



## Beyond Applicability: Rethinking How Educational Research Serves Practice

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**Abstract:** Educational research is increasingly expected to demonstrate value for practice, yet what such value actually entails remains under-specified. This editorial argues that the challenge lies less in a research-practice “gap” than in the absence of clear, shared criteria for judging practical relevance. It examines how practical value is often narrowly equated with actionability or prescription, overlooking other legitimate forms of contribution. Drawing on research utilization literature and a conception of practice as professional judgment under conditions of uncertainty, the article proposes a plural understanding of how research may serve practice. It invites greater reflexivity in editorial evaluation by articulating guiding questions that clarify intended practical contributions, conditions of appropriation, and implicit costs for practitioners, without imposing reductive standards.

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### Introduction – A familiar demand, a somewhat unclear answer

Educational research is increasingly expected to matter for practice. This expectation appears in editorial policies, funding calls, strategic plans, and public discourse alike. Research is urged to be relevant, useful, impactful, or practice-oriented. Few would openly contest this demand. Yet, despite its apparent consensus, the question of what it actually means for educational research to be valuable for practice remains surprisingly under-specified.

In most academic settings, discussions about research quality continue to rely primarily on methodological, theoretical, or formal criteria: robustness of design, internal and external validity, coherence of argumentation, contribution to the literature. These criteria are essential and non-negotiable. However, they rarely address—at least explicitly—the ways in which a piece of research is expected to resonate with, inform, or support educational practice. As a result, a paradox persists: while research is publicly called upon to serve practice, it is often evaluated using criteria that are only loosely connected to that ambition.

This editorial argues that the difficulty does not lie in a lack of interest in practice, nor in a simple “gap” between research and practice. Rather, it lies in the absence of clear, shared, and explicit criteria for judging when—and how—educational research can legitimately be considered valuable for practice. This lack of clarification has consequences not only for researchers and editors, but also for practitioners who encounter academic work and struggle to situate its relevance to their professional realities.

The aim here is not to propose a new framework, checklist, or evaluative rubric. Instead, this editorial seeks to clarify the nature of the question itself, to make visible a set of often implicit expectations, and to suggest a way of thinking about “value for practice” that is demanding, plural, and respectful of both academic and professional forms of reasoning.

## Practice as a Rhetorical Horizon of Educational Research

References to practice have become almost obligatory in educational research. Articles routinely conclude with sections titled “Implications for practice,” even when those implications are speculative, generic, or only loosely connected to the empirical findings. Similarly, research proposals often promise practical impact without specifying what form that impact might realistically take.

This situation is not new. Decades ago, Lindblom and Cohen (1979) already argued that knowledge does not become useful simply by being well produced; it becomes useful through particular conditions of interpretation, appropriation, and use. Later work on research utilization emphasized that research may inform practice in multiple ways—instrumentally, conceptually, symbolically—rather than through direct application alone (Weiss, 1986).

More recent literature has focused extensively on research use, knowledge mobilization, and research-practice partnerships. These strands have significantly advanced our understanding of how research circulates, under what conditions it is taken up, and why it is sometimes ignored (Levin, 2013). Yet they have also contributed, perhaps unintentionally, to shifting attention away from a more upstream issue: the criteria by which research is judged as practice-relevant in the first place.

In other words, much of the literature asks: *How is research used?* or *Why is research not used?* Far less attention is given to the prior question: On what basis do we claim that a given piece of research deserves to be used, attended to, or taken seriously by practitioners? When this question remains implicit, misunderstandings are inevitable.

## What Does “Valuable for Practice” Actually Mean?

To say that research is valuable for practice can mean many different things, which are often conflated. Among them:

- that the research provides directly applicable recommendations;
- that it offers tools, models, or procedures that can be transferred to other contexts;
- that it helps practitioners better understand situations they already experience;
- that it supports professional judgment without prescribing action;
- that it makes visible tensions, trade-offs, or unintended consequences of familiar practices.

These forms of value are not equivalent, nor should they be. A study may be highly valuable for practice by sharpening how practitioners interpret classroom interactions, institutional constraints, or student responses, even if it does not suggest any immediate change in behavior. Conversely, a study that proposes concrete interventions may have limited value if its conditions of implementation are opaque or unrealistic.

One source of confusion lies in the tendency to equate practical value with actionability. Frameworks emphasizing “actionable” or “usable” evidence often assume that the highest form of practical relevance lies in the ability to guide decisions directly. While such guidance can indeed be valuable, it represents only one among several legitimate ways research may contribute to practice.

Educational practice is not a set or a sequence of technical problems awaiting optimal solutions. It is a form of professional action characterized by uncertainty, competing goals, ethical responsibility, contextual constraint, and ever-evolving micro-situations. In such conditions, research rarely functions as a rigid set of to-be-followed instructions. More often, it serves as a resource for thinking, judging, and justifying action.

