

Educators' Notebook

Reviews of Research of Interest to Educators

Increasing the Impact and Value of Research in Education

Ben Levin

Interest in the potential value and impact of research in education is growing. Research impact happens gradually through a variety of social and political processes. This Notebook outlines current thinking on ways of improving linkages and building connections between research, policy and practice in education.

Dr. Ben Levin, is a Professor in the Department of Educational Administration, Foundations and Psychology at the University of Manitoba. This work on research impact is being done as part of his appointment as Visiting scholar for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), whose financial assistance is gratefully acknowledged. However all opinions are solely those of the author.

March 2003

Volume 14 Number 1

Copyright 2003. Sponsored by the Department of Educational Administration, Foundations and Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba, and the Manitoba Council for Leadership in Education, 1005-401 York Avenue, Winnipeg. May be reprinted without permission providing that credit is given to the sponsors.
Available on the web at www.mcle.ms

Increasing the Impact and Value of Research in Education

Ben Levin

Introduction

Researchers and educators have each long felt that the potential value of research to the education system was being limited by flaws in the approach of the other party (e.g. Hargreaves, 1999). Practitioners believed that research was too esoteric or impractical. Researchers believed that practitioners and policy-makers were unwilling to pay attention to research findings (Kennedy, 1997).

Links between research and practice in education have improved in recent years. More educators have more knowledge about research. Governments have become more interested in what is being called 'evidence-based' decision-making (Davies, 1999; Levacic & Glatter, 2001). Policy documents are more likely to have in them some attention to relevant research, and evaluation efforts have increased. The media give more attention to the reporting of research. Researchers have also tried harder to reach out with their work to educators. The difficulties have by no means disappeared but there has been progress. A great deal has also been learned about some of the things that can be done to build this relationship.

Impact is Indirect

One main finding has been that the impact of research tends to happen indirectly, over time, and often through third parties (Weiss, 1979). An individual study is rarely directly taken up and turned into practice. Rather, knowledge about an issue slowly builds and is communicated by

various parties through many social and political dynamics (Lindblom & Cohen, 1990). Gradually people learn about new ideas or practices, for various reasons find those ideas attractive, and work to implement them.

In education, examples of the gradual impact of research come readily, such as the growing emphasis on inclusion in special education, or the importance of parents' involvement in their children's early development. These examples show how ideas that were once quite contrary to the conventional wisdom were actively promoted, gradually became acceptable, and eventually became conventional wisdom and the basis of practice.

This process does not happen automatically. At any given moment many ideas are competing for attention and active measures are required to develop support for them (Stone, 1997). Reports are written, media interest is enlisted, lobby groups are brought into the effort, and the ideas are made part of political campaigns. Gradually changes in ideas support changes in practices.

Not all such changes are related to research; most educators can list examples of changes in policy and practice that were poorly supported by research. Research is only one part of the struggle over ideas but it does seem to be growing in importance.

Good linkages between research and practice should run in two directions. It is not simply a matter of researchers' telling schools what to do and educators passively implementing these practices, but of a two-

way relationship in which the needs and views of practice also influence research topics and methods.

Ways to Increase Impact

In thinking about steps to help foster impact it is important to think of processes that connect the 'producers' of research with the 'consumers' in a way that respects each of these worlds yet helps each to take advantage of what the other has to offer. Recent developments in action research and teacher research can contribute to this dialogue. A vital role can also be played by graduate students, who are often involved in both research and practice.

In regard to the conduct of research, there could be changes to increase the incentives for researchers to invest their energy in trying to increase impact. If research grants held this as a requirement, and if there were more recognition for such work, more of it would occur. Research organizations could increase the supports they provide around research impact, as is already done in the development of research in science and technology. It would help if research organizations provided professional writers, media experts, or even lists of potential strategies for increasing impact, along with better skills in using the internet as a dissemination mechanism.

On the other hand, many 'user' organizations lack the capacity to find and use research effectively. There may be nobody assigned to do such work, or nobody able to sort out good research work from bad. Organizations may lack internal communication processes for letting people know about interesting work so that learning is not shared. These are all areas where educational organizations could do better. Finally, and probably most important, are steps to increase the interaction between researchers and those with an interest in the

uses of research. More effective communications vehicles, including better use of the internet (Willinksy, 2003) and of print media are vital. There are some promising developments in using the net interactively, not just to provide access to information but also to build communication among people with common interests but different roles, such as school leaders and leadership researchers. However face-to-face contact remains crucial and is often the prerequisite for effective electronic communication. Many opportunities exist to bring more 'users' into research events and more research into practitioner events, as well as by creating entirely new events.

Third parties are vital to research impact (Majone, 1989). A great deal of people's information about research comes from other sources – the media, people who write popular work based on research, and the many organizations that use research as part of their efforts to influence policy and practice in education. Think tanks, business organizations, labour organizations and community groups all have an interest in research and often work hard at disseminating research that they see as important. The clash of ideas and opinions in the political process is an important way in which research becomes known, and an important vehicle for increasing impact (Lindblom, 1990).

Conclusions

In sum there are grounds to be optimistic about the future of research in education in terms of its value to policy and practice. Nothing is automatic and nothing should be taken for granted. Much ongoing effort will be required. Yet there seems to be an opportunity to build bridges that could have important and long-lasting value to educators, schools, families and especially students.

SELECTED REFERENCES

- Davies, P. (1999). What is evidence-based education? British Journal of Educational Studies, 47(2), 108-121.
- Hargreaves, D. (1999) Revitalising educational research, Cambridge Journal of Education, 29, 2, 239-250
- Kennedy, M. (1997). The connection between research and practice. Educational Researcher. 26(7), 4-12.
- Levacic, R. & Glatter, R. (2001). 'Really good ideas?': Developing evidence-informed policy and practice in educational leadership and management. Educational Management and Administration 29(1), 5-25.
- Lindblom, C. (1990). Inquiry and change. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lindblom, C. & Cohen, D. (1979). Usable knowledge. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Majone, G. (1989). Evidence, argument and persuasion in the policy process. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Stone, D. (1997). Policy paradox. New York: Norton.
- Weiss, C. (1979). The many meanings of research utilization. Public Administration Review 39(5), 426-431.
- Willinsky, J. (2003). Policymakers' online use of academic research. Educational Policy Analysis Archives, 11 (2) (January, 2003). [Epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v11n2/](http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v11n2/)

ISSN 1181 - 9480

This is a brief review of a complex body of educational research. Since no brief review can capture the subtleties and qualifications reflected in the larger works, readers are urged to consult the references that have been cited. The views expressed in this notebook are those of the author. The sponsors welcome your comments on this issue and your suggestions for future issues of Educators' Notebook.