

The Gap Between Educational R&D and Practice:

Views from the Netherlands and Flanders

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Issues:

- How broad / deep is the gap
- Stakeholders positions and perceptions
- Directions for improvement / solutions
- Some reflection on underlying causes (a system perspective)

Sources:

- Literature review
- Survey carried out by University of Amsterdam
- Focus group research by the University of Ghent (published by the Flemish Institute for Scientific and Technological Studies)
- Recent statements by the President of the Dutch Association for Educational Research (VOR)

What about the Gap?

The gap is widely acknowledged.

Four key problems are distinguished (both in the NL and FI):

1. Few compelling results / no strong scientific evidence is generated
2. Few results can be used in practice
3. Practitioners find educational R&D not convincing / of little practical use
4. Practitioners make little use of research outcomes.

However, views on the nature of it and on how it should be bridged vary.

Nature of the Gap (Flanders). It may be:

- A gap between two different knowledge systems
- A result of unscientific approaches to research
- A gap between two different communities
- An imaginary gap based on perceptions, assumptions and misunderstanding.
- The debate is mainly opinionated and held through public media (little empirical research)

Reflection on the gap (the NL):

- How much impact is possible, desirable and admitted anyway?
- Negative views may be explained by naivety, insufficient skills, poor conditions, political factors and status

The debate is more polarized (politicized) in the Netherlands than in Flanders.

- *2007: Dutch parliament starts an inquiry on innovation in education.*
- *Questions about the role of educational research.... (at least in the public debate)*

Stakeholders Perceptions of the Gap

Stakeholders in the Netherlands:

- Researchers
- Practitioners

- Funding bodies
 - E.g. the research council, universities, the ministry of E&S, buffer/sector organisations representing schools, employers or industry
- Intermediary agents
 - E.g. teacher trainers, consultants, advisors, journalists, knowledge centres, interest groups, buffer organisations, policy makers / policy advisors

Stakeholders in Flanders:

- Researchers
- Practitioners:
 - Teachers
 - School leaders
- Government

- Intermediary agents
 - Teacher trainers and pedagogical advisors

The Dutch Survey

- N = 160
- Including 51 researchers, 32 managers / policy makers, 20 teacher trainers, 19 teachers, 14 students, 5 designers / developers, 19 others (e.g. journalists).
- 7-point Likert Scale
- Standard deviations between 1.2 and 1.8,
- but no significant variance between (average scores of) different actor groups
- General consensus

General consensus: The gap exists indeed

Strongest agreement (>5)

- The education (policy) sector does not use results of educational R&D
- National policy is not based on educational R&D
- Consulting educational R&D is not the norm in the education (policy) sector
- Actors in the education (policy) sector do not have the means to use educational R&D
- Actors in the education (policy) sector do not conduct research themselves
- There is no cooperation on equal basis between the education (policy) sector and the researchers
- Facilities for such cooperation are lacking
- Current educational R&D can contribute much more to practice than one thinks.

Moderate-strong agreement (4-5):

- The education (policy) sector does not have high esteem of educational R&D
- The education (policy) sector does not use the results of educational R&D
- There is too little educational R&D
- Educational R&D does not address the right questions
- There is too little coherence in educational R&D
- Reports on educational R&D are not accessible
- Teacher training colleges do not base their programmes on educational R&D
- Teacher training materials are not based on educational R&D
- The educational (policy) sector lacks the skills to use educational R&D

Moderate agreement (3-4):

- Educational R&D so far does not deliver results that can be applied in practice
- Scientific quality of educational R&D is generally weak
- The educational (policy) sector is hardly cooperative towards research
- The willingness for cooperation is lacking

Weak agreement (2-3):

- Educational R&D has so far not produced significant scientific knowledge.
- Educational R&D cannot deliver practically applicable results because education is so complex.
- Educational R&D can contribute less than one would expect, even when it develops further and results are optimally used.

Comments from the President of the Dutch Association of Educational Research

- There is a gap between “pure academic researchers” and “applied / practice oriented / demand-driven researchers”
- Both sectors 100-150 fte / 20-30 M€ a year (but many more individuals in the latter group)
- 40-60 M€ in total, compared to 29 B€ budget for education
- 500-600 M€ for innovation in education
- Innovation and research in education are totally separated systems.
- Innovations are ideologically based
- There is no empirical research on the effects of innovations (not even in terms of accountability on their success or failure).
- Consequently, educational research is being marginalized.
- Proposal: 5% norm for research in each innovation.

The Flemish Focus Group Study

More variety (than in the NL) in perceptions between actor groups

- Teachers are most critical
 - Research does not address their problems and questions
- School leaders are less critical
 - They use research results focused on the school level.
 - Yet the link between research and practice can be strengthened.
 - Different languages is the main problem.
- Intermediary actors are the least critical
 - Is there a gap?

Further Insights from the Flemish Focus Group Study

- There is no linear relationship between the type of research project and its dissemination and its impact.
- Research focused on enhancing practice at school or class level is most likely to have an impact
- Researchers committed to enhancing teaching practice are better connected to practitioners
- Dissemination is more successful when it corresponds to the needs of practitioners
- Research with practical relevance is appreciated
- Secondary school teachers appreciate more research on teaching the discipline/subject than on general pedagogical issues and methods
- ***Research that holds evidence is more likely to be applied***
- ***Especially teachers value the visibility of evidence and effectiveness***
- Schools need internal capacity (“specialists”, “agents” and “antennae”) to enhance their ability to use research
- Also because there is no national platform for educational R&D

Four Models or Solutions

1. RDD
 2. Evidence based practice model
 3. Cross-sectoral practices (combining professional roles)
 4. Knowledge communities (networks)
- The Netherlands:
 - Two poles: positivists will prefer EBP models; post-modernists will prefer knowledge communities
 - More moderate approaches: post-positivists and “moderate enlightenment” will view the four approaches as mutually reinforcing.
 - Flanders:
 - Especially teachers value EPB
 - Both practitioners and researchers are in favor of an enhanced RDD model (with stronger collaboration, i.e. 3 & 4)
 - School leaders plea for a national forum (more and better communication between research & practice).

Some Reflections

based on comparisons at system level

- The Dutch educational sector / field is more complex.
 - More funding bodies and (many) more intermediary agents.
 - Diffuse role of the government
 - Divergent driving forces:
 - Intermediary agents are in the NL mainly market driven (competition and commercialization)
 - The research sector is more strongly driven by an evaluation culture (research assessment and rankings!)
- In Flanders universities and polytechnics cooperate
 - Research capacity of polytechnics has been developed since the mid-nineties
 - In collaboration with the universities (associations)
 - Qualification level of academic staff in polytechnics is higher (more PhDs) than in the NL
- In the Netherlands polytechnics (try to) compete with universities (less cooperation)
 - But have a weak research capacity
 - Low qualification levels of academic staff
 - The suggestion to appoint “lectoren” (associate professors) in polytechnics with a Evidence Based mission is most recent
- In Flanders teacher competencies related to using and participating in research are of longer date (and more acknowledged by younger teachers than older)
- In the NL this competency is acknowledged only very recently (2006) and not yet really implemented in teacher training programmes.