

## Editorial

### Special Issue on Research Impact in Education

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Amid increased calls for research use in education policy and practice are increased calls for researchers and their research to have impact—an issue experienced globally. After several decades of the study of research use and knowledge utilization, there is a shift in how education research is talked about, and, increasingly, how its evaluation is considered. Motivated by observations of this shift and the recent emergence of research impact in the context of U.S. education, this special issue focuses on scholarship that advances thinking about research impact both conceptually—in the presentation of frameworks and strategies—and empirically—through case studies across multiple contexts.

The first piece in the collection is an editorial monograph, “Wordplay or Paradigm Shift: The Meaning of ‘Research Impact’,” that draws on the testimony of thought leaders in the U.S. education system, offering a conceptual frame for the issue and highlighting several themes and tensions associated with research impact. These issues were front and center in the call for proposals and are addressed in the collection of articles that constitute this special issue.

#### A conceptualization of what it means for research to have impact

Across this volume, impact is taken up in different ways, from changes in policy and practice to changes in student outcomes. In “Exploring Teachers’ Conceptual Uses of Research as Part of the Development and Scale Up of Research-Informed Practices,” **Jane Flood** and **Chris Brown** describe an intervention aimed at creating research-informed teaching practice. This study offers evidence of how research can impact prac-

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tice through multiple case studies, and also how research-informed teaching may impact students. In “Mediated, Evidence-Informed Practice as Impact,” **Joel Malin** offers professional use as a way of thinking about impact, drawing on the work of Edutopia, a widely known and influential education intermediary in the U.S. Utilizing survey data from Edutopia, he links educator responses to different conceptualizations of research use and resulting reported changes in practice, which he argues is high up on the hierarchy of sought-after impact. **Amanda Cooper**, **Samantha Shewchuk**, and **Stephen MacGregor**’s article, entitled “A Developmental Evaluation of Research-Practice Partnerships and Their Impacts,” offers a deep dive into multiple evaluation frameworks for Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs), an increasingly popular strategy for research impact. Drawing on the literature, document analysis, and interviews from four cases, the authors consider metrics for and dimensions of impact in partnership work. Perhaps not surprisingly, findings surface diverse conceptualizations of impact both within and across RPPs, including differences among stakeholders.

### **The research that is intended to have impact**

Centered in this issue is a particular form of knowledge, research evidence, with the goal of understanding how this type of knowledge can impact educational outcomes. Most of the articles featured here attend specifically to research evidence: Flood and Brown document engagement with research literature in the design of practices; and, **Stephen MacGregor** and **David Phipps**, in “A Networked Approach to Research Impact,” examine a network focused on the mobilization of research knowledge from universities via the case of Research Impact Canada. However, this volume features alternative framings for knowledge that generates impact. For example, **Sofya Malik**’s multiple case studies of knowledge mobilization organizations in Ontario, featured in “Knowledge Mobilization for Impact,” include those that promote practice-based knowledge, and Malin’s case study of Edutopia is a rich example of the use of integrated research and practice-based knowledge, a signature feature of that intermediary’s work. These cases can help to extend thinking about research impact by situating research among many types of information or knowledge that support policy and practice.

### **How research impact is operationalized and observed**

The theme of measurement occurs across all studies. Malik, for example, finds that impact is a consistent struggle across cases, with organizations identifying conceptual, measurement, and logistical challenges capturing whether or not their efforts generated intended changes. As a result, impact is most often a measure of outputs. Similarly, Cooper and colleagues find 123 metrics or indicators used to capture a wide range of the dimensions of impact in partnership work. Others, such as Malin and MacGregor and Phipps, utilize self-reported measures to capture varied aspects of impact, acknowledging the value of this approach for some but not all aspects of impact. In addition to method, however, the collection also acknowledges that the observation of impact is complicated by the varied ways in which impact might be conceptualized, which links back to the first theme. In particular, the differences between instrumental and conceptual use, described in several manuscripts, including Flood and Brown and Malin, raise challenges for observing and capturing research impact.

## What conditions contribute to impact (or the lack thereof)?

This collection addresses a wide range of factors. MacGregor and Phipps tackle this issue directly, focusing on capacity building within higher education institutions in the Research Impact Canada network. They provide a rich case study evaluation of this multi-institution network, offering lessons about the impact of network learning on knowledge mobilization practice and also about the ways in which impact-focused missions are manifested in roles and systems in diverse institutions. Here, impact is a long game with significant institutional investment in capacity building toward this end. Moving to the micro level, Flood and Brown's work with classroom educators with a specific research use intervention highlights a different set of capacity-building activities anchored in theories of action and engaging with local conditions and needs. Others provide insight related to stakeholders. For example, Cooper and colleagues discuss impact in the context of multi-stakeholder RPPs.

Taken together, these articles offer a wide range of perspectives, creating an opportunity to reflect on what is being learned from these varied contexts and projects, and to inform the growing dialogue about research impact in the context of education. Further, as an open access journal, we hope that this special issue, and others to come, creates an opportunity for the sharing of ideas across research, policy, and practice boundaries, and engagement in dialogue about the role of research in strengthening educational opportunities and outcomes in the years to come.