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EPI and edpol roundtable

4th November 2021

Evidence Based Education Policy: Can we do better?

Attendees:

Professor Gary McCulloch, UCL
Dr Diana Beech, London Higher
Professor Simon Burgess, University of Bristol
Professor Rob Coe, EEF & EBE
Professor Nick Pearce, University of Bath
Dr Lesley Duff, NFER
Sam Freedman, Ark & Institute of Government
Jon Kay, EEF
Professor Ruth Lupton, Manchester University
Tim Oates, Cambridge Assessment
Professor Steve Higgins, Durham University
Rt Hon David Laws, EPI
Patrick Wall, edpol.net

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Evidenced-based Education Policy: Can we do better?

Supporting papers

Evidence support for policy making, edpol, October 2021

The Education Policy Knowledge Centre, edpol, October 2021

DISCLAIMER

The points below are drawn up from the roundtable discussion and are unattributed. They are not necessarily supported by all attendees.

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Summary

The roundtable discussed the edpol contention that there is an “evidence gap” for system level policymakers. The EEF’s success in providing clear guidance to practitioners was discussed and confirmed. In the light of this, all participants felt that policy makers should be better supported.

For the majority, the evidence gap must be addressed directly, for example, through evidence review and synthesis, comparative policy capacity and the extension of the “what works” model. Some suggested that priority should be given to long-term planning, regional devolution or delegation to advisory bodies. These approaches are not mutually exclusive.

The set-up of the EEF highlighted the importance of independence and long-term funding. Its format provided useful learning on presentational clarity, research mediation and evidence evaluation.

Opinions differed on how to increase evidence review and synthesis for both policy makers and the wider education eco-system. They ranged from setting up an independent institution, through collaboration between existing organisations, to funding more and better data.

As a precautionary note, it is critical to thoroughly understand the nature of the problem at hand, before investing in any potential solution.

Nature of the problem

Edpol summarised issues in English policy making, e.g. short-term decision-making cycles, sporadic use of evidence, lack of institutional memory and instability at the centre of decision making. These points were not contested. Further, there is an evidence gap at the macro/system policy making level, characterised by proportionately less research (than evidence for practitioners), lack of mediation and inconsistent understanding of policy approaches in other jurisdictions. This detracted from policy makers inclination and ability to look at the larger, more difficult issues. EEF was introduced as a good example of evidence-based decision making that supports practitioners, (but generally not system level policy makers).

Learning from the EEF

Background

The EEF influences practice in schools and increasingly the decisions that schools themselves make. The website enjoys high access, maintains nuance, achieves cut through and increasingly influences direct classroom recommendations.

The EEF have undertaken hundreds of RCTs (Randomised Control Trials). Only one in three or one in four trials has a positive result - so it's expensive to run many trials. The EEF has proven that rigorous impact evaluations are possible at a large-scale. Around half of schools have taken part in a RCTs.

Endowment has allowed the EEF to act independently and when necessary “to say no” (e.g. to the DfE). The EEF publishes all of its findings and there is no publication bias. The EEF has also formed the Schools Research Network.

Not all areas that require answers can be managed through RCTs - so the EEF have moved into rapid trials and other experimental design. The EEF has learnt the importance of consultation with stakeholders and evaluating questions that teachers value most. The EEF has also moved into active dissemination and actively engaging in policy discussions. Independence isn't that easy because there is still a need to engage with policy makers – the balance must be managed carefully.

Roundtable comments on EEF

All panellists felt that, within its terms of reference, the EEF had achieved a huge amount, not least in changing expectations around evidence informed policy and the use of RCTs. Marking out of ten, most people gave EEF an eight.

