

Teacher and Research Priorities: To What Extent Do They Align?

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Educational research aspires to serve the public good by improving educational practice, informing policy, and ultimately improving outcomes for students and communities (Sykes et al., 2009). At its best, it supports practitioners, empowers decision-makers, and enriches public discourse about schooling. Yet a persistent tension remains between the production of educational research and its practical relevance to those who work in schools, especially classroom teachers. Many educators report that research is too often disconnected from their day-to-day realities, offering little actionable insight or failing to reflect the challenges they encounter (Finnigan & Daly, 2014; Nelson & O’Beirne, 2014). As a result, much research intended to support schools can feel remote or inaccessible to the very people it seeks to benefit.

The stakes of this misalignment are particularly high in the current educational climate. K-12 schools are still navigating the aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated longstanding inequities and introduced new challenges related to student behavior, attendance, mental health, and instructional loss (Marshall & Pressley, 2024). At the same time, teachers face intensifying demands in an era of shifting curricular standards, political scrutiny, and rapid technological change, including the growing influence of artificial intelligence in classrooms (Ferlazzo, 2025). These pressures have contributed to burnout (McDaniel et al., 2024), staffing shortages (Nguyen et al., 2024), and declining morale (Lavery & Dahill-Brown, 2024) across the profession. In such a context, ensuring that educational research meaningfully addresses the

issues that matter most to educators is more than an academic concern; it is central to the legitimacy of the field. In this study, we sought to answer the following question: *To what extent does prominent educational research reflect the priorities of U.S. K-12 teachers?*

Framework

Scholars have long described a “research-practice gap” in education, whereby the knowledge that is produced by researchers and the knowledge required by practitioners operate in parallel rather than in partnership (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Hargreaves, 1996). While numerous efforts have been made to bridge this divide, including the development of translational research, practice-based partnerships, and research-practice networks, many of these initiatives focus on dissemination or implementation rather than on the starting point, where researchers and practitioners are focused on the same problems in the first place (Levin, 2013). On the one side of the gap, researchers often prioritize theory-building, methodological innovation, and publication in peer-reviewed venues, activities that, while academically valuable, can feel abstract or inaccessible to classroom educators. On the other side, teachers face complex, immediate problems that require timely, practical solutions grounded in the realities of the classroom. Bridging the research-practice gap requires more than translating findings or improving access; it potentially requires a reexamination of research agendas to ensure the lived experiences of those working in schools. As such, understanding whether there is thematic alignment between current educational research and teacher-identified concerns is an important step in making research more relevant, credible, and actionable in K-12 settings.

Method

To answer our research question, we conducted two methods concurrently: (1) a content analysis of recent AERA annual meeting programs and (2) a brief national survey of U.S. teachers.

Content Analysis

To ascertain what prominent educational research has focused on, we conducted a content analysis of AERA annual meeting conference programs for the five annual meetings that have occurred during the current decade. To identify the major themes of the conference, we utilized Microsoft Copilot, an AI-powered language model, to analyze the full text of the conference programs from 2021 to 2025. Our university-supported Copilot subscription does not use uploaded data or conversations for training. The conference programs, provided in PDF format, included detailed descriptions of all scheduled sessions, including paper presentations, symposia, roundtables, and workshops. Copilot systematically reviewed this content using natural language processing techniques to identify recurring keywords, concepts, and disciplinary focuses. Sessions were grouped into preliminary thematic categories based on semantic similarity and topical overlap. These categories were then iteratively refined through clustering and frequency analysis to ensure conceptual coherence and distinctiveness. The final set of themes was determined by ranking categories according to the number of sessions associated with each, resulting in five dominant themes.

We utilized 3 main prompts. The first was applied to each individual year's program, after uploading the pdf. *"Could you give me the main themes of this conference based on the descriptions of conference presentations?"* Then, after each program was addressed separately,

we sought to generate themes across the full set of programs with the prompt “*What were the most prominent themes across each of the annual programs?*” Then relative prominence of each theme was visualized using a frequency-based bar chart to illustrate their distribution across the program, using the prompt “*Would you be able to create a bar chart of the frequency of the top 5 themes, to show their relative importance?*”

We conducted the analysis three times in separate sessions to ensure consistency and replicability and found only minor differences in phrasing.

Teacher Survey

To gain an understanding of the issues that mattered most to American K-12 teachers, we administered a brief, national survey between July 11 and July 22, 2025 using Prolific (n=263). We received responses from teachers representing 43 states. Most taught in traditional public schools (82%), and most were general education teachers (71%). We asked teachers three demographic items: (1) the state in which they reside; (2) their role (e.g., general education teacher, special education teacher, instructional coach); and (3) the type of school in which they taught (e.g., traditional public school, charter school, private school, hybrid/microschool). We received responses from teachers representing 43 states. Most taught in traditional public schools (82%), and most were general education teachers (71%). We then asked the following open-ended item: *We are educational researchers and want to know what issues matter to you. What are the top 3 issues that educational researchers should be focusing on?*

Data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti version 25, and codes were created based on participant responses. We did not use any AI-powered functions of ATLAS.ti during this phase.

