



Research@Work

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Authors

The report was written by Sandra Mahar.

This project was managed by the Research Branch, Office for Policy, Research and Innovation.

Additional material and editing

Sabdha Charlton; University of Melbourne: Lyn Yates

For more information contact:

Sandra Mahar

Research Manager

Email: research@edumail.vic.gov.au

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Overview

The Government's vision for the education system is to provide all Victorians with learning experiences that will lead to a fulfilled and secure future in a prosperous and cohesive society. Effective educational policy requires comprehensive and well-supported information. Information and advice that are substantiated by rigorous research play a key role in guiding and developing Victoria's education system.

The Department aims to model the exemplary use of research through incorporating reflection, inquiry and evaluation within all of its operating modes. In this way the education and training system and its educators will assist students, schools and the wider community to become more informed and critical users of information.

Research@Work has been developed to support the professional needs of Departmental staff whose responsibilities include undertaking and/or commissioning research and developing initiatives and policy. The paper will also be relevant to education researchers working in schools and other education institutions, and classroom practitioners undertaking action research to improve teaching and learning.

The Department considers that improved engagement with research across all levels of Victoria's education and training system, from policy and initiative implementation to classroom teaching practices and curriculum development, will result in improved outcomes for all Victorian students.

Research@Work sets out to explain:

- the role and importance of research in education;
- the context and current debates about what types of research should be done in education; and
- strategies and starting points for involvement in research.

A bibliography and resource list is also included at the end of this paper.

Research@Work has been developed by the Research and Development Branch within the Office of Learning and Teaching. The Branch plays a major role in ensuring that high quality strategic research is embedded in Departmental practice, from policy and initiative development through to the implementation of innovative work practices across all sectors.

The Research and Development Branch actively works with other parts of the Department of Education and Training to ensure that research influences and enhances directions in learning and teaching. One of the explicit functions of the Research and Development Branch is to 'integrate a research based approach into Departmental planning' (Department of Education and Training, 2005).

The role and importance of research in education

Research in Education

Research is commonly understood as the practice of investigating an area of interest in order to gather more information to better understand it. However, this definition includes many everyday activities that gather information, such as having a conversation, surfing the internet or reading a book. More formally, an activity is recognised as ‘research’ when it is conducted in a way that has *systematic form* and *methods* that are accepted by a *publicly acknowledged source of expertise* as a valid way of producing knowledge. At a minimum, research requires that an act of investigation will have been done thoughtfully and in a way that follows practices and methodologies accepted by the wider research community.

In the Victorian education system, research is undertaken to inform policy and improve education practices, processes and outcomes. Educators and administrators are users, commissioners and generators of research. Techniques and methodologies range from large-scale longitudinal studies (for example, the Early Years Literacy Program), to individual practitioner research (for example, a teacher’s action research project on classroom practices that support personal learning styles). Information sought in educational research may range from pure statistics to highly interpretive and qualitative information about the feelings and experiences of students, staff or members of the school community.

Recent debate, both in Australia and overseas, has focussed on the increasing requirements for—evidence-based research and policy. The impetus for evidence-based research in education arose when advances observed in other fields, such as medicine, were not as evident in education. Research in medicine and sciences has developed within a framework of thinking that is known as the ‘scientific method’. This framework has become the predominant model for rigorous research investigation. It remains the favoured and accepted model for research undertaken by academic and government institutions, and it is typically seen as the approach necessary to obtain research information that is objectively verifiable.

Over recent decades, the capacity of the scientific method to adequately reflect the subtleties of human experiences and concerns has been challenged. In some cases this criticism has led to a greater recognition and inclusion of qualitative (subjective) sources of information into science-based research methods. In other cases, criticism has resulted in the rejection of the whole scientific method paradigm for areas of human investigation and the establishment of alternative frameworks for considering and researching human issues, particularly social concerns.

Users of educational research need to understand that varying and often competing philosophical frameworks may underpin different approaches to educational research. Cresswell (2003) notes that although philosophical ideas remain largely ‘hidden’ in research they still influence the practice of research and thus need to be identified.

The image of science-based research limited to objective, observable, quantitative information has been modified over recent decades, particularly through debates in the social sciences about its limitations in explaining human conduct. Recognition of the role of

cognitive and emotional factors has been given greater place in mainstream scientific research, with the gradual incorporation of more qualitative methods of investigation. However, science-based research approaches continue to rest on a deductive approach in which theory can be tested objectively through an explicit logical chain of reasoning.

In contrast, rival approaches to research frequently emphasise personal and social meaning as the starting point for human research. Such frameworks accept multiple simultaneous meanings and validate personalised perspectives or ‘narratives’.

