

# The interconnections between research and impact in social sciences education

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In this edition of JSSE, we are keen to explore the interconnections between research and impact in social sciences education. In our call for papers, we invited work that investigates whether and, if so, in what ways, research relates to change. This, we suggested to the very many academics and others who are involved in knowledge creation and so-called real-world change, requires consideration of philosophical and ontological perspectives as well as explorations of agency and power-dynamics in the academic field and in knowledge-political contexts, in which research results are communicated and used for governing social science education and its actors.

Building from the general position outlined in the above paragraph, there were four main frameworks or starting points or fundamental perspectives that we aimed to encourage. Firstly, in this issue of JSSE those philosophical and ontological perspectives about research are, of course, centrally relevant. Social scientific research is never neutral and its bias strongly affects the nature of the research objects as well as the ways research results are transformed in educational programs. In exploring the purpose of research in social sciences education we need, fundamentally, to ask 'what is it for'? And by raising this question we wish to gain a clearer understanding of what sort of impact may be possible. Secondly, these fundamental considerations about the purpose of research in relation to impact may also be explored in particular contexts. What sort of impact (if any) emerges from explorations in particular fields and using particular methods? Social sciences education encompasses a broad range of characterisations including diverse academic disciplines and integrated fields of study. We wish to explore debates about the nature and type of impact that may apply to theoretical and/or professional, large and/or small scale, qualitative and/or quantitative approaches, and ask throughout whether these labels constitute binary or other divides. This focus on particular contexts allows for consideration of impact in relation to specific forms of research activity. Is it possible, for example, that impact is more or less relevant to particular methods and methodologies including such approaches as randomised controlled trials, systematic reviewing and so on? Thirdly, we offered the opportunity to explore the sorts of ethical considerations that are relevant to the relationship between research and impact in social sciences education. We wondered

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whether consideration of impact raises particular moral or ethical issues and, if so, how might we address them? When that research is taking place, we invited colleagues to write about whether the process of the work itself has an impact. Is there, for example, a power dynamic between the researcher and the researched? Who has agency in research processes? Fourthly, we were interested in the question of what evidence would we need in order to suggest that impact has been achieved in social sciences education? Is there something that is distinct between dissemination of research findings and questions about impact? Is it possible to avoid researching in order to achieve something which is merely a pre-determined outcome?

We did not wish to impose unhelpful restrictions on what authors might wish to write. We made it clear that we would be pleased to consider work that emerges from a single context (e.g., from one local, regional or national location) as well as from analyses that go across geographical and other areas including comparative perspectives. Whether or not articles would come from European and other countries where language issues and issues of national or ethnic identities are closely connected and contested or from other perspectives, was left for contributors to decide. We did, however, in an attempt to be helpful to potential contributors suggest the following questions that could form the basis for an article:

- What are the philosophical foundations and contemporary theoretical debates about research in social sciences education that relate to impact?
- How is research organised, communicated and used by governments, governmental agencies, think tanks and other public bodies to inform, educate and control citizens?
- What does research mean –directly or indirectly – to young people (including their families and communities) and to professionals? Do they see it as a means by which they can understand, promote and practise social justice? Do they feel research has an impact and if so what is that?
- What are the ethical considerations that arise from a developing relationship between research and impact?
- What is done when a connection is made between research and teaching? What sort of teaching, learning and assessment activities occurs?
- Does research impact on policy?
- What evidence do we need to claim impact?
- What are the likely and desired futures for research that targets or achieves impact in social sciences education?

Impact is a multifaceted concept and the contributions in this issue reflect the pluralism of approaches in social science education. This is due to the fact that civic education still doesn't seem to be neither a "natural" school subject nor an undisputed field of public intervention in contemporary democracies.

