 2014). This promotes a much closer alignment between what is *said* and what is *done* within the English context. The REF exercise, conducted every seven years, judges the overall quality of research submissions and determines funding for UK universities. In addition to funding provided via the REF, educational researchers bid for competitive research funding from large organisations, such as NFER and ESRC in England and the EEC at a European level.

Although Finnish researchers also compete for national and international funding opportunities, for the most part, Finnish researchers design and implement their own research projects based on their interests and expertise. In England, however, the emphasis on evidence-based research

tends to favour quantitative approaches carried out by teams on a large scale, applied to policy and disseminated widely. This position has been emphasized in a series of papers written by the DfE (2013) explicitly promoting a greater focus on quantitative evidence in areas where gaps in research have been identified.

This pressure arguably limits the democratic participation of educational researchers to contribute to the development of education. The participation of educational researchers is further limited in the English context, as incentives are offered to educational practitioners to engage in research in their own contexts (Goldacre, 2013) by-passing university-based educational researchers. Whilst from a democratic perspective it would seem to be of great importance to include educational practitioners as partners in educational research and development, to exclude academic educational researchers from this process carries negative connotations. The approach restricts rather than enables conceptions of democracy. It is these social-political arrangements, often experienced in terms of power or powerlessness, that are the focus of the *relatings* in the section below.

### **Research ‘relatings’ in Finland and England**

When Higher Education was part of the welfare state project in Finland, the most important relations were regional. The expectation was that the university would serve the region in which it was placed supporting the overall development of the nation (Välimaa, 2004). However, the situation in reality is not so straightforward. It could be perceived that internationalisation of research was part of the democratic aims of the nation-building project. However, it was also possible to perceive this as an attempt to facilitate competition in a global market for research funding.

Although educational researchers in Finland enjoy a significant amount of freedom and responsibility, the democratic ideals of educational research outlined in the opening of the chapter, particularly in relation to societal impact, are little discussed. Whereas in England the REF data exists to highlight the impact of educational research, in Finland, ideals of responsibility seem to have been transformed or reduced to the notion of recognition. University researchers are concerned with how to gain international funding, develop international research partnerships, and achieve international publications as listed in the Academy of Finland funding criteria (Academy of Finland, 2015).

This need for recognition is also reflected in the University of Jyväskylä’s commissioned audit published as The Research Assessment Report in 2011. The aim of the audit was to strengthen the reputation of the university as an international, research-based institution, with talented and creative scientists, and efficient infrastructures. This in turn would make it more attractive to potential investors and sponsors (Research Assessment Report, 2011:144).



The assessment criteria include:

1. Scientific quality of the Unit's research
2. Quality of the scientific impact (only in terms of international success)
3. Quality of research collaborations
4. Quality and quantity of the research funding
5. Quality of the research environment.

It is interesting that the notion of relating to and addressing societal needs are absent from these criteria. Nevertheless, according to the University of Jyväskylä Faculty of Education:

The societal impact of the research conducted in the Faculty of Education is evident in many respects. The Faculty of Education offers teacher education (from kindergarten teachers to adult educators) that is based on research... In the key research areas the faculty does internationally high standard research and produces on this basis quality education. These research activities form a strong foundation for the continual development of the internationally top quality education and training system in Finland (Faculty of Education, 2015, trans. Ruohotie-Lyhty).

One possible interpretation is that these two texts highlight the conundrum faced by educational researchers in Finland: on the one hand, the requirement for socially meaningful research exists and is enshrined in the University Law. On the other hand, this research is funded and justified through other means. Funding for this research is gained through competition and evaluated according to criteria that does not necessarily value or recognize socially meaningful research. The absence of strong guidelines with regard to educational research enables individual researchers to determine what is important in response to what is happening in schools and to develop educational activities within the university.

The ramifications of these diverse drivers for research are visible in the strategic recruitment and use of fixed-term or part-time contracts for academic staff in Higher Education in both countries. In order to keep up with the demands of increasingly neoliberal policies, educational researchers have to publish in internationally recognised journals, teach, compete for funding, be sensitive to local needs, responsive to global demands and build international networks. In Finland, if educational researchers are able to meet these demands, the social-political arrangements of educational research provide them with the freedom to develop projects, trial initiatives and engage with different partners. In England, researchers have currency if they are well published and win bids for significant funding opportunities.

The recent curriculum reform process in Finland (Board of Education, 2014) as well as a recent working report to reform teacher development (Heikkinen et. al, 2015) are indicative of the ways

in which educational researchers continue to be valued partners in the broader development of education in Finland. Although there are no specific mechanisms in place for sustaining these relationships, these *relatings* are nevertheless sustained by the current social-political arrangements of Finland.

The prevailing agenda of the government in England views Higher Education institutions as costly and research outputs as not necessarily adequately linked to effective schooling. There are also conflicting interests between research stakeholders. Student researchers relate to supervisors and examiners, researchers to participants whether practitioners, children or people who are vulnerable. Researchers also relate to publishers, and publishers to potential audiences and markets as well as to governments and governing bodies. It is perhaps unsurprising that ‘there is a significant tension between researchers and policy makers... [As t]he two parties have conflicting interests, agendas, audience, timescales, terminology and concern for topicality’ (Levin, 1991 cited in Cohen et al, 2000:44).

