

RESEARCHING MYSELF, RESEARCHER OF RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT

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I have a professional and research interest that I've struggled to adequately describe. I *can*, given time, describe an underlying belief: When the connections between research and practice in education are strong, we are best positioned to improve teaching and learning. Actually, I write some version of this in many of my research paper introductions, also pointing to some supportive literature. Less happily, I usually also point to scholarship showing that ameliorating research-practice gaps is not easy, full-out solutions are elusive, and so on. But, all of that is peripheral to what I aim to do here. Rather than pointing to others' work, others' thoughts, here, instead, I turn my focus inward, trusting, as suggested by Pinar (1975), that to do so in a particular way [focusing on the nature of my educational experiences and following the *currere* methodology as I understand it] ultimately might be personally and professionally illuminating. It is past time for me to seriously ask: *Why*, really, am I so obstinately interested in research engagement in education?

I go into this with a couple of hopes. An assistant professor now, I've thrown myself headlong into this research path, arguably without sufficiently exploring my own motivations—and, as such, at least somewhat in the dark as to how virtuous or complicated my pursuit may be. Related, and as introduced above, I sometimes find myself struggling to explain why I study educational “research use” or “research engagement” or “knowledge mobilization.” I have noticed furrowed brows, and I've incurred opportunity costs from not being able to draw people in. I am missing chances to learn alongside others—potential research collaborators, thought partners, critical friends, etc.—if only I could attract them into my sometimes-lonely and constantly-recalibrating orbit. The key implication, I think, is that my thinking and research program is less dynamic and more limited than it could be.

Going in, I see myself at least being able to point doctoral students or other prospective collaborators to this manuscript, so they can get to know me and my interests in greater depth. Then, I hope, they'll be able to judge whether we have some common intellectual ground—or if, instead, they should double back and run for the hills.

So here I go, hoping to get closer to the core of what I really want to do with this wonderful career opportunity I have, with the time and space I have been given to conduct meaningful research in education, and with the chance to positively influence current and aspiring educational leaders. Accordingly, I engage in an initial self-exploration in relation to this peculiar and persistent interest. So, first, I go back—all the way, albeit briefly, to high school, onward through college, into my professional K-12 life, to and through graduate school, and to the present day. I, then, attempt to pull it all together, considering what it all means and what might be or should be next for me.

GOING BACK

Something I remember now: I'm a senior at Goodrich High School in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin in 1998-1999. I'm a good student by conventional measures—nearly a 4.0 GPA, taking a full complement of advanced classes, generally respectful of

teachers and peers, and so on—but, I am not firing on all cylinders. Case in point: I'm challenged in C. P. Biology to conduct my first, independent experiment, applying the scientific method to answer some research question of my choosing. Somehow, I land on studying the effects of a zero-gravity environment on plant growth. Never mind that the Ferris wheel contraption I use (building it required Dad's superior mechanical skills) does not actually create a zero-gravity environment and that the engine fails repeatedly through the course of the experiment. More basically, my *attitude*, my appreciation for the powerful process I had been invited into, just isn't there. On some level, I know my project is a mess from the get-go, and coupled with that, I haven't yet grasped the potential power or function of the scientific method. My first foray into scientific knowledge production is, accordingly, quite sad. On the upside, it supplies good comic material for my friends for years/decades to come.

Fast forward a few years, and I'm a psychology major at UW-Madison. Initially "undecided," I get fascinated by the study of mind and behavior, and being on a focused path is making a big difference for me. The de facto "weed-out course" is Experimental Psychology, and here again, I am challenged to [among other things] design and conduct my own experiment. A chance at redemption, perhaps? This time, too, we are also taught how to develop a research question that can somehow build from/add to existing literature that we have identified, we are explicitly taught the logic of experimentation, we are guided through some quantitative analyses, and ultimately, we are expected to write up our study in a conventional manner. This time, I embrace the challenge before me, put a great deal of time and thought into it, and by all measures, the study is a success. I also feel proud, feel a change in myself—as I write this I now realize this event marks, better than any other, my transition from scientific knowledge *recipient* to (receiver *and*) *producer*. Science is now *active*, and I am now a part of it. This is a big deal for me—a really big shift—and one I suspect still too few people make.

Why was this experience—the process, the outcome—so different? I believe a couple things were at play. Perhaps most importantly, I began operating within a discipline that held my attention, that offered a series of fascinating puzzles. For instance, the question I developed and set out to answer—“*What are the effects of offense severity and perspective-taking on persons' willingness to forgive?*”—captivated me on several levels. In fact, on my more high-flying days, I envisioned myself as someone who—by improving our understanding of the nature of forgiveness—might be able to forestall wars, ushering in an unprecedented era of peace in the world! [*important side note*: I was assigning value to scientific topics/ outputs—and still do, to a large extent, now—based on its predicted social utility or actionability in the real world.]

