

# What works for whom? The problem of agency in educational research

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## abstract

- ▶ The ‘what works?’ effectiveness agenda in England is currently being driven by Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF) which aims to produce a table of evidence about educational interventions that make a difference to pupil attainment, predominantly as measured by national tests: the RCT method is the sine qua non, and even the precise details of the methodology and statistical analysis are laid down so that resulting effect sizes of the various interventions evaluated are comparable.
- ▶ The ideal outcome is that a principal or leader of an academy chain can decide how to manage its investments by selecting from a table of evidence based interventions that might be thought workable and cost effective in their context.
- ▶ I will draw on some literature to critique this, while pointing to new possibilities for policy. I criticise the medical analogy and RCT methodology, especially from the point of view of ‘agency’ of teachers and learners. The result will be suggestions that might offer policy what it needs, while situating learning-teaching at the centre of the educational activity being modelled.

# Agenda

- ▶ 1. Background to ‘what works?’ Literature
- ▶ 2. Why isn’t it ‘working’ for us? Is it working for policy?
- ▶ 3. Can ‘we’ develop policy research that could work for teachers (and learners) ?

# 1.1 Background literature: medical analogy

- ▶ Hargreaves and Hammersley debate: the analogy between education with medicine
- ▶ Balance and relation between technix/science and praxis (techne and phronesis) in education and medicine: the problem of ‘consciousness’
- ▶ Anecdote: when NICE ain’t so nice (i) dementia and its outcome measures; (ii) medical over-diagnosis (Angelina’s surgery?)

## 1.2 What works: literature

1. Hammersley and Hargreaves debate 1997 - 2000
2. Smeyers & DePaepe (eds) (2006) 'Educational Research: Why 'What Works' Doesn't Work' Springer
3. Transmaths (Williams et al) critique: 'what works' judged by narrow L.O.s may have unintended effects on affect
4. 'What Works Clearinghouse' (WWC in US): immanent critique by Ginsburg & Smith of 27 Maths curricula
5. from principles of RCT to 'fidelity' (Humphrey et al., 2016)
6. SI in IJRME: Pampaka, Williams, & Homer, 2016 ( eds) – technical interest. Critique – 'for whom?'

## 2.1 What works – critiques

1. Professional **autonomy vs accountability** (Wenger: vertical /horizontal accountability) e.g. Hammersley's dangers of taking teaching from the teachers, but more, 'taking' research from researchers
2. Each RCT is in fact a 'case': Smeyers 'relevance and irrelevance' and the Tennessee class size research
3. Transmaths (Williams et al) critique: values and 'what works' judged by narrow L.O.s may have unintended effects (why anything proved to 'work' may be its opposite)
4. Multiple problems of RCT in practice [Ginsburg & Smith](#) e.g. specifying the intervention as a particular of some 'general', and of 'fidelity' in multiple contexts(Humphrey et al., 2016)
5. SI in IJRME: Pampaka, Williams, & Homer, 2016 ( eds) – technical interest. Critiques – 'for whom?'

## 2.2 What have WW and RCTs ever done for 'us'? A critique

- ▶ The unit of randomisation is usually the school: intended agency rests there, not with teachers or learners
- ▶ 'learners' (and their outcomes) are the 'object' – performativity and compliance?
- ▶ Teachers are evaluated by their 'fidelity', i.e. their compliance with the designers intentions
- ▶ *Researchers* are increasingly controlled (meta-analysis rationale)
- ▶ Irony: the aim is that those charged with decision-making will have no choices to the extent this programme is successful

## 2.3 So its all hopeless?

- ▶ Even though the WW and RCT has proved ‘failing’ or has been unable to fulfill its ambitions ... it appears to answer policy concerns/needs – Torgerson even blogs ‘the debate is over’
- ▶ Negation: policy can be shown evidence that ‘WW’ does not work (optimally) ... in part because it treats learners and teachers as compliant objects, and learning and teaching as alienated (eg Transmaths findings)
- ▶ BUT (negation of negation) ... this requires offering alternatives that meet policy needs while respecting L-T



