

Education Leaders' Perspectives on Special Education Research: A Priority Setting Study

Jennifer Baumbusch, Jennifer E.V. Lloyd, Yu Chyi David Liou,
& Danjie Zou, University of British Columbia

Abstract

Research priority setting makes knowledge users integral to the development of research agendas. The purpose of this study was to explore educational leaders' perspectives on research priorities in special education. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with leaders from 60 public school districts in British Columbia, Canada. Seventy-one participants representing 43 districts completed the survey. The results of a pre-set list of questions indicated that the top three research priorities were grade-to-grade transitions, high school graduation, and time to designation. In terms of designation, or student categorization, participants were most interested in "Intensive Behaviour Interventions/Severe Mental Illness." When asked about other priorities, participants identified types of support and interventions. These results have implications for developing research agendas that can support informed decision-making around policy and programming.

Keywords: Knowledge mobilization; Research priority setting; Special education; Teachers

Introduction

In an era of knowledge mobilization, referred to in some disciplines as knowledge translation, engaging knowledge users throughout the research process is an impor-

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tant aspect of the research enterprise. Knowledge mobilization is defined as the “reciprocal and complementary flow and uptake of research knowledge between researchers, knowledge brokers and knowledge users” (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 2015, par. 1). Knowledge users encompass a broad range of audiences, including educators, students, parents, and policymakers. Scholars have described the ineffectiveness of traditional, conventional, linear models of knowledge uptake, where there is a unidirectional transfer of knowledge from producers to users (Campbell, Pollock, Carr-Harris, Briscoe, Bairos, & Malik, 2014). Rather, more relational and collaborative models of knowledge mobilization have been found to have more impact on both research and practice (Baumbusch et al., 2008; Briscoe, Pollock, Campbell, & Carr-Harris, 2016; Campbell et al., 2014; Cooper & Shewchuk, 2015). Increasingly, it is recognized that as part of this multidirectional approach, knowledge users can, and should, be engaged at the very earliest points of the research process. As Ruth Swanwick and Marc Marschark (2010) wrote, “we currently lack channels for communication from teachers to researchers about the priorities in education and from researchers to teachers about scientific progress . . . research often fails to address educational priorities, knowledge gained from relevant investigations is rarely translated into practice, and decision-making is often governed by administrative expedience rather than evidence” (p. 217).

Research priority setting (RPS) is one approach that can be used to include knowledge users at the early stages of the research process. A key objective of RPS is to establish consensus among stakeholders (that is, knowledge users and researchers) in order to direct research efforts (Bryant, Sanson-Fisher, Walsh, & Stewart, 2014). The actual methods for generating priorities are diverse, ranging from calls for submission, stakeholder questionnaires and surveys, and workshops to nominal group technique, Delphi technique, and public input sessions (Bryant et al., 2014). The recognized strengths of RPS are that it can ensure inclusiveness, comprehensive information gathering, clear and focused criteria, and transparency (Bryant et al., 2014; Tomlinson, Chopra, Hoosian, & Rudan, 2011; Viergever, Olifson, Ghaffar, & Terry, 2010). Researchers ought to consider common limitations associated with each method (e.g., surveys, Delphi technique) when choosing an RPS approach. While RPS is useful in many research programs, it is particularly helpful in situations where there are numerous opportunities for analyses, such as the analysis of large-scale population-based administrative databases. Such databases provide unprecedented opportunities to explore censuses of data collected for a variety of administrative reasons, thereby allowing for insights into diverse and often wide-ranging variables and subpopulations contained in the databases (Lloyd, Zou, & Baumbusch, 2020). Inviting knowledge users to engage in RPS in such research helps ensure that the results ultimately resonate and apply to policy and practice.