- EEF has gained more purchase than could have been hoped for in 2010. The EEF is responsible for a lot of positive changes in the use of evidence, synthesis and RCTs. It has helped to understand that implementation and scaling is more difficult.
- EEF has restored the link between evidence and policy making that was broken when research lost its reputation and was seen as unable to address the type of questions policymakers/practitioners provided. EEF evidence is trusted in policy and this has to some extent restored confidence in the value of educational research.
- The tool kit is particularly effective because you know what you're going to get in different areas. The synthesis and presentation is clear and positive.
- We have done relatively well in science, reading and maths compared with many PISA countries and while the causal link is not direct, the data suggests this is due to evidence-based intervention (a view later contested).

Some concerns

- The EEF has led to a narrowing on “what the problem is” and “what evidence counts”. It is also important to ask where else the financing would have gone, and whether in comparison the EEF offers value for money
- There is a danger that the majority of schools use the website to justify what they intended to do anyway. RCTs have been successful at looking at what has worked. It is

also more widely understood that it is much more difficult to know what will work at scale, i.e. through implementation.

- The EEF still needs to do more work on the cost of options in the tool kit, including the time it takes teachers to implement and manage a recommendation.
- Has the EEF helped children from disadvantaged backgrounds? Probably not was one view (and later suggested this is because many of the important issues lie outside of the realm of action (and policy) that EEF research).
- At some stage earlier we should have said these types of RCTs and areas aren't going to have the type of impact that we wish for. We need to look more fundamentally at what teachers are doing in the classroom every day.
- People cannot necessarily choose between all the options nor properly diagnose their own situation and needs.

Wider questions prompted by consideration of the EEF

- EEF shows how long research takes to accumulate – it has been 10 years to get good representation in research areas.
- There is a wider conversation about other problems that need improvement in our education system and addressed at scale that go beyond the EEF remit.
- Politicians ask questions that legitimately EEF can't answer - given the type of work they do and the time available.
- One of the strengths of EEF is it is based on RCTs and this is a reminder that we should be cautious about moving away from causal analysis when providing policy advice. This poses a challenge because there are many policy areas that cannot be supported by RCTs. Consequently, we need some other approach, in addition to EEF.
- Many of the examples that were given as policy failures are areas where you can't run RCTs. RCTs show that most initiatives fail.
- The EEF wouldn't have been too successful if it had to tender through the ESRC; its institutional endowment has worked; the ten-year funding has provided independence.
- Ministers are interested in evidence e.g. work done on early careers framework. Not clear where demarcation lies between practice and policy.
- Many politicians won't pay to evaluate their own homework, so we need an independent body. DfE say they want EEF evaluations to justify initiatives to the treasury. This is driving demand for research.

Addressing the “policy level evidence gap”

Proposal for a Knowledge Centre

Edpol introduced the concept of a knowledge centre, a comprehensive capacity to support policy makers and the education eco-system with international comparative analysis and research reviews.

The organization would present around options in each policy area (assessment, curriculum, accountability etc), simplify and synthesise, use a tool-kit type presentation layer and drill down to underlying mixed method research. The focus on macro-level policy levers would eventually enable the study of system level dynamics.

Roundtable comments

It was agreed that there is a significant issue with policy making. This might be addressed in several different ways. The majority wanted to see the evidence gap addressed directly and most commonly through a new institution or collaboration for an evidenced based initiative. Others felt the emphasis should be on long-term planning, regional devolution, arms-length delegation or greater investment in more data.

Support for comparative policy review. There is a problem to the extent that we are not able to see the bigger picture. It is necessary to learn from international experience and from the past. This will help us to better analyse policy risk. We can learn a lot from other countries and from the pros and cons of different policies.

- We need something that has a substantial overview. We need more of a proactive approach rather than the responsive one which could end up firefighting. We need to understand policy risks as well as policy options.
- A set of evidence reviews that are authoritative and that people could call upon would be wonderful. Possibly it is utopian. It will of course be contested, for example, economist versus sociologists. But the complexity should not deter us - policy solutions have to tackle this problem (see TO's fourteen policy control factors interacting in different ways in different localities).
- Many countries are doing interesting things. Knowledge of this informs the system, raises the general level of discourse and eventually the DfE have to have to make better decisions.

