BOOK REVIEW

The Untested Accusation: Principals, Research Knowledge, and Policy Making in Schools

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Since the earliest days of university sponsorship, education research has been demeaned by scholars in other fields, ignored by practitioners, and alternatively spoofed and criticised by politicians, policy makers, and members of the public at large. (p. 1)

A totally nonsensical claim!

Those who favour the view that educational research has no impact are totally unaware of the progress and the advance of educational research today, according to Biddle and Saha in an important book. A great many research studies have been carried out that have resulted in important innovations in the various sectors of education. One example is the revolution in curriculum development and teaching methodology.

From the evidence advanced in this investigation conducted through a comparative research by interviewing 120 school principals in the United States and Australia, the authors of The Untested Accusation argue strongly that educational research has had great impact among users of research knowledge involved in policy making in schools. This body of research is supported by evidence that most principals are exposed to a variety of research sources ranging from newsletters and professional journals to meetings and seminars. Another finding supporting this argument is that most principals frequently cited research sources in their work, and are able to recognise examples of knowledge based on research that they had read or used.

Aims of the study

The main objective of Biddle and Saha in their study was to challenge the view that educational research has weak methods, vacuous contributions, minimal or non-existent impact, feckless characters and lack of evidence. Secondly, they sought information about how generated-research knowledge is disseminated and diffused to principals and what types of sources most principals read and cited. The study also investigated principals’ attitudes toward the value of research knowledge and sought to find out if the principals had a deep understanding of that knowledge. Finally, the study investigated whether or not research knowledge had an impact on principals’ thinking and policy-making in schools. The study was conducted with a sample of 120 school principals in the United States and in Australia.

Key findings

The findings reported in this book fall into five main categories.

Principals’ exposure to knowledge source

In the first section, the authors investigated how research knowledge is diffused and transmitted to users in the education community, especially the school principals in the two countries. The study found that school principals used various types of sources for acquiring professional knowledge that they then used regularly and frequently. A second finding was that principals were exposed to a wide range of different knowledge sources. Principals from both countries acquired most of their ideas about research knowledge from secondary sources, for example, meetings and experiences designed for educators. Further, most principals adopted a scholarly stance when seeking and acquiring professional knowledge by consulting professional journals regularly and they frequently cited these journals as their sources of knowledge.

From the frequency of citation in both countries, professional journals were cited more often than other sources. However, there was a significant difference in the frequency of citation between the two countries where professional journals and workshop organised by others were more often cited by the principals in the United States, whereas professional books, regional and national bulletins, other professional people, professional meetings and long term interests were most often cited by school principals in Australia. These differences in citation frequency were statistically significant. These significant differences might be a result of different social context and by the way the two countries structure and organise their education.

Principals’ opinions about research and innovation

The authors report that generally most principals made positive judgement about generated-research knowledge and defined themselves as regular and enthusiastic users of that knowledge. Secondly, the results of the study suggest that most principals say that they learnt personally from research knowledge and used it to influence their colleagues or help persons such as teachers, parents and students. However, they were also aware of the poor communication between researchers and the principals, and the problems of dissemination and diffusion of research knowledge.

Most principals also held positive thoughts about innovation, and the results of the study did not support those critics who portray school principals as conservative and rule-driven. The assessment of the value of knowledge given by both American and Australian respondents was generally at high levels of 44 per cent and 49 per cent respectively. It was striking that 83 per cent American principals and 74 per cent Australian principals reported that they had learned from research knowledge.

Research knowledge that principals volunteered

A key finding in this section of the study suggests that most principals in both countries retained examples of useful knowledge associated with educational research in their thinking and found it easy to talk about examples of research knowledge. Secondly, the principals tended to have noticeable interest in various examples of useful knowledge from educational research. Indeed, they were able to recognise from four to eight examples of research knowledge that had influenced their thinking.

Most principals showed a deep understanding of the educational research knowledge by retaining some details associated with salient and relevant research knowledge. However, the American principals retained slightly more research knowledge than the Australian principals. It was assumed that most American principals had completed postgraduate course that were associated with a higher level of research knowledge.
Research knowledge that principals recognised

The results of the study show that the principals retained many examples of research knowledge in their thinking and, that they also tended to remember examples of research knowledge that covered many topics. With respect to the finding that American principals recognise more examples of educational research knowledge than did the Australian principals, it was argued could be a result of the wider exposure of the American principals to higher education than the respondents in Australia.

Principals’ reported use of research knowledge

The findings in this last section clearly indicate that generated-research knowledge had a great impact on the whole educational community, and particularly on school principals. Then, if the principals played vital roles in the school decision-making, it was very likely that principals were powerful agents in dissemination and implementation of the generated-research knowledge. The results of this study also show that the implementation of research knowledge takes many forms, such as in innovation in staff development, in teachers’ motivation, and in classroom supervision techniques. It was concluded that research knowledge had great potential for affecting and influencing the decision-making and practices within a school.

Conclusions

There is no reason to support the widespread claims that research has had minimal impact on education as they were untested by the evidence according to the authors of this book. Biddle and Saha present strong evidence that school principals in both the United States and Australia have wide exposure to generated-research knowledge through various secondary sources, frequently and regularly cited the research sources, retained and had a deep understanding of research knowledge. In addition, respondents from both countries show positive judgement of the value of research knowledge and were affected in their thinking and decision making in the schools by that knowledge.

Therefore, on the evidence presented, there seems little reason not to accept the view that educational research has played a significant role in shaping and building the knowledge and skills of school principals. However, there are always still problems associated with such a study.

First, it is well known that principals in the past were exposed to a variety of knowledge sources, but often failed to examine the types of knowledge and the quality of the sources. In order to see the impact of the knowledge in school policy making, the study should also have categorised the types of knowledge acquired from different sources and examined more closely whether or not the acquired knowledge was still relevant to a principal’s work.

Secondly, the study succeeded in confirming that most principals were able to retain and recognise the effects of research knowledge on education, but the study was lacking in evidence to show how well school principals understood the salient knowledge. This study should also have questioned principals about their policy making in schools that had been affected by the generated-research knowledge. In other words, the study should have investigated and categorised the products of the research knowledge. It was also unfortunate that the study did not investigate the process of knowledge dissemination from principals to those teachers and students in their schools to see how the generated-research knowledge affected the policy making and the outcomes in their school.

It is also natural that most principals are always busy with a heavy workload and this could prevent them from reading various source of knowledge like professional journals. This situation might result in limited access to knowledge about educational research. Thus, decision making
could be based more on their experience and intuition, and might not be affected by the generated-research knowledge.

Finally, this study might not be able to generalise its findings to principals from developing countries for several reasons. First, developing countries are seriously lacking in research utilisation centres that are supposed to be the agents for knowledge dissemination to potential users of research knowledge. Secondly, the western countries where this study was carried out have sophisticated information and communication technology as the main agent of disseminating research knowledge and the use of this technology is unfortunately not discussed in this book. Hierarchical leadership has caused principals in most developing countries to depend on the policies and the authority of the top leadership in their national education systems. As a result, principals’ exposure to research knowledge might depend on knowledge that is heavily biased by political interests.

‘Theory is in the end…the most practical of all things’       John Dewey (1929)

This book should be read not only by principals and school administrators throughout the world, but also by research workers who generate new knowledge.