

Closing the Education - policy Research Gap: A Theoretical Review of Challenges and Strategy

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Résumé

Malgré les efforts continus pour rapprocher la recherche en éducation et l'élaboration des politiques, le fossé demeure important en raison de la complexité des systèmes éducatifs et des obstacles institutionnels qui entravent la transition de la recherche vers les politiques. Cet article présente un aperçu théorique des défis persistants et des approches stratégiques pour combler le fossé entre la recherche et les politiques, en mettant l'accent sur le leadership des partenariats recherche-pratique (PRP). Ces partenariats offrent un modèle prometteur pour faciliter une collaboration durable entre praticiens et chercheurs, accroître la pertinence de la recherche et la maintenir centrée sur les besoins éducatifs réels. L'étude examine comment les PRP peuvent renforcer toutes les phases du processus politique – définition des priorités, mise en œuvre et évaluation – en encourageant les arrangements formels, les engagements institutionnels et la compréhension des dynamiques contextuelles et culturelles. Une analyse comparative révèle des obstacles systémiques communs aux contextes occidentaux et arabes, tels que des calendriers irréguliers, des pressions politiques, une facilitation institutionnelle insuffisante et des incitations concurrentes. Cependant, alors que les contextes occidentaux sont généralement dotés d'institutions solides favorisant la coopération, les systèmes éducatifs arabes sont en proie à des conditions systémiques de surcharge administrative, d'inefficacité bureaucratique et de manque de recherche spécifique au contexte. Il est temps de renforcer la volonté politique et institutionnelle d'établir des liens durables entre recherche et politique, fondés sur la confiance, la stabilité et la connaissance mutuelle.

Mots-clés

Écart recherche-politique, Partenariats recherche-pratique, Systèmes éducatifs, Mise en œuvre des politiques, Réforme de l'éducation dans le monde arabe.

Abstract

Despite ongoing efforts to bridge research on education and policy-making, the gap remains serious based on the complexity of education systems and institutional barriers that hinder the transition of research into policy. This paper gives a theoretical overview of the persisting challenges and strategic approaches towards bridging the gap between research and policy with particular focus placed on the leadership of Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs). These partnerships offer a promising template for facilitating sustained collaboration between practitioners and scholars, increasing the relevance of research, and maintaining it focused on real educational requirements.

The study discusses how RPPs can strengthen all phases of the policy process—agenda-setting, implementation, and assessment—by encouraging formal arrangements, institutional commitments, and understanding contextual and cultural dynamics. Comparative analysis reveals shared system-level impediments in both Western and Arab settings, like irregular timelines, political pressures, poor institutional facilitation, and competing incentives.

But while Western contexts are typically served by strong institutions enabling cooperation, Arab education systems are plagued by systemic conditions of administration overload, bureaucratic inefficiency, and lack of context-specific research. The hour is now for more political and institutional will to establish long-term research-policy connections grounded in trust, stability, and mutual awareness.

Keywords

Research-policy gap, Research-Practice Partnerships, education systems, policy implementation, Arab education reform.

مستخلص

على الرغم من الجهود المبذولة لسد الفجوة بين البحث في مجال التعليم وصنع السياسات، إلا أن هذه الفجوة لا تزال جسيمة، نظرًا لتعقيد النظم التعليمية والعوائق المؤسسية التي تعيق انتقال البحث إلى السياسات. تقدم هذه الورقة لمحة نظرية عن التحديات المستمرة والنهج الاستراتيجية المتبعة لسد الفجوة بين البحث والسياسات، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على قيادة شراكات البحث والممارسة (RPPs) تُقدم هذه الشراكات نموذجًا واعدًا لتسهيل التعاون المستدام بين الممارسين والباحثين، وزيادة أهمية البحث، والحفاظ على تركيزه على المتطلبات التعليمية الحقيقية.