To date, the use of RPS in educational research has been minimal, although researchers do acknowledge the importance of knowledge mobilization in general (McNeely, Morland, Doty, Meschke, Awad, Husain, & Nashwan, 2017; Pollard & Pollard, 2004; Read, Fernandez-Hermosilla, Anderson, & Mundy, 2015; Swanwick & Marschark, 2010). Clea McNeely, Lyn Morland, S. Benjamin Doty, Laurie Meschke, Summer Awad, Altaf Husain, and Ayat Nashwan (2017) used RPS to identify research

priorities that promote school success for new immigrant and refugee youth. Their study demonstrated that users wanted research that would be of practical use in program development and delivery for this population. Robyn Read, Magdalena Fernandez-Hermosilla, Stephen Anderson, and Karen Mundy (2015) employed RPS activities to identify school improvements in the developing world. In particular, they utilized RPS to indicate priorities for funding allocation within a broad research agenda. Both of these studies highlight the benefits of including knowledge users in helping to determine priorities that will have an impact “on the ground.” A review of the literature did not produce any studies that utilized RPS in special education research.

Special education is a distinct field of inquiry and practice within the larger discipline of education. While many definitions of special education exist, essentially this approach refers to “the process of educating children with disabilities in regular classrooms of their neighbourhood schools – the schools they would attend if they did not have a disability – and providing them with the necessary services and support” (Rafferty, Boettcher, & Griffin, 2001, p. 266). The RPS presented in this article was part of a larger study investigating the educational trajectories of students across multiple categories of need in special education (Baumbusch & Lloyd, 2016). In British Columbia, where this study was conducted, and more generally in Canada, there is a lack of population-based research about students with special education needs (Towle, 2015). The study entailed analyzing data for over 44,000 students with special needs designations enrolled in British Columbia’s public education system. Research areas for the study were based on data routinely collected by the province’s Ministry of Education. Hence, the research topics in this RPS study were limited by the existing administrative data. The purpose of the RPS study presented herein was to explore educational leaders’ perspectives on research priorities in special education. This study elucidates educational leaders’ opinions about future directions for researchers and decision-makers who study and create special education policy and programs.

The specific research questions were:

1. Given a pre-determined set of research areas based on available population-level administrative data, what are educational leaders’ research priorities?
2. Which specific special education student groups (here, called designations) are educational leaders most interested in learning about through population-based research?
3. Beyond the available administrative data, what additional population-level research priorities do educational leaders identify?

Method

Design and setting

This research was part of a larger study investigating the educational trajectories of students across multiple categories of need in special education in British Columbia. To conduct an RPS study suitable to the type of population-based data used for the larger study, a cross-sectional survey design was employed to assess educational lead-

ers’ research priorities in special education. The survey was conducted between December 2017 and April 2018. The study was conducted in British Columbia, the third most densely populated province of Canada’s 10 provinces and three territories. British Columbia has 60 public school districts. Population-level student data are collected at the provincial level for a range of educational variables. Such variables include an annual designation for students who have special needs (see Figure 1). Hence, these “pre-set” variables became the areas of focus for the priority setting exercise. The administrative database can be analyzed for each designation group separately and/or the total population of students identified as having special needs.

Figure 1. British Columbia Ministry of Education’s 12 special needs designations

Letter code	Special needs designations
A	Physically dependent
B	Deafblind
C	Moderate to profound intellectual disability
D	Physical disability/chronic health impairment
E	Visual impairment
F	Deaf or hard of hearing
G	Autism spectrum disorder
H	Intensive behaviour interventions/severe mental illness
K	Mild intellectual disability
P	Gifted
Q	Learning disability
R	Moderate behaviour support/mental illness

Survey procedure and participant recruitment

An initial version of the survey was developed based on the available population-level variables and designations. This version was then piloted with 25 individuals as part of a workshop at a conference about community inclusion for individuals with disabilities. The pilot group included educators, parents of students with special needs, and community support workers. They provided feedback on the clarity and relevance of the survey questions. This feedback was used to refine the survey and create an online version. The finalized survey was placed on the online platform Fluid Surveys (SurveyMonkey, 2020).

Emails were sent to superintendents and special education leaders in each of the 60 school districts ($n = 140$) introducing the project, informing them of the survey, and requesting their participation. These emails contained a link to the survey itself, as well as an invitation to forward the survey to anyone working in their district who might be interested in participating. Participants were also offered the choice of completing the survey in pen-and-paper format. In the latter case, a survey, along with a pre-stamped return envelope, was emailed to the participant. The survey was designed to be completed in approximately 15 minutes. In total, 65 participants completed the survey online, and six did so by paper.