Whilst philosophical and theoretical differences between science-based and alternative research approaches are broadly reflected in the use of quantitative and qualitative research methods, this distinction is only a partial one. Various ‘mixed method’ research approaches have sought to combine scientific rigour with intuitive and holistic approaches.

The field of education has been influenced by these debates and education research now accepts an array of legitimate frameworks for investigating the complex human issues involved in education. Irrespective of whether a scientific or alternative framework of explanation is used, it is only when research embodies rigorous and disciplined thinking and processes that its findings can be said to constitute an ‘evidence base’ that can be confidently used to inform decision-making and action. The identification of relevant research questions and use of appropriate methods are central to achieving valid and useful research findings.

High quality research is characteristically subjected to intensive review by peers who are expert in the same field of inquiry. Typically the process of publication in reputable journals provides peer review or other forms of expert scrutiny and critical appraisal for claims made by researchers. The difference between ‘mere opinion’ and rigorous research is not found in the simple application of method alone or in the nature of the issues to be addressed. Rather it is the rigour, logic and systematic approach that exemplify high quality research of whatever the philosophical orientation. Effective education workers need to be able to continuously examine and evaluate claims made for a large and changing array of educational approaches, programs and ideas.

Characteristics of ‘good’ educational research

The Department has historically used and encouraged varied types of research. Accordingly, the rigour, clarity and usefulness of research used by the Department is more important than its theoretical orientation.

The increasing commitment of governments to ‘evidence-based research’ will require systematic attention to the technical quality of research and greater emphasis at the planning level to reviews of research that have already been completed. Researchers need to understand what is already known, and build on this.

Some of the important and broadly accepted dimensions of research quality cover:

Clarity of purpose

Clarity of purpose is central to conducting research. Researchers and those commissioning research need to be confident that the central questions to be addressed, and the purposes the research findings are intended to serve, have been identified. Achieving a clear statement of purpose may need some discussion and negotiation with key stakeholders. In an academic context, research that develops some new insights into an issue may be valued in its own

right. In a public policy context, such as education, there is likely to be more emphasis on application of the research to achieve certain outcomes or improvements.

Appropriateness for intended audience

Researchers need to ensure the research they conduct meets the needs of their audience. Yates (2004) highlights the importance of context in judging the usefulness and quality of a piece of research. For example, the strengths of an article written for an academic journal may include peer review, academic language and innovation. These factors are likely to be less relevant to research for policy purposes which may require a focus on government priorities, possibly a short time-frame, non-academic language and ‘value for money’.

Methodology

Explicit attention needs to be given to how the research questions are to be addressed, that is the methods that will be employed to obtain and analyse information. The choice of an appropriate research methodology involves the informed selection of recognised strategies, techniques and methods. These methods or strategies need to be described in detail and their application justified in terms of underlying theory or rationale and appropriateness to the issue at hand.

Major differences in methodology are likely to be apparent among different research traditions according to their associated philosophy of knowledge. Science-based traditions generally consider research as a means of uncovering a reality that does exist. Most qualitative and post-modern traditions in research view the researcher as ‘constructing’, not just uncovering what they find. Many ‘gender’ researchers believe ‘voice’ is important: for example who gets to speak, and how that is represented. ‘Collaborative action research’ views knowledge as something that is built in action. The choice of a particular methodological approach for any piece of research needs to be explicitly justified by the framework of theory and philosophy from which it derives and the questions the research is seeking to answer.

Validation

Research using a science-based approach typically tests the validity of an existing theory by making; and then testing predictions; developed from that theory. Validation of more subjective or qualitatively based research is usually expressed in terms of its capacity to enhance meaningful narrative in an area of social, economic or political activity.

Clarity, meaning and the progressive extension of knowledge are common aims of research irrespective of orientation. Research may have a number of outcomes. It may:

- support an existing theory or framework of thinking;
- lead to the refinement of a theoretical position; or
- lead to the refutation of part or whole of a theoretical approach.

If research is well conducted it will contribute to human knowledge, regardless of the outcome.

Research in education, as in any other field of knowledge, demonstrates validity through the quality of thought and theoretical explanation, careful design and use of research standards that are accepted as exemplary within the framework of knowledge being used. Educational

research that has established validity and quality will serve needs ranging from guiding school decision-making and practice to contributing an educational perspective to broad interdisciplinary knowledge.

Utility

The coherence and clear expression of research outcomes will directly reflect their usefulness, particularly to Government in improving educational policy and practice. Accordingly, it is important for the Department to ensure that any research undertaken or commissioned represents value for public money. The ‘bottom line’ for education research is that it significantly contributes to the development of policy and programs that assist teachers and students in Victorian schools and training institutions.