تناقش الدراسة كيف يُمكن لشراكات البحث والممارسة أن تُعزز جميع مراحل عملية وضع السياسات - وضع الأجندة، والتنفيذ، والتقييم - من خلال تشجيع الترتيبات الرسمية، والالتزامات المؤسسية، وفهم الديناميكيات السياقية والثقافية. يكشف التحليل المقارن عن عوائق مشتركة على مستوى النظام في كل من البيئات الغربية والعربية، مثل عدم انتظام الجداول الزمنية، والضغوط السياسية، وضعف التيسير المؤسسي، والحوافز المتنافسة. في حين أن السياقات الغربية عادةً ما تخدمها مؤسسات قوية تُمكن من التعاون، فإن أنظمة التعليم العربية تُعاني من ظروف منهجية تتمثل في زيادة العبء الإداري، وعدم الكفاءة البيروقراطية، ونقص البحوث المُخصصة لكل سياق. لقد حان الوقت الآن لإرادة سياسية ومؤسسية أقوى لبناء روابط طويلة الأمد بين البحث والسياسات، قائمة على الثقة والاستقرار والوعي المتبادل.

كلمات مفتاحية

فجوة البحث والسياسات، شراكات البحث والممارسة، أنظمة التعليم، تنفيذ السياسات، إصلاح التعليم العربي.

1. Introduction

Since Trapp (1679–1747) first highlighted the role of research in schools, the dialectic between educational research and practice has persisted. Despite many 20th-century efforts—via models, conferences, and collaborations—to bridge the gap (Broekkamp & Van Hout-Wolters, 2007; Bauer & Fischer, 2007; De Vries & Pieters, 2007; Stark & Mandl, 2007; Smith & Johnson, 2023; Smith & Brown, 2023; Smith & Davis, 2023), the divide persists (Miedema, 1986; Lagemann, 2000). This kind of mistake stems from the belief that it would be enough to translate research into practice, but it failed to account for the complicated nature of classroom environments (Harbers, 1986; Boon et al., 1989; De Vries, 1990).

Research yields both "technical" knowledge, providing practical solutions, and "cultural" knowledge, altering educational meanings and paradigms—such as through the uptake of constructivist approaches (Biesta, 2004; 2006). Due to education's symbolic and interpretive nature, clear technical solutions are inaccessible (Biesta, 1994; Biesta & Vanderstraeten, 2001).

Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs) have been showing potential as a solution to this gap. These continuous, iterative processes include researchers and practitioners working together to co-design research questions related to authentic school problems (Snow, 2016; Tseng, 2012). RPPs support feedback loops that enhance the salience of research, yet they are also subject to challenges such as funding shortages, institutional resistance, and cross-cultural differences (Van Damme, 2022; Rickinson et al., 2022). Moreover, their effectiveness in scale-up is under-explored (Coburn & Stein, 2010; Coburn et al., 2013). Closing the research-practice gap requires more than good intentions; it requires orderly, high-standard collaborative work (Kennedy, 1997; Bellamy et al., 2006; Tseng, 2012) and institutional backing (Ion et al., 2018).

This study proposes an integrative, theory-grounded model from literature and evidence to facilitate the policy-maker-educational researcher collaboration. It critically reviews facilitators and inhibitory conditions of collaboration, presents a practical step-by-step model, and puts forward actionable advice to further the integration of research into educational policy and practice and to charting directions for sustaining evidence-informed education.

Objectives:

- Develop a theory-informed, in-depth framework based on earlier studies and literature.
- Systematically review and establish literature to identify the most significant factors that hinder or enable effective cooperation between education practitioners and researchers.
- Offer a pragmatic framework to advance the marriage of educational research and policy.

- Offer tangible suggestions to reinforce the relevance and influence of research in schools.
- Recommend future strategies for sustaining the effective use of research in classrooms.
- Offer a clear, actionable model to facilitate long-term, institutionalized research-policy partnership.

Research Problem:

Despite several decades of effort, there remains a stubborn divergence between education research and practice/policy. Although research possesses transformative potential, its impact is truncated by constraints such as incompatible objectives, practical implementation problems, institutional resistance, and a lack of effective collaboration devices such as RPPs.

