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Introduction

Increasing reliance on digital learning platforms (DLPs) in both K-12 and higher education has generated vast amounts of learner data, opening new opportunities to better understand what works, for whom, and under what conditions. As this field grows, so too does the need for responsible, practitioner-informed research practices that center the voices of educators—who are most closely connected to student learning.

[SEERNet](#) is an IES-funded research network and movement to leverage DLPs, particularly those being used at scale by large student populations, as research infrastructure. As the initiative has evolved over the past four years, varying models have emerged for how DLPs engage practitioners in their research processes. Some DLPs use technologies that fully anonymize large datasets, enabling researchers to access data without requiring teacher participation. This approach allows for faster data access and reduces district and teacher burden. Others involve educators more directly, even empowering teachers to conduct research in their own classrooms. This model supports highly contextualized research grounded in daily practice. Both approaches offer important contributions to the field.

Regardless of the approach, researchers increasingly recognize that educators care deeply about how the data generated in their classrooms is used. In response, we conducted a collaborative study through SEERNet's networks to better understand educators' perspectives on DLP-based research. This report synthesizes survey data and practitioner insights on the perceived benefits, challenges, and ethical considerations, particularly those related to student data privacy, associated with this emerging field.

Relevant Literature

DLPs as research infrastructure in education research. Using DLPs as research infrastructure offers many advantages to education researchers. First, DLPs reduce the gap between educational theory and applied practice. Research is situated directly in the platforms that students are interacting with, which enhances the external validity of findings (Schellinger et al., 2024). DLPs also offer the ability to collect detailed log-level data on students that surpasses the limited scope of traditional longer-term, outcome-focused analyses (e.g., final course grades; Wei et al., 2025). Unlike final grades, which only reflect a student's terminal performance, log-level data captures the incremental process of learning, revealing exactly how a student navigates a task before they reach an endpoint. These variables, which can include time-on-task, hint requests, and clickstream data, allow researchers insight into the mechanisms of learning that were previously inaccessible (Schellinger et al., 2024). These data also allow identification of students who are less likely to be successful in the course and offer opportunities for early intervention by educators (Zhang & Qin, 2018). Third, DLP research can be conducted with high methodological rigor, allowing A/B interventions and randomized control trials (RCTs) that further evidence-based research and support causal explanations of learning mechanisms (Wei et al., 2025). Finally, DLPs can further the goal of bridging the research-to-practice gap by using data that is generated by students and educators in their normal use of the DLP to ground conclusions in the authentic student learning context (Dawson et al., 2008).

The importance of educator and practitioner participation in research. The most well-documented instances of practitioner participation in research are from Research Practice Partnerships (RPPs). These collaborative research engagements help bridge the research-to-practice divide, ensuring that research is closely aligned with the interests, needs, and priorities of the classroom (Penuel et al., 2020; Coburn & Penuel, 2016). The quality of the research is also improved, enabling more timely and relevant outcomes (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). This increases the probability that the emerging research-informed innovations and interventions are feasible for classroom implementation (Cai & Hwang, 2021; Snow, 2015) and show promise for impacts on student learning (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). RPPs also enable deeper partnerships between researchers and practitioners. By empowering practitioners to contribute to the development of knowledge, RPPs democratize university-based research (Sjölund, 2023; Bevins & Price, 2014).

Challenges of conducting research with educators. Applied education research has many inherent logistical complexities that researchers and educators face. External researchers often treat classrooms as "labs" to test pre-established theories, a process that requires navigating multiple levels of permission from IRBs to school boards to ensure the environment meets their specific research needs (Roschelle et al., 2025). In contrast, DLPs overcome these challenges by streamlining student assent and consent through approved protocols (Schellinger et al., 2024) and providing researcher-facing dashboards and documentation to facilitate easier data collection and analysis (Roschelle et al., 2025).