I also thought it was cool to scientifically study something that others thought of purely or mostly in mystical or religious terms. On less manic days, I at least could reason that sustaining relationships often requires forgiveness, so it was worthwhile to try to better understand how it occurs or could occur. I marveled at the idea that, through systematic process and logical research design, it might be possible for scientists (*or me*) to advance our knowledge in this key area. I liked the idea that I could formulate hypotheses and subject them to systematic test, and the overall approach to knowledge accumulation made sense. Accordingly, I internalized much of the scientific research process and became active within it, and it was wonderful and empowering.

Alas, it wasn't all rosy for me in the research world from then on. For one, I then volunteered in a psychology research lab, and in that setting, I struggled for several reasons. Chiefly, I was juggling far too much—working nearly full-time in a group home, readying for graduate school, maintaining a relationship with my first girlfriend, and more. *And*, I somehow got onto the wrong foot with the laboratory supervisor, thereafter, learning the priceless lesson that workplace relationships can make or break you. After I botched a data entry assignment, she said something to me like, “You know, research isn't for everyone...” Looking back, I think I was still a pretty immature person who was often experiencing “two steps forward, one step back” type stuff in various aspects of my life—not quite sure enough yet of what was important and what wasn't and making some poor decisions. But, my struggles in this lab setting were painful enough to re-introduce serious doubts into my mind, causing me to temporarily suspend this newfound “researcher” identity.

Leading into my first graduate school experience, I internalized the message that psychology majors who go on to pursue PhDs in clinical psychology or cognitive neuroscience, among other sub-disciplines, achieved the highest status. Part of me wanted to conform, though my practical side won out. The job market in school psychology looked stronger, and the timeline to degree shorter: the pathway I followed required two intense years of graduate study, followed by a one-year internship. I also knew I generally liked school settings and usually liked children better than adults, so I saw myself being happy as a school psychologist. Of course, my actual knowledge about school psychology was limited—I conjured an image of the kindly looking, gray-bearded, briefcase-carrying gentleman I sometimes had seen walking around my elementary school—but this knowledge gap allowed me to create my own, romantic vision of what I'd be doing and how glorious it would most certainly be.

My time as a graduate student, at the University of Minnesota, was truly great: challenging, stimulating, and overflowing with learning opportunities. I went in with the clear intention of preparing myself for school practice but was taught that—even given that goal—learning and education could and should be studied and treated as a science: we were to become *scientist-practitioners*. Some faculty—there and beyond—had taken on a nearly evangelical zeal, truly believing in the power of certain ideas and approaches to transform education. The response to intervention (“RTI”) movement was just about to go full swing in education, and several faculty members were on the forefront of the research, theory, and/or the political advocacy behind its rise. We learned processes designed to help teams identify and solve individual and systemic problems in schools, and meanwhile, we learned a number of skills and techniques in service of these goals: measurement, systematic and naturalistic observation, single-case and pre-post intervention designs, and so on. I began embracing the idea that science could be usefully brought to bear within real-life settings—e.g., in schools or classrooms, not needing to be confined to universities, stuffy laboratories, etc. That was, in retrospect, a huge realization, and I am grateful for it.

Still, I had some questions and misgivings. For example, I often questioned just how well these ideas would translate into practice. I also wondered why we focused so intently on some problems (e.g., on early reading development and on how to remediate early academic struggles) but so superficially on others (e.g., on mental health issues experienced by adolescent students, on the measurement and improvement of critical thinking, on structural and systemic issues like poverty and school funding, etc.). I identified some tentative answers to these questions, and they were not always satisfactory to me. For instance, I assumed certain problems were being emphasized because they were more easily “operationalized” and/or because

they fit within a professor's comfort zone. Maybe the stickier problems were less conducive to study, were uncomfortable to discuss, or maybe they were thought to be less within our control and so less worthy of our focus. In retrospect, I was already deeply grappling with the extent to which research and practice were connected, and I realized that disconnections could sometimes be created on the research side too (e.g., if certain problems of practice were not getting sufficient attention). Because I was pretty deep in this preparing-for-practice mindset, it was natural to be focusing in this way, and the stakes of research-practice disconnects felt quite real: When I predicted I'd face particular issues in schools for which my coursework wasn't adequately preparing me, I felt anxiety. All in all, though, these were some of the best days of my life, leaving a huge mark on the professional I became and the odd hybrid of a researcher I now seem to be.

