

# CONDUCTING RESEARCH THAT MATTERS

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The focus of our Faculty's inaugural journal on education a research and the public good addresses a timely and important issue given renewed debate governing the role and value of educational research in relation to practice. We say renewed because questions about the relevance of educational research for educators are not new. These contentious discussions are particularly pronounced in the US and the UK where major funding agencies now seek greater accountability for the dollars spent on education research. Such accountability has largely translated into a demand for more studies of a scale and magnitude large enough to demonstrate clear cause-and-effect relationships between applied, testable education interventions and improved student outcomes. The argument thus further holds that smaller experimental, correlational, and qualitatively descriptive studies can make only limited contributions to education policies and program development.

The distinction in the argument is not based purely on the merits of quantitative versus qualitative research, but of issues surrounding the size and magnitude of studies and whether findings reliably apply across diverse classrooms and populations. Our view is that distinguishing between large-scale statistically significant studies and smaller empirical or qualitative investigations creates an unnecessary tension between researchers, alienates research users, and establishes false dichotomies between research methodologies. Our argument is that the criteria for determining a study's value should be guided foremost by whether the work will have a direct and beneficial effect on students and on schools. Data gathering methods are then chosen according to that objective.

Below we describe how collaborative research models based on equitable school and university partnerships, regardless of study size or data collection methods, can bridge what Brown (2005) calls the theory-practice-gap. We also highlight two studies we have conducted, both done collaboratively with educators toward improving student outcomes, but differing significantly in purpose, size, and scope.

We use the notion of 'framing' our understanding of collaborative research since the field has yet to establish a widely held methodological definition. The literature does indicate, however, that collaborative studies are typically aimed at addressing

practical or “real world” problems that educators face, which, when investigated properly, allow for meaningful and transformative change to occur (Palincsar, 2005). To this end, educators and academics need to collaborate fully in identifying the research questions to be addressed and in designing how the study will be conducted. A crucial aspect of collaborative research is the need to sustain the endeavour over a time period long enough to ensure practices are transformed for the better and become entrenched, and student outcomes improve.

Collaborative research studies often differ in significant ways and are perhaps best understood if the collaborators’ relationship and their shared research purposes are positioned along a continuum. At one end reside studies that involve numerous practitioners and researchers in hands-on investigations aimed at gathering reliable data evidence on which to base large-scale education reforms. These studies require participant populations large enough to establish causality between tested interventions and increased student achievement, and ensure findings are generalizable across multiple educational settings. They also employ statistical data collection methods and are conducted over a time period long enough to show clearly that improvements are due to the interventions and not other side effects.

We have been involved in studies of this magnitude, most recently by working with 26 schools and nearly 4,000 children in kindergarten to grade two to determine whether closely monitoring early literacy skill development each year influences reading development (Sloat, et. al., 2007) . We assessed children’s grade-appropriate reading knowledge up to seven times a year to monitor whether learners were ‘on track’ with learning to read. Assessment results were then used by schools and districts to guide teaching and learning. The study’s purpose, design, and methods emerged collaboratively amongst all stakeholders over a full calendar year for a four-year implementation strategy that relied on statistical data and involved an immediate feedback loop to support practitioners and their students.

At the other end of the spectrum from these large-scale collaborations are smaller studies carried out by a minimum of one practitioner and one academic researcher. The size and scope of these investigations are such that they typically involve only a single classroom toward changing a specific teaching or learning practice, and they tend to rely on descriptive data gathering methods. Studies of this scope and nature are clearly not aimed at bringing about systemic change, but they are no less important when measured against the central criterion of improving students’ education outcomes.

A significantly smaller, yet equally meaningful collaborative investigation we have just concluded involved working with a single kindergarten teacher and her students. Our twofold aim was to implement a diagnostic data assessment system (as advocated for in education research and practice) so the teacher could monitor each

child's learning progress against defined grade-appropriate learning benchmarks and differentiate instruction as needed. Once the system was in place, we then worked alongside the teacher while also studying closely what issues and barriers both enabled and prevented her from using the individualized data monitoring system to guide each child's learning. Findings from this small study will provide a solid framework for a larger study to further our understanding of the research-to-practice gap in adopting data monitoring systems at the primary grade levels.

In this decade, increasing priority in the US is now being placed on issues of democracy and ethics in relation to education: the democratic right of every child to receive a quality education, and the ethical obligation of universities to contribute substantively to that effort (e.g., Catelli, 2006). While the argument is largely motivated by economics in terms of ensuring a highly educated population for America's long-term economic wellbeing, it is no less important to heed both the message and the growing momentum of that message. Faculties of Education in Canada will also soon be asked to become more focused in their teacher education programs, and more directly involved in strengthening our education systems. We maintain that collaborative research presents a viable method and an opportunity to help reach the achievement equity and overall success we want for our students.

## References

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