Creating New Partnerships for Research in Developing Countries

Iffat Farah

Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development

Karachi, Pakistan

A PhD student at a US university wanting to do research fieldwork in her own country in the south, I arrived in a remote village in Pakistan to study literacy practices in the community. I was comfortable in the knowledge that I would have fewer problems in associating with people since I was not a "foreigner". However, this assumption was soon challenged. As I was sitting in the courtyard of my host's house my first morning in the village, I heard people talking in the street just outside. "Who is this '*gori*' (white woman) who came yesterday?" "What is she going to measure and assess?" "What will we get out of this". I heard my hosts' voice trying to explain as best as he could about why I was there. These questions persisted throughout the eight months I stayed in the village, as people tried to make sense of my identity, the nature and purpose of my activities and its relevance to their own lives and experiences. I finished my data collection in the village, went away to write and got rewards for doing so. But questions about the nature, purpose and value of research in our context (questions that the villagers were asking) have continued to nag me.

The experience of researchers from the North working in the South has raised similar issues. Let me refer to one such experience recalled by Reimers and McGin (1997). Although this experience is in the context of national policy and large scale educational reform, I think it raises questions similar to the one I was confronted with in village. During the 1990's, under a project funded by USAID, researchers from Harvard University conducted a series of research studies on school education in Pakistan with the intent of using the findings to make policy recommendations. Reimers and McGinn (1997) recall their experience as follows:

"... We made our first public report of findings and analysis based on the most comprehensive educational research ever done in that country. We were confident of our data and spent three days preparing ... We met with the top education administrators for all four provinces of Pakistan – a blue ribbon group. They gave us the floor the first day, and we presented our findings complete with transparencies and handouts. The next day they made a presentation in response to what we they had heard .Almost all their comments were

negative, denying the validity and usefulness of our reports. On the third day they drew up recommendations for action, many of which directly contradicted what we had recommended." (p.xiv)

The researchers drew critical lessons from this experience about their role, "stunned and embarrassed by this experience, we have since focused our careers on learning how to use our skills in ways that can be appreciated by the audience we seek to serve".

In both examples, the research subjects and the research audience were questioned the rights of the researcher and felt threatened by the activity and its results. The villagers thought that I would measure something and report to the government, the bureaucrats in saw that research findings as pointing at their inefficiency in the work of their department and were threatened. Both the villagers and the Educational managers do not appreciate the research and were uncertain about the purpose of the research and the role and identity of the researchers.

I will try to address the questions being raised above about (a) the research agenda: What is being researched? Who determines this agenda, (b) the researchers' identity and relationship with the potential beneficiaries or users of research: Who does the research? and (c) the value, purpose and use of research: What difference will this research make? How will it be used?

Similar questions about the value of educational research are being asked generally in the North, however, I will discuss these with reference to my experiences and understanding of engaging in research in Pakistan. Perhaps, in the plenary after this presentation, we could hear some of your experiences to see how generalizable my observations may be.

What is researched?

A look at a collection of abstracts[1] of educational research in Pakistan over more than twenty years shows that (1) most research is on topics related to the management of education (2) except for one instance where northern consultants (example above) conducted rigorous and sustained work, the research agenda is fragmented and there is little attempt to generate

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[1] Documentation of Education Research in Pakistan. (1995) *Academy of Educational Planning and Management (AEPAM), Ministry of Education, Islamabad, Pakistan*

substantial knowledge to understand and improve any particular issue or problem (3) "research" is defined extremely broadly – any description or review of a situation is listed as research.

Unlike most northern countries where what gets researched is largely determined by the academics (although I realize that this situation is changing rapidly with difficult funding situation and the pressure on researchers to demonstrate impact, in countries, such as Pakistan, which are heavily dependent on external loans and aid, educational policies and educational research are still primarily determined by international development agencies and donors. Even with agencies such as NORAD which encourages local initiatives and priorities, a lack of capacity and a culture where generation and use of research knowledge is not part of the discourse of decision making at any level, leaves the agenda with those who bring the funds. This is not entirely a bad thing because some useful basic and evaluation research has been funded.

In a recent attempt to try out ways of identifying an internal/ locally determined research agenda we conducted a series of five national dialogues on key issues in education. We invited a large number of people from the government, private sector, NGOs, teachers and head teachers. We found it a useful exercise which we intend to repeat at other the level of districts. It was clear from the discussion in the five dialogues that we need to find more about what works in our contexts and what could improve the life chances of learners in schools. The key recommendation was to understand what works and what leads to improvement in educational access and quality, and how improvement can be scaled up. It was clear that the answer to what works cannot be taken directly from what has worked elsewhere, although we may learn from it. For example, we enthusiastically, introduced cooperative learning and inquiry in our teacher education programs expecting this to lead to improved learning opportunities for children in our classrooms. However, since this did not readily happen, we are now trying to understand the extent to which the strategy is actually applicable in large classrooms (the norm in our context), and the challenges these strategies pose for children who get contradictory messages about "what is credible knowledge" and "how it is acquired" from family and society in general. Researching these issues will probably help us modify the way we promote cooperative learning, and adapt the strategy for use in contexts which are substantially different from the ones where it was initially developed. Similar issues of contextual significance and relevance need to be explored for

many innovations being introduced to improve education in developing countries. The research agenda in the developing countries must be influenced by major problems being faced by these countries. For example in Pakistan, poverty has been steadily increasing and has become one of the main issues confronting us. In its plans for poverty reduction, the government emphasizes a close relationship between poverty and education. However, I think we also need to explore the exact nature of this relationship. People often equate poverty with economic condition and consequently see education as a means of economic betterment. When education does not necessarily lead to economic rewards, they become disillusioned and stop sending their children to school.