Research at work

How to use research at work

This section of the paper explores the specific ways in which research can be embedded into the work practices of Departmental staff. There are four main ways that Departmental staff commonly engage with research in their work:

- carrying out research;
- commissioning and managing research projects;
- surveying the existing research in an area for the purpose of developing and writing policy and initiatives; and
- using research to improve teaching or work practice.

There are a number of generic skills required to effectively engage with research. Perhaps the most important is a grasp of the knowledge area and theoretical position underlying the research. This grounding is vital for undertaking, commissioning, using or understanding research. Two interconnected activities support this grounding:

- Clarification of the central questions or purposes that need to be addressed by the research – e.g. what needs to be known, who needs the information, what use will be made of it
- Examination of existing knowledge relevant to the research question/s. This covers:
 - a critique of current and past investigations that provide information of the area under question; and
 - a review of relevant research literature.

These interrelated processes are best run concurrently, enabling a progressive refinement and clarification of the issues to be examined through research and a grasp of the current ‘state of the art’ knowledge available from local and worldwide sources.

Other skills essential for the effective development and use of research include an ability to: -

- determine appropriate methodologies and research designs
- understanding and ability to interpret data – both qualitative and quantitative
- manage externally contracted research
- write research reports
- interpret research outcomes and use research for applied and policy purposes
- judge and evaluate research quality.

The following section examines the major areas that are essential to understanding, constructing, reporting on and using educational research. They are as follows:

- Conducting a Literature Review

- Developing Research Questions
- Methodology
- Data Collection and Analysis
- Research Writing
- Evaluation

Conducting a literature review

Departmental officers who undertake, commission or use research need to ensure that key questions and issues are addressed and that the research is clearly grounded in purpose, context and underlying theory. Although this does not necessarily require specialist research training, it does require a careful grasp of key issues associated with the prospective research, as well as awareness of its relevance to Departmental purposes. The key to achieving a critical awareness of significant issues and existing findings in an area of research is an ongoing review of relevant research and theoretical literature. The literature review is therefore not a first or separate activity, but part of a process of developing and clarifying research questions for investigation.

In its simplest form, a literature review is a critical reading of the research literature relevant to a project. Such a reading may provide an introductory overview of key issues, including the current consensus of findings and the gaps of knowledge. This awareness can inform and help to scope further research needed by the Department. A formal literature review usually comprises a written report that brings together and critically analyses the literature on a topic. The review assists in forming an argument that will then support a proposed research project, policy or initiative. Such reading provides background context and awareness of current issues, including gaps of knowledge in an area of interest.

Besides providing background and contextual knowledge in a particular area, a critical literature review can help to identify an appropriate direction and rationale for further research. An awareness of international developments in research helps to ensure the relevance and best research practice of projects undertaken by the Department. Whether a literature review is informing the direction of policy or of future research, a careful review of the research literature will provide a critical and balanced analysis of the particular topic or issue.

Silverman concludes that it is important to use a literature review to focus on and draw from studies that inform the particular research issue or problem under consideration. (Silverman 2004). The literature review will assist in the identification of:

- key academic and information sites, journals and other resources;
- key databases;
- known experts in the field;
- associated areas that are related to the topic of interest;
- metadata on key concepts, themes, etc.;
- apparent ‘gaps’ of research knowledge in the area of interest; and

- the policy/political dimensions and implications surrounding the area of interest.

Skills in reading research and policy literature include ‘skim reading’ and paying attention to the beginnings and endings of chapters to get a sense of whether the content is potentially relevant. Some points to keep in mind while reading are:

- What assumptions does the reader bring to the research?
- What assumptions does the researcher bring to the research?
- What factors may be influencing the research e.g. the researcher’s stake, funding sources, personal values and beliefs, current government policies?
- Is the research context relevant to possible research being considered e.g. subjects of the study, institutional settings, etc?
- How convincing are the arguments provided?
- How sound are the technical details of the research? Was the methodology appropriate, given the theoretical and philosophical framework of the research?

It is important to note that findings from a piece of qualitative research are not generalisable – they are by nature context specific and value-laden. This does not mean that the principles cannot be applied elsewhere; they may be tentatively applied as long as the contexts are explored and acknowledged.

The research report should inform the reader of the outcomes of the literature review and where current research fits in the broader spectrum of research.

Developing research questions

As the review of relevant research literature progresses, potential research issues are likely to become clearer and can eventually be formalised into the research questions that will direct the project. Although this step may seem straightforward, it can be one of the most challenging steps in the research process. Research questions define the scope of the study, determining matters which are to be given focal attention and matters that are to be excluded.