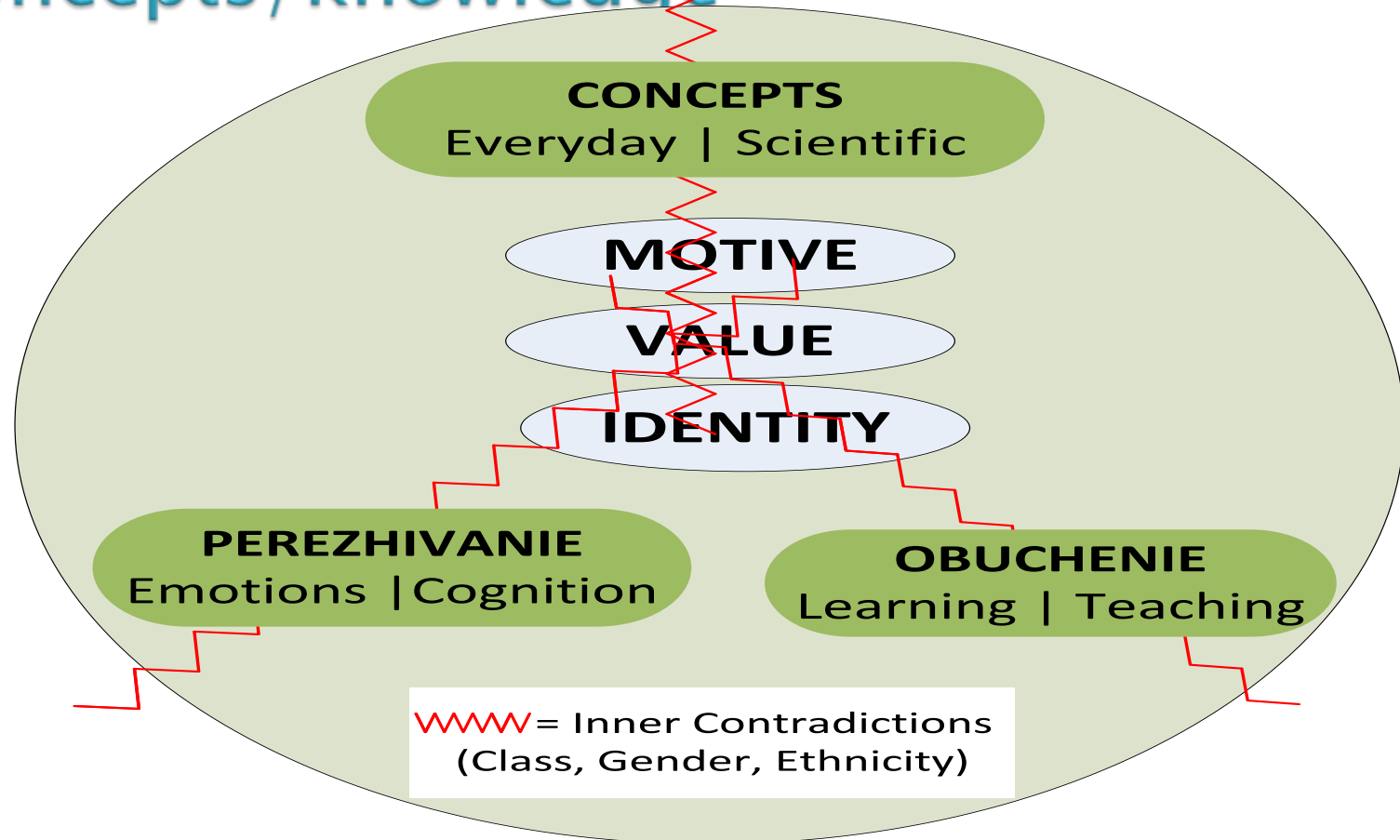
# Question?

- ▶ How can research (R&D) respect agency of learners and teachers ... (what models have we got?)
- ▶ ... as well as satisfy/ inform policy, i.e. provide evidence of effectiveness ...
- ▶ ... and offer policy efficacy (policy people want to feel useful too)?