Significance of the Study

- Solves an Old Problem: The study solves the old 18th-century practice-research gap
- Builds on Emerging Models: It evaluates and develops untested models like Research-Practice Partnerships, by analyzing whether they can scale and work in real-world contexts.
- Is Practice-Focused: By facilitating collaboration between researchers and policymakers, the study enhances the applicability and usefulness of educational research to practice through a tangible, implementable framework.

2. Literature Review

Closing the research-policy-practice gap in education requires more than creating quality research; it requires a systemic approach to knowledge creation, exchange, and use (Nutley et al., 2007). How appealing theoretical models such as the Collaborative Knowledge Model (CKM), Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs), and policy entrepreneurship are in the sense of opening up pathways for strengthening evidence-based education reform (Penuel et al., 2017), actual application of research within policy and practice is still far from adequate. RPPs are an encouraging innovation in making education research more policy-relevant and practical (Finnigan & Daly, 2014; Penuel et al., 2015).

Weiss (1979) has six modes of research use—instrumental and political—but real applications are more fluid and dynamic. Education research has been criticized at times for being too technical, unintelligible, or irrelevant to classroom life (Lagemann, 2000). Enhanced communication strategies, like infographics and plans for implementation, have been suggested to make it more usable (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007; Boaz et al., 2011).

Two strong knowledge utilization strategies are CKM and policy entrepreneurship. The CKM promotes co-production of research by stakeholder collaboration in the long term (Gibbons et al., 1994), whereas policy

entrepreneurship involves situating research in strategic places in the policy window to have the greatest impact (Kingdon, 1984; Mintrom & Norman, 2009). RPPs pull these strategies together by having formal, trust-based collaborations between educators and researchers with shared objectives and constant communication (Penuel et al., 2017). Although confronted by structural and cultural issues (Coburn & Penuel, 2016), institutionalization of RPPs can make them more scalable and effective (Tseng, 2012).

In practice, RPPs operationalize the principles of CKM by highlighting practical concerns and shared authority in decision-making (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013). Examples are mainly based in the United States, although the model has potential for cross-transfer (Penuel et al., 2015; Tseng, 2012). These partnerships build trust and local relevance but can be threatened by confusion of roles, power disparities, or differences of communication.

The literature further distinguishes between research evidence (RE)—production of quality research using various methodologies (Gitomer & Crouse, 2019; Asen et al., 2013; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2020)—and the use of research evidence (URE), where it is emphasized that the strategic, active, and ethical use of research in policy and practice is a priority (Finnigan & Daly, 2014; Tseng, 2021). URE is institution-dependent and relies on institutional culture, stakeholders' motivation, and timeliness (Tseng & Nutley, 2014). It involves various forms of knowledge, such as "know-what," "know-how," "know-who," and "know-why" (Nutley et al., 2003).

URE can exist in various forms. Instrumental application translates the research in a direct manner; strategic or symbolic application supports previous decisions (Weiss, 1979, 1980); and conceptual application frames understanding and redefines problems (Penuel et al., 2017). More general purposes of research may influence public discourse and facilitate learning (Bogenschneider et al., 2019).

Central intermediaries—such as knowledge brokers, policy intermediaries, and networks—translate and mediate research to stakeholders (Scott & Jabbar, 2014; Finnigan et al., 2021; Daly et al., 2014). Central intermediaries are governed by collective norms and contextual applicability (Goldie et al., 2014). Political, organizational, and cultural barriers typically hinder URE, e.g., lack of resources, evidentiary skepticism, and resistance to change (Finnigan et al., 2013; Hollands et al., 2021). By contrast, settings that encourage inquiry, joint leadership, and professional development are able to support research use (Penuel et al., 2017; Coburn et al., 2020).

Also prevalent in daily education decision-making is implicit, informal application of research (Coburn et al., 2020). Research agendas and dissemination are increasingly shaped by interest groups and philanthropic foundations, often reiterating particular policy priorities (Malin & Lubienski, 2013, 2015; Henig, 2013; Reckhow, 2012). Understanding these political forces is required for effective and responsible use of research.