Research can be a powerful, but often costly tool for guiding educational decision-making and policy development. The choice of research questions therefore requires stringent care and justification. Staff advising about, or developing project briefs and tenders for commissioned research must carefully consider the questions that are to be addressed through research.

In the case of qualitative research, Creswell (2003) suggests that questions should begin with words such as ‘what’ or ‘how’, as these will convey an open and emerging design, whereas ‘why’ questions are more relevant to quantitative research (reflecting a cause and effect approach).

For commissioned research, Departmental staff need to know the contractor’s knowledge and expertise in the specified area; the assumptions and biases the contractor may bring to the research; and the reasons why specific directions are selected; as these issues are integral to the development of research questions.

Methodology

Educational research is a broad field that draws from a variety of methodologies ranging from humanities-based research to scientific randomised controlled trials. The Department recognises that different methodologies have different strengths, but particular methodologies may be better suited to understanding the complexities of learning and teaching. Quantitative, qualitative and mixed research methods are all likely to find a useful place in educational research.

The most crucial factor when choosing a research method is to ensure the research framework and methodology is appropriately selected, clearly justified and expertly managed. Those conducting the research need to possess or be able to access appropriate expertise. Key considerations include:

- what level of training is required for particular research strategies?
- who will be supporting the researcher in their work?
- how much education/training will be needed to complete the project?
- what is within the researcher's skill and abilities?
- what is most accessible to the researcher? and
- what is possible within the time frame?

The researcher will also need to consider:

- the level of generalisability sought from the research;
- what depth, breadth and reliability will the audience require and expect from this research;
- the limitations of the selected research strategy; and
- the final audience for the research.

Quantitative research

Quantitative research gathers data that can be counted, evaluated, statistically tested and measured. Such research is premised on the '...hypothetical-deductive approach of experimental designs that requires the specification of main variables and the statement of specific research questions *before* the data collection begins' (Patton 1987).

Within education, quantitative research is used to gather objective information to assist schools to improve student outcomes. For example, student achievements in literacy and numeracy are recorded on an annual basis by individual schools. When this information is collated and presented centrally it provides a state-wide perspective that allows individual schools to compare their results against 'like' schools and statewide benchmarks.

It should be noted that quantitative methods are not restricted to basic information but can be applied to complex conceptual information based on clear theoretical grounds.

Qualitative research

‘I think metaphorically of qualitative research as an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colours, different textures, and various blends of material. This fabric is not explained easily or simply.’ (Creswell 1998)

Research methods within qualitative research focus on holistic, subjective meaning and experience. Through interviews, focus groups, observations and case studies, researchers examine the experiences of individuals and groups. Sources of information in qualitative research include analysis of documents and programs in which the researcher seeks to explore the ways individuals, systems and organisations behave and respond within the educational setting.

Qualitative research places the researcher within a naturalistic setting, such as a school. Within this context, a school-based researcher will attempt to make the school ‘visible’ through a series of depictions or representations that help them to better understand the school. The quality of interaction between the researcher and the participants is integral to the quality of qualitative research. Emphasis is placed on the participants’ terms of reference rather than the researcher’s constructions and expectations of the outcomes of the research.

Qualitative research, as seen by its advocates, is able to capture and include multiple interacting factors, deviations, unexpected variations, unforeseen side effects and any significant effects.

Practitioner research

Practitioner research is an example of a qualitative research approach commonly used in education, especially by teachers. It is also known as insider research, self-study, inquiry and action-research. Practitioner research deliberately accepts the researcher as ‘an active constructor of knowledge rather than a passive consumer of it’ (Abdal-Haqq 1995).

Smyth and Holian believe that one of the benefits of practitioner research is the ability to solve practical problems with others in real situations (Smyth and Holian 1999). At the school level, practitioner research is seen as having the potential to foster collaborative work practices that can lead to improved learning and teaching practices, and ultimately, improved outcomes for students. Teachers are well positioned to undertake school-based research. Researchers who are also educators bring a unique perspective to research because of their knowledge in relation to:

- the educational institution and its culture;
- how the educational institution operates at both formal and informal levels;
- knowledge of sensitive issues within the educational institution;
- working relationships and alliances at institution and community levels; and
- the background, needs and interests of their students.

Issues associated with practitioner research include:

- practitioner bias in gathering and analysing data;
- the researcher holding a position of power or authority (e.g. having the ability to coerce others); and

- interpretations of situations to reinforce existing or preferred practice.