Recognizing this does not lower standards for research. On the contrary, it demands greater precision about what kind of practical contribution a study seeks to make, and under what conditions that contribution can reasonably be expected.

### **Research as a Resource for Professional Judgment**

Educational practitioners—teachers, school leaders, advisors—operate in environments where decisions must be made continuously, often with incomplete information and under multiple constraints. Professional competence in such contexts involves not only knowing what works, but knowing how to interpret situations, weigh alternatives (while explicitly considering many), anticipate consequences, and justify choices.

From this perspective, one important form of practical value lies in the way research contributes to professional judgment. A study may be valuable for practice if it:

- clarifies recurring patterns or dilemmas encountered in educational or teaching settings;
- articulates distinctions that practitioners implicitly navigate but rarely formalize;
- offers conceptual tools that help make sense of complex situations;
- challenges taken-for-granted assumptions without prescribing ready-made solutions.

Such contributions may not lead to immediate changes in practice, yet they can strongly shape how practitioners understand their work. This form of value is less visible than direct application, but no less real. Biesta (2007) cautioned against reducing educational research to “what works,” noting that education involves judgment rather than mere implementation. Research that acknowledges this complexity can be intellectually and professionally meaningful

for practitioners, while for academics it requires resisting the tendency to equate relevance with prescription—despite teachers’ understandable search for quick-fix educational “Holy Grails.” Insisting that practical relevance be demonstrated mainly through ready-to-use solutions is therefore not a neutral stance: it privileges certain forms of knowledge and risks marginalizing work that supports professional judgment, conceptual clarification, or critical reflection.

### **Implications for Editorial Evaluation**

If educational research can be valuable for practice in multiple, non-equivalent ways, then editorial evaluation faces a delicate task. The issue is not whether to maintain rigorous standards—those are essential—but how to articulate expectations concerning practice in a way that is neither superficial nor reductive.

Rather than adding new mandatory criteria or checklists, editorial boards and reviewers might benefit from adopting a shared grammar of judgment when considering claims of practical relevance. Such a grammar could be framed as a set of reflective questions, for example:

- For which specific practices does this research plausibly claim relevance?  
Classroom teaching, curriculum design, professional development, policy interpretation, institutional decision-making?
- What kind of practical contribution is being offered?  
Guidance for action, conceptual clarification, critical perspective, diagnostic insight, evaluative, or reflective support?
- What conditions of interpretation or appropriation are made explicit?  
Contextual features, constraints, required expertise, or limits of transferability?
- What is the implicit “cost” for practitioners?

What time, resources, conceptual effort, or organizational change are required to engage meaningfully with the findings? This issue is particularly salient for overburdened teachers, for whom the cost–benefit ratios of available alternatives are central considerations in every-day and minute-by-minute professional decisions.

Importantly, these questions do not replace methodological criteria; they complement them. They also do not impose a single model of relevance. Instead, they invite authors to be explicit about their intentions and reviewers to evaluate those intentions on their own terms.

For practitioners who read academic journals, such clarity can be equally beneficial. When a study makes explicit what it can—and cannot—reasonably offer to practice, readers are better positioned to judge its relevance for their own contexts, rather than feeling either disappointed or overwhelmed.

## Clarifying Without Normalizing

Clarifying what it means for educational research to be valuable for practice does not require standardization or homogenization. On the contrary, it involves recognizing the diversity of legitimate relations between research and practice, and resisting the temptation to reduce that diversity to a single evaluative model.

Educational research can be theoretically ambitious without being detached from practice. It can be empirically modest without being trivial. It can be deeply situated without being merely anecdotal. Acknowledging these possibilities requires a shift not in standards, but in the way standards are articulated and justified.

For academic readers, such clarification may encourage greater reflexivity about the assumptions that govern evaluation and publication. For practitioners, it may provide reassurance that research need not be prescriptive to be professionally meaningful. Expert knowledge is not merely a matter of accumulating propositional content; it also involves the capacity to interpret, judge, and situate knowledge within concrete situations. In our experience, when teachers encounter research findings, they usually have the professional competence required to appropriate them productively—often immediately—for practice or reflection, without relying on step-by-step prescriptions (Potvin et al., 2024).

This capacity, however, is neither uniformly distributed nor independent of working conditions, professional experience, or institutional support; acknowledging such variability does not undermine the argument, but rather underscores the importance of research that respects practitioners as interpretive agents rather than passive implementers.

Ultimately, the question is not whether educational research should serve practice, but how we recognize and evaluate the many ways in which it already does. Making this question explicit is not a threat to rigor; it is a step toward greater intellectual honesty and mutual intelligibility within the field.

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