Institutional barriers to research. At the K-12 level, school district education policies, outcomes, and processes are accountable to the public and the state (Ming & Dickson, 2025). Additionally, almost all students are minors, who warrant additional research protections. Because K-12 teachers have extremely restricted extra time to conduct their own research (Chow et al., 2025), K-12 research is often conducted by external researchers in dynamics that can feel "extractive" to educators, where researchers apply a study they designed without understanding the context of K-12 classroom research and misalign their research output priorities with teachers' priorities of maximizing student experiences and success in the classroom.

(Ming & Dickson, 2025). In higher education, students are more similar to adult “customers,” who are opting into a specific educational experience and can consent for themselves. Higher ed researchers are often internal faculty members who are incentivized to produce research output and are rarely rewarded for improving their pedagogical approaches or classroom experiences for their students (Ming & Dickson, 2025). Higher ed faculty can also be resistant to incorporating new technology in their classrooms, seeing it as a distraction from their primary duties of research and teaching (Macfadyen & Dawson, 2012). Across both educational levels, however, there is a broad and consistent tension: administration’s priority is to maximize student enrollment, while researchers’ priorities are to maximize their research output.

To better understand the experiences, research complexities, and institutional barriers that educators encounter when using DLPs, we designed this study to capture perspectives from both K-12 and higher education populations.

This descriptive study seeks to understand educator perceptions regarding the potential benefits, challenges, and ethical considerations of educational research conducted within DLPs. Our research is guided by two core questions:

1. What are educators’ perceptions of the benefits, challenges, and ethical considerations of educational research on DLPs?
2. How do these perceptions differ between K-12 and higher education participants?

This study was piloted, refined, and analyzed in collaboration with the SEERNet Practitioner Advisory Board (PAB). Specifically, we consulted Dr. Cheryl Robertson and Dr. Chad Sorrells—both of whom are authors on this report—to leverage their applied experience in both K-12 and higher education settings. Dr. Robertson spent 30 years as a middle school science teacher and is now a program coordinator and instructor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Dr. Sorrells is a middle school math teacher, edTPA Coach at iTeach, and University Supervisor and instructor at the University of West Alabama College of Education.

Methods

Survey Materials

We developed a 37-item survey to identify the perspectives of K-12 and higher education educators on research being conducted in DLPs. The survey was adapted from a questionnaire previously administered at Rice University and utilized branching logic to tailor questions based on the participant's primary educational context.

- **Research Involvement and Ethics:** All participants responded to 18 items regarding research involvement, awareness, and ethical considerations. Example items included: "If you knew research was being conducted on a learning platform, how would that knowledge influence your decision to adopt that platform?" and "How important do you believe student privacy is in the context of research on learning platforms?" Participants were asked to respond with their agreement on a scale of 1 to 5.
- **K-12 Items:** Participants identified their teaching context through four specific questions, such as "What is your current K-12 role?" (e.g., classroom teacher, coach, administrator) and "How long have you been in education?" (categorized by years of experience).
- **Higher Education Items:** We included 15 items to identify higher education teaching contexts, including perceptions of departmental support and the use of research outcomes. Example items included: "How supportive is your department about implementing education research-informed practices?" and questions identifying perceived barriers to implementation (e.g., administrative hurdles, time, resources, or privacy concerns).

Procedure

The survey was disseminated nationally from February 2025 to June 2025 through various professional networks, email, and social media, utilizing both individual profiles and the established profiles of Digital Promise and SEERNet.

We utilized descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies and percentages) to analyze the survey responses. The interpretation of this data was a collaborative effort; our team, which includes practitioners with both K-12 and higher education experience, integrated our professional insights with those of the PAB. During co-analysis, we utilized a protocol adapted from the IDEA Data Center's Data Meeting protocol (Nimkoff et al., 2018) to discuss observations, interpretations, and implications, which forms the basis of the discussion presented in this report.

Participants

There were 43 total respondents: 25 from K-12 and 18 from higher education. As participants were not required to answer every item, there are minor discrepancies between the total number of respondents and the responses per individual item.