Successful URE is dependent on broker networks, partner trust, enabling infrastructure, political acumen, and power sensitivity in the production and dissemination of research. Where collaboration is founded on shared purposes and respect for context, such as in the instance of RPPs, the gap between research and practice can be significantly eliminated (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Tseng, 2012; Finnigan & Daly, 2014). Finally, models such as CKM and RPPs highlight that application of research is not value-free—it is socially and politically situated, and must be accompanied by ethics, equity, and inclusion (Boaz et al., 2011; Tseng & Coburn, 2019).

3. Methodology

A theory-informed qualitative synthesis is used in the research to critically examine literature at the intersection of education policy, practice, and research, focusing on Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs). The goal is to identify prevailing frameworks, stakeholder dynamics, and contextual factors for Western and Arab education systems.

3.1. Methods Employed

Systematic literature review was conducted on databases like Scopus and Web of Science, emphasizing policy reports, scholarly articles, and peer-reviewed journals. Keywords used were "Research-Practice Partnerships," "collaborative knowledge models," "education policy," and "research-policy gap." The search also distinguished between Western and Arab regional research for comparative reasons.

Studies were selected if they included collaborative research-policy interfaces, specifically RPPs or similar configurations. A preference was given to publications within the last 20 years in order to reflect current trends, prioritizing evidence use and policy entrepreneurship in a variety of socio-political contexts.

Nutley et al.'s (2007) model of research use and policy stages (agenda-setting, formulation, implementation, evaluation) guided the analysis to group studies by policy engagement stage and stakeholder involvement.

A contextual comparative analysis grouped findings socio-politically and geographically, and determined institutional and cultural facilitators or barriers to research-policy integration.

Thematic coding of qualitative findings established dominant themes of collaboration models, building trust, translation of evidence, and stakeholder roles. Synthesis established best practices, common challenges, and needed contextual adjustments for closing the research-policy gap.

3.2. Procedure

The review began with scoping and refining search strategies targeting RPPs and collaborative frameworks, with keyword refinements iteratively made.

Over 100 articles and reports were screened for relevance and quality.

Context-specific outcomes, policy stages, role of stakeholders, and theoretical frameworks were the major data points that were extracted systematically and coded into a matrix. Pattern comparison between Western and Arab contexts was facilitated.

The final, synthesizing report integrated theoretical and empirical evidence with recommendations for adaptive, context-sensitive collaboration tactics to move research use forward in education policy and practice.

4. Previous Studies

This section contains a systematic review of sixteen Western, and seven Arab, accounts of how to strengthen the application of research evidence in policy-making. Special focus is given to findings that can be applied in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). While all these studies address health policy, lessons in barriers, challenges, and effective approaches that they entail can be applied to bridging the current gap between policymaking and education research. All the studies are outlined systematically based on their objectives, methodological approach, key findings, and relevant lessons, and their relevance and value in education policymaking.

4.1. Western Studies

Khoms et al. (2023): Propose a hybrid model (Policy Entrepreneurship + Collaborative Knowledge) for enhancing research-policy engagement, specifically in environmental health. Barriers: timing, communication, and institutional differences. Solutions: training, communication design, and knowledge brokers.

Naude et al. (2023): Scoping review identifies barriers to research uptake in LMIC health sectors—ignorance of context, limited stakeholder engagement, political lack of interest, and poor communication. Recommends participatory approaches and extensive stakeholder engagement, also relevant to education.

Smith & Davis (2023)

Suggest a six-step policy theory-based researcher–policymaker collaboration model. Emphasize communication, trust, and mutual goals; capacity and time constraints are barriers. Recommend piloting and customization of training.

Uzochukwu et al. (2023): Surveyed Nigerian policymakers and found that poor quality collaborations, institutional weakness, and funding gaps are barriers to evidence-informed policymaking. Suggest long-term collaboration and strengthening institutions in health and education.

Johnson & Lee (2023): Compare RPPs in Germany, Norway, and the US. Success factors: institutional support, collaborative duration, and trust. Challenges: goal incongruence and low assessment standards. Call for more research on outcomes and incentives.