Moving into PK-12 practice (2005-2013), it was in my mind, at first, all about *application*, about putting all this knowledge to the test. Would these ideas and approaches *work*? The results, overall, were decidedly mixed. Sometimes, the ideas and processes I'd been taught seemed to fall flat, and at other times, all went very well, keeping me energized for the next chance. But again, what was really happening was that I was grappling with research-practice relationships (or disconnects), specifically the ability of research, or of applied research processes, to enhance practice. And, I was evolving in terms of what "research" or "professional knowledge" was or could be.

Some of my experiences were while I functioned as a school-based "problem solving team" facilitator. I had been taught, in graduate school and in internship, how to guide these teams, which typically also included general and special educators, speech/language pathologists, and perhaps others, like principals. We'd follow a specific process for identifying and analyzing particular "problems" (e.g., a student is struggling to read, a group of students is misbehaving, etc.) that were brought to the team, selecting or co-designing interventions, measuring how the student/s responded to the interventions, and then making some decisions or re-cycling through the process. I found it hard to argue against such a process and still do. To follow a process like this seems rational to me, and breakdowns generally did not (in my view) reflect some flaw of the process, but rather something/s external to it, such as:

- My own professional failings (e.g., perhaps I didn't yet know how to deal best with *this* problem or topic)
- Insufficient research available regarding this topic or this topic in *this context* (and so on)
- Research that was existing but that we could not access (structural issue?) or that we were not aware of when we needed it (dissemination or networking issue?)
- The type of knowledge we needed, which related more to implementation, being in relatively short supply (knowledge production issue?)
- Insufficient levels of trust between team members and/or in the process to engage deeply and vulnerably in what could be emotionally-laden work
- What I later learned were epistemic conflicts, instances where my philosophical commitments were incompatible with those of my colleagues, that complicated our ability to form a mutually agreed upon course of action

Regarding those epistemic conflicts, I had been trained largely (and sometimes implicitly) as an applied behaviorist, which impacted my ideas, my suggestions regarding measurement, interventions, and decision-making. [*Think*: reinforcement schedules, incentives, functional analyses of behavior, etc.]. My teacher colleagues, I

learned, invariably had been trained differently, sometimes so much so that my ideas and suggestions could be philosophically incompatible with theirs. At times, they might be positively allergic to my idea, or dismissive of my credibility (e.g., “What do you know? You haven’t taught.”). In such situations, I felt like an outsider—an uncomfortable but important feeling that I have continued to carry with me. At first, it was deeply frustrating to be in such situations, at odds with colleagues and with ideas and sometimes having my research-based suggestions dismissed, and so on. At times, I felt as if I were in a “post-fact” world, one in which anecdotes and personalities trumped scientific evidence. Making matters worse, I’m a firmly conflict-averse person; being at odds with my colleagues, when it happened, just felt bad. But, soon I realized that others on the team might feel the same way—they might feel as if their way of thinking, their expertise, was being undervalued—and from then, on I resolved to think about these situations more creatively and flexibly. I realized other team members were bringing a great deal of experience and expertise to the team, too, and that their angle, indeed, could prove to be the correct one. More practically, asking someone to implement some change that they didn’t believe in just seemed futile. So, my thinking shifted substantially away from defending my own technical positions and more so toward the “little things” like building trust and camaraderie, making sure everyone was heard and ideas could intermingle, that everyone was well-fed (literally and figuratively), and so forth. And, if/when we still struggled, then I’d start thinking bigger, in terms of dynamics between team members, in terms of the politics, culture, histories of the school and district within which we were operating, or other factors that might be affecting our functioning (and so then, what to do with these even bigger and more complex issues?).

I guess, looking back, this was sort of when I began to confront and then embrace complexity in education. I was deeply *in it*, doing my best, while also sensing and embracing newer and bigger questions. I hung onto and continued offering the best that my training and my perspectives could, but I also recognized my own legitimate shortcomings and began to see how sometimes others’ strengths could offset those. I also began to take more of a pragmatic, “any idea is fine (within reason) as long as we can agree to monitor and revisit it” type of approach. I was beginning to play the long game I guess, focusing on how to enhance our team functioning and assuming good results would follow. I became concerned, for instance, with how to surface/ elicit different ideas, and if/whether they could combine in some way that would be good for the school, good for the students. And, looking inward and outward, I thought more about the information sources that are/were available—and those that were unavailable—to us as we engaged in these deliberations. These types of concerns, as I’ll elaborate later, remain very much part of my thinking and my research agenda.