We then uploaded our data into our university-supported Copilot and asked it to capture the themes among the teachers' responses as a robustness check using the following prompt: *My colleagues and I have conducted a brief survey of teachers asking them what issues mattered most to them. Identify the main themes based on teacher responses.* Results were similar.

Results

To answer the study's research question, we compared responses from the AERA program content analysis with findings from our survey of teachers.

Content Analysis Findings

The first of our three prompts asked Copilot to provide the main themes of each of the last five conferences based on descriptions of the conference presentations. Overall, research focused on educational equity, social justice, identity, and inclusion was most prominent in the programs. See Table 1 for a Copilot summary of responses.

Table 1.

Year-by-Year Themes from AERA Educational Research Presentations

Prompt 1: Could you give me the main themes of the conference based on the descriptions of conference presentations?

2025: #1. Equity, Justice, and Identity

- Racial and gender justice in education
- Critical race theory, intersectionality, and decolonial frameworks
- LGBTQ+ inclusion and anti-bullying
- Culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies
- Ethnic studies and community-based education

2024: #1. Equity, Justice, and Inclusion

- Strong emphasis on racial justice, social justice, and equity-oriented scholarship.
- Sessions explored Black, Latinx, Asian American, and Indigenous educational experiences, often through critical race theory, intersectionality, and culturally responsive pedagogy.
- Topics included decolonizing education, anti-racist curriculum, and inclusive teacher preparation.

2023: #1. Equity, Justice, and Inclusion in Education

This theme permeated nearly every division and SIG, with a strong emphasis on:

- Antiracist and decolonial education
- Critical race theory and intersectionality
- Support for BIPOC educators and students
- Culturally sustaining pedagogies
- Youth voice and community-based learning
- Teacher well-being and identity in racialized contexts

2022: #1. Equity, Justice, and Identity in Education · Antiracist education and dismantling systemic inequities · Culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies · LGBTQ+, Indigenous, and multilingual student experiences · Critical race theory, intersectionality, and decolonial frameworks
2021: #1 Equity, Social Justice and Teacher Education · Equity · Teacher Education · Social Justice · Technology · Identity

Our second Copilot prompt inquired about the most prominent theme across each of the annual programs from 2021 to 2025. The most prominent theme identified was “Equity, Justice, and Inclusion.” See Table 2 for the Copilot response.

Table 2.

*Most Prominent Theme Across 2021-2025 AERA Programs – Copilot Response***Prompt 2: What was the most prominent theme across each of the annual programs?**

Across the 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025 AERA Annual Meetings, one major theme emerged as the most prominent and widely represented:

Equity, Justice, and Inclusion

- The most dominant theme across all five years.
 - Antiracist and decolonial education
 - Critical race theory and intersectionality
 - Inclusive practices for BIPOC, LGBTQ+, immigrant, and disabled students
 - Equity in school leadership and policy
- Featured in presidential sessions, SIGs, and division symposia.

Our third and final prompt asked Copilot to create a bar chart capturing the frequency of the top 5 themes to illustrate their relative importance. Equity and Social Justice was the most prominent theme, which appeared double the number of times as the second-most prominent theme (See Figure 1).

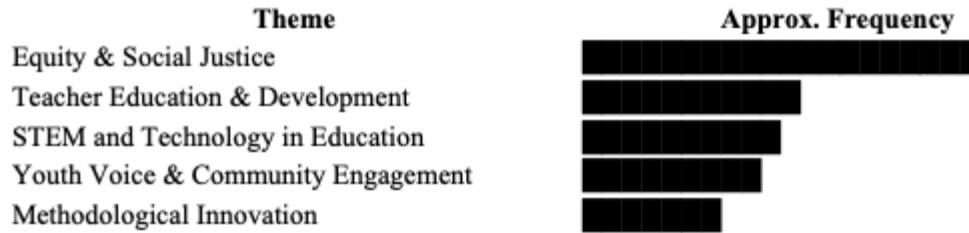


Figure 1 – Relative Importance of Top 5 Topics Found in Prominent Educational Research

The rest of the top 5 themes included: (2) teacher education and professional development; (3) STEM and technology education; (4) youth voice and community engagement; and (5) methodological innovation. It is worth noting that the most common subthemes among the 2nd through 5th most prevalent topics included topics related to equity and social justice as well. For example, two of the prominent themes within the Teacher Education and Professional Development theme were “supporting teachers of color” and “critical consciousness and identity development,” – both of which could easily find a home within the top topic of Equity and Social Justice as well. Likewise, the top subtheme within Methodological Innovation was “critical quantitative methods (QuantCrit).” See Table 3 for a breakdown of subthemes among the top 5 overarching themes found in contemporary educational research.

Table 3.