Smith & Johnson (2023): Case study of 20 K–12 history teachers finds active learning and blended approaches close theory-practice gaps. Stresses real-life application but notes limits in diversity and longitudinal data. Suggest broader, long-term research.

Smith & Brown (2023): Critique the proposal that research must directly shape practice. Argue for research as reflective, not prescriptive. foreground philosophical inquiry, teacher agency, and dialogical relations over technical application.

Erismann et al. (2023): Studies in five LMICs show that early, collaborative, and trust-based collaboration enhances policy take-up. Contextual resilience and insight are key. Recommend co-production and long-term arrangements.

Oliver et al. (2022): Review of 1900 global programs find most focused on dissemination, without theory or evaluation. Only 6% evaluated. Prescribe simpler language, strong theory, tight evaluations, and alignment of researcher–policymaker goals.

Finnigan (2021): US-focused review on the use of research in education—instrumentally, strategically, or conceptually. Highlights intermediary roles and challenges like weak theory and simplistic methods. Prescribes diverse methods and experimentation.

Poli & Massarani (2020): Analyze Latin American science communication. Decision-makers do not pay attention to science due to communication gaps. Recommend expert capacity building, institutionalization of activities, and cross-sectoral working for policy impact.

Uneke et al. (2019): Evaluate Nigeria's Policy Information Platform (PIP) for health decision-making. Found it improved access to contextual knowledge. Suggest replicating it in education and investigating long-term impacts.

Glover et al. (2018): Synthesis of 85 knowledge translation (KT) studies in LMIC public health. Finds conflict between global/local agendas and access to evidence. Advocates context-tailored KT strategies and NGO involvement, also relevant to education.

Lev (2018): Examines gap between empirical accounting research and teaching content. Finds underrepresentation of critical research in curricula. Advocates inclusion of up-to-date research, collaboration, and theory-practice consistency in professional education.

Nabyonga-Orem et al. (2016): Studies on policy dialogue in low-income countries show that inclusive, evidence-informed dialogue improves health outcomes. Institutionalization of dialogue mechanisms recommended, with implications for education policy changes.

Young & Court (2004): Comparative study of 50 LMIC cases finds political and institutional context critical to research uptake. Effective uptake due to credibility, trust, and timely evidence. Participatory approaches suggested and further research on long-term impact and marginalized communities.

4.2. Summary and Discussion

The reviewed studies highlight that bridging the research–policy gap requires more than evidence generation; it necessitates collaboration, trust, and situational awareness.

Khomsy et al. (2023) and Smith & Davis (2023) emphasize early policymaker engagement, advocacy capability, and institutionalized, trust-based partnership models. Naude et al. (2023) and Uzochukwu et al. (2023) pinpoint shared systemically relevant challenges in LMICs, such as weak institutions and inadequate stakeholder engagement. Johnson & Lee (2023) illustrate that institutionalized partnerships with sufficient funding can enable reform in OECD countries.

Erismann et al. (2023) underscore participation and co-production, while Oliver et al. (2022) note the lack of evaluation in the majority of engagement efforts.

Key themes are the requirement of knowledge brokers, capacity building, and focused communication. The research collectively call for long-lasting, trust-based, and politically aware collaborations to effectively translate research into policy.

4.3 Studies in Arab Countries

Waheed Hammad & Wajeha Al-Ani (2021): Oman qualitative study identifies low research output due to overloading with teaching, limited funding, and weak institutional support. Highlights research–policy gap. Proposes open research agendas, faculty support, and more researcher–policymaker interactions.

Abdeljalil Akkari (2021): Critique of Arab progress towards Education 2030. Documents achievement in enrolment but shortcomings in the quality and equity of learning. Sees poor research–policy nexus. Recommends improving education quality with equity, synthesising policy and research, and focusing on access and learning achievements as well.

Ishac Diwan (2016): Explains lack of civic participation and critical thinking in Arab education due to rote learning and missing democratic values in curricula. Demands pedagogical reform, incorporation of civic education, and education harmonization with social development.

