
Research Use and Its Impact in Secondary Schools: Exploring Knowledge Mobilization in Education

Executive Summary



A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT:

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE),
the Canadian Education Association (CEA) and
11 school districts across Canada

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose, Scope, Overview of Study

- The purpose of this collaborative research is to learn about the ways research is encountered and used to shape policy and practice in Canadian secondary schools.
- Involved superintendents, principals and others with designated leadership roles in eleven school districts across Canada
- Pre and post-intervention survey design: first survey administered May 2008, second survey administered September 2009.
- Three interventions implemented throughout the 2008/ 2009 school year in 9 districts:
 - System to share research articles
 - Study groups around research issues
 - Districts conducting research

Key Messages

- Research use remains modest in most school districts.
- While attitudes are positive about research use, district capacity to undertake knowledge mobilization work is variable.
- Even in districts with capacity, actual frequency of research use often remains modest; therefore, research capacity is not necessarily synonymous with use.
- Better ways are needed to increase daily use of research and embed that use in organizational systems and processes.
- Knowledge mobilization activity still appears to depend heavily on volunteerism or on a few interested people rather than being embedded in daily practices.
- Educators' beliefs are shaped more by experience and colleagues than by empirical evidence.
- Interventions to increase research use had modest success. Interventions were most successful where (1) designated intermediaries/ facilitators were involved and (2) research used was connected to existing priority issues.
- There are some simple things districts could do to foster increased knowledge and use of evidence:
 - creating shared space using technology to post, share and find relevant research
 - aligning research use with organizational priorities
 - adding research use to existing departmental and staff meetings
 - integrating research use into existing organizational structures such as established committees and teams
 - building networks to foster mutual learning about research within and across districts.

District Research Practices

- More similarities than differences across districts; generally responses were positive and ratings did not differ very much across districts.
- Research use remains modest across districts, despite the overall consensus (85%) that the important role of research is evident in the ways districts relate research to practice:

Research Related Readings

- 63 % of educational leaders spend between 0-5 hours per month on research related reading.
- 37 % of educational leaders spend 6 or more hours a month on research related reading.

Research Related Events

- 47 % of respondents spend 2 hours or less per month in research related events.
- 25% are not engaged at all in research related events.

Research Related Networking

- 52% of educational leaders spend between 0-2 hours per month, with 23% doing none.
- 27% of educational leaders spend more than 6 hours per month.

- Less than half (45%) of educational leaders surveyed reported that formalized roles and research departments existed within their districts, with 16% not knowing.
- In many cases (40%), even those who knew that their district had formalized research capacity weren't sure how many people were involved. In one school district that has made a consistent effort in knowledge mobilization, 94% of respondents knew that the infrastructure exists, suggesting that efforts to give more profile to research do have an impact.
- 37% of respondents reported having research posted on their districts websites, with a third of educational leaders being unsure of whether or not research is posted
- Most districts (70%) did have joint research projects with universities and community organizations, although almost a quarter of respondents were not sure of this
- Districts report a range of research related activities including professional development (85%), support for action research (83%), funding for research generation and use (61%), incorporating data in district reporting (78%), sponsoring research-focused events (78%), opportunities for informal networking (73%), circulating research articles (74%), providing staff with time to engage with research-related activities (65%).

- Districts regularly report and analyze various data: high school graduation rates (91%), elementary school literacy levels (84%), credit accumulation (73%), suspension/expulsion numbers (68%), special education referral rates (60%) and achievement data by ethnicity and socio-economic status (58%). However, 12% to 26% of educational leaders, depending on the data source, did not know if these data sources were analyzed within their districts
- Most respondents reported using these data or other research for district and school improvement plans and annual reports (around 85% in each case).

Knowledge Claims Relevant To Practice

- All respondents were asked to evaluate six knowledge claims about student success in secondary schools, each based on strong empirical evidence.
- There was strong agreement among respondents on three knowledge claims and considerable disagreement on the other three knowledge claims.
- For all the knowledge claims, respondents reported that personal experience is the most powerful influence on their views, followed by colleagues or professional networks.
- Direct contact with formal research sources and professional development appeared to play a weaker role in shaping opinions across all the districts.
- Respondents reported more use of research evidence for the claims that had the most agreement, suggesting that more exposure to research is related to greater understanding.

Interventions

- The post-intervention survey did not show significant changes from the initial survey
- Overall, these interventions had modest success. Although nine districts agreed to take part in the interventions, only three districts were able to move the interventions to any significant level of action.
- The usual barriers to action emerged, including lack of time, lack of capacity, the absence of someone to take initiative, and the relatively low priority these activities received.
- The interventions were most effective where they fit with an existing district priority or infrastructure, otherwise even interventions that were simple to implement were not employed.

- Variation in the interventions and in survey respondents make it difficult to say whether some interventions were more effective in affecting research practices, knowledge and sources of knowledge. In each intervention there were districts that were more or less successful but this was not systematically related to change in the follow-up survey.
- The three most successful districts all had an intermediary or facilitator who coordinated district efforts.
- The interventions did not necessarily reach large numbers of people in the districts and we do not know if the post-survey respondents were actually participants in any of the interventions.
- The findings from this analysis are consistent with the literature that says that impact of research interventions varies widely.

Implications for School Districts

- Research use is generally not a high priority in secondary schools, but there is a growing recognition among educational leaders of the importance of research in school districts.
- Some districts lack capacity whereas others, even with capacity, still report modest levels of use; therefore, capacity is not necessarily synonymous with actual use. In some districts, capacity building is needed; in others (even with capacity) efforts are needed to increase the daily use of research by embedding it in organizational systems and processes.
- Structures and processes are needed to support research use along with a culture that supports and encourages research. There are some simple things districts could do to foster increased knowledge and use of evidence:
 - creating shared space using technology to post, share and find relevant research
 - aligning research use with organizational priorities
 - adding research use to existing departmental and staff meetings
 - integrating research use into existing organizational structures such as established committees and teams
 - building networks to foster mutual learning about research within and across districts.
- Facilitators and intermediaries can help bring different groups together and cultivate relationships.
- Engagement with research needs to go beyond a conversation and be linked explicitly to action plans.

Implications for Further Research

- The research design (measuring the change in agreement with particular bodies of research knowledge using interventions and pre-post design) is a complicated yet promising methodology to measure both research use and impact. Its value lies in moving away from assessing opinions to measures of actual knowledge and behavior.
- Future studies would need to:
 - Control the sample more to ensure that involvement in interventions corresponded to pre-post responses
 - Build more commitment from districts by identifying a leader within each district as condition of participation
 - Provide clearer direction on how interventions should be conducted to increase fidelity

Conclusion

- The picture around research use in education is not as bleak as some critics would suggest.
- Our data show that Canadian school districts are interested in making use of research to shape their work, and they have taken a number of steps in that direction.
- Canadian schools are fortunate to have committed and competent educators working hard to improve the lives of their students, and with considerable openness to the potential contribution of research to that work.
- Our data suggest that school districts could make this work more of a focus and more systematic and, in that way, could increase the impact of their efforts, perhaps with relatively little effort.