

CLOSE-TO-PRACTICE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

A BERA STATEMENT

High quality close-to-practice research requires the robust use of research design, theory and methods to address clearly defined research questions, through an iterative process of research and application. The research process will be well documented and the conclusions that are drawn will be appropriate to the strengths and weaknesses of the design, theory and methods used. Such research will draw upon practitioners' and researchers' reflections on both practice and context.

This statement is intended as a shared reference-point for high quality research conducted within diverse research traditions that shares the central aim of making a contribution to educational practice.

What is close-to-practice educational research?

Education is an applied discipline, and there are several well-established traditions of educational research focussing on issues of practice. These traditions include (but are not restricted to) action research, practitioner research, design-based research, randomised controlled trials and lesson study. Some of these have more established and explicit quality criteria, while in others there is less consensus over methods and how their quality can be judged.

BERA is adopting the term 'close-to-practice (CtP) research' as a shorthand for any research that focusses on educational practices in order to better understand or improve them. (This is not to suggest that CtP is a new research tradition or paradigm.) Drawing upon Cooke's (2005) definition from medical research, BERA defines CtP research as follows.

Close-to-practice research focusses on issues defined by practitioners as relevant to their practice, and involves collaboration between people whose main expertise is research, practice, or both.

In some cases the researcher may also be a practitioner; in other cases different individuals will occupy the role(s) of researcher and practitioner. A broad understanding of 'practice' is assumed: the practice of teachers and other educators will be a significant focus, though the practice of other actors in the education ecosystem (including examiners, education policymakers, curriculum developers and so on) may also be included.

Why is BERA issuing a statement on close-to-practice educational research?

BERA has identified CtP research as an area of interest to its members for several reasons. In his 2005 BERA presidential address, Geoff Whitty drew a distinction between 'education research' (which is 'about education', and has the purpose of studying education as a social phenomenon) and 'educational research' (which is 'for education', with the purpose of improving some aspect of educational practice) (Whitty, 2006). BERA is now revisiting this theme in the guise of CtP research. Many BERA members, and their employing organisations, value and are committed to research that aims to understand and improve educational practice in the contexts in which they work. These contexts may include the early years, schools, further education, higher education, teacher education, and continuing professional development.

It is true that a great deal of research has elements that are both *about* and *for* education, to use Whitty's terms, and there are a variety of well-established traditions of research within the field that aim to strengthen professional knowledge through studies set in practice contexts. However, there is sometimes a perception that the very highest-quality research (as judged through peer-review for the most competitive research journals, or by the Research Excellence Framework [REF]) tends to be *about* education rather than *for* education. However, we know from the education sub-panel's feedback from the 2014 REF that the best classroom enquiry was rated 4* (world-leading), and that many of the most competitive peer-reviewed journals carry research about practice. The best research *for* education can be truly excellent.

BERA Council decided to commission a small-scale research project to illuminate dimensions of quality in CtP research (Wyse et al 2018). This statement draws upon that research, and is intended to guide the work of BERA members and the educational research community more widely in conducting, commissioning and advising on CtP research.

The quality of CtP educational research

CtP research is, by its very nature, often small in scale and focussed on a very specific location. For example, some CtP studies are designed to fix a problem in a specific site to the satisfaction of an individual practitioner. BERA endorses this kind of evidence-informed approach to tackling issues of practice.

In such cases, the purpose of a small-scale investigation is not to produce insights about practice *in general* that would stand the test of well-informed public scrutiny – rather, it is to produce answers that are useful and acceptable *to the practitioners themselves*.

In other cases, the investigation is intended to generate reliable public knowledge about practice (for instance, whether and how to use synthetic phonics in the teaching of reading). Such research may indeed draw upon, and contribute to, reliable public knowledge about both method and theory. However, defining which findings can be generalisable beyond the site of investigation and which cannot may prove challenging. To generate reliable public knowledge that can contribute to a broader conversation in the field, it will usually be necessary to pursue more than one iteration of investigation and application. To enable refinement of practice drawing upon a group of studies and better understanding of replicability, the research design needs to be well-documented.

In order to underpin knowledge claims, high-quality CtP research will draw upon theoretical frameworks that address the ways in which insights from one site can be extended to others. Studies should be constructed with sound methodological underpinnings that give confidence in the reliability and validity of findings. Claims about implications beyond the site where the research was conducted should draw upon available empirical, theoretical and methodological insights in the field. Furthermore, as the success of interventions based on research depend upon enactment by practitioners (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), it is recommended that practitioner voices are involved at all stages of the research process.

References

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- Pawson, R. & Tilley, N. (1997). *Realistic evaluation*. London: SAGE.
- Whitty, G. (2006). Education(al) research and education policy making: is conflict inevitable? *British Educational Research Journal*, 32(2): 159–176
- Wyse, D., Brown, C., Oliver, S. & Poblete, X. (2018) *The BERA Close-to-Practice Research Project: Research Report*, London: BERA. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/bera-statement-on-close-to-practice-research>

About this statement

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) is committed to advancing the quality of education research. In the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), the proportion of research outputs in education judged as 'world-leading' (4*) broadly matched those of other 'units of assessment' (UOAs: subjects or fields as defined within the REF) within the social sciences. However, there was a significantly larger proportion of lower-graded outputs (that is, 2*, 1* and 'unclassified') in education than in other social science UOAs. The funding formula does not attribute quality-related funding to work rated as less than 3*, although the value of such outputs is acknowledged in quality descriptors. Furthermore, of all UOAs, education submitted the lowest proportion of higher education institution staff to the REF (as indicated by Higher Education Statistics Agency returns).

In feedback on the 2014 REF exercise, the education sub-panel drew attention to areas of relative strength and weakness. On classroom enquiry, for example, the panel observed the following.

'There were many examples of practice-focused research, the best of which drew on social scientific theory, method or both. Some of these were world-leading, particularly those featuring co-production or close collaboration between learners, teachers and researchers. Weaker outputs were often descriptive and were judged to be of modest originality, significance and rigour. Such research is a very important form of professional activity in the development of self-improving education systems but is, by its very nature, contextually variable.'

In its spring 2015 issue, BERA's members' magazine *Research Intelligence* carried articles on the 2014 REF, which included comments about the quality of close-to-practice research.

In response to this feedback, and to ongoing debates about the nature of quality in educational research, BERA Council set up a working group to provide guidance to BERA members on dimensions of quality in classroom enquiry and other areas of close-to-practice research, in advance of the next REF in 2021. A small-scale research project was commissioned, and as a result the following statement has been adopted by the Association to provide guidance on quality in close-to-practice educational research. A full report from that research project has been published in both summary and full-length form.

Full report

Wyse, D., Brown, C., Oliver, S. & Poblete, X. (2018). *The BERA Close-to-Practice Research Project: Research Report*. London: British Educational Research Association. Retrieved from: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/bera-statement-on-close-to-practice-research>

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