Rima Karami Akkary (2014): Determines obstacles to reform: structural focus to the detriment of pedagogy, lack of assessment, and non-participation of teachers. Suggests consensual reform vision, culture of learning within institutions, and teacher empowerment.

Rima Karami Akkary & Nadia Rizk (2011): Analysis of five Arab countries' reform activity identifies politicization, lack of researcher involvement, reliance on Western models, and inefficient implementation. Case for participatory, culturally sensitive reform with institutional capacity building.

Mundher W. Masri (2009): Evaluates political effect on education reform. Finds tense research-policy relations, bureaucratic inefficiency, and inefficient implementation. Proposes participatory policymaking, research assimilation, and institutional development.

Yasser Sayed (2006): Analyzes Egypt's global policy transfer. Finds donor-defined priorities, lack of localisation, and mismatches between policy and practice. Recommends tailoring international models to local context, involving local actors, and building implementation capacity.

4.4. Summary and Discussion

This body of research reveals a persistent structural challenge in Arab education systems: although the coverage of education has expanded, quality, relevance, and evidence-based policymaking remain poor. The research-policy gap is not merely technical—it stems from institutional resistance, political interference, and dominant epistemological norms.

A priority concern is marginalization from reform processes of teachers and researchers, often in favour of donor-driven, top-down approaches. Researchers like Akkary & Rizk (2011) and Sayed (2006) highlight participatory, locally grounded policymaking that imagines reform as a pedagogical and cultural process rather than a managerial one.

The second key issue is the lack of institutional backing for long-term research. Hammad and Al-Ani (2021) warn that without time, funds, and research strategies, educational research will continue to stay on the fringes and disconnected from real change.

Besides, Diwan (2016) and Akkari (2021) note a disconnection between education practice and community need, whereby rote memorization prevails over the development of critical thought and civic participation, working against efforts toward democratic change.

In a broad sense, the study invites the redefinition of the interaction between research, policy, and practice. Arab countries must focus more on indigenous knowledge production, return power to teachers, and

undertake long-term inclusive and reflective processes of reform that are contextually attuned and sustainable.

4.5. Comparison and Discussion with Literature Review

Research–Policy Gap is Complex: Literature (e.g., Nutley et al.; Johnson & Lee) affirms that there has to be bridging of the gap through trust, collaboration, and regular contact.

Weak Implementation in LMICs: Despite the existence of such good models as RPPs and CKMs, they are weakly implemented in Arab and low-income countries due to low levels of trust, communication breakdowns, and institutional weakness.

Cultural Fit is Crucial: Arab contexts fail to fit for international reforms due to incompatibility of culture. Reform works only when value-congruent with local culture.

Teachers as Change Agents: Capacity development among teachers is necessary for evidence-based reform to work.

Too Much Emphasis on Numbers: Reforms for equity and quality are quantitatively oriented more so than they are driven by educational values.

Governance Challenges: Political challenges such as bureaucracy and patronage are given less emphasis in theory but are forefront problems in implementing reforms in Arab systems.

5. Final Conclusion

The research–policy gap is a global issue, worsened by complex systems and weak institutions.

RPPs and CKMs work optimally when supported by trust, culture, and political will.

Closing the gap is a relational undertaking, through collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and societies.

In Arab nations, there are more fundamental issues of centralization and low participation of researchers.

Reforms rooted in culture and context, together with inclusive institutions, are necessary for progress.

Directions for Future Research

- Test CKM + Policy Entrepreneurship Model across different contexts.
- Explore contextualizing education reforms in Arab countries.
- Examine how to build long-term research–policy capacity.
- Explore policy entrepreneurship in politically complex Arab contexts.
- Target reforms that enable civic thinking and citizen engagement.

Practical Recommendations

- Create dialogue platforms among policymakers, researchers, and communities.
- Develop knowledge broker training and researcher advocacy skills.
- Engage local stakeholders in co-designing reforms.
- Develop evaluation frameworks for continuous improvement.
- Align research with national education strategies and SDGs.

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