

What Is Educational Research?

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MOST researchers would agree that educational research involves some kind of orderly systematic approach. Essential to that order is the objective and detached recording of phenomena so that others, simultaneously viewing the object of study or repeating the observations, arrive at the same finding.

Practitioners and Researchers

The preceding characteristics seem to set research apart in some ways from the problem solving that you and I engage in daily. Nonetheless, researchers and problem solvers share a number of important characteristics, such as originality, insight, and conceptual ability. Moreover, they employ similar deductive and inductive techniques of logic.

Yet, despite these similarities, the problem-solving practitioner tends not to identify with the researcher. In part this may result from the difference in the problems of major interest to each—the practitioner being concerned with practical problems of day-to-day operation, the researcher preferring to work on those problems of more general, often theoretical, significance, especially those soluble by his available techniques. Perhaps

most important, especially since the appearance of widespread interest in behavior modification, research techniques appear to lend themselves to the “manipulation” of people. By contrast, the practitioner more often thinks in terms of helping people in ways that are self-determined. Further, while the researcher handles people in groups, the practitioner prefers to handle each case as a unique human being.

The differences in their orientation interfere with the close relationship between researcher and practitioner which, if realized, would maximize the contributions of each. Indeed, since both are ultimately seeking to improve education, and since the knowledge sought by the researcher is the same as that needed by the practitioner in order to increase effectiveness, it is unfortunate that misunderstandings exist.¹

It may help to close this gap if we explore some of the bases out of which these differences in orientation grow. First, the

¹ Interestingly, the researcher in his role as a faculty member may play exactly the same role in just the same way as the practitioner in the elementary or high school classroom, but his role and image as a researcher are different.

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person doing research needs to deal with averages and groups, since only in this way can he eliminate the individual idiosyncrasies which obscure the more general rule or principle that he is seeking.

Second, research is based on the researcher's belief that behavior is governed by certain reasonable laws. Therefore, he believes behavior is determinable by some combination of factors—environmental, physiological, conceptual, affective, perceptual. The researcher's problem is to find out what factors in these realms cause changes in behavior, and to study the nature, duration, and intensity of that behavior. While we are in fact far from knowing those laws, their existence remains for researchers an important methodological assumption.

Research and Values

While it is clear that both researcher and practitioner proceed from a certain stance about the world from which we infer their value positions, less apparent is the role of research itself in choosing among values. It is assumed that research can do all things, including deciding among values. It cannot. Knowledge gained by research is inherently neither good nor evil, but may be judged only in terms of values applied to the consequences of its use. There is now much greater concern about these consequences than previously. This has resulted in a whole new research emphasis called *policy research*.

The funding by the U.S. Office of Education of two Educational Policy Research Centers, one at Syracuse and one at the Stanford Research Institute, began a movement which has since been followed at other institutions. Policy research is also helping to uncover the tangled web of conflicting value choices implicit in education. Among other things, this approach begins to make clear why no research earns universal acclaim. Since there

is seldom agreement on what is "good" education, it is impossible with any given research result to universally please everyone.

While research cannot make value judgments, there is another sense, however, in which the researcher implies certain judgments about what is important and therefore of value.

For example, Flanders' interaction analysis, by its focus on teacher-pupil verbal interaction, raises that aspect to greater value and importance. Not all researchers necessarily would agree that this value is the prime one, as witness the 17-volume *Mirrors for Behavior*² which includes, besides Flanders', a variety of other schemes dealing with such characteristics as nonverbal behavior, depth of conceptualization, etc. Each researcher in these volumes sees the phenomenon in terms of what he thinks is important, and if his research is widely read it has an impact—witness the number of teachers who are learning to guide their classroom behaviors through interaction analysis. Thus, the very nature of what is studied is an implicit value judgment with potential impact on the practitioner.

Because of the narrow focus of much past research, one current trend worthy of note is the broadening of research in both focus and technique. We have already commented on the growth of policy-oriented research. In addition, there is a revival of interest in the history of education. Considering its potential for influencing society, educational history has been woefully underworked and undersupported.

Education especially needs to relate current to past trends. For example, where are the comparisons of the British Infant School with the progressive schools of the twenties?

² Anita Simon and E. Gil Boyer. *Mirrors for Behavior: An Anthology of Observation Instruments*. Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools, Inc., 1967-70.

If the Infant School is a reincarnation, may we expect history to repeat itself? Though we are making progress in developing our history base, we need more of this.

Some historical base is being generated in the increasing number of case studies of school innovations. These studies, such as Guthrie Birkhead's *How the Campus Proposal Failed in Syracuse*,³ combine the skills of a trained and careful observer with the acumen of a social scientist to permit some bit of new knowledge to be ground out of each new study. The results give curriculum workers new perspective on how decisions affecting them are made and how these decisions can be influenced.

Still another increasingly active field of interest to the curriculum worker is that of logical analysis. Through clarification of the terms frequently used in education, some useful distinctions have been developed. Green's⁴

³ Guthrie Birkhead. *How the Campus Proposal Failed in Syracuse*, New York. Syracuse: Eastern Regional Institute for Education, 1970. 95 pp.

⁴ Thomas F. Green. *The Activities of Teaching*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1971. 234 pp.

examination of teaching in relation to conditioning, training, instructing, and indoctrinating is an example of such clarification.

While these emphases on broader modes of research are hopeful signs, they should not be taken as disparagement of the kind of quantitative work which has been the major emphasis of current research. The results of quantitative research techniques should prove increasingly useful to the curriculum worker. Indeed, as generalizations become more precise, the best way to express such precision is in quantitative terms.

Research extending across all these fronts and increasing in depth should shortly begin a new era. The advent of the proposed National Institute of Education, like the National Institutes of Health, should provide a focus around which researchers and practitioners can rally. And what is more reasonable than that, despite their differences in orientation, they should join hands in support of NIE? In contributing to the practitioners' success, researchers come to feel worthwhile; and in the successful study of education, practitioners have their best hope of assured success. □

Educational Leadership Announces Proposed Themes for 1972-73

Manuscripts relevant to the proposed themes for the 1972-73 issues of *Educational Leadership* are now being solicited from the readers by the editor.

Planning for the upcoming publication year of the journal was completed by the ASCD Publications Committee at meetings during the 1972 Annual Conference in Philadelphia, March 5-8. Proposed topics, and deadlines for receipt of manuscripts for examination, are the following:

October: "Protest and Conflict: Why?" (May 15, 1972)

November: "Using Resources at the Local Level" (May 15)

December: "Education for Career Development" (June 1)

January: "Curriculum Management: A Panacea?" (July 1)

February: "Shifts in University/School Role" (August 1)

March: "Innovation as an Ongoing Process" (September 1)

April: "Whatever Happened to Curriculum Content Revision?" (October 1)

May: "Methods That Can Make a Difference" (November 1).

Length of manuscripts should be approximately 1400 words (about five pages), typed doublespaced. General style should conform to that of the journal. Photographs or other illustrative materials are requested.

Decisions on materials will be made as promptly as possible, and all unused manuscripts will be returned.

Materials should be addressed to: Robert R. Leeper, Editor, *Educational Leadership*, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

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