K-12 Participants

K-12 respondents were predominantly classroom teachers ($N = 12$, 48%), with several district administrators ($N = 3$, 12%) and others representing roles such as Instructional Coach, Individualized Education Program (IEP) Chair, and Central Office staff. Most respondents reported 16+ years of experience ($N = 11$, 44%). Their experience spanned a variety of primary disciplines and grade levels (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. K-12 teacher-reported primary disciplines

Primary Discipline	<i>n</i>	%
Language Arts	3	36%
Science	2	18%
Math	1	9%
World Languages	1	9%
Career and Technical Education (CTE)	1	9%
Library Media	1	9%
Special Education	1	9%

Table 2. K-12 teacher-reported grades worked with

Grades Worked With	<i>n</i>
Primary	6
Elementary	6
Middle	9
Secondary	10

Note. Multiple selections were allowed; some participants reported working across multiple grade levels.

Higher Education Participants

The majority of higher education participants reported 11-15 years of experience ($N = 7$, 39%). Most participants taught in a 4-year university ($N = 6$, 33%) or graduate/professional institution ($N = 6$, 33%). Their experience was primarily concentrated in the social sciences (see Table 3).

Table 3: Primary Higher Education discipline

Primary Discipline	<i>n</i>	%
Social Sciences	6	35%
Other	4	24%
Humanities	2	12%
Natural Sciences	1	6%
Mathematics	1	6%

Note. $N = 17$. Free-text responses to "Other" included Business ($n = 1$), Communication Sciences and Disorders ($n = 1$), and Computer Science ($n = 1$). One participant did not provide specific details.

Results

In analyzing our results, we considered within-group and across-group trends for items responded to by both K-12 and higher education participants.

Research Awareness and General Feelings

Awareness of research conducted within digital learning platforms was variable both within and between groups. Both groups demonstrated a higher tendency toward awareness than non-awareness. However, K-12 educators expressed a slightly greater tendency toward non-awareness; 6 reported “Yes,” 5 reported “No,” and 3 reported “Maybe.” In contrast, higher education respondents showed a clearer trend toward awareness, with 8 reporting “Yes,” 3 reporting “No,” and 2 reporting “Maybe.”

Figure 1: Awareness of research on DLPs

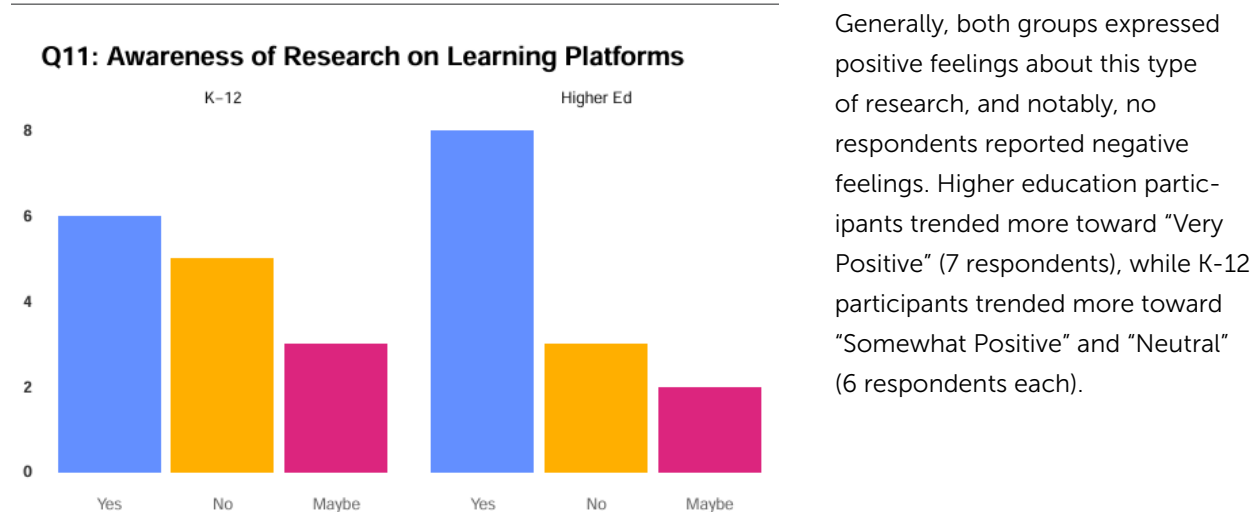
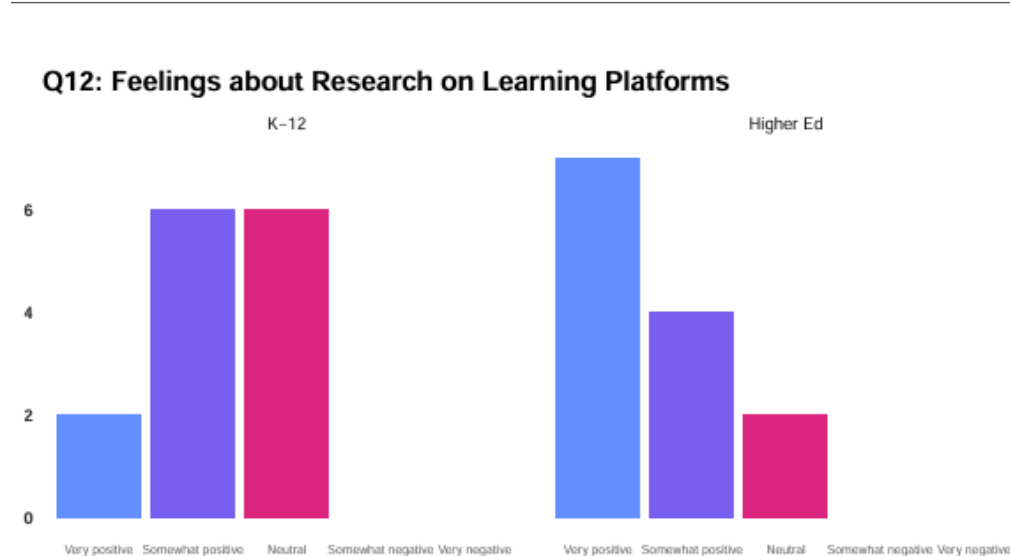


Figure 2: Feelings about Research on Learning Platforms



Research Participation

There were notable contrasts between K-12 and higher education regarding direct participation in research on DLPs. K-12 respondents primarily reported that they had not been involved in such research, with 10 reporting “No” and 4 reporting “Yes.” Higher education participants were evenly split, with 7 reporting “Yes” and 7 reporting “No.”

When describing their roles in that research, participants reported a variety of involvement levels. K-12 participants described themselves as participants ($n = 2$), researchers ($n = 2$), or advisors ($n = 1$). Higher education participants reported roles with higher levels of oversight, including researchers ($n = 3$), principal investigators ($n = 2$), course directors ($n = 1$), and advisors ($n = 1$).

Table 4. Research Roles of K-12 Participants

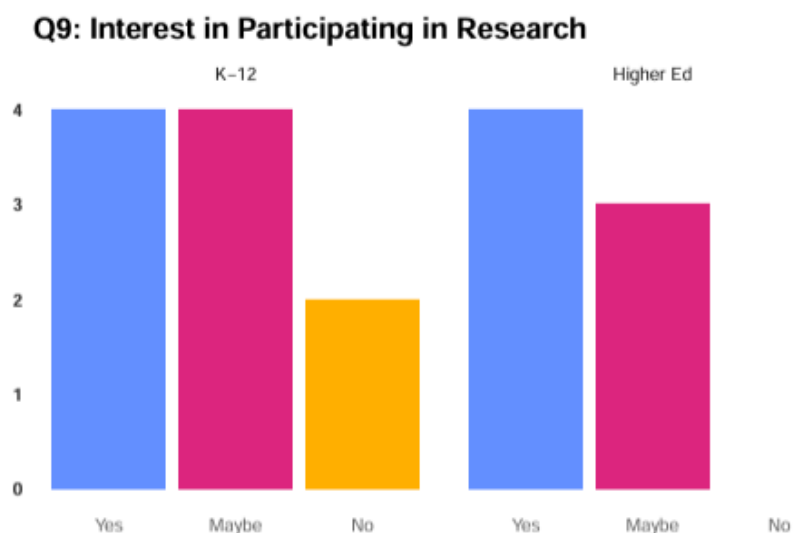
Role	n
Participant	2
Researcher	2
Advisor	1

Table 5. Research Roles of Higher Ed Participants

Role	n
Researcher	3
PI	2
Course Director	1
Advisor	1

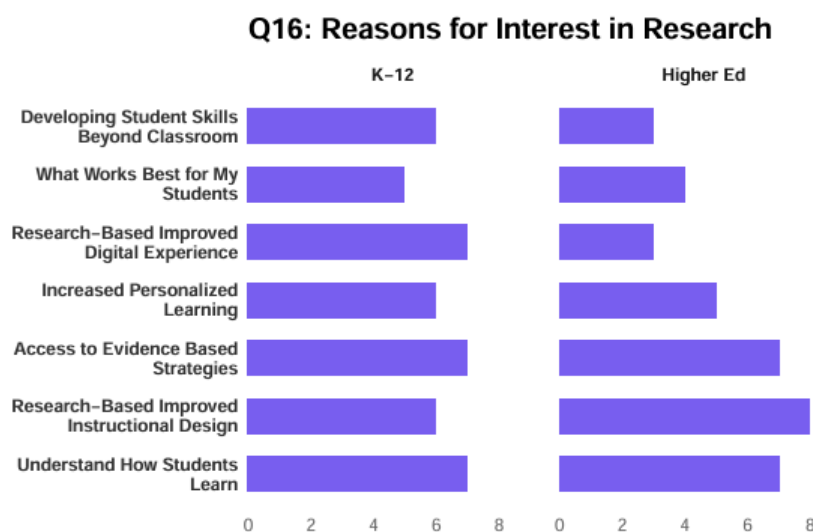
With regard to *interest* in participating in research, trends between groups were similar. Higher education was slightly more positive and K-12 participants were slightly more uncertain (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3. Interest in Participating in Research



When asked what would most strongly influence their desire to participate in research involving a DLP, both groups noted access to evidence-based strategies and an understanding of how students learn in their top three responses. For K-12 educators, an additional top priority included a research-based improved digital experience. For higher education, research-based improved instructional design was a higher priority (see Figure 4).

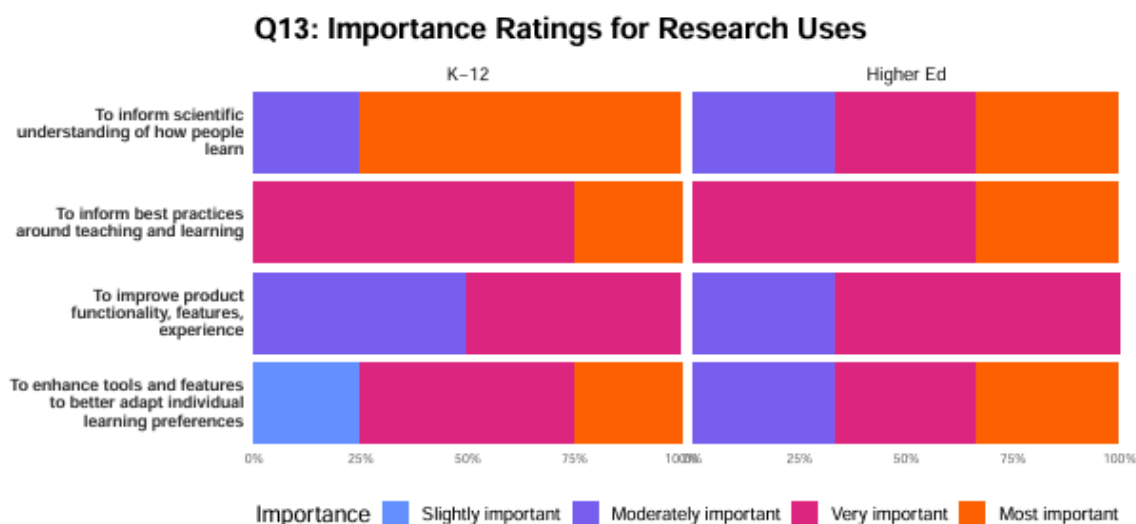
Figure 4. Reasons for Interest in Research



Research Goals

Differences were also noted between participants regarding the kinds of research they find most important. When asked to rank the importance of different types of research goals, both groups were similar in their perception that research to inform best practices in teaching and learning are the most important. K-12 participants felt more strongly about the need to improve product functionality, features, and experiences than higher ed participants, yet slightly less strongly in the need to enhance tools and features to better adapt to individual learning preferences (see Figure 5).

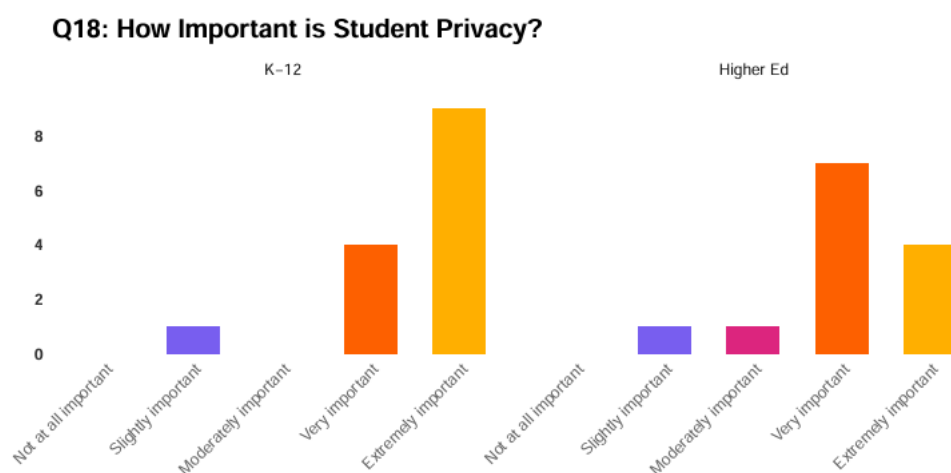
Figure 5. Comparison of K-12 and Higher Ed in the Kinds of Research They Find Important



Ethics and Privacy

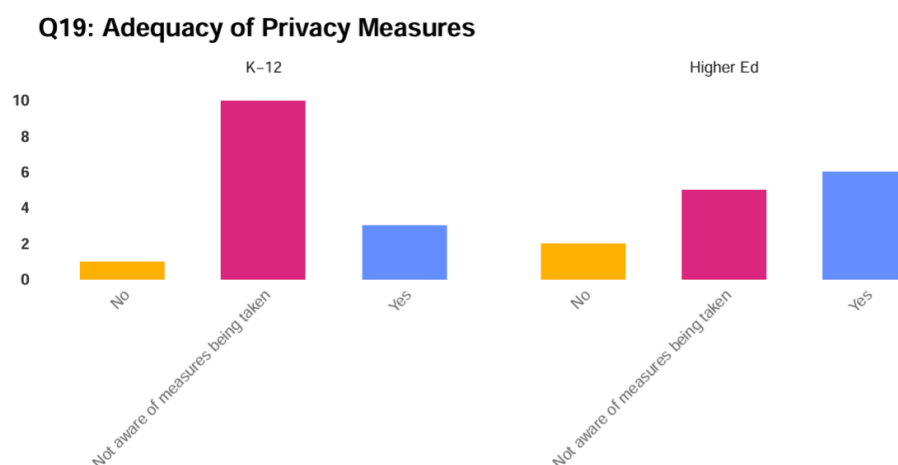
Two questions were asked regarding student privacy and privacy measures in digital learning platforms. In regards to the importance of student privacy, most participants responded that it was either very important or extremely important, