



Editorial

Opportunities and Dilemmas in Interactions between the Education Sector and Academia

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The purpose of this Special Issue is two-fold. First, to direct critical attention to the production of knowledge within the education sector by asking the question “Where might knowledge which addresses challenges and stimulates innovation in the education sector be best produced?” Second,



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to offer an answer to this question, that researchers situated in both universities and schools/kindergartens can and do co-create knowledge which has direct and valuable relevance for teaching practice, at the same time as meeting the high demands of scientific quality.

As editors of this Special Issue, we seek to contribute to ongoing discussions at an international level about research interactions between universities and schools/kindergartens. We propose an alternative to the familiar “bridge metaphor”, in which researchers operating in both universities and schools/kindergartens are portrayed as providing links between two separate worlds. The bridge metaphor suggests and reinforces alienation between research and practice; indicating that the practice of education and educational research are somehow not expressions of the same educational values and aims. This Special Issue aims to counter such dualistic understandings, by presenting research work carried out by educational practitioners. We agree with Townsend (2002, p. 72) in asking for a ‘reconfiguration’ of relations within research, in which educational researchers are understood as navigating and operating within various and diverse arenas of knowledge production, and in which educational practice is seen as essential as research for the continual development of impactful knowledge.

In Norway, the Research Council (RCN) has had a particular focus on the need for greater innovation in the education sector, whilst also highlighting considerable stumbling blocks such as risk-aversity, a lack of resources allocated to innovation, ineffective decision-making processes, piecemeal approach to improvements, and too great a divide between research and practice (The Research Council of Norway, 2018). The literature reveals similar, equally complex challenges elsewhere in the world, intensified recently due to increasing strains on resources (Cinar et al., 2019; Clausen et al., 2020). One response to these challenges in Norway has been RCN’s establishment of a public sector Ph.D. programme (OFFPHD). In OFFPHDs, practitioners complete a doctoral research study at an academic institution while maintaining their position of employment within the public sector. Intended outcomes of OFFPHD include improved competence in analysis and innovative problem-solving, as well as the ability to apply and produce research findings. There are challenges, however. Our work leading a national network for all those involved in OFFPHD within the field of education (NATPRONET) has led us to a heightened critical awareness of apparent linguistic and attitudinal divisions between universities and schools/kindergartens, as well as uncertainty about how Ph.D. candidates might bring about change. We have, therefore, been compelled to seek out and highlight “collaborative, interdisciplinary knowledge activities which are considered crucial for twenty-first century success” (Holley, 2015, p. 642). The research produced by OFFPHD candidates provides examples of such activities. Within their organisations, OFFPHD candidates participate in knowledge-

creating practices that are critically investigative and curiosity-driven; they are themselves the change they have been charged with bringing about. It is not necessarily research results, produced according to standardised understandings of scientific rigour that have the greatest impact in terms of innovation, but the activities and practices they create and the trails they leave behind from their co-creative knowledge practices. As ‘pracademics’ (Volpe & Chandler, 1999), capable of conceptualising their identity in multiple ways and producing knowledge practices that are true to educational values, they are the impact. Both symbolically and actually, they contribute to reinstating practice relevance in educational research.

Internationally, doctoral education continues to be in transition, due to its perceived effect on economic growth, attractiveness for employers, developments in the global market, and the increased belief in applied research being ‘useful’ in the here and now (Lee & Bongaardt, 2021). In Norway, the OFFPHD is not categorised as a professional doctorate, but is assessed according to the same criteria as Ph.D. programmes. Internationally, professional doctorates have become increasingly prevalent (Jones, 2018). They are generally regarded as a means of meeting the demand for researchers with the competence to enact change, rather than solely producing “academically-valued deliverables” (Jones, 2018, p. 817) more commonly associated with Doctor of Philosophy programmes. The number of professional doctorate programmes within education (e.g., Education Doctorates, or Ed.D.) has grown significantly worldwide (Czerniawski, 2023), due perhaps to the opinion that Ed.D. candidates have greater “capacity to transform educational practice” (Perry, 2012, p. 114). At the same time, some familiar concerns about the quality of professional doctorates have been raised within academia (Jones, 2018). New knowledge and approaches provided by professional doctorates create flexibility and openings to adapt and develop, however, this can also be unsettling, and research that is deemed close-to-practice has a “troubled history” (Czerniawski, 2023), with questions of validity and quality being raised. Such discussions about the status of different doctoral programmes, especially when doctorates that are situated within the field of practice are deemed questionable, are unhelpful, and in our opinion can contribute to a strengthening of divisions between universities and schools/kindergartens. Rather than reinforcing a hierarchy of research where close-to-practice research is either heralded as more relevant or criticised as not scientific enough, we agree with Czerniawski (2023) in adopting a more nuanced approach and highlighting a need for greater criticality regarding the research-production process. Regardless of where the researcher is situated, the decision-making processes of funding, evaluating, and publishing research significantly define the production of knowledge. Arguably, researchers who operate in multiple arenas have a greater opportunity to reflect critically on the neoliberalist demands associated with scientific output, accountability and the provision of solutions

(Bacevic, 2019). We support a reconsideration of the structures of knowledge-creation, opening for more dynamic processes which both encourage and recognise the various arenas in which impactful research can be produced.

An exploration of the knowledge created in interactions between universities and schools/kindergartens is, at its heart, a consideration of the very nature and purpose of educational research. Boyd and Smith (2016) suggest the idea of 'knowledge exchange', in which researchers interact and inquire with other stakeholders to bring about new, better understandings. Taking a social constructivist view, 'knowledge exchange' can be understood as a process of co-creation (Dewey, 1938; Mead, 1934). Scientific progress in educational research framed in this way, is largely a social venture in which people are an essential part of designing solutions (Bason, 2018) – a skill particularly relevant for the 21st century. As a result, scientific rigour is underpinned by reflexivity, operationalised as ongoing critical self-investigation and context-sensitivity (Gadamer, 1994). Arguably, researchers who are situated within schools/kindergartens, such as OFFPHD candidates and professional doctoral candidates, are best placed to facilitate educational research understood in this way.

The articles in this Special Issue demonstrate the opportunities and dilemmas arising in the intersections of collaboration and the development of knowledge and practice across and within sectors. They transcend the dichotomous and normative question of whether such cross-cutting collaboration is positive or negative, and instead highlight the more important questions of why and how partnerships and collaboration between universities and schools/kindergartens can be further developed. Together, the articles shed light on how collaboration between educational sectors leads to the development of knowledge that is different from the knowledge that would have been developed if produced solely in one sector. They show how it is possible to be playful in innovative ways in the interactive spaces created when universities and kindergartens/schools recognise their mutual aim to develop knowledge that can benefit children, students, and society. At the same time, the articles demonstrate how challenges of structures and mandates complicate collaborative efforts.

To conclude, we direct attention towards the potential for better knowledge development when Ph.D. candidates in schools and kindergartens collaborate with colleagues to broaden perspectives, stimulate innovation and engage in critically reflexive investigations from within practice. The Norwegian way of funding doctorates for education professionals (OFFPHD) is greatly beneficial in that it both increases the motivation for teachers to partake in research, while also ensuring high-quality analysis. Other countries may be inspired to develop similar approaches adjusted to their

local contexts. Access to both university and school/kindergarten communities complexifies and enriches the research process. A more diverse research population is key to producing impactful knowledge for a wide range of educational organisations.

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