Getting into educational administration and enrolling in educational leadership coursework/programming at Roosevelt University and then at the University of Illinois (U of I) forced my thinking further toward larger groups and systems. The courses tended to address very different literature and theories about how schools could and should function. Deep exposure to theory and practical strategies regarding leadership, organization, and change was great for me. I also appreciated taking some steps back, examining the history of schooling in the US, beginning to understand the complexity of educational policy in the US (and beyond), and so forth. Regarding policy, I somewhat predictably became interested in research-*policy* connections/ disconnections, especially when I transitioned into administration. While a human resources director, my job was deeply affected by several policy changes, especially a sweeping, new teacher evaluation law. I wondered about the bases (research, other

sources of evidence, ideology, etc.) of such policy changes. While at U of I, I was fortunate to get connected with Chris Lubienski, a scholar who was studying *policy influence*, among other things. He and I found ample common ground, and I greatly benefited from collaborating with him.

A challenge I felt, as I was exposed to new ideas, was to consider how they integrated with (or complicated, undermined, etc.) my existing thinking. Ultimately, one of the biggest gifts of this time-period was that I was brought to think in greater depth about systemic and historically-grounded inequities and about how profoundly school experiences and outcomes could differ according to community, culture, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, gender, and other background characteristics. The challenge for me became to constantly think about whether and how some of the “ed psych” skills and dispositions I carried could serve to document and help to address large issues like these, either in the school world or the policy world.

NOW AND BEYOND

Fast forward to the present day, and I’m a 3rd year assistant professor of educational leadership at Miami University. I now have an unprecedented amount of time and space to “choose my own adventure.” How am I filling it up? It is uncanny how much it seems I’m carrying the experiences I’ve outlined thus far:

- I’m gravitating toward the writing of scholars like Tim Cain and Clive Dimmock, who are interested in research engagement but also embracing a broad view of evidence and expertise in education—e.g., valuing the tacit expertise teachers bring to bear, considering how it can be made explicit and how it can intermingle with other sources of evidence.
- I’ve become acquainted with improvement science and implementation science. Particularly, I’m examining various improvement methodologies—e.g., networked improvement communities (NICs; see Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2016) and design-based school improvement (Mintrop, 2016), trying to dissect and compare their logics, the skills and dispositions required to engage in them, whether and to what extent they can productively focus on stickier issues of equity and social justice, and so forth.
- Inspired by interdisciplinary scholars and educators, I’m exploring theories/ideas like boundary-spanning and boundary-crossing, thinking about the features and conditions (and leadership approaches and organizational arrangements) in which we can effectively do so (see Malin, 2018; Brown & Malin, 2017). With mentor and colleague Don Hackmann, I’ve also been exploring educational leadership across boundaries, within the context of cross-sector collaborations (Malin & Hackmann, 2017; Malin & Hackmann, 2018).
- I’m looking with fresh eyes at those individuals and organizations that reside in the *in-between* spaces in education, considering the features of their approaches (e.g., Malin & Paralkar, 2017; Malin, Brown, & Trubceac, 2018). I’ve become very interested in the brokerage and mobilization of research-based ideas—how and why it occurs, innovative approaches, and so forth. Related and focused on research-policy connections and influence, I continue to explore the roles and functions of think-tanks and advocacy organizations.

Thinking back on my brief scholarly career, I’m happy to see that my pursuits are getting progressively bolder, more “big picture.” Maybe I’m becoming more confident in who I am and what I can contribute. Maybe I’m getting older and realizing I won’t

be here forever. Maybe it's my amazing wife Nicole's encouragement and challenging thinking, or maybe it's the added urgency of thinking about what my son's education and life can or will be.

In any case, I can look forward with optimism and even excitement. Regarding the specifics of what's next, I'm not quite sure. I will likely continue to specialize on studying and understanding the in-between space in education (i.e., the brokerage of knowledge, knowledge networks, etc.). I'm interested in platforms like *Edutopia* and *Pinterest for Teachers* and wondering to what extent and in what ways educational knowledge production is being, or can be, democratized. Very likely, I will continue to study complex educational reforms that require the integration of diverse individuals and organizations. Within such situations, having sometimes felt like an educational outsider myself, I'm particularly interested in how educators can welcome and leverage, rather than repel, diverse ideas and contributions. Perhaps, I will turn away from traditional research and forge a research-practice partnership (or similar arrangement) and produce some scholarship as part of it. Perhaps some new and unanticipated ideas and directions will arise. Despite these ambiguities, I'm generally feeling good about the path/s that I'm on. Most generally, I'm happy that my mind is as open as it ever was: I'm learning new things and incorporating new ideas daily. I'm grateful to those who have modeled how to be "professional omnivores," and I eagerly read scholarship from those who claim to have developed models, processes, and networks that might facilitate stronger educational change and teaching and learning improvements. Knowing how challenging the work is in practice but also having tasted some successes, I go in with a nice mixture of skepticism and optimism. I am thankful for the experiences and training that I have had, because I think they have yielded some helpful intuitions about what might become some key areas of focus and because they have also highlighted what's less important. And, I guess the next big challenge is to draw some more folks into this work and this excitement that I feel. Anyone interested?

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