The past two decades have been characterized by a quasi-disruptive restructuring of western education and research systems, which, in a governance-oriented perspective, has recalibrated the connection of the public research system with educational practice and control. The new modes of governance in education have contributed to a significant change in the contexts of educational research, including in didactics research and in civic education (Biesta, 2007). This development is linked to the perception that the quality of political decisions in a knowledge society can be improved if it is based on scientific evidence (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2011). In the educational policy domain, this means that in the context of the rapid development of relevant measurement technologies (but also due to the international regimes of educational competition, Sellar & Lingard, 2013) evidence-based comparisons favor control thinking grounded on the logic of scientific knowledge. Therefore, the impact of research about civic education is determined by the processes of legitimation and controversial claims on its uses and

effects in public education systems in established democracies (Westheimer & Kane, 2004). In this context, research on the effectiveness of civic education is often intertwined with an output-oriented view of public intervention and evidence-based policy-making. Thus, the resource allocation, the curricular formats and the professionalisation in the field of civic education are permanent issues of questioning and disputes between actors who talk about the intrinsic qualities of civic education in contemporary democracies and those who ask for “numbers” when it comes to issues of justification of and resource allocation for civic education in schools and in nonformal organisations.

The didactics of social, political and economic education certainly enjoy(ed) a privileged position. Although there are international comparative programs of performance quantification (see ICCS 2016, Schulz 2019), complex features make it difficult to quantify the effects of specific teaching-oriented measures in real-world classroom contexts. The social sciences thus benefit from the fact that they belong to the “low-structured” subjects (Stodolsky, 1991), for which overspecified teaching instructions are difficult to derive from empirical data. In fact, there is a lot of criticism of small-scale operationalisations of competence goals in civic education (see Sander, 2013; see for a comparative analysis of the ambiguity of civic education goals at the teacher level Reichert & Torney-Purta, 2019).

Also, since formal civic education is constantly associated with the essential vision of schools as institutions for democracy education, the demands placed on it are primarily embedded in the respective national political cultures in which political learning spaces are negotiated in conflicting political processes. These are not only evidenced through the logic of the measurable educational performance but also with regard to the different politically and culturally anchored notions of “good” democratic policy-making and politically effective and democratic individuals.

In this two-dimensional context (quantification/evidence-based educational governance and new relevance of civic education for civic cultures in critical democratic transitions), addressing the impact of research in civic education is ambiguous, because both visions come into play when the societal impact of civic education is at stake. We, therefore, think, that it is very useful to follow a pragmatic vision of “impact” in a democratic political culture and society, that is framing impact as a “productive interaction” such as “exchanges between researchers and stakeholders in which knowledge is produced and valued that is both scientifically robust and socially relevant.” (Spaapen & Van Drooge, 2011, 212). The current concepts of identification of relevant impacts are all focused on the transdisciplinary dimensions of collaborations in the civic educational context, that is any cooperation between researchers, teachers, social workers, bureaucrats and politicians, activists as well as individual students and citizens. An impact occurs when behavioural change is caused by the new knowledge produced in a transdisciplinary setting (ibid.). Only very few educational systems have elaborated sophisticated ways of organising and evaluating impact in a dynamic interaction-oriented perspective (Great Britain, Australia, Netherlands, see: Muhonen et al., 2020). This issue of the Journal of Social Science Education is the first contribution highlighting the “pathways to impact” in a domain-specific perspective.

We are delighted that our call for papers received such a positive response. We believe that the contributions included in this issue help in the clarification and development of understanding for vitally important areas of work within higher education. We received very good submissions that emerged from a wide range of perspectives. We offer below a summary of the work published in this issue of JSSE:

*Lee Jerome* describes and discusses the focus in the UK on impact. Making a difference beyond academic communities is now a key requirement of researchers. This, as Jerome clearly shows, is not at all straightforward. The linear relationship between research and practice that might be imagined by policymakers and those who evaluate the work of university-based staff is extremely complex. Jerome valuably brings his experience not only as a researcher but also as a teacher educator and as a citizen involved in a range of activities.