Such issues can be addressed by the researcher having a range of strategies in place. These could include:

- sensitive and ongoing monitoring of the environment to ensure that current and emerging issues are appropriately addressed;
- working with an external researcher, supervisor or colleague who can provide critical and independent feedback;
- addressing any feelings of anxiety that develop within the workplace;
- drawing on and sharing the ‘voices’ of the school – teachers, students, parents and stakeholders; and
- capturing situations that are relevant to the research through innovative practices including multi-media presentations including photographs, videos, music, performances; and -
- using the technique of ‘triangulation’ to gain perspectives from several groups.

Comment on quantitative and qualitative research methods

As previously noted there are major differences in emphasis and underlying approach to knowledge between quantitative and qualitative research methods. Equally, there have been continuing moves within research communities to find ways of drawing on the strengths of both approaches. The main onus on those undertaking or using research is to ensure that the research approach and methods chosen are clearly justified and undertaken by researchers with appropriate expertise.

Data collection and analysis

The research design should specify in detail the information that is to be obtained and how it will be collected and analysed. It also needs to ensure that the proposed information can be obtained practically, ethically and in a timely way by those having the appropriate training and skills. The validity of the information depends on the manner in which it is obtained and used. Information obtained through research needs to be interpreted and analysed in ways consistent with the study’s orientation and theoretical framework, and conducted by researchers with the relevant skills and knowledge. There are well recognised techniques and methods for the analysis of various types of research information

Research Writing

The researcher is responsible for communicating the results of a research project in written form, usually a report. This report may be accompanied by technical information that supports its findings, if this has been requested. Two vital considerations in the preparation of a research report are its key findings and its intended audience. The type of report required will be reflected through its:

- structure, e.g. executive summary, main report, recommendations, appendices and technical information;
- tone/language – whether a formal or a personalised voice is used;

- format – whether an internal, ‘glossy’ or online publication;
- length; and
- referencing style.

It is important to consider what length of report is required (a couple of pages, or a detailed document); how much of the technical details need to be included; the usefulness of highlighting findings and recommendations as an Executive Summary in a longer report; and the language used in the report. For instance, a conversational tone may be suitable for a practitioner audience, but for formal policy documents a more detached and formal tone may be more appropriate.

In addition to a written report, those undertaking or commissioning research might also be requested to provide policy advice, or a reflective paper to share the findings that have emerged from the research.

Evaluation

Evaluation involves judging the success of an endeavour in meeting the goals set for it. Judgements about success depend on having clearly articulated goals as part of the explanatory framework of the research.

Evaluation is integral to a research design that specifies intended outcomes and the ways these will be measured. Therefore methods of evaluation need to be ‘built in’ to well-designed research from its inception.

A recently commissioned Departmental report on tools and strategies that measure school reform provides detailed information on evaluation (Department of Education & Training 2005). This report discusses the traditional use of summative assessment and the move to more formative styles of evaluation aimed at improving program effectiveness. It stresses the importance of evaluating the impact of the research at appropriate stages and ensuring that the evaluation is linked to research goals. A cyclical model of review and development is also presented and each of its components is discussed in detail. Information about this report is included in the Resource List of this paper.

Conclusion

A large number of Departmental staff and associated educational research stakeholders need to undertake, commission or use research information. This paper was developed by the Research and Development Branch to support its aim of integrating a research based approach into Departmental planning. It is intended to provide information and insight into the processes and responsibilities that are part of the Department’s commitment to using high quality research to guide educational decision-making and policy development.

Research is often not conducted in a perfect world but by identifying and understanding some key principles we can maximise the outcomes and benefits of our research.

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Resource list

Research websites

Association for Qualitative Research (AQR), Australia

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/aqr/>

Association for the Supervision and Development of Curriculum (ASCD), USA

<http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/index.jsp/>

Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE)

<http://www.aare.edu.au/index.htm>

Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)

<http://www.acer.edu.au/>

Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), OECD

http://www.oecd.org/document/27/0,2340,en_2649_33723_2516571_1_1_1_1,00.html

Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC), USA

<http://www.eric.ed.gov/>

NCVER Useful Websites for VET Information, Australia

<http://www.ncver.edu.au/pubs/usefulwebsites.pdf>

National Education Research Forum (NERF), UK

<http://www.nerf-uk.org/>

National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), UK

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/index.cfm>

New Zealand Council for Education Research (NZCER)

<http://nzcer.org.nz/>

Research of the Month (ROM), UK

http://www.gtce.org.uk/PolicyAndResearch/research/ROMtopics/childrens_schooling/

Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE)

University of Glasgow

<http://www.scre.ac.uk/>

The Research Informed Practice Site (TRIPS), UK

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/>

US Department of Education Research and Statistics (including Institute of Education Sciences)

<http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/landing.jhtml?src=rt>