

Editorial: From research use to knowledge work: rethinking the research–policy–practice nexus in education

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Over the past 2 decades, the use of research and evidence in education has become a central international policy concern. Governments, international organisations and educational systems increasingly emphasise evidence-informed practice, research engagement and data use as mechanisms for improving educational quality, strengthening accountability and supporting the development of varied forms of professional capital. Across many countries, teachers and school leaders are expected not only to implement reforms but also to engage actively and in communities with research, data and other knowledge sources in order to improve teaching, learning and school development (Penuel *et al.*, 2017). At the same time, educational systems are marked by growing accountability pressures linked to standardised testing, evaluation systems, international benchmarks and performance measurement, often accompanied by expectations for rapid and measurable improvement.

Yet access to research and evidence does not automatically lead to meaningful use in practice, nor is there universal agreement as to the nature and form research and evidence should take in order to support school and system improvement. Teachers may experience educational research as abstract, disconnected from local concerns or insufficiently relevant to the complexities of everyday professional work (Joram *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, policy-oriented understandings of evidence use often rely on rational-linear assumptions, expecting research to inform decision-making directly and instrumentally, despite the situated and interpretive nature of educational practice (Tseng, 2012). Accountability pressures may also encourage forms of knowledge use oriented towards short-term measurable outcomes rather than long-term professional learning and sustainable development (Mausethagen *et al.*, 2018).

Against this background, this special issue contributes to international debates on research use, evidence-informed practice, educational improvement and the development of professional capital more broadly by moving beyond narrow understandings of “using research” towards broader analyses of educational knowledge work. In this special issue, we define knowledge work as the collective processes through which educators and policy actors interpret, negotiate and develop varied forms of knowledge – a practice that is inseparable from the cultivation of professional capital and the building of professional communities and related practice. Collectively, the contributions emphasise the conceptual and practical complexity of research engagement and evidence use if it is to truly lead to improvement in schools and systems. Consideration must be given to the nature and purpose of research and evidence; the varied communities that construct, engage or advocate for this and the implications of this when connected with existing and growing pressures on schools and systems. Teachers, school leaders and policy actors engage in situated forms of knowledge work in which diverse knowledge sources are interpreted, negotiated, legitimised, adapted and developed within specific organisational, relational and governance contexts, and this is consequential in determining the possibilities of research engagement and evidence use, as well as the possibilities for rethinking the research, policy and practice nexus in education. Considering this, this special issue is concerned with the question: What if the real challenge in education is not how to engage with research or to use evidence, but how to better work with varied forms and sources of knowledge?



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The contributions in this special issue

The special issue opens with [Lorentzen et al.'s \(2026\)](#) systematic scoping review of research on research use in education. The review maps how the field has developed over time and identifies three broader generations of research use studies. It shows that rational-linear understandings of dissemination and implementation continue to dominate parts of the literature, despite growing attention to relational, systemic and practice-oriented approaches. The review also highlights conceptual ambiguities surrounding terms such as “research use”, “evidence use” and “research-informed practice” and argues for more situated and context-sensitive understandings of how educational actors engage with research in practice.

The second contribution, by [Ion et al. \(2026\)](#), examines how teachers understand and engage with research across five European countries. Drawing on Baudrillard's semiotic theory of consumption, the article moves beyond instrumental understandings of research use by analysing the symbolic meanings teachers attach to research. The findings demonstrate that teachers' engagement with research depends not only on perceived utility but also on identity, legitimacy and professional meaning-making. Research, therefore, functions not merely as a technical resource but also as a symbolic and cultural object within professional communities.

The third article, by [Niederberger and Skedsmo \(2026\)](#), explores how teachers and school leaders mobilise and negotiate diverse knowledge sources within two simultaneous school development projects in a Swiss primary school. By comparing a policy-driven project with a locally initiated development project, the article demonstrates how governance structures and leadership practices shape different forms of knowledge work. Drawing on Nicolini's practice-based perspective, the study conceptualises school leaders as “epistemic mediators” and analyses how knowledge sources are shared, legitimised, adapted, validated and developed within organisational practices.

The fourth article, by [Holmeide \(2026\)](#), analyses changes in Norwegian teachers' evaluations of professional knowledge between 2008 and 2022. Using repeated cross-sectional survey data interpreted through professional capital theory, the study identifies significant shifts in how teachers value subject knowledge, knowledge about learning and relational knowledge. The findings point towards what the author terms a “relational turn” in teaching, where relational knowledge has become increasingly central within teachers' understandings of professional competence.