### 3. What alternative models of education research might look like? A proposal for a SoL-T

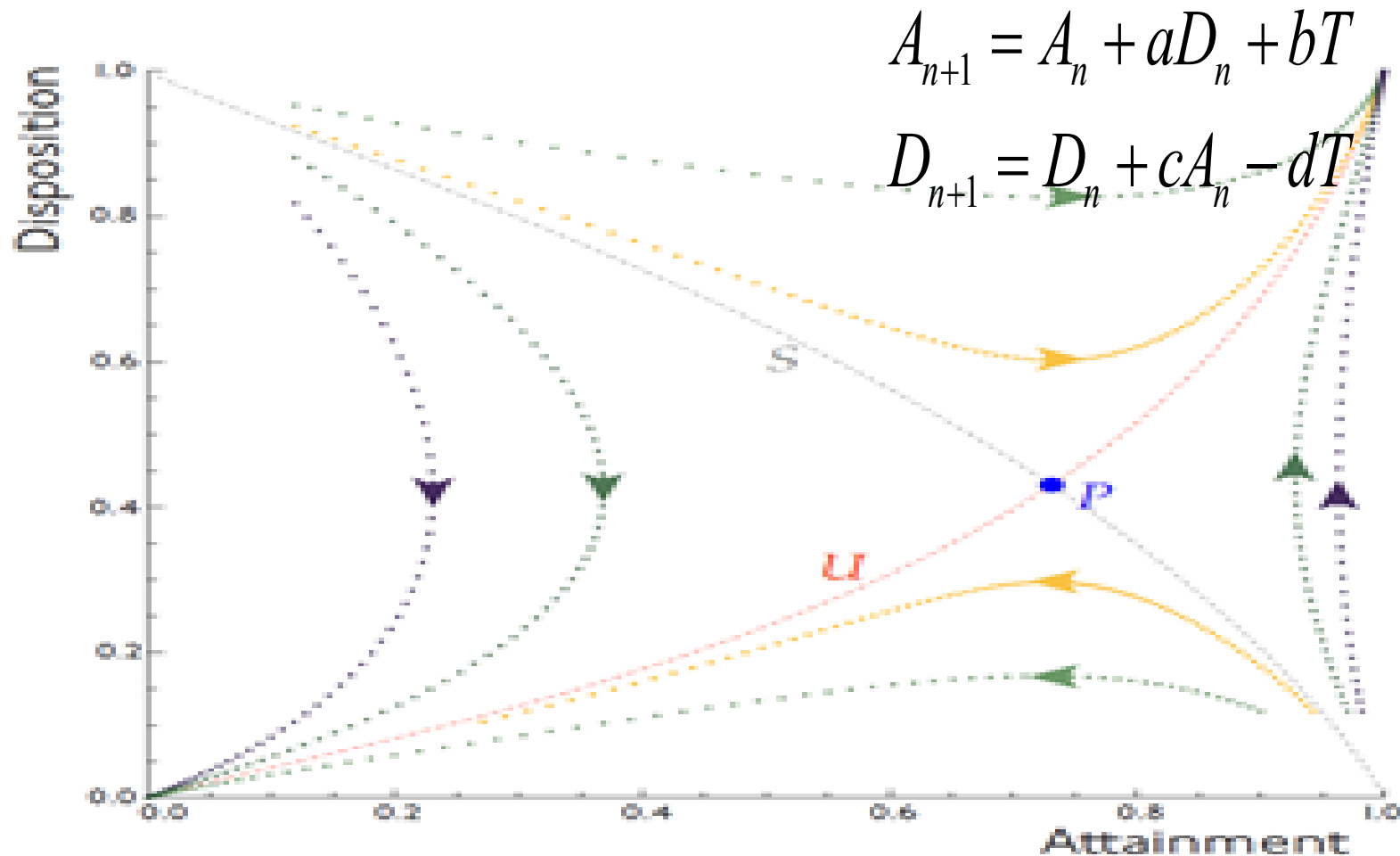
- ▶ What works to be based on a **science** of Learning-Teaching (L-T) (Vygotsky's obuchenie)
- ▶ Learning-Teaching seen as ONE joint activity, 'entangling' or entwining learners with teachers
- ▶ Emotion-cognition might be seen as ONE attribute of felt-thought experience (eg in L-T)
- ▶ Values and identities seen as conflicted, multiple contradictory, problematic (there is no single 'faithful' teacher, or 'successful' learner(

## 3.2 picture of SoL-T 'true' concepts/knowledge



**Figure 1. Activity of learning-teaching in education:** the three contradictions and their mediation by identity and motive, and Inner/ social structural contradictions cutting through all moments.

## 3.2 Eg: entangled emotion–cognition



**Figure 2. The learning trajectories of Attainment and Disposition (A,D) from Muldoon et al. (2015)**

## 3.3 Such models offer policy alternatives

- ▶ Policy might support agents' (eg professionals) autonomy rather than 'instrumental compliance'
- ▶ Giving teaching back to the teachers, learning back to the learners
- ▶ But we have to 'provide evidence' that such models 'work better' for policy
- ▶ Explicit 'agency' of L-T as conditions in interventions?

# 4. Conclusions/ discussion

- ▶ We argue that educational research needs to offer **policy-people** (at each level: nation = school = classroom = learner) what they need ... while insisting that it places the joint activity of learning-teaching as the essential ‘producer’ of educational outcomes.
- ▶ This suggests we need scientific models that offer L and T (and researchers) agency, choices, strategies, and empirical studies that show policy how these models can work more effectively

## Selected references

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