*Katherina Marej* discusses philosophically the nature of impact. She argues that three aspects are necessary to generate impact: transdisciplinarity (practice must be integrated into the research process); transparency (the paradigmatic approach with its methodological implications as well as the normative framing or objective must be explicit); and, self-reflexivity (researchers need to reflect not only on their methods, but also on themselves as individuals and their assumptions).

*Klas Andersson* explores the relationship between research and practice by investigating the extent to which teachers are persuaded by research data to change their practice. Teachers were randomly assigned to teach using a conventional approach in the classroom or to one that was aligned with deliberative democracy. The findings are striking. The teachers were not interested in changing their teaching practices in accordance with the results about student learning that emerged from the study. They did want to develop the materials that were used in the project but they preferred to do so on the basis of their own ideas and beliefs about good practice.

*Marta Żerkowska-Balas* and *Michał Wenzel* from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warszawa, Poland explore a particular initiative, investigating not only the impact of the program on young people's civic education but also the appropriateness of the means used to evaluate the attempt to affect education. The focus of the work is the project 'Youth Vote +' for young people in Poland. There is an investigation into 3 key areas: civic (knowledge and skills related to the functioning of democracy), interpersonal (the ability to cooperate and organize), as well as cognitive (selection and understanding of information, ability to argue). Certain challenges are highlighted especially regarding passivity, apathy, lack of commitment, lack of faith in the sense of the democratic process. There are clearly some challenges about the impact that might be expected when teaching about the political system and as such this article usefully addresses issues about what works and how we know.

*Alex Manning*, *Emma Towers* and *Richard Brock* discuss what happens when attempts are made to improve well being in schools. On the basis of data gathered and analysed from London schools the authors suggest that a positive and constructive attempt to improve people's lives actually led to unintended negative effects. If an initiative that is designed to improve well being actually leads to increased workload and stress then something is going wrong. The point at which researchers are able to identify what is actually happening as a result of an initiative is obviously crucial. And there is the issue of whether researchers should be able to gain official positive recognition for pointing out the weaknesses of positively motivated official initiatives (so, the researchers prevent action being taken) is a challenging idea.

*Ian Davies*, *Mark Evans*, *Márta Fülöp*, *Dina Kiwan*, *Andrew Peterson* and *Jasmine Sim* discuss overarching issues about the relationship between research and impact and then focus on one recently completed research and development project. In general terms, the authors are positive about the potential for researchers to make valuable contributions not only to knowledge creation but also to individuals and communities beyond the university. They draw attention to their successful project *Youth activism, engagement and the development of new civic learning spaces* but suggest that as currently defined by officials in the UK at least, this project would probably not be regarded as having made significant impact. They suggest that it would be preferable to consider impact in relation to general arguments about strengthening societal culture by generating greater respect for knowledge and clarifying its relationship with society, and by knowledge based arguments in that a specific evaluation of impact would allow us to know more about the nature of the research-practice interface.

We also include a review of the book published in 2019 and written by Edwards, *Global Education Policy, impact evaluations, and alternatives: the political economy of knowledge production*.

We have learned a great deal from our colleagues in the course of editing this edition of JSSE. We were not surprised by the very positive approach to impact. Of course, we knew already that people who are devoting their professional lives to knowledge creation and education are

enthusiastic (perhaps obsessed) by the need to make the world a better place. And yet, the issues that were raised in a carefully nuanced academic manner with a clear elaboration of professional and wider social and political considerations were for us fascinating and extremely valuable. Our knowledge and understandings were enhanced. We learned more about the fundamental issues about the extent to which researchers can identify the truth and whether others accept it. Fundamentally, we are concerned that a rather simplistic and unhelpful Benthamite approach to knowledge is being promoted within higher education and society more generally. Bentham's philosophical work has become enshrined in popular imagination with the near-slogan of 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'. His close association with a specific university – University College London – makes very clear the relevance of his philosophical position that highlights particular ideas and issues in higher education and research. It is possible that such a utilitarian position is insufficiently attached to a principled approach to knowledge creation. Satisfying the wants of the majority (or those who are seen to speak for them) might not always lead to identifying the truth or making things genuinely better. Indeed, if researchers are judged by the attention they generate then this may serve only to confirm the status of both those who are already privileged and those who seek to confirm established norms. Whether or not we apply scientific-sounding metrics to such findings may be beside the point.

