CHAPTER 2

MEETING IN THE MIDDLE: EXPANDING THE USE OF CIE ACADEMIC RESEARCH THROUGH ACCESS, RELEVANCE AND PRACTITIONER SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT

Working in the world of international education consulting, while being fresh out of a PhD in comparative and international education (CIE), has magnified the challenges in bridging academic CIE research and practical work. When brought into practical work, CIE academic research brings a critical lens to what can often be a normative field, while clarifying theoretical lineage and concepts, supporting the operationalization and conceptualization of terms, and strengthening survey and questionnaire development. Despite the usefulness of CIE academic research to strengthen practical projects, programs and research, access to academic research in CIE limits its use on numerous levels. First, physical access to articles and books through costly subscriptions is an often-discussed challenge. Access to academic language, particularly for second language learners, carries an additional barrier. Finally, practitioners’ ability to wade through lengthy, dense, and technical articles, while identifying the key components of academic research, is a skill that is developed over time and with training.
While the reasons for the divide are common to many fields, CIE academic research has the added challenge of being situated in the highly practical field of education. However, this makes practitioner access to CIE academic research all the more crucial. Along with discussing issues of relevance and access, this discussion chapter highlights the exploration of alternative sources of academic research content to help academics and other scholars in CIE make their research more accessible. In this way, this discussion proposes that academic research and practice meet in the middle. Not only by increasing physical access to research through the various means discussed but also by using scaffolding approaches to academic research dissemination with the aim to increase the capacity of practitioners’ access to and use of CIE academic research. These approaches not only serve to bring academic research into the visibility of practice, but also to support practitioners’ skills in accessing and applying academic CIE research more easily.

**Keywords:** Research to practice; practitioner; academic research; best practices; practitioner capacity building; international education development

**CIE IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE**

Bridging the academic/practice divide is an endeavor taken across fields, with common challenges in ensuring that academic research is central to practice (McIntyre, 2005). In the field of education, much of this research considers the divide between research and classroom practice (Hemsley-Brown & Sharp, 2003; Vanderlinde & Van Braak, 2010). However, my experience with this divide is often at the organizational level, as INGOs and NGOs implement education research and practice in local contexts. Despite common topics relevant to practice international education development (IED), in particular the centrality of issues of access, equity, the global and contextual forces of education, and sustainability the power of comparative and international education (CIE) academic research to inform practical work is overlooked. In my work, I have the opportunity to infuse desk reviews, assessments and evaluations, and local school curriculum with CIE approaches, particularly related to issues of gender, and to make visible the importance of academic CIE research in IED practice. I have found that rooting practical research and literature related to CIE theory and methodologies can strengthen and clarify key concepts and understandings and bring a much-needed critical lens to what often can be a normative field. Biesta (2007) identifies these two roles of academic research in informing practice as the technical role of research in practice and the cultural role of research in practice, respectively. The former provides the answer to “what works?” and the latter provides a change in the practitioner’s lens, interpretation or understanding of their practice. Both roles of research provide compelling reasons for uptake of research by practitioners and are relevant for in practical work across contexts in IED.
As organizations are inclined to borrow “best practices” from external contexts and apply them to local contexts (Halpin & Troy, 1995; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014; Steiner-Khamsi & Quist, 2000), limited knowledge of the critical considerations of issues such as power, language, and post-colonial hegemony can reproduce inequity through the borrowing of best practices. While practitioners may seek to consider race, class, ethnicity, and gender in implementing best practices and research, this might be limited to disaggregated data, with a lack of understanding of how these sociocultural forces truly interact with global best practice at a local level and problems that stem from uncritical implementation. Organizations which apply normative understandings of issues of equity, for example an understanding of gender which lacks the nuanced consideration of power dynamics, can unintentionally reproduce inequalities as these issues become buzzwords wrapped in a package of social equality and social inclusion. There is a common aim between academic CIE research and practice of decreasing marginalization and improving equity and I rely heavily on critical theories in CIE to bring a deeper understanding of these issues to development work through research and trainings and to bring clarity in conceptualization to practice.

As organizations seek to adhere to international standards of equality and the head-spinning number of approaches, frameworks, concepts, and definitions that are considered best practices, the lineage of academic CIE research that supports and clarifies these issues becomes lost. Without an understanding of the origin of CIE-related approaches, frameworks, concepts, and definitions, or the related body of literature in academia that already exists, practitioners are left re-inventing the wheel, often while thinking that they actually invented the wheel. With the loss of theoretical lineage, organizations either reproduce what is already known, or lay claim to approaches, frameworks, concepts, and definitions, which have decades of established research. They become repackaged with a recognizable organization brand, but without a clear understanding of the origins of the work or without the critical perspective central to CIE research. With this comes a re-conceptualization of processes that have already been outlined in academia as new program findings and underpinnings for future program development and research (Burde, 2004). This further entrenches the notion that organizations have either coined a particular approach or framework or that there is limited research in the area and future research is required. The body of literature related to CIE has the potential to open the black box of best practices and reveal the lineages of theory and practice developed through decades of research in the field of CIE. This serves to demystify the origin of best practices, particularly in areas of critical theory and pedagogy, and ground practice in relevant and accessible academic CIE theory and research, adding academic rigor to practical work. This does not suggest that organizations and practitioners must change the conceptualizations and definitions with which they work, but instead could connect these varied conceptualizations and definitions more clearly to academic lineages and work that underpin their understandings to create a clearer conceptualization of practice components.

