

Educational Research and Development

[1969, revised 1986, 1995, 2005, 2015]

Research and development activities that will assist teachers in meeting the educational needs of students and society are fundamental. Although some educational innovations result from intuition, optimal school improvement strategies are derived from the thoughtful application of research to teaching and learning processes. The challenge is to develop ways of using the findings of research to improve educational practice and policies in order to enhance student learning. This is increasingly true in the context of the growing complexities and global forces impacting education, schools and communities.

The Contextual Basis of Decision Making

Schools are complex environments in which multiple variables determine the applicability of particular research findings. As professionals, teachers recognize that research provides a rational basis for making evidence-informed educational decisions from the classroom to system level. Research activities that support the study of curriculum change, education finance and the overall structure and organization of education are essential to improving learning opportunities for students. Examining relationships among the various parts of the educational system and school communities can help identify gaps and overlaps in educational services and improve the capacity to respond to the learning needs of all students. Future educational needs can be determined from studies of social and economic change and demographic trends that provide the broader context for teaching and learning. For example, the needs of the teaching profession can be assessed from studies that focus on the effects of teacher education and on teacher supply, mobility, utilization, recruitment and retention.

Systematic and continuous planning in education is critical to educational decision making. Research studies improve planning by establishing benchmarks and making future projections. The teaching profession must be involved in this process and in determining the priorities and directions of research and development in general.

The Alberta Teachers' Association identifies and promotes the study of issues that are of direct concern to the Association and the broader educational community. In particular, the Association encourages appropriate agencies and institutions to undertake educational research that will enhance student learning, including factors that will improve teaching and learning conditions. As well, the Association actively pursues a presence in the global education research community to build capacity in key areas of policy development and analysis.

School Community Considerations

The impact of educational research and development on students and the classroom must be carefully considered. A range of legislative and regulatory frameworks guide research activity by university and school-based personnel. It is essential that educational research and development adhere to the highest principles of ethical conduct in protecting the interests of students and school communities.

As the voice of the teaching profession, the Alberta Teachers' Association has a responsibility to ensure that research and development activities do not impose undue demands on time or interfere with the primary responsibilities of teachers. Educational research and development must, whenever planned change is proposed, incorporate study of its impact on teacher workload and conditions of practice. In addition, teachers must be provided with time to plan for educational innovations before they are implemented. Teacher involvement initiated by both internal and external agencies must be carried out on a voluntary basis; provide school communities and participants with an opportunity to review the research design, methodologies and findings; and allow teachers to share in the benefits that may result from educational research activities, including peer and public recognition, curriculum development and related work in which they are directly involved.

A Collaborative Approach to Research

The building of fundamental theory in education requires a research program implemented on a coordinated, long-term and continuing basis. A sustained and systematic approach to research requires resources that create individual and institutional capacity.

One key place for basic educational research to occur is in the professional faculties of the universities. Faculties of education need to coordinate, finance and encourage research vital to the teaching profession. Universities must accept responsibility for providing adequate finances for educational research through budgetary allocations. The faculties themselves must strive to demonstrate to all those involved in education that the research component of their work is essential to the professional education of teachers.

Through a variety of research initiatives, and national and international networks, the Association supports research as leverage for positive change. As well, classroom teachers are increasingly becoming involved in action- or inquiry-based research. More and more, teachers are being recognized for their valuable contribution to the redefinition of the knowledge base for teaching and to the alternative ways of exploring approaches to teaching practice. Many are involved in action- or inquiry-based research—an ongoing, practical, self-reflective process that critically examines teaching practices and the theories on which they are based—in order to improve both personal practice and the education of students.

The Alberta Teachers' Association believes that teachers need both time and resources to engage in professional inquiry and research activities. Financing and staffing for basic research projects remain crucial. In order to ensure sustainability, there must be an assurance of sufficient financial resources from the provincial and federal governments, with additional funds provided from private sources. This goal could be achieved through the development of a provincial framework that brings together the assets and expertise of the research community, which would assist in the planning and coordination of research activities.

Evidence-Informed Policy and Practice

Teachers must be involved in and take on key leadership roles in the planning, implementation and evaluation of innovation of educational practice. Systematic pilot studies, action research and school improvement initiatives should be employed to assess and refine innovations before they are considered for general use or to influence policy decisions. These efforts at applied research should challenge ideas and theories to confirm or build on the findings of previous research, testing educational processes and methods that are required to implement the innovation. The change processes and methods that are required to implement an innovation on a large scale must be evaluated in terms of both their desirability and sustainability by teachers and the collective body of the profession.

Cooperation among all education partners is essential to fostering an orderly and positive approach to innovation and to the diffusion of information based on research. The teaching profession constantly strives to bridge the gap between theory and practice. As key partners in the educational research community, the profession will continue to be an authoritative voice in applying research findings to school and system contexts.