Informing the policy making eco-system. Beyond the politicians, there is a need to inform the ecosystem. It's not really a what work centre because that's very much limited to policymakers. Comparative education understanding is managed very badly in this country - people tend to point to examples like Finland and Singapore without in depth understanding of policy, practice and context in those countries.

Research focus. It is not possible to generate EEF type evidence at the system level – the approach has to be about synthesis.

- Some felt the “what work centre” type of research and policy evaluation would be too limiting. Such mistakes have been made in reviewing “area regeneration” i.e. taking a narrow view of specific policies when the questions are much more macro, for example, about economic transition, regional economic imbalance, overcentralisation – “these are bigger things”.
- Note, comparative research and review must take into account social, economic and political context. Finland made many attempts to reform their system and in all cases there must be careful consideration of time lags and causality.

Structures and frameworks. There is an opportunity to learn from the EEF - long-term funding, independence, building knowledge in an additive way, effective communication, availability knowledge transfer. It can't be a narrow organisation with a narrow set of questions. A new body should draw across a wide body of work that is already in the system - a range of disciplines knowledge and practice.

- Between EPPIE, EPI, this roundtable and Campbell collaboration, a lot of the bones to respond to the problem are provided. It is better to bolster what we already have rather than build a new institution.
- The House of Commons library has all sorts of information including fabulous policy briefs, including an updated review with what's going on. There needs to be more dialogue with the academic community. There used to be specialist conferences and roundtables with the policy makers and researchers including a lot more fluid dialogue. Now there are just bi-lateral conversations around a particular policy area. The House of Commons Select Committee could help with these types of initiatives.
- Any knowledge centre should not duplicate the existing policy work of the EEF, given its growing role in quality assuring policy work and conducting evaluations and pilots of policy initiatives such as ECF and EYFSP as part of its role as the What Works Centre for Education

Engaging the DfE. The DfE analytical community should be engaged, because they're having the same conversation in Sanctuary buildings about how best to support policy-making. It is a supply and demand problem. The analysts there can be good at system modelling and funding but there is potential for much greater synergy between the DfE and external research communities.

Other priorities

A number of other solutions were offered to help the policy making process. These initiatives are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

- **Arms-length bodies.** Losing the Central Advisory Council has meant that in depth reviews are not undertaken. Reports from Plowden, Newsom, and Crowther were referenced.
- **Long-term and regional.** We need to create a system with ministers, government and thinkers for the long-term. It is also important to have a regional dimension. Many policies play out differently in different areas.
- **Devolution.** There are problems of the political set up and political economy. They are not going to be solved by the establishment of an and independent research body. It would be better to devolve policy making decisions or give responsibility to professional organisations. [Admittedly there is a danger that Ministers will said reverse initiatives].
- Some of the more egregious policy changes have been in the areas of curriculum, assessment and qualifications. It would be reasonable for some of these things to be done elsewhere other than desks at Sanctuary buildings. Metro Mayors should have more responsibility for schooling and post 16.
- **Invest in data.** The NPD (National Pupil Database) is a good start, but has many gaps including matching pupil data with teacher data. This would provide data for all organisations including EPI and would act as a break on ministers coming out with more unsubstantiated initiatives. We shouldn't be relying on PISA and TIMMS Data when we could do better.
- Also pushing the data argument and modelling and dashboards and impact of different policies we can move beyond where policy hasn't worked in the past and think more about modelling, we can start to look forward which is important because everybody assumes that their new policy will work and we can help them to understand where it may not or who it might work best for.

Cautionary note

Ministers want one thing that they don't actually have control over i.e. what the child learns in the classroom. It is to do with the nature of centralisation – as a result they flounder around with proxies to achieve this. We need a great, long discussion about this and what is the nature of the problem. We need to look more carefully at the transformation of systems and the interrelated nature of problems that arise in education, including those in the local community.