Locked into this discussion are highly complex ideas and issues about the nature of what it is that researchers do. As soon as we accept that knowledge is socially constructed then we enter a situation in which the truth may be contested from several different perspectives. Simplistic assertions of supposedly objective truth may be as unhelpful as invitations to enter a postmodern maze where reality itself is questioned. In a recent very stimulating and highly engaging book Ahmed (2019) who has recently left her university post in the face of the way her work was restricted, suggests we are being led into a sort of word game in which we need to explore what is meant by use, getting used to and being used. Do researchers and the people they aim to work with enjoy autonomy and if so in what contexts, for what purposes and within what limits?

These matters extend the debate away from the fundamental philosophical position and into characterizations of how decisions are made about public matters and more specifically about professionalism. In the broad political context, politicians are, rightly, keen to promote the good life and the good society and the electorate and all members of society have a right and responsibility to know what is being proposed and what impact is or will be achieved. Issues and ideas about evidence have in the European context gained a particularly high profile during discussions about the UK's departure from the European Union (or, Brexit). Evidence from experts was not welcomed by certain politicians (Mance 2016). In educational contexts, it was noticeable that the wealth of evidence from research and the official inspection agency (Ofsted) about the positive impact of citizenship education was not enough to resist its transformation to something that was not research-informed and involved the official promotion of character education (see Davies and Chong, 2016). There is in this context an acute dilemma for researchers and professionals in social sciences education. There is of course the expectation and requirement that knowledge must be generated truthfully. But at times the ways in which evidence is used by public figures with such a strong degree of distortion and manipulation are troubling. Academics are implicitly and explicitly encouraged in the face of distortion to act not just as intellectuals. Education is always, obviously, political. But there must surely be a point at which the overlap between the role of an academic and that of an activist or campaign manager (e.g., Plouffe 2009) becomes problematic.

The more precisely focused or limited discussions about impact are relevant to debates about the nature of the professions. To what extent are those professions the guardians of standards and by extension what influences are they – and should they be – subject to? To state possible extremes may help clarify the nature of discussions about professionals – are they an exclusive elite generating capital of various forms for themselves, or are they the means by which progress

may be achieved? In this polarized debate it is then a small step to those arguments about the agency of the individual and so this connects back to the philosophical debates about the nature of impact and in relation to social and political debates about the type of citizenship we prefer. Are we committed to the civic republican tradition in which duties in public contexts are primary; or do we prefer the liberal tradition in which the rights of individuals in private contexts are to be prioritised?

The nature of the distinction between dissemination and impact is crucial. The former may simply be passing information to others; the latter is being able to judge whether anything significant has happened as a result of the research that has been undertaken. This may mean that communication to individuals (with the standard research project initiative of web pages, twitter accounts and so on) is devalued and so an interpretation exists that the recipients of that message are less able than others to decide for themselves. Instead, those people need to be persuaded and prompted to specific initiatives which are then evaluated. The role of the researcher has gone far beyond knowledge creation. This may be a very good thing. We have certainly experienced some dismay when we have witnessed on many occasions politicians embracing research that reflects their pre-established positions and rejecting research that seeks to develop something that is not conservative. But, potentially, accepting a wider and more political role for researchers is not something which is unproblematic.

Ultimately, the impact we are looking for in producing this issue of JSSE is for readers to consider the ideas offered by our authors and to reflect on whether or not their understandings have been enhanced and whether they want to do anything about it. At the risk of not achieving 'impact', we want people to think and act on the basis of knowledge for what they have decided will help achieve an inclusive, pluralistic society.

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