## IMPROVING EDUCATION THROUGH RESEARCH

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**Abstract**
This paper focuses on the role of research in the improvement of educational practice. I use the 10 Principles for Effective Pedagogy, which were formulated on the basis of research conducted in the UK's Teacher and Learning Research Programme as an example to highlight some common problems in the discussion about research and educational improvement. In the paper I explore three issues. The first concerns the idea that the improvement of education is identical to increasing the effectiveness of educational action. Here I suggest that in education the question is never whether something is effective or not, but what something is supposed to be effective for, which is the question of educational purpose. The second issue concerns the prevalence of quasi-causal thinking about educational practice and its improvement. Here I suggest that complexity theory and the idea of complexity reduction provides a much more meaningful educational ontology that makes it possible to think very differently about the drivers for educational change and improvement. Third, I make a distinction between two ways in which research knowledge can be meaningful and useful for educational practice – a technical way where research is supposed to generate knowledge about how to do things and a cultural way which has to do with generating different ways to make sense of education. Seeing that research can engage with educational practice in these two different registers, opens up a different way to think about what research might aim to achieve in order to contribute to educational improvement.

**Introduction**
Ever since the establishment of the first professorship in education at the University of Halle in Germany in 1779, educators and educationalists have raised questions about the potential contribution of research to the improvement of educational practice. Ernst Christian Trapp, the first holder of this chair, not only devoted his inaugural lecture to what has become known as the theory-practice problem in education

In this paper I wish to raise a number of questions about the idea of educational improvement and about the role research can and should play in it. While a detailed discussion of TLRP's 10 principles lies beyond the scope of this paper, I will use the principles to illustrate what I see as some of the common problems in discussions about educational research and educational improvement. The principles thus function as an exemplary 'case' within this paper. I will start with a brief presentation of the principles and will then focus on three issues. The first has to do with the idea that educational improvement entails increasing the effectiveness of educational processes and practices. Here I will argue that any discussion about effectiveness always needs to be connected to wider considerations about the aims and purposes of education.

**The practical roles of research**
The foregoing observations also have important implications for what we expect from research. In the discussion about educational improvement in terms of effectiveness and 'what works', one could say that the main if not only expectation there is about research is that it generates technical knowledge, that is, knowledge about possible relationships

between variables – and in education the focus is perhaps first and foremost on the relationship between those variables that can be controlled by the teacher, which include pedagogy curriculum and assessment. Technical knowledge, however, tends to rely on quasi-causal assumptions about the dynamics of education. While, as I have suggested, open, semiotic, recursive systems such as education can be pushed towards greater predictability by reducing the complexity of its operation, thinking of them in quasi-causal terms assumes a 'black box' approach that does not generate an understanding of the actual dynamics at work.

One could see this as an argument for the need for a different kind of technical knowledge and, hence, a different kind of research, one that actually probes deeper into the dynamics of educational systems. While in one sense this is indeed what follows from the line I have been pursuing in this paper, to suggest that this is still a kind of technical knowledge misses an important point about the social ontology of education It does, after all, make all the difference whether one sees a classroom in terms of behavioural objectives, learning difficulties, inclusion, legitimate peripheral participation, critical race theory or teaching as a gift – to name but a few different ways in which educational processes and practices can be made meaningful. The kind of knowledge that research can offer in relation to this – and I do take 'research' in the broad sense of including empirical and theoretical scholarship – can, according to be called cultural knowledge, as it is knowledge that provides us with different

## Conclusions

In this paper I have tried to raise a number of critical questions about educational improvement and the role research can play in it. I have used TLRP's ten principles for effective pedagogy as a 'case' for exploring these questions in more detail. I have argued that educational improvement cannot be understood as just an increase in the effectiveness of the educational operation, but always needs to engage with the question of what education should be effective for, that is, with the question of educational purpose, as it is only in relation to this that a distinction between educational change and educational improvement can be made. I have suggested that the multidimensional nature of educational purpose puts a further limit on effectiveness thinking, in that what might be an effective approach or strategy with regard to one (domain of) purpose may not be effective in relation to another. This is why educational judgement is always required and research can never be translated into abstract and general principles for effective pedagogy. In addition, I have shown that much talk about educational improvement relies on a quasi-causal concept of education, which basically refrains from theorising the dynamics of education, but rather relies on a black box account that looks for correlations between 'inputs' and 'outcomes'.

## References

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