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University Preparation and the Research/Practice Divide

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A major disconnect between education research and practice is widely acknowledged by both school practitioners and university-based researchers. Evidence and commentary relative to the disconnect are articulated in four articles in the April 2007 issue of Phi Delta Kappan under the theme The Research/Practice Divide. The authors explained, decried, explored, and sought to close the divide; none expressed doubt concerning the existence of the divide in teacher education or education leadership. Davis asserted (2007, p. 569), “It appears that comparatively little of what is written and thought about by scholars and policy makers actually has any appreciable impact on classrooms or drives durable system-wide reform efforts.”

Reasons for the divide vary. University professors are often viewed by school practitioners as distant from the realities and complexities of schools. The language used to communicate research, the frequent dearth of PK-12 experiences, and perceived arrogance of university scholars are widely cited as contributing factors to the notion that their work is not useful for those in the trenches. Additionally, the values of schools of education typically emerge from a higher education culture that is viewed as non-responsive to the needs of practicing teachers and administrators (Murphy, 2007).

Practitioners, both teachers and administrators, are perceived as sharing the responsibility for the gap between research and its application to practice (Davis, 2007). Teachers and administrators contribute to the divide by seeking simple solutions in addressing complex problems, by being unacquainted with the scholarly literature, and by misapplying research. Practitioners are widely regarded as ill equipped to function as informed consumers of research.

Several of the reasons for the research/practice divide provide possible avenues for bridging the divide. Duffey and Kear (2007) recommend professional development for practitioners that clearly articulates the nature of education research and the necessity to apply research-based practice to particular students and particular situations.

Zirkel (2007) discovered that superintendents and professors of education leadership read different journals – with the exception of Phi Delta Kappan and Educational Leadership. He suggested ways to better align the readings of professors and superintendents. Davis (2007) attributed the research/practice divide to both academics and practitioners. He suggested that practitioners be wary of the findings of university professors, many of whom have lost touch with the realities of schools, learn the finer points of research design from experts or by reading refereed journals, and apply the findings of research with care. By becoming informed users of research, practitioners can avoid exaggerated attributions of causality, misconceptions about chance, generalizing from perceptions and self-reported data, misapplying research conducted in one setting to a different setting, and various other misuses of research. In short, practitioners are expected to become more sophisticated users of research.

The challenge for practitioners to become better-informed consumers of research is daunting. Initially, in order to read and understand research accurately, an individual must possess a basic understanding of the fundamentals of research: the research problem, sampling techniques, measurement
instruments, research design, and data analysis. Additionally, the practitioner must be able to apply the fundamental knowledge in evaluating the research. The evaluation must exceed a simple critique of an individual research report to the extended evaluation of research on a particular topic or problem. The consumer of research must be able to evaluate a variety of designs, findings, and conclusions to enable decision making in a given school setting.

Considerable time and study are required to attain a basic understanding of the fundamentals of research. Additional effort and study are necessary to apply the knowledge as a competent evaluator of research. This presents a major challenge given the limited time available to practitioners and the complexities of statistics and research. The authors contend that this ability is much more likely to be acquired through formal coursework rather than individual reading, informal channels, or school district professional development.

Attainment of both outcomes is highly improbable within the context of baccalaureate programs that are primarily concerned with preparing competent beginning teachers. Doctoral programs in education typically have extensive requirements in research and statistics. However, only approximately one percent of licensed public school personnel hold a doctorate, making the impact on PK-12 education minimal (Digest, 2004). Furthermore, approximately six percent of public school teachers hold specialist degrees or certificates of advanced graduate study. In contrast, about forty-one percent of all public school teachers hold Master’s degrees. This implies that to produce a significant pool of competent research consumers among practitioners, coursework would need to be delivered at the Master’s degree level.

Thus, the question arises, is the coursework required in Master’s level education programs in the United States sufficient to enable practitioners to become informed consumers of research? A literature review failed to disclose studies addressing the issue. Consequently, the focus of this study was to ascertain the extent to which Master’s level coursework prepares PK-12 school practitioners to become competent consumers of education research.

The colleges and universities selected for this study were generated from a National Center for Education Statistics data file (College Navigator, 2007). The population consisted of all 1076 colleges and universities identified by NCES as offering Master’s programs in education. A random table of numbers was used to select 50 colleges and universities from the population for inclusion in the study.

Official websites for each college and university were examined for program information. Master’s level education programs designed for PK-12 school practitioners were identified and examined for coursework that supported the two desired student outcomes a) an understanding of research processes and strategies, and b) the ability to use the knowledge as an informed consumer of educational research. Typical graduate level coursework included:

Introductory educational research, advanced educational research, introductory statistics, advanced statistics, and consumer research (any course designed to assist students in becoming informed consumers of research).