Participation in the survey research was voluntary. All survey responses, whether completed online or on paper, were confidential and anonymous. The only “identi-

fier” participants were asked to provide was the specific school district they worked in (to provide the researchers with an idea about the scope of the survey responses). There was also a separate space—not linked to the survey responses—in which participants could include their name and email address if they wanted to receive the results of the study. Written approval to undertake this survey research was obtained from the University of British Columbia’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board.

Participants

In total, 71 participants completed the survey, representing 43 (72%) of British Columbia’s 60 public school districts. There were between one and 10 participants for each participating district, but the majority of districts (74.4%) had one participant only.

Participants held numerous different positions. The majority of respondents identified as district learning support service providers ($n = 18$, 25.4% of 71), principals ($n = 12$, 16.9%), district superintendents ($n = 10$, 14.1%), and school teachers ($n = 9$, 12.7%). Given the breadth of positions, the 71 participants’ positions were grouped as follows for analytic purposes: district administrators ($n = 32$, 45.1%), district learning support service providers ($n = 22$, 31.0%), and school staff ($n = 17$, 23.9%).

Participants had great variety in their years of professional experience, ranging from five years to 40 years, with a mean of 24.0 years ($SD = 8.6$). As such, the 71 participants’ years of experience were grouped as follows (presented in order of prevalence): 20–29 years ($n = 33$, 46.5%), 30 or more years ($n = 21$, 29.6%), 10 to 19 years ($n = 12$, 16.9%), and nine or fewer years ($n = 5$, 7.0% of 71). Taken together, over three-quarters of participants had 20 or more years of educational experience.

Participants’ highest level of education also varied, but the majority of respondents had a master’s degree ($n = 60$, 84.5%). Other respondents indicated they held a bachelor’s degree ($n = 6$, 8.5%) or a doctorate ($n = 4$, 5.6%), and one participant left this entry blank ($n = 1$, 1.4%). This grouping (bachelor’s, master’s, doctorate) was used in the analyses.

Finally, the majority of participants identified themselves as a “special education specialist” ($n = 49$, 69.0%), in contrast to those who said they were not ($n = 22$, 31.0%). No definition of special education specialist was provided, as the aim was to ascertain what percentage of the survey participants considered themselves to be highly experienced or trained in special education, specifically.

Research priority setting survey and analytic variables

The overarching aim of the survey was to gain information about educational leaders’ research priorities in relation to the population-level educational journeys of students with special needs based on the available data. In the first part of the survey, participants were asked to rank eight specific research questions—crafted to capture several different and quantitatively measurable aspects of the educational journeys of students with special needs—in terms of their perceived importance (i.e., what participants thought was of greatest value to help inform special education). These eight different research questions were:

1. Grade-to-grade transition: At what pace, over time, are students with special needs and disabilities progressing through grade levels? (Kindergarten through Grade 12, for example.)
2. Homeschooling and independent schooling: What number of students with special needs and disabilities are homeschooled and/or independently (privately) schooled?
3. Standardized assessments: How are students with special needs and disabilities performing on standardized tests, such as provincial examinations?
4. High school graduation: Are students with special needs and disabilities completing high school? And, if so, with which credential?
5. Time to designation: What is the number of school years students with special needs and disabilities are in the school system prior to receiving a special needs designation? (See the following section for more detail.)
6. Consistency in designations over time: Do the specific special needs designations individual students receive tend to stay consistent over time? Or do they change over time?
7. Change in severity over time: What is the effect on students who have a special need or disability that increases in severity over time? Or decreases in severity over time?
8. Sociodemographic differences: What are the results of the aforementioned questions, disaggregated by students' gender? Indigenous status? English as a second language status?

In the second part of the survey, participants were asked to indicate which of the 12 special needs designations the British Columbia Ministry of Education routinely tracks they would be most interested in having the eight research questions address. The 12 designations, with the Ministry of Education's accompanying letter code, are described in Figure 1.

Participants could check multiple designation(s). They also had the choice of selecting "no preference," "all of the designations," or "other, please specify" (which included space for a handwritten response). For more about the ministry's special education designations, please refer to the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2016).

