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Barriers and conditions for teachers' utilisation of academic knowledge



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ABSTRACT

Teachers' expertise is mostly based on insights acquired in their own practice, and not on academic knowledge. Although many attempts have been made to explain this, it is not clear which conditions foster and which barriers hinder teachers' use of academic knowledge. Therefore, this review study explores barriers and conditions for teachers' academic knowledge utilisation in the literature since 2001. We have developed a comprehensive model to categorise barriers and conditions at four levels: the research knowledge level, the individual teacher level, the school-organisational level, and the communication level. Our review study reveals that structural collaboration, such as school-university partnerships and innovative communication networks, is increasingly proposed as a strategy to improve teachers' utilisation of academic knowledge.

1. Introduction

Teachers in today's society have to deal with a networked world and with new types of cooperation and collaboration, as well as with new knowledge and new ways of evaluating knowledge. They also need to keep these insights up to date (van Weert, 2006). As Leat and Lin (2003) conclude, due to the rapidly changing society, teachers need to sustain their insights and skills through professional learning and development.

Yet the expertise of teachers is mostly based on insights they have acquired in their own practice, whereas knowledge from educational research hardly plays a role (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Weimer, 2008). Although teachers' practical knowledge and expertise are valuable for everyday classroom practice, new and innovative teaching practices can benefit from educational research. Despite general agreement on the potential of knowledge from educational research to improve educational practices, it is often not used by teachers (e.g. Cain, 2016). This gap between research and practice is commonly acknowledged; researchers claim there is a knowledge base that teachers can use, but the latter experience barriers to access it. Moreover, they find that researchers examine problems that are less relevant for their practice (Lysenko, Abrami, Dagenais, & Janosz, 2014).

Therefore, the knowledge teachers commonly use is of a very different kind from the knowledge that is usually produced by educational researchers in the academic community. Referring to teacher knowledge, Wieser (2016) distinguishes two modes of teacher knowledge, which should be integrated in order to develop expertise: practical knowledge and personal knowledge. Practical knowledge provides teachers with orientations for teaching (Wieser, 2016), and can be characterised as linked with practice, concrete, specific, integrated and contextually rich (Hiebert et al., 2002). Personal knowledge provides teachers with orientations for

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reflection on teaching, and is used for preparing teaching, to justify directions for action, and to correct perspectives (Wieser, 2016). However, for teacher knowledge to become professional knowledge, it is generally agreed that professional knowledge draws on both teachers' practical and personal knowledge, as well as knowledge from research (Lillejord & Børte, 2016).

Contrary to teacher knowledge, academic research knowledge is seen as objective, codified by research, expressed in formalised ways, generalised, impersonal, and generated in order to develop theory (Cain, 2016; Wieser, 2016). Whereas teachers develop expertise by integrating practical and personal knowledge in daily practice (Wieser, 2016), characterised as non-academic (Hemsley-Brown & Sharp, 2003), research knowledge is mostly generated in the academic community and shared with academics in academic journals. In this paper the term academic knowledge is used to refer to this kind of research-generated knowledge.

Although many explanations have been proposed for the research-practice gap or academic-teacher divide, it is not clear which conditions foster and which barriers hinder teachers' use of academic knowledge. Therefore, teachers' lack of utilisation of academic or research-based knowledge continues to be a challenge (Hiebert et al., 2002; Ion & Iucu, 2014).

1.1. Teachers' academic knowledge utilisation

This literature review concerns teachers' academic knowledge utilisation (AKU). The term 'academic knowledge utilisation' refers to teachers' use of research-generated or academic knowledge to ground their teaching practice on research evidence and insights, and therefore does not include practical or personal knowledge from either teachers themselves or their colleagues, or practitioner research conducted by teacher-researchers. AKU is conceptualised as the process of finding, selecting and interpreting academic knowledge, translating knowledge into implications for teaching practice, and applying these implications to their own teaching practice. The last step in this process is sharing this knowledge and experiences by using it with others.

Literature distinguishes between three types of AKU: 1) instrumental, 2) conceptual and 3) strategic research use (e.g. Ion & Iucu, 2014). Instrumental research use implies a concrete application of research, which has often been translated into a material or usable form and is used to direct specific decisions and/or interventions. Conceptual research use is based on research that may change thinking, but not necessarily change particular actions. Strategic research use involves the use of research as a persuasive or political tool to legitimise a position or practice. Because of the aim of this study (improving practice) and of the target group (teachers), it focuses on the instrumental use of academic knowledge.

In 2003, Hemsley-Brown and Sharp (2003) delivered a major contribution to the debate on bridging the gap between research and practice. In their review study on the use of research-based knowledge by teachers, they highlight important factors at different levels for increasing teachers' AKU: accessibility of academic knowledge and a change towards a more practice-based research design, teachers' individual skills and a positive attitude towards academic knowledge, organisational factors (e.g. school leaders) in stimulating and facilitating teachers' AKU, and more and closer communication between teachers and researchers. Since their review many studies have been published on the topic of teachers' AKU. In line with the conclusions of Hemsley-Brown and Sharp (2003) and studies in the following thirteen years, many initiatives have sought to increase teachers' AKU. Despite those initiatives, the gap still exists between research and practice in education.

Therefore, this literature review explores *barriers* and *conditions* for teachers' AKU in secondary education. Based on the results, interventions and strategies will be explored for increasing academic knowledge utilisation by teachers. Two research questions guided our study: 1) Which barriers for teachers' academic knowledge utilisation are described in the literature? and 2) Which conditions are identified that enhance teachers' academic knowledge utilisation?

2. Method

This study was performed in three steps. First, key terms were used to search for relevant articles. Second, relevant articles were selected based on a list of inclusion criteria. Third, the resulting set of articles was analysed with a focus on identifying barriers and conditions for AKU.

2.1. Search

Two databases were used for our search, ERIC and Google scholar. The search was limited to English language peer-reviewed publications published between 2001 and 2016. This starting date was chosen because a similar literature review by Hemsley-Brown and Sharp (2003) on the use of research to improve the practice of teachers included publications until 2001. Their findings are included in this paper, and are summarised at the beginning of each category of barriers and conditions. The search terms used were: *knowledge utilisation* OR *research utilisation*, *knowledge use* OR *research use*, *secondary education* OR *high school* AND *teacher**. The search resulted in 447 papers.

2.2. Selection

The abstracts of these 447 papers were scanned, and relevant papers were selected using as inclusion criteria:

- the paper is published in a peer-reviewed academic journal
- the paper concerns the use of knowledge generated by researchers from the academic community;
- the paper relates to knowledge utilisation by teachers;

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