How and *why* educators use research and evidence: Insights from the Monash Q Project

Integrating research into Australian classrooms is rapidly becoming a strong priority for those in education. References to the 'use of research' and 'evidence-based initiatives' are now a feature in various state-level school improvement frameworks (e.g., Department of Education & Training [DET] Victoria, 2021), national guidelines and standards (e.g., Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2018, 2019), and professional learning approaches (e.g., Bastow, 2019). There has also been an emergence of new evidence-focused education organisations, the most notable being a national evidence institute – Australian Education Research Organisation [AERO] – whose mission it is to work with teachers, school leaders and other education stakeholders to "generate high-quality evidence, make high-quality evidence accessible and enhance the use of evidence in Australian education" (AERO, 2021).

Despite these advances though, very little is known about the challenges and opportunities around how educators find and use different research and evidence in practice.

The Monash Q Project is a 5-year partnership between the Paul Ramsay Foundation and Monash University to improve the use of research in Australian schools. Currently in its third year, the Q team recently interviewed and surveyed nearly 500 educators from 414 schools across four Australian states (New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria, and Queensland) to build on our conceptual understandings of quality research use (Rickinson et al., 2020a, 2020b) and investigate:

1. what types of research and evidence are valued by educators;
2. how and why they source different kinds of evidence;
3. whether and how they use research in their practice; and
4. what they believe "using research well" in practice means.

Overwhelmingly, educators told us that they wanted to use research well in their practice and believe in its value, particularly its connection with improving student learning outcomes. However, there are challenges to increasing and improving research use in practice.

Educators use and value a range of research, information and evidence

Overall, educators use a variety of research and evidence in practice. They also consult many sources to access this research and evidence, including: social media, colleagues both within and external to their schools, governments and official bodies, as well as academic databases. Survey responses indicated that nearly 100 different evidence types, sourced from approximately 25 different channels, were used by educators in the last 12 months to support a school improvement initiative. Research-related sources and information were used significantly less frequently though when compared with other types, such as student data or policy and curriculum documents.

Whilst educators had various reasons for sourcing and using different evidence types, there were several clear themes that emerged. These themes highlighted the importance of: the credibility of both the source and the evidence type, particularly whether the evidence had academic backing; whether the evidence included proof of impact; and contextual relevance, in terms of how well the evidence aligned with school plans and individuals' teaching practices.

"Quality research use occurs when decisions are aligned with research and are carefully considered in the context of the school." Teacher, Independent P-12 School, Victoria.

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Research is used in a variety of ways

Despite research-related sources and evidence types being used less frequently when compared with other types, nearly three-quarters of all educators (70%) indicated that they had used research in the last 12 months. When research was used, it was done so in various ways. Educators reported using research in direct instrumental ways (e.g., 67% used research to design or plan a new program or initiative), as well as in indirect conceptual ways (e.g., 55% used research to better understand an issue or problem). Research was also used individually (e.g., 72% used research to improve their knowledge of a topic or subject, with 67% using it to reflect on their own practice) and collectively with others (e.g., 76% used research to discuss best practice with colleagues). Contextual relevance again was a clear reason for using research to support decision-making and practice improvement.

Challenges to increased and improved research use

Educators, particularly teachers, indicated that there were challenges to increased and improved use of research in practice. These challenges may account for why teachers appear to use research less in practice (61% reported using in research in the last 12 months) when compared with school leaders (91%). Challenges faced by teachers centre on their beliefs in both the value of research and in their school's support of research use, as well as their own research-related skills. For example, approximately 60% of all teachers (compared with 18% of school leaders) indicated that their own knowledge and experience should be prioritised over the use of research to improve practice. Teachers also reported significantly less confidence or ability than school leaders to: find and source relevant research; judge research quality; analyse and interpret different research for use; and initiate discussions with colleagues. Nearly two-thirds indicated that they had low levels of trust in research due to perceived bias.

Whilst time and access issues were a concern for all educators, nearly 80% of teachers felt that they did not have sufficient access to research, and 85% felt that they did not have adequate time to engage with research properly. Just over 50% of teachers believed that their schools were accountable for not specifically making sufficient time available to use research.

Using research well involves "having the time to access new ideas" and then "having the time to digest and implement it". Teacher, Catholic Secondary School, Victoria.

Supporting educators to improve their use of research in practice

Educators' survey and interview responses provide important cues for teachers, school and system leaders as to how research use can be increased and improved in practice.

Foremost, **educators themselves need to be supported as critical consumers of information**. Having the right skills to find, assess and use research in practice, as well as the confidence in these skills was deemed necessary by educators. Having an open and questioning mindset and a belief in the value of connecting research with improvements in practice were also important. All education sector stakeholders have roles to play in supporting educators to develop their skill bases, as well as ensuring that school cultures are supportive and encouraging of experimentation with research-informed practices.

Research itself also needs to be contextually relevant, credible and practical for educators to want and be able to use it in practice. Researchers, policy-makers and research organisations need to be cognisant of educators' needs in this regard. Simply disseminating research or evidence that is assumed to be contextually relevant may not be sufficient. Research availability and accessibility must also go hand-in-hand with increasing educators' awareness of credible and trustworthy research sources, as well as their research-related skills.

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Last, **the challenge of available time needs to be addressed**. Helping educators to find the time to engage with research well is an issue for all education sector stakeholders to understand and resolve – it is not up to teachers alone to solve this. Those schools where staff indicated that they were using research well, had different ways of making dedicated time available to find and interpret research collectively, that were then linked to school performance planning and reporting processes. These types of actions need to be leveraged across the education system.

The Q Project's findings continue to build and shape deeper understandings of what it means to use research well in educational practice. Our publications about educators' insights to date can be found here. With these in mind, we encourage different educators and system stakeholders to join us in discussions about quality research use and connect with the project to contribute to improving the use of research in Australian educational practice.

The Monash Q Project is part of the Faculty of Education at Monash University. The project is led by Mark Rickinson and Lucas Walsh, and includes researchers Jo Gleeson, Connie Cirkony, Blake Cutler and Mandy Salisbury.

For more information visit our website here or follow us @MonashQProject on Twitter.

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