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Many are the paths to understanding “what works”

“Cheshire Cat,” Alice began, rather carefully. “Would you tell me, please, which way to go from here?”

“That depends on where you want to go,” said the Cat.

The Cheshire Cat’s grinning reply in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, widely used in management training, is often followed by the training course leader’s question “if you don’t know where you are going, how will you know when you get there?” It’s as simple and as complex at that! It is about strategic planning and purpose, so that fitness of, and for, purpose can be aligned and so that “what works” can be judged.

Consider, then, not only of the current prominence accorded to the “what works” agenda in education, but, *pace* Brecht’s stylish parody in Arturo Ui, the resistible rise of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) within that agenda. The simple statement that where we want to go informs which path we take frequently seems to be lost on those who consider RCTs to be self-evidently the top of a mysterious tree or pyramid of educational research designs. They have no place there, nor are there hierarchies of research. Rather, fitness for purpose, so blindingly obvious, appears to have blinded the eyes of those who condemn to a pit of worthlessness any research that does not use RCTs, or who believe that the only path to salvation is an RCT.

How ridiculous it is, in societies which proclaim their adherence to precepts and principles of diversity and inclusion, that so much store is set on RCTs alone, or, if their advocates deign to admit the presence of lower pond-life, on other less worthy methods. Heaven forbid that we use case studies, action research, small-scale research, careful observational research, and we damn with faint praise the use of qualitative research for anything apart from bolstering up RCTs with concomitant process evaluations.

Perhaps we exaggerate for the sake of heuristic clarity. The point is that, just as in other walks of life, the “gold standard” has long been abandoned, opening the door to a range of other ways of ensuring quality and currency. There is no “one best way”, just as in science (to which RCTs appeal) there is no singular “scientific method” (St. Pierre, 2002; Thomas, 2016; Wrigley & McCusker, 2019).

The four papers in this issue attest to diversity and inclusion, accepting that there are many paths to understanding “what works”. Weiss, Lerche, Muckenthaler, Heimlich, and Kiel, researching inclusive schools, use structural equation modelling to show that “the extent to which self-reported adaptive instruction is implemented by teachers depends, above all, on the teachers themselves, their characteristics, and their participation in joint activities”. Not an RCT in sight. Trinidad’s paper reports that “rising and stable high expectations increase the likelihood of entering and graduating from college. However, the opposite is true for those with falling and volatile low expectations. ... These findings suggest the salience of expectation stability, and the need to help students sustain and manage their expectations”. Again, not an RCT in sight.

Of course, experimentation should not be ruled out; rather, diversity and inclusion should be celebrated as they serve fitness for purpose. Experiments are but one out of many approaches in the arsenal of research methods. Hence, this issue includes the report on a “quasi-natural experiment” from Stöver, in which studying “the impact of a shortened schooling time on

the transition from school to studies” brought about by the G8 policy as it operates in Germany, uses regression analysis to find that “[t]he reform G8 had a negative effect on the relative number of school graduates with an immediate transition into university but a positive effect on all subsequent transition rates”. Not wishing to rule out full-blown RCTs, the final paper, by See, Morris, Gorard, and Siddiqui, presents the findings of a 1-year efficacy trial of Maths Counts, which was “an intensive, individualised programme delivered by trained teaching assistants” and which, whilst taking care to ensure fidelity to the principles of RCTs, noted limitations of the study and the boundaries of what could be taken from it, that is, a suitably cautious approach.

“What works” is necessarily linked to intentions and fitness of purpose, which, in turn, are linked to different pathways and fitness for purpose, which, in turn, suggest diversity of methods rather than obedience to single mantras of currently fashionable research methods; a broad church rather than a single ideology.

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