Based upon course requirements, programs were classified using three levels:

No Preparation None of the coursework required
Minimal Preparation One course required*

Exceeds Minimal Preparation Two or more of the courses listed above
*One 3 semester credit hour course or the equivalent

"Exceeds Minimal Preparation" was used to classify two or more required courses to avoid differences of opinion that might result by using “Adequate”, “Satisfactory”, or “Optimum”, as levels of preparation. The authors contend that both practitioners and researchers will almost universally accept the classification of one course as being “Minimal Preparation” for becoming an informed consumer of research, suggesting something less than “Satisfactory” or “Adequate”. The authors chose to avoid the more intricate discussion concerning the number or nature of courses that might constitute adequate or satisfactory preparation. The recognition and acceptance of the classification “Minimal” level coursework would be instructive for the research/practice divide discussion. There should be little disagreement over the assertion that those who do not have education research knowledge or skills cannot be expected to be informed users of the same.

The number of required research related courses ranged from 0 to 3 in Master’s degree programs among the 50 colleges and universities in the sample. The requirements did not appreciably vary across programs and degrees at 33 of the institutions. At 17 of the colleges or universities, requirements varied by degree program, department, and area emphasis. The level of preparation for the 50 institutions, using the greater number of required courses (0-3) for the 17 colleges with intra-institutional differences, was as follows: “No Preparation” 8 (16%), “Minimal Preparation” 33 (66%), and “Exceeds Minimal Preparation” 9 (18%). Expressed differently, 82% of the institutions were classified as “No Preparation or Minimal Preparation”. Using the lower number of required courses (0-3) for the 17 colleges with intra-institutional differences, 88% of the 50 institutions were classified as requiring “No Preparation or Minimal Preparation”. The authors found it interesting that of the 9 institutions that require 2 or more research related courses 5 are located in California, 2 in Texas, 1 in Pennsylvania, and 1 in Ohio.

The authors considered the possibility that the results obtained by using institutions of all sizes and types in the population may have resulted in a disproportionately low number of required research related courses. Consequently, a random sample of 10 was taken from the 50 designated research institutions, one for each of the 50 states in the United States. Only one of the universities was classified as “Exceeds Minimal Preparation”. Nine (90%) of the institutions required “No Preparation or Minimal Preparation”.

The use of websites in determining program requirements lacked a certain degree of sophistication. More definitive information may have been obtained through the use of surveys or interviews. Education research outcomes can be achieved through other required coursework such as subject specific methods courses. However, a more precise study would unlikely alter the most relevant and clear finding: only minimal coursework is directed toward preparing school practitioners as competent consumers of education research.

A reaction to the presence of only minimal required coursework in research within Master’s degree programs might be to establish criteria for an “adequate” level of preparation and then call for widespread program changes. Such changes would not readily occur since current curricula reflect the values of professors and their institutions, efforts to meet various state and national standards, and
accommodation to the needs and wishes of PK-12 school districts. Altering any of these would require significant cultural changes and political influence that entail years of effort.

There is little debate concerning the need for school practice to be based on research that establishes best practice. The need to do so is as widely accepted as the divide itself. The efficacy of educational research is well established and an essential element of progress in any profession or discipline Gies (1984). Perhaps a more realistic approach to the research/practice dilemma can be found by shifting the focus away from expecting all school practitioners to be highly skilled in research methodology, interpretation, and application to practice. After all, the fundamental issue is the wise use of research, not practitioners’ abilities. The field of medicine may provide a more effective, efficient, and realistic model for achieving the intended outcomes.

Medical practitioners, as consumers of research, report many of the same limitations as practicing educators: time constraints, language used by researchers, difficulty of generalizing results, and implications for professional practice. Physicians, pharmacists, and other medical practitioners rely extensively on support organizations or support groups to collect, analyze, and synthesize research studies. Similarly, school practitioners might well consider a call for better support from existing organizations or groups such as research universities, professional associations, corporate entities, state departments of education, or the United States Department of Education as a means of closing the research/practice divide. Riehl’s (2006) comparison of medical research and educational research is informative for this discussion.

Another promising solution to the divide is the resurrection of differentiated staffing models that had their genesis in the 60’s and 70’s. Teams of teachers were organized on the basis of role level, preparation, experience, and competence that applied the “principle of individual differences” to teachers as well as students. Some positions might well require the doctorate, evidence of functioning as an exemplary practitioner, and the ability to cite research literature relative to curriculum, instruction, evaluation, and other dimensions of school-based practice. These leaders would be equipped to promote a research based approach to the instructional arena, thereby positively impacting the research/practitioner divide (Gies, 1984).

The need for formal, reliable, and ongoing research information presented in a form functional for practitioners continues to persist in a place called school. The current emphasis on evidence and scientifically based research to support education initiatives adds urgency to the call. Ultimately, the desired outcome is for all schools to operate on the basis of the best research available with its practitioners guided by this research.

Teaching, like any of the learned professions, depends upon a continuing body of research utilized by practitioners to advance the field of practice. While teaching will continue to remain both an art and a science, teaching must be understood as a means to an end. That end is to ensure successive generations of children and youth whose abilities are enabled so that they may function as competent individuals, capable citizens, and successfully pursue chosen career paths. Competent citizens represent the foundation for any advancing society. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be (Jefferson, 1816).”

References


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