



Editorial: The Role of Systematic Reviews in Exploring Possibilities for Evidence-based Practice

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It is little wonder that with the increased emphasis on evidence-based practice and policy in education, exploring 'what works and why' has become a focus of many university-based courses for teachers, practitioners and specialist educators. The call to know what works and why has been articulated in policy circles in a broader context of limited funding and needing "to ensure value for money in relation to measureable outcomes" (Clegg, 2005, p. 416). Systematic reviews were at the heart of the initial medical models of evidence based practice. As a method of reviewing the literature, systematic reviews make explicit and transparent the processes for gathering, evaluating and synthesising the findings of studies that are relevant to a particular topic or question. In relation to medicine, and we would argue education, it is almost impossible for individual clinicians to review the literature and keep up with the rate of change given the proliferation of published research. Hence systematic reviews, summarising best practice, are necessary for informed clinical decision making. Within education, a model of evidence practice has emerged which draws on, and *legitimises* multiple sources of evidence including systematic reviews of available research evidence, a teacher or educator's professional judgement and input from the team surrounding the learner, including family members and the learner themselves. Although there is a growing body of literature about evidence based practice in education we know very little about if and how it is impacting on teachers' work.

Within academic journals there has been a great deal of debate as to whether or not the idea of evidence based practice can be applied to educational practice because of the role that norms and values play in educational decision-making (e.g., Biesta, 2007). In medical and health models of evidence based practice, in the reviewing of the research evidence, studies which are designed as randomised controlled trials are accorded the greatest value and authority in terms of evidence. The relevance of this 'gold standard' for reviews of educational research has also been debated. In light of the complex nature of many educational questions the need to draw on a range of research designs that fit the purpose of the question that is being asked is emphasised (e.g., Hammersley, 2001). Thus it can be seen that there are a number of complex issues surrounding the notion of evidence based practice and that there are a number of challenges for researchers and practitioners in thinking through what evidence based practice might look like in education, what evidence might be drawn on and what evidence should be included in systematic reviews.

In 2012 we, the guest editors of this issue of the journal, taught a postgraduate course on Evidence Based Practice in Education. This course is available to students enrolled in both general education and educational psychology post-graduate qualifications at Victoria University of Wellington. Due to the pivotal role that a systematic review of the literature has in evidence based practice we decided that a major focus in the curriculum and assessment of the course would be the production of a systematic review of empirical research literature. Throughout the course we also considered what other kinds of evidence and influences are considered important and impinge upon educational decision-making. These included cultural and familial values, professional wisdom and judgement, the normative and political nature of education, professional ethical codes and research ethics, and the influence of both the specific context and the individual at the centre of the decision making process. These aspects of evidence based practice are beyond the scope of this issue where the focus is on one aspect of evidence based practice, systematic reviews. In our article in this issue we explain more fully the process with which students engaged in to produce their systematic reviews.

A critical aspect for us is starting with the right question. Too often in education we are asked to account for, or respond to a question that has minimal relevancy, meaningfulness or even interest to the learner or the teacher. We address this using Schlosser, Koul and Costello's (2007) work on "asking well-built questions" which emphasises the constructed nature of questions and Bevan-Brown's (2001) work with regards cultural issues in asking questions. Clearly not all questions are equally good questions so the process of how questions were formulated for the systematic reviews was important in the work of the postgraduate students in the course. The process of doing a systematic review needed to fit our 'relevancy' criteria, both for the students and anyone who had the opportunity to read their reviews. Hence, we approached the Ministry of Education and asked that their professional practice staff send in questions that could provide a focus for a systematic review that would be relevant to their practice, and also we hoped for teachers and educators more generally.

We selected 8 of the completed systematic reviews for inclusion in this special edition. All were peer reviewed by academic staff outside of the course. We strove to include articles that addressed a small number of issues and interventions across a range of ages and educational contexts. The first three articles by Fran Hoffman, Kirsty Tait and Kristy Lemmon review research about reducing anxiety for children and young people with autism, with one article focussing on classroom based strategies and the other two articles focussing on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). The next article by Nina McCullum-Clarke also reviews research related to CBT but with a focus on the use of computers to facilitate CBT with adolescents who have anxiety. Ryan Cullen looks more broadly at school based interventions for adolescents with anxiety and Kate Browne reviews research about classroom strategies for increasing positive behaviour from adolescents exhibiting challenging behaviour. Jane Gunn reviews research based interventions designed to meet the needs of children with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. The final article by Heather Smyth reviews what research indicates about the effectiveness of professional development for culturally responsive teaching.

These systematic reviews have been developed by educators working with children (with roles as diverse as teacher-aide, secondary school teacher, community-based worker, Ministry of Education adviser), who were completing their MEdPsych. Many of these people are now in training to be an educational psychologist. The work within this issue contributes to an evidence-based practice model, and for these writers it provides a foundation to begin discussions, to think about assessments and interventions, but always as a starting point. For each child and their teacher, new questions arise and our constant search for evidence, for solutions, for generating new possibilities of practice continues.

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