Educators' Networks as primary search strategy for finding useful evidence

A Report from the Center for Research Use in Education

University of Delaware
University of Pennsylvania
University of Minnesota

Horatio Blackman, Ph.D., Author

The recent spike in pressure to increase collaboration between education research and practice has driven researchers to engage in dissecting the underlying behaviors of evidence-based educational decision-making. But how can we understand the way practitioners incorporate research into their organizational decision making, without understanding the nature of search strategies utilized by those same practitioners? Acknowledging the very existence of these distinctions allows researchers to modify current dissemination efforts and prioritize the avenues which give practitioners the most access to research.

The results presented here are based on early results from two pilot studies conducted in 2017 and 2018. Over 1500 educators from 64 schools took part in two pilot studies to measure depth of research use, specifically the strategies for searching for evidence in the context of practice and use. This article specifically addresses the research question "Where do practitioners/educators find useful evidence?"

Figure 1. Practitioners' General Search Strategies for Evidence
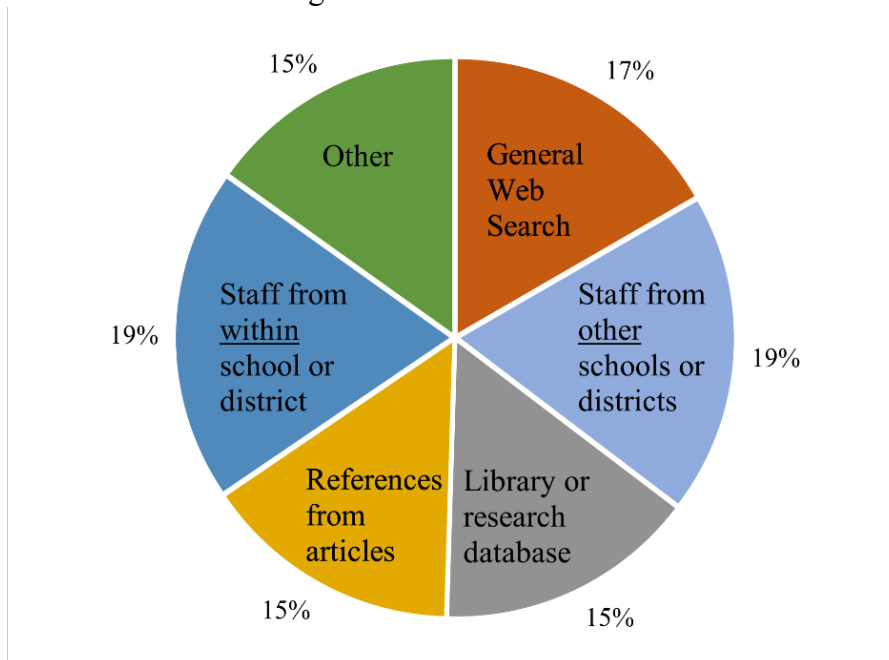
The pie chart above displays the general search strategies employed by practitioners who have taken the survey. While educators did not report significant differences between which strategies were most utilized, consulting both staff from within the school, internal (n=367), and staff from other schools, external (n=354), staff as a means of acquiring research is reported as one of the more common search strategies.

Networks and local spheres of knowledge may then exert a strong influence constructing the narrative of research use in school cultures. As such, it is crucial that researchers utilize their resources and seek out opportunities to connect directly with educators. This finding also further emphasizes the urgency to understand the social, cultural, structural, and values-based attitudes of research among practitioners as well as the dissemination practices of education researchers. If much of the research used in schools is disseminated through colleagues and their broader educator networks, we are then left with a set of questions about personal beliefs regarding research and how those beliefs influence research use in schools:

- How is the nature of research in a school setting being influenced by the personal beliefs of those same educators?
- Do personal beliefs influence the very framework for the way educators inquire about available research?
- If so, where do these beliefs stem from, and how can we redirect networks to effectively disseminate and access research?

Answering these questions is the stepping stone to reconfiguring the way we think about connecting the research and practice communities. Much like a house cannot be built without the foundational layers that ground its frame, we cannot expect research and practice to seamlessly collaborate without the basic knowledge and understanding of whether and how research is sought out and the set of beliefs that are related to these actions. Through continued research investigating these issues – which CRUE is currently undertaking – can we begin to identify and establish the organizational structures, attitudes, and strategies necessary in both the researcher and practitioner communities to bridge gaps between them; leading to improved outcomes for the students we serve.