

The Importance of Educational Research

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Abstract

This article discusses the importance of research in education. Educational research can enrich our knowledge, promote teachers' practice and inform policy debates.

Introduction

It is not easy to understand the process of learning and teaching. Unquestionably, the success in education is influenced by many factors. Therefore, teachers need to keep informed of the latest research-based knowledge to fulfill their commitments to society. The important role of educational research is strikingly illustrated by the fact that every new widely-accepted idea for solving educational problems is evidence-based or research-based. Teachers should be both producers and consumers of educational research as it can enrich their knowledge, promote their practice and inform policy debates (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002; Langenbach, Vaughn, & Aagaard, 1994).

Educational Research Enriches Our Knowledge

Research is a vital component in education because it makes a substantial contribution to the knowledge that provides a scholarly basis for every educational activity. That knowledge is created through the researchers' description, prediction, improvement and explanation (Borg & Gall, 1989). Cresswell (2014) states that research improves the collective understanding of education by addressing areas where little is known, presenting more information for further investigations, expanding what is already known, and verifying previous findings. According to Gall, Gall and Borg (2006, p. 36), when studying a problem in education, different researchers tend to use different approaches; if teachers do not understand these approaches, they will not be able to develop a comprehensive understanding of the problem and what is known about it. In addition, the academic knowledge gained from research can help educators communicate and cooperate with other colleagues and researchers, and often there are lessons to learn from this knowledge sharing community.

English Language Education

In the field of English language education, research remains its decisive role in informing and enhancing the teachers' understanding of the language teaching and learning processes, socio-cultural impacts on these processes, and the most suitable repertoire to handle the unexpected problems. For example, Poon (2009) found that the major research themes in English language education in Hong Kong in the past three decades were centrally concerned with English Language Teaching (ELT) methodology, students' learning experience and strategies, teachers' attitudes and values, teacher training and qualifications, learning outcome and the influences of Medium of Instruction (MOI) policy on teaching and learning. As a young teacher of English as a foreign language in Vietnam, I constantly wonder how far my adopted methods reach the intended objectives and why many of my students seem to be unwilling to speak English. Our studies (Nhan & Lai, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2013) help me understand that teachers should not look for the best language teaching method, but rather the most suitable approach, design of materials, and set of procedures in a particular course.

Educational Research Promotes School Practice

Another crucial aspect of educational research is that it can facilitate school practice and at the same time improve any individuals who strive to enhance their own practice (Best & Kahn, 1998). Neither theory alone nor practice alone will result in effective teaching. One of the decisive factors in the success of education is the teachers' creative ability to effectively apply their theoretical background knowledge to their practice. The academic knowledge provided by educational studies can help teachers develop their pedagogic strategies and other necessary skills in helping students achieve the desired educational outcomes. If teachers' classroom performance is based solely on their own experiences without reflection, they may encounter a lot of difficulties and may not accomplish the intended aims and objectives. According to Kervin, et al. (2006), successful teachers keep reflecting on their practice and then use those analyses to shape their future practice. Ideally, a good practice must be well supported by tested theories. Many investigations in education manage to help teachers revise theories and then draw appropriate conclusions for their classroom practice. For instance, Creswell (2014) argues that while much of the educational research conducted before the Eighties is certainly unreflective of our increasingly heterogeneous learners, most of studies dated after that time help revise theories

and practice to reflect different student needs. Therefore, teachers should be flexible and innovative in adopting and adapting new theories or knowledge from educational research.

Educational Research Informs Policy Debates

One more principal reason that educational research is important is that it gives policy makers updated information to make decisions. According to Tierney (1995), the four audiences of your research are your colleagues, those involved in the study, policymakers and the general public. Shavelson and Towne (2002) state that educational research has made a tremendous impact on the shaping of American national policy, especially on the policies of the No Child Left Behind Act and the Institute of Education Sciences.

Research in education allows us to evaluate and reexamine the quality of all educational factors such as learners, teachers, textbooks, syllabuses and management, and then it provides a justification and rationale for decisions and actions. For instance, Stone (1994, p. 97), drawing from the data of ACER Word Knowledge Test, found that Hong Kong tertiary students had insufficient word knowledge skills, and because “the results of this study are consistent with general anecdotal and research evidence suggesting that the English proficiency of Hong Kong undergraduates is low”, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) was used as the exit test of English for Hong Kong tertiary students.

Moreover, sound research in education can show either a disagreement or consensus on debated issues; it can also reveal that some educational problem is still unsolved and thus suggests the necessity of policy reform. According to Poon (2009), the heated debate of MOI in Hong Kong has been brought up many times without any resolution and the Hong Kong government has adopted three different MOI policies since the late 1960s. The point is that the importance of bilingual education has not been realized. Poon (2008, p. 221), therefore, proposes that “Hong Kong should get rid of its old paradigm of viewing English-medium teaching as a colonial liability, but rather as a legacy in harmony with Chinese-medium teaching.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is incumbent on teachers to know how to find, interpret, critically evaluate and reliably conduct educational research on their own, in their real contexts. This should be an essential aspect of all educators’ professional life because research in education can add

significantly to their academic knowledge, reinforce their practice and provide policy makers with a lot of useful informed information. Obviously, research can produce better students, better teachers, better schools and better educational environments.

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