I could suggest many areas for research and many topics but I think that in developing countries with limited resources for education in general and research in particular, the research agenda must be negotiated between the researchers, the potential beneficiaries or users, and those who fund research. It may be helpful is to determine some principles which would help define a research agenda. One principle could be to take on research which could make a difference. Another could be to promote sustained work on a topic rather than fragmented research which fails to contribute to building knowledge or add value to the programs.

Who does the research?
Unfortunately little educational research gets done in universities in Pakistan because of a lack of capacity and also because of the perception of university Education Departments about their role, often seen to be teaching only. As I said earlier most research is sponsored by development agencies and donors sometimes through the government or semi independent government institutions and often conducted by individual consultants and consulting agencies and sometimes by NGOs and some think-tanks. Since most of the work of the consultants is for some immediate, often externally determined purpose, there is little incentive to plan for wide dissemination and use of research. Also dissemination comes at the very end of the research suggesting that the researchers are experts critiquing others or assessing a situation; thus unwittingly leading to resentment among those who live in it.

If educational research is to be meaningful in the South we must extend the idea of research partnership beyond professional partnerships between researchers from the North and South to include the users of research in the South. It is essential to reduce the distance between

researchers and potential users of research. One approach is to conduct participatory research in more than one ways. For example, we are in the process of developing proposals to conduct small scale studies at the district level (about teachers and teacher education) where interactions with stakeholders (decision makers, district managers, teachers and NGOs and ordinary people) are built into the process of research –so that they participate in selection of the research agenda and findings are shared and reviewed with them as we draw conclusions and make recommendations. The technical work must be done by the researchers since the other stakeholders may neither have the time nor the capacity to engage in research.

Research partnerships between North and South researchers are also fraught with complexities because of the differences in values, interests and perceptions of each other's capacity, expertise and authority. My own experience of such partnership was a "fragile union" which took time to develop ..." One objective of the donor funded project for which the partnership was established was to help build capacity in a context where this is thought to be lacking. We found that productive partnership required developing a "professional frame" which developed shared responsibility mutual accountability and collegiality. As we concluded in an article about our experience, "When the intricacies of status, norm, role, equity, and authority take centre stage in an international setting which brings together persons from developed and developing contests, who is developed and who is underdeveloped becomes glaringly problematic". (Penny, et.al, 2000, p.454).

How is research used?

First we must acknowledge that people anywhere do not readily make decisions or change their practices, on the basis of research findings, even when they have access to these findings. Many other factors influence their There are many factors that influence their decisions and practices. The question we need to address is what can we do so as to make research knowledge become at least one of the factors.

In Pakistan, generally there is limited capacity to use research. Several factors contribute to this situation. These include general perceptions about what is valuable knowledge (wisdom and experience rather than research evidence), poor dissemination of the research findings, limited access or no access to research findings by people, lack of advocacy based on research findings, language in which research findings are communicated, and the channels of communication. More effort (by researchers and those who fund research) to disseminate

findings, not only to a limited audience but widely to those who may be potential beneficiaries of actions informed by the research, can increase the possibility of research making a difference.

What can a Network such as NETREED do?

- I have some difficulty in the north South distinction. I would rather like to think of a community of researchers interested in doing work to make a difference to the educational context of developing or southern countries. Extending the NETREED and other such networks to include researchers and users of research from the south and facilitating linkages, encouraging the formation of smaller regional networks and helping develop links between smaller regional networks may help create such a community.

- Contribute to the development of national and regional research agenda; identifying what is critical and advocating the input of users in the development of this agenda as well as in particular research proposals. Many of the issues such as large classes, language diversity and medium of instruction, poverty and education are common to many African and Asian countries. Cross case analysis of the findings could help advocacy for action on these issues.

- Conduct and support the review of research findings from developing countries on particular topics and disseminate in these countries as well as internationally

- Help mainstream research from the developing countries. Research from the developing countries remains on the margins of the development of educational theory. Many reasons for this including credibility of the southern researchers, significance of the research topics, volume of research produced, and language of dissemination could explain this situation. There might be a role for a research network such as this can play in bringing research findings from the South to the core discourse on educational theory.

- Influencing educational policy and programs. A network such as this can make a difference if it connects with policy makers, managers, and service delivery and advocacy organizations particularly NGOs working in the southern countries.

- Build capacity and credibility for research in the south (do it with us) by engaging in joint research and sharing findings with each other we can build mutual capacity. We have an excellent example of joint research where each partner helped others in out work with researchers from Oslo College, Bristol University and AKU.

Research by the North or the South can be meaningful if it can make a difference to the people. I have shared some ideas with you about how this network might help do this. What I have suggested in this presentation is the possibility of a new multidimensional partnership between researchers of education in developing countries, policy makers and those who influence them such as international funding agencies and the common people who can play an extremely powerful role if they have access to research knowledge. I am advocating a partnership which begins from the very beginning – i.e. from identifying a research agenda rather than at the end where the research findings are delivered. I also suggest a partnership that leads to a research community with different members with a common interest rather than a relationship between the North and the South.

References

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