Top 5 Educational Research Topics Represented at AERA, 2021-2025

1. Equity & Social Justice

- **Most dominant theme** across all three years.
- Topics included:
 - Antiracist and decolonial education
 - Critical race theory and intersectionality
 - Inclusive practices for BIPOC, LGBTQ+, immigrant, and disabled students
 - Equity in school leadership and policy
- Featured in presidential sessions, SIGs, and division symposia.

2. Teacher Education and Professional Development

- Strong focus on:
 - Mentoring early-career and preservice teachers
 - Supporting teachers of color
 - Critical consciousness and identity development
 - “Grow Your Own” and community-based teacher pipelines
- Sessions spanned Divisions K, G, and C.

3. STEM and Technology in Education

- Recurring emphasis on:
 - Computational thinking and AI in classrooms
 - Equity in STEM participation
 - Digital learning environments and immersive tech (e.g., VR)

- Data literacy and tech-enhanced assessment
- Often linked with equity and access themes.

● 4. Youth Voice and Community Engagement

- Highlighted through:
 - Youth participatory action research (YPAR)
 - Student activism and civic engagement
 - Community-based learning and partnerships
 - Mental health and identity development
- Especially visible in Divisions G and SIGs focused on social justice.

● 5. Methodological Innovation

- Growing interest in:
 - Critical quantitative methods (QuantCrit)
 - Arts-based, narrative, and autoethnographic research
 - Mixed-methods and meta-analytic approaches
 - Decolonizing and community-engaged methodologies
 - Prominent in Divisions D, G, and across SIGs.
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Overall, research featured at the largest educational research organization's annual meeting has been dominated by issues related to educational equity, social justice, critical theory, and identity.

Teacher Survey Findings

Findings from our national survey of teachers revealed seven top themes. The top issue that mattered to practicing K-12 teachers was student behavior and discipline. Teachers were very concerned about disruptions in the classroom, which for many have become worse since the COVID-19 pandemic. The rest of the top 7 issues included: (2) educational technology and artificial intelligence; (3) teacher and student mental health and well-being; (4) parental support; (5) curriculum and instructional challenges; (6) funding and resources; and (7) teacher retention and professional respect. When we asked Copilot to also analyze our data, similar findings were produced. See Table 4 for a Copilot summary of teacher responses.

Table 4.

*Copilot Summary of Teacher Survey Responses***Top Themes Identified from Teacher Responses**

1. Student Behavior and Discipline
 - Words like *behavior*, *discipline*, *respect*, and *engagement* appeared frequently.
 - Many teachers expressed concerns about disruptive behaviors, lack of accountability, and classroom management challenges.
2. Technology and AI
 - Frequent mentions of *AI*, *technology*, *cell phones*, and *screen time*.
 - Teachers are grappling with how to integrate technology meaningfully while managing its impact on attention spans and academic integrity.
3. Mental Health and Well-being
 - Terms like *mental health*, *burnout*, *stress*, and *well-being* were common.
 - Both student and teacher mental health were highlighted as pressing concerns.
4. Parental Involvement and Support
 - Words such as *parents*, *home*, *support*, and *involvement* were noted.
 - Teachers emphasized the importance of family engagement in student success and behavior.
5. Curriculum and Instructional Challenges
 - Mentions of *curriculum*, *standardized testing*, *rigor*, and *instruction*.
 - Teachers are seeking more relevant, engaging, and flexible curricula that meet diverse student needs.

6. Funding and Resources

- Frequent use of *funding, resources, pay, and support*.
- Many responses pointed to inadequate financial support and lack of materials.

7. Teacher Retention and Professional Respect

- Words like *retention, support, respect, and training*.
- Concerns about high turnover, lack of professional autonomy, and insufficient planning time were common.

Comparison of Content Analysis and Teacher Survey Findings

We compared content analysis findings with teacher survey findings and found almost no overlap between the two lists of prominent issues. The issues that practicing K-12 teachers surfaced as important to their professional work were most absent from the list of top topics explored in prominent, contemporary educational research, with two exceptions. Artificial intelligence was a top topic among researchers and teachers, as was professional development and training. However, many of the topics prioritized by researchers (e.g., racial justice, social justice, and decolonizing education) were not present in teacher survey responses, and many of the topics prioritized by teachers (e.g., student discipline, student mental health, and parental support) were not prioritized by researchers.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the extent to which educational researchers are meeting the needs of practicing K-12 teachers. With few exceptions (e.g., artificial intelligence), they are not. This matters because educational research has been used to drive evidence-based improvement in schools (e.g., McMillan, 2022; Sykes et al., 2009). At a moment in time when some policymakers are questioning the value of educational research (Alazmi & Alazimi, 2023), it is incumbent upon those of us who engage in this important work to ensure that we are reflecting what matters to teachers.

Lest we be misunderstood, we would like to make a few points clear. We are not stating that topics surfaced by researchers (e.g., racial justice) are unimportant. Likewise, we believe in academic freedom and believe scholars should study what they believe is important. However, our findings do point to a mismatch in priorities between those who toil in schools on a daily basis and those who study them.

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