In the third part of the survey, participants were invited to include any additional research questions—beyond those posed by the researchers in the first part of the survey—they thought the researchers had failed to capture with respect to the educational journeys of students with special needs. Out of the 71 participants, 39 (54.9%) included an entry in this space.

Analytic plan

For the quantitative survey data, a series of descriptive analyses was applied, including frequency tables, cross-tabulations, and histograms—all of which were performed in SPSS Version 25 (IBM Corp, 2017). Content analysis was used for the

qualitative data from the open-ended question. This is a more descriptive approach to qualitative analysis (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Responses were categorized and the number of similar responses were counted to determine which additional research areas the participants wanted prioritized.

Results

Quantitative analyses

The quantitative analyses began by exploring histograms for each of the eight “importance” variables for all 71 participants’ available data. As half of these variables’ distributions appeared to be skewed, skewness statistics were computed for the eight variables. Four of them showed evidence of moderate skew: -0.73 (homeschooling and independent schooling), -0.90 (standardized assessments), 0.90 (high school graduation), and 0.73 (time to designation). Because of this skew in these variables, median rankings (rather than mean) are reported for the results. A summary of the median versus mean statistics was created for the total sample (see Table 1).

Table 1: Median and mean “importance” rankings for each research question (all participants)

	Median ranking	Mean ranking	n
Grade-to-grade transitions	4	4.2	71
Homeschooling and independent schooling	6	5.8	70
Standardized assessments	7	5.9	69
High school graduation	2	2.9	71
Time to designation	3	3.3	69
Consistency in designations over time	5	4.8	71
Change in severity over time	5	4.6	70
Sociodemographic differences	4	4.1	71

Note: The lower the median/mean, the higher the importance ranking (1 = most important, 8 = least important).

Irrespective of the measure of central tendency used, four variables stood out as having the lowest (most important) rankings: grade-to-grade transitions, high school graduation, time to designation, and sociodemographic differences. In contrast, the variables with the highest (least important) rankings were: homeschooling and independent schooling, standardized assessments, consistency in designations over time, and change in severity over time.

Although the purpose of the survey was to describe its overall findings, and not to explore specific group differences in the medians of each of the variables’ rankings, a series of independent samples median tests was run: one for the position group, one for the years of experience group, one for the highest level of education group, and one for the special education specialist question. The results of these various tests indicated that, across groups, there was no significant difference in the median rankings for any of the variables, except for standardized assessments in the position group analysis ($p = .03$). (The statistical significance is revealed upon review of the underlying frequency data: district administrators and district learning support services ranked standardized assessments from 1 to 8 in importance, whereas school-

level staff rankings ranged from 3 to 8 in importance, with no one scoring it a 4). Because, however, the emphasis of this study is its overall descriptive aspects, the median rankings are not only presented for all participants (Table 1) but also by the position group (Table 2), the years of experience group (Table 3), the highest level of education group (Table 4), and the special education specialist question (Table 5). The similarities and differences across groups and research questions are synthesized in the Discussion section.

Table 2: Median “importance” rank for each research question by the position group

	District administrators		District learning support service providers		School staff	
	Median ranking	<i>n</i>	Median ranking	<i>n</i>	Median ranking	<i>n</i>
Grade-to-grade transitions	3	30	5	22	4	17
Homeschooling and independent schooling	6	31	6	22	6	17
Standardized assessments*	6	30	6	22	7	17
High school graduation	2	32	1.5	22	2	17
Time to designation	3	30	3	22	3	17
Consistency in designations over time	5	32	5	22	4	17
Change in severity over time	5	31	5	22	4	17
Sociodemographic differences	4	32	3.5	22	5	17

Notes: The lower the median, the higher the importance ranking (1 = most important, 8 = least important). *Medians are statistically significantly different across groups ($p = .03$). The statistical significance is revealed upon review of the underlying frequency data: district administrators and district learning support services ranked standardized assessments from 1 to 8 in importance, whereas school-level staff rankings ranged from 3 to 8 in importance, with no one scoring it a 4.

Table 3: Median “importance” rank for each research question by the years of experience group

	9 or fewer years		10 to 19 years		20 to 29 years		30 or more years	
	Median ranking	<i>n</i>	Median ranking	<i>n</i>	Median ranking	<i>n</i>	Median ranking	<i>n</i>
Grade-to-grade transitions	6	5	4	12	3	33	4	21
Homeschooling and independent schooling	6	5	6	12	6	33	6.5	20
Standardized assessments	7	5	7	12	6.5	32	6	20
High school graduation	2	5	2	12	1	33	3	21
Time to designation	2	5	3	12	3	32	3	20

Table 3 (continued)

	9 or fewer years		10 to 19 years		20 to 29 years		30 or more years	
	Median Ranking	<i>n</i>	Median Ranking	<i>n</i>	Median Ranking	<i>n</i>	Median Ranking	<i>n</i>
Consistency in designations over time	3	5	5	12	5	33	4	21
Change in severity over time	3	5	5.5	12	5	33	4	20
Sociodemographic differences	7	5	4	12	4	33	3	21

Note: The lower the median, the higher the importance ranking (1 = most important, 8 = least important).

Table 4: Median “importance” rank for each research question by the highest level of education group

	<i>Bachelor’s</i>		<i>Master’s</i>		<i>Doctorate</i>	
	<i>Median ranking</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Median ranking</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Median ranking</i>	<i>n</i>
Grade-to-grade transitions	6	6	4	60	4.5	4
Homeschooling and independent schooling	7	6	6	59	7	4
Standardized assessments	7	6	6	59	7	3
High school graduation	3	6	2	60	2	4
Time to designation	3.5	6	3	59	2	3
Consistency in designations over time	3.5	6	5	60	4.5	4
Change in severity over time	2.5	6	5	59	2	4
Sociodemographic differences	4	6	4	60	3	4

Notes: The lower the median, the higher the importance ranking (1 = most important, 8 = least important). One participant left their highest level of education blank.

Table 5: Median “importance” rank for each research question by special education specialist

	<i>Yes, a special education specialist</i>		<i>No, not a special education specialist</i>	
	<i>Median ranking</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Median ranking</i>	<i>n</i>
Grade-to-grade transitions	4	49	4	22
Homeschooling and independent schooling	6	48	6	22
Standardized assessments	7	47	6.5	22
High school graduation	2	49	3	22
Time to designation	3	47	3	22
Consistency in designations over time	5	49	5	22
Change in severity over time	5	48	4	22
Sociodemographic differences	4	49	4	22

Note: The lower the median, the higher the importance ranking (1 = most important, 8 = least important).

Participants were then asked to indicate which of the 12 special needs designations the British Columbia Ministry of Education routinely tracks they would be most interested in having the eight research questions address. The frequencies (percentage) of special needs designations endorsed by all participants are presented in Table 6, in descending order of the percentage of endorsements.

Table 6: Frequency (%) of special needs designations endorsed by all participants

Letter code	Special needs designations	Frequency of endorsements	% of all participants (n = 71)
H	Intensive behaviour interventions/severe mental illness	44	62.0%
G	Autism Spectrum Disorder	41	57.7%
Q	Learning disability	39	54.9%
D	Physical disability/chronic health impairment	30	42.3%
C	Moderate to profound intellectual disability	18	25.4%
K	Mild intellectual disability	18	25.4%
	(All of the designations)	18	25.4%
R	Moderate behaviour support/mental illness	15	21.1%
A	Physically dependent	12	16.9%
F	Deaf or hard of hearing	12	16.9%
B	Deafblind	9	12.7%
E	Visual impairment	9	12.7%
P	Gifted	5	7.0%
	(Other, please specify)	3	4.2%
	(No preference)	2	2.8%

Notes: Participants could check all options that applied. Results are presented in descending order of percentage.

The three most endorsed special needs designations were: (H) Intensive Behaviour Interventions/Severe Mental Illness (62.0%), (G) Autism Spectrum Disorder (57.7%), and (Q) Learning Disability (54.9%). In contrast, the three least endorsed special needs designations were: (tie between) (B) Deafblind (12.7%) and (E) Visual Impairment (12.7%), and (P) Gifted (7.0%) (see Table 6). Because of the small frequencies for several specific special needs designations for the total sample, disaggregated results are not presented here (e.g., results for specific groups).

Qualitative analyses

While 39 (54.9%) participants responded to the open-ended question, their responses actually generated 62 unique comments about additional research questions related to students with special needs. As presented in Table 7, the categories of responses show that educators are most interested in the effectiveness of specialized supports and interventions for students with special needs. This is followed by focused questions about time to designation, which was one of the questions included

in the quantitative portion of the survey. Not surprisingly, participants are curious about the relationship between additional funding for students with special needs and outcomes, as well as the impact of K–12 education on postsecondary and post-school life. These and all of the categories reflect important areas of research to educational leaders.

Table 7: Qualitative categories, sample sizes, and data exemplars

Category	<i>n</i>	Data exemplar
Types of support/interventions for students with special needs	11	What sorts of remediation (small group, one-on-one, reading support) are offered after elementary school? What technologies are effective in supporting students with varying challenges across the curriculum?
Time to designation	7	What is the impact of access to diagnosis healthcare? Did a delay in the diagnosis of the learning disability and inadequate interventions at an early age play a role in the co-morbidity of the Intensive Behaviour Interventions/Severe Mental Illness designation?
Funding for special education	6	How does government funding affect student success? How is the school district's use of funding related to educational outcomes?
Post K–12 life	6	How many students progress to a postsecondary program? How can we study trajectories of students with special needs after they leave the K–12 school system (as young adults)?
Socio-economic status	6	What is the impact of poverty? What is the role of socio-economic status (poverty) on outcomes for students with special needs?
Student mental health	6	What is the link between anxiety and learning and executive functioning? What is the impact of trauma on students' educational trajectories?
Designation-specific questions	5	Are special needs related to cognition or behaviour the biggest barrier to educational journeys? How do a math learning disability (LD), reading LD, or other LDs differ?
Home and family life	5	What is the relationship between parent advocacy and student success? What home supports are available, what relationships do students have with school from home?
Specialized programming for students with special needs	5	What are the limitations of attempts for full inclusion?
Teacher education	4	What are teacher perceptions of self-efficacy around diverse learners? How does each district work to support teachers, build their qualifications, and refresh them?
Classroom/school conditions	3	How does class size impact learning?
Educational assistant support	2	How does additional educational assistant support impact learning?
Rural versus urban differences	1	What regional differences are there for students with special needs (geographic differences, rural/urban, inner-city demographics)?

Discussion

This study is among the first to utilize RPS to develop a research agenda in educational research and, more specifically, for population-based research about students with special needs. Presented with a pre-determined list of research areas based on available data, participants prioritized grade-to-grade transitions, high school graduation, time to designation, and sociodemographic differences, while de-prioritizing homeschooling/independent schooling and standardized assessments. There were also notable similarities in research priorities disaggregated by participant group. When grouped by position, years of experience, highest level of education, and self-identification as a special education specialist, participants ranked high school graduation and time to designation as *most* important. The doctorate group indicated change in severity and the district administrators group indicated grade-to-grade transitions as additional priorities. Over half of the participant groups prioritized grade-to-grade transitions and sociodemographic differences in addition to high school graduation and time to designation. All but one of the participant groups ranked homeschooling/independent schooling and standardized assessments as *least* important. A notable exception was the nine or fewer years of experience group, which indicated standardized assessments and sociodemographic differences as least important.

The top research priorities identified by educational leaders reflect their decision-making roles in educational systems. Grade-to-grade transitions, which involve either moving students with special needs through their grades at a “typical” pace (i.e., one grade per school year) or retaining students in a grade or moving them into transitional classrooms remains a debatable topic (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). By prioritizing this area first, educational leaders may be indicating the need for research to further examine what systems of delivery best support the educational journeys of students with special needs. High school graduation, which was ranked second, is a key “success” outcome of K–12 education. In the United States (which is referenced in the absence of available British Columbian or Canadian data) in 2016, graduation rates for students with disabilities (65.5%) continued to be behind the rates of students without disabilities (86.6%) (DePaoli, Balfanz, Atwell, & Bridgeland, 2018). Past research has indicated that students with special needs who have a high school diploma are more likely to be employed and/or attend postsecondary school than those who do not (Schifter, 2016). Hence, having information about high school graduation can provide valuable insight into how well K–12 education is serving students with special needs.

This study offers insight into the categories of students with special needs that educational leaders would like to know more about. In terms of student-specific designations, participants chose “Intensive Behaviour Interventions/Severe Mental Illness,” “Autism Spectrum Disorder,” and “Learning Disability” to be of greatest research interest. In contrast, they were least interested in the “Gifted,” “Visual Impairment,” and “Deafblind” designations. Interest in Autism Spectrum Disorder and learning disability is not surprising, as they likely represent the largest groups of students. In 2014, the prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder in the United States was reported to be one in 59 children aged eight years (Baio et al., 2018). In 2011–2012, the prevalence of learning disabilities among children aged 3–17 years old was estimated at eight percent (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015). However, the

identification of “Intensive Behaviour Interventions/Severe Mental Illness” as the top choice is compelling, especially in light of emergent evidence that the rate of mental illness among young people is growing (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). A systematic review indicated that interventions for children and youth are largely focused on parents and home life (Kato, Yanagawa, Fujiwara, & Morawska, 2015). However, educators are on the front-line of working with children and youth who are experiencing severe mental illness and, therefore, require evidence-informed programs and tools to work with these students in their classrooms. These results suggest that educational leaders desire further research to support their efforts in this area.

The qualitative portion of the study also illuminated areas of priority for educational leaders and has methodological considerations for using RPS in special education. In comparison to the ranking questions, which were restricted to pre-determined choices, the open-ended question allowed respondents to articulate their research priorities based on their experience and knowledge. This data collection strategy may be more closely aligned with a core intention of RPS: ensuring that knowledge users have an unhindered opportunity to recommend priorities. Importantly, the top priority of educational leaders, which relates to interventions, speaks to the question, “is what we are doing making a difference?” It challenges researchers to ensure that they are measuring outcomes and reporting to those who participate in their work. Other responses reflected some of the available data (e.g., funding, sociodemographic factors). These priorities also offer an opportunity for researchers to bridge the gap between knowledge users and data stewards. Researchers can return to the data stewards with the research priorities to investigate whether such data exist or could be pursued.

For the open-ended question, the priority that emerged related to the types of interventions and supports available for students with special needs, and their effectiveness. This priority reflects the importance of evaluation in special education programming and the need for research to support evidence-informed strategies in environments where students with special needs are integrated into mainstream classrooms. While some of the priorities linked to areas in the ranking portion of the survey (e.g., funding, sociodemographic factors), educational leaders clearly identified interest in post K–12 life. Research, particularly involving large administrative databases that can be linked through unique identifiers, could offer a potential pathway to answering questions about the life-course of people with special needs and disabilities. Another important area identified by educational leaders is related to the impact of teachers and educational assistants on learning, and the concomitant professional development required. Overall, the open-ended question showed that educational leaders can offer novel contributions to the development of research agendas.

This study contributes valuable insights into the role of RPS in developing research agendas in educational research and the broader importance of knowledge mobilization in the research enterprise. This approach to research, particularly early in the process, affords those who use the research greater input into study development. This also greatly benefits researchers, who ought to be aiming to have their work integrated into policy and programming in addition to traditional academic dissemination. A multi-directional approach to knowledge mobilization has the potential to address gaps in communication that have been previously identified

(Cooper & Shewchuk, 2015; Swanwick & Marschark, 2010), thereby benefitting educators, students, and researchers alike.

Limitations

This study has focused on one geographic area (British Columbia, Canada), which limits the generalizability of the results, as the delivery of special education—and the related terminology—varies somewhat by jurisdiction. The restricted qualitative data prevented a more fulsome exploration around prioritization choices. Future research should include more open-ended questions or focus groups. Additionally, the participant group largely focused on educational leaders, particularly those with a focus on special education. Further research could explore the similarities and differences between various groups of knowledge users, including classroom teachers, parents, and students.

Conclusion

Given the breadth and depth of special education research, the integration of knowledge mobilization strategies such as RPSs are urgently needed. These innovative strategies can serve to better integrate educators in the research process and, in turn, make knowledge generated by research more meaningful and usable for educators. This study demonstrates the potential role of knowledge users in co-producing novel and multifaceted research agendas in special education.

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