The potential of unlocking the lineage of best practices is not limited to approaches, frameworks, concepts, and definitions, but also access to validated
and established questionnaire and survey development that academics in CIE use in their own work. This can prevent re-inventing measurement tools and can curtail the wholesale adoption of measurement tools into contexts where measurement loses power or reproduces inequity. With access to CIE theory, approaches and measures that are rooted in academic standards and centered around context and issues of equity, small organizations could avoid reinventing measures. In larger organizations, adherence to the international standards of measurement in the form of large-scale assessment tools can be problematic for issues of validity and equity when indiscriminately applied without the critical lens that is at the heart of the field of CIE that allows for appropriate contextualization. Unfortunately, the power of academic research in CIE to inform practice in meaningful ways is hindered by challenges of access, relevance, and a lack of practitioner support in recognizing and handling these challenges.

Despite a desire by organizations and practitioners to bolster practical work with academic research in CIE, much of this research is locked away behind exorbitant subscription fees and copyright infringement threats (Directorate-General for Research and Innovation et al., 2019). Even if these bodies of literature are openly accessible, one must learn the skill of how to deeply engage the literature to access the research that drives it, which takes time that many practitioners simply may not have. Beyond the struggle to find and download academic articles, lies dense literature, with pages of inaccessible language, especially for those who do not have a command of English. Publications are devoid of the bullet points and breakout boxes found in reports that make for easy reading in practical reports and publications. Add to that a frightening number of tables with \( p \)-values which must be critically evaluated and methodology that is of interest mainly to those who already have an extensive background, and interest, in said methodology. While academic publishing is unlikely to change, there are approaches that could increase the desire of practitioners to reach across the research/practice divide by supporting researchers in the access and use of CIE research.

**CONSIDERING SOLUTIONS: ACCESS, RELEVANCE, AND PRACTITIONER CAPACITY BUILDING**

Practices to bridge the academic/practice divide are often discussed in terms of moving academic research into the hands of practitioners and how to encourage practitioners to use that research in that work. These conversations can include suggestions of open access publishing, and the use of public platforms where researchers can make their work available for download. And although there is a proliferation of research–practice partnerships (RPPs) (Coburn & Penuel, 2016), these are often partnerships in Western contexts that are between researchers at universities and school districts and schools. If these partnerships are in diverse contexts, they are rarely researched. I suggest that bridging this divide requires a meeting in the middle of academia and practice, in which academics make their work more accessible and support practitioners in learning to engage academic research, while practitioners work to actively engage academic CIE research with
newfound access, purpose, and skills. There are a number of pedagogical tools that are likely already in CIE academics’ toolboxes that can support this meeting of academia and practice. The first step is reaching practitioners and clarifying why CIE strengthens their work. A recent example in my own work was to identify CIE approaches to equity which are rooted in theory that can illuminate the processes associated with the socialization of gender. By explicitly identifying the research and literature related to gender socialization and specifically linking it to the ability to use this information in developing programs which support those processes specifically, the organization was able to see the value in incorporating this into their work.

Why CIE academic research matters specifically to practitioners and their practice is critical. CIE researchers can explicitly link the research to practical outcomes and program development and remove the guess work for practitioners. While these might be outlined in publications, if practitioners cannot access or digest the research in the academic publication, burying the justification of its use in an article locks this information further away in the ivory tower. The illumination of research relevance and use cannot be embedded in the journal article itself, but should be an endeavor separate from the publishing processes.

Amplifying the relevance and application of CIE academic research can be embedded in multiple media formats such as brief and simple online videos, workshops, and how-to-guides, that are publicly available, easy to search for and address questions such as: Why does CIE academic research matter to practice? What are the key findings and how can they be used in practice? What are the key components of the article and what should a practitioner look for in future articles that can help practitioners access and digest CIE academic research more proficiently? Organizations often disseminate their findings and work through multiple formats such as briefs, white papers, and blogs. Academics can do something similar, with each research publication could be accompanied by a short online tutorial (video, workshop, or how-to-guide to use) that is then distributed on social media or through practitioner networks. The networks used for dissemination must be networks that matter to practitioners. In this way, it is also important to consider the differing technologies of contexts. True to CIE approaches, the dissemination of research should be done on platforms that are contextually appropriate. In Cambodia, for example, Facebook groups and Facebook Messenger are the main platform for information and networking. However, other contexts have technologies that are more suitable and relevant.

The development of accessible materials related to CIE research can move beyond supporting access and relevance and also support practitioner learning in the consumption and use of academic CIE research. In education, instructional scaffolding is a variety of techniques that supports learners by gradually increasing the level of difficulty of learning materials and helping learners engage materials at a variety of levels (Meyer & Turner, 2002). Scaffolding academic research could bring research into the hands of practitioners and support practitioners’ skills in engaging academic CIE research. This is done in the form of popular media outlets when journal articles are presented in briefly in the context of larger issues of interest to readers. In English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching,
“graded readers” are used to support the comprehension of complex texts, including research articles, so that students not only learn the challenging language in the text, but also learn to engage the text in meaningful ways (Hill, 1986). This approach can be applied to CIE contexts, in which critical research is presented in short, leveled forms, along with “tips” and vocabulary for reading the full version of the article critically. These leveled forms of research could then be made publicly accessible and widely circulated, linked to the original research publication, and always accompanied by practical suggestions on why the research matters to programming and practice. Perhaps undertaking this endeavor could be a collaborative effort between academics and practitioners who both stand to benefit from creating accessible, relevant research and developing practitioner skills in using academic CIE research.

REFERENCES