The final article, by [Campbell et al. \(2026\)](#), interrogates how supranational organisations construct discourses of research engagement and configure the systemic conditions under which evidence is mobilised in education policymaking. Through interpretive analysis of OECD, UNESCO and World Bank texts, the study reveals how metaphors, framings and governance networks shape the legitimacy and uptake of research, highlighting tensions between global narratives and local needs, symbolic and instrumental uses of evidence and systemic capacity versus individual competency. In doing so, the article advances a revised conceptual framework that situates discourse, power and epistemic justice at the heart of research and evidence use in education systems.

Reflections across the contributions

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue illustrate a shift from viewing research use as a technical matter of implementation towards understanding educational improvement as situated and collective knowledge work. Across different contexts – including schools and systems in Switzerland, Norway, England as well as supranational policy spaces – the articles show that research and evidence do not move directly into practice. Instead, knowledge becomes meaningful through processes of interpretation, negotiation, legitimation and adaptation shaped by governance structures, organisational conditions, professional cultures and local priorities.

A first cross-cutting insight concerns the plurality and changing legitimacy of knowledge forms in education. Educational actors rarely rely on a single source of knowledge. Rather,

they engage with heterogeneous knowledge ecologies involving research, professional experience, contextual understanding, assessment data, relationships and policy expectations. Questions concerning what counts as legitimate knowledge therefore emerge as central professional and political questions within education systems, particularly as the complex challenges our societies face multiply and the expectations on schools and education systems intensify.

A second insight concerns the epistemic dimensions of educational work. Teachers and school leaders emerge as much more than passive implementers of reform, but as actors who evaluate, translate and combine multiple knowledge sources in response to complex and sometimes competing demands. Professional judgement remains central, even within increasingly accountability-oriented educational systems, particularly in some contexts where research and evidence are intended to easily describe and prescribe practice from universalist assumptions and standpoints.

A third insight concerns the importance of organisational and relational infrastructures for meaningful engagement with research and evidence. Collaborative cultures, leadership mediation, professional trust and opportunities for collective reflection appear across the contributions as essential conditions for sustainable knowledge work and the related professional learning and school development that can come with it. At the same time, several articles show how governance arrangements and accountability pressures may narrow the scope for professional agency by privileging measurable evidence over contextual, relational and experiential forms of knowledge, while supranational discourses further reinforce epistemic preferences that privilege certain methodologies and risk marginalising diverse or locally situated knowledge traditions.

The special issue also emphasises the tensions, dilemmas and contradictions as inherent to educational knowledge work. Teachers and school leaders are often expected to engage in reflective, context-sensitive practice while also meeting externally defined standards, performance indicators and policy expectations. In some contexts, this creates pressures towards short-term measurable outcomes at the expense of deeper professional learning and locally meaningful development. Rather than treating such tensions as obstacles to implementation, the contributions suggest that they should be understood as constitutive dimensions of educational knowledge work.

Finally, the special issue points towards important directions for future research. More attention is needed to how governance structures at local, system and supranational levels shape the epistemic conditions of educational work, how different forms of knowledge gain legitimacy within schools and policy spaces and how organisational infrastructures can support collective professional learning and knowledge work over time. Future studies should also continue exploring the affective, relational and identity-related dimensions of knowledge work, particularly in contexts characterised by increasing accountability pressures and rapidly changing educational expectations.

These insights raise important questions for the field, which we invite readers to consider:

- (1) How can schools and systems cultivate knowledge work as a collective practice rather than an individual burden?
- (2) What governance arrangements best support knowledge work and professional agency while respecting diverse knowledge traditions?
- (3) How can professional communities balance accountability demands with relational and experiential forms of knowledge?
- (4) What infrastructures are needed to sustain knowledge work as a driver of professional capital and educational improvement?

Collectively, the articles in this special issue suggest that improving research and evidence use in education is not primarily a matter of strengthening mechanisms of dissemination or

implementation. Rather, it requires deeper understanding of the organisational, relational and governance conditions under which educational actors engage with, negotiate and develop knowledge in practice. What emerges is a call to reimagine research engagement, evidence-use and knowledge work more broadly as living practices that shape, and are shaped by, the everyday work of education.

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