Educational researchers face difficult choices and may be inclined to focus on government-stated priorities significantly limiting the possibilities of educational research to contribute to the democratic development of society. Findings from large-scale quantitative studies on what works from commissioned research projects may not be relevant to specific educational contexts or the individuals educational researchers are working with. Research questions may be reduced to questions about effectivity and effectiveness obscuring the complexity of education and educational research as democratic practices. As Biesta notes:

The extent to which a government not only allows the research field to raise this set of questions (i.e. what is educationally desirable) but actually supports and encourages researchers to go beyond simplistic questions about ‘what works’ may well be an indication of the degree to which a society can be called democratic. From the point of view of democracy, an exclusive emphasis on ‘what works’ will simply not work (Biesta, 2007:20).

Educational researchers working within the qualitative research paradigm may also choose ‘interpretivist/constructivist’ approaches rather than ‘critical theory/emancipatory’ paradigms with more explicitly democratic agendas. These choices not only risk reducing the scope of educational research (Albrecht et al, 2001:149) but also impoverish the quality and range of participation within educational research (Liamputtong, 2007; Cunnah, 2015) and the democratic potential of educational research (Biesta, 2007).

It is perhaps in the *relatings* around educational research that the most significant differences exist between Finland and England. Within the English context, educational researchers are cajoled, arguably required to take certain approaches in response to given questions seeking

particular answers with mechanisms in place to reward compliance with official policy. This is within the context of regulatory research priorities of the time. Within the Finnish context, on the other hand, educational researchers still benefit from a well-established tradition that favours equality and autonomy, a system that requires educational researchers to be able to act independently and responsibly.

These differences arguably stem from the *sayings* outlined at the beginning of the chapter. Finnish ideals are given voice in the University Law. In England, on the other hand, the impact of research goals is judged by the DfE and the evaluative framework of the REF. Of course, research in Finland and England cannot in reality be reduced to simple statements and categories; it is a complex process that grows out of disparate societal, political and cultural discourses.

## **Concluding discussion**

The aim of this chapter was to look at the ways in which educational research is constructed as a practice in two contemporary democracies, Finland and England, and to see what possibilities the existing structures provide for educational research to serve democratic development within these contexts.

Arguably a democratic society is a society in which social research can perform both a technical and a cultural role, (De Vries, 1990, as cited in Biesta, 2007). Furthermore, a democratic society should be distinguished by open and informed debate about the definition of educational problems and the aims and outcomes of educational undertakings. It could be perceived that the Finnish model with its open-ended mission for educational research creates a more fertile basis for this kind of debate, and the model in England is limited by more direct political guidance. However, the results of the REF show significant social impact of research in England. The results of the 2014 REF, for example, demonstrate the high quality and enhanced international standing of research conducted in UK universities. The expert panels, which included international members of the research community, found a significant improvement across a broad range of universities in the UK. Outstanding impacts on the economy, society, culture, public policy and services, health, the environment and quality of life within the UK and internationally were found. Impact, in the context of the REF, refers to any effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia. These domains of impact reflect universities' productive and democratic engagement in a wide range of public and private fields in the UK and beyond. To support equality and diversity, each university applies a code of practice on the fair and transparent selection of staff, and conducts an equality impact assessment. However, access to these panels is restricted to highly successful and experienced academics and scholars, rather than educational practitioners and other stakeholders, or novice and aspiring scholars. Inevitably, questions arise in relation to the REF. *Who* can be part of this panel expert? When experts make

judgements on outputs submitted, how can researchers defend their work? Is there room for the voice of the researcher? Are democratic practices applied? Nevertheless, the significant impact on social change ensuing from the REF exercise is in accordance with democratic principles. Regardless of the freedom offered in Finland for open-ended discussion about the methods and goals of education, the discussion has not been particularly animated in recent years. As the model of the Finnish university changes in response to international evaluations and expectations, researchers may recognise the threat to the existing freedom they enjoy. Educational research that is restricted to a mere technical role without responding to larger questions of societal structures, human rights and the possibility for change cannot be considered as educational research for democracy. Ignoring or weakening the role of university-based educational research and coercing researchers to conform to a particular educational approach in England may serve short-term political goals but risks undermining future development as it impoverishes participation in and around educational research. However, the REF evidence in England does suggest positive societal impact. The Finnish model, in which societal impact of research remains largely unrecognised and unmotivated by the funding bodies, is problematic. Although educational researchers in Finland have the freedom to participate in educational research for democracy, the focus of research lacks reference to the societal mission that was formerly a keystone in the development of Finnish society.

In order for optimum knowledge and learning to be generated by diverse educational research stakeholders and society at large, constructive relationships ‘between research, policy and practice that allow reciprocal learning to occur’ (Darling-Hammond, 1996:11) are vital. If a democratic society is distinguished by open and informed debate about the definition of educational problems and the aims and outcomes of educational undertakings, research relationships should be carefully nurtured with time given for deliberation (Robertson, 2009) around research questions, paradigms, purposes, policies and implications. It is not only deliberation *within* the research process that is necessary, but also *around* educational research. Ongoing discussion is needed with regard to the purpose of educational research and the responsibilities of educational research within a democratic society. It is this ongoing discussion and the ensuing action that unites participants within a democracy.

In this chapter we used the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis & Smith, 2008) to examine the practices of educational research in Finland and in England. We suggest that this model can significantly contribute to the scrutiny of education and educational research in other European and global contexts as well. The model of practice architectures draws attention to different conditions that comprise any practice as well as revealing a-synergies in the *saying*, *doings* and *relatings* that enable or disable development. This model is sensitive enough to capture different starting points and national situations beyond apparent similarities, serving as a basis for learning from each other rather than making generalisations about apparent differences. It is this kind of approach that we hope will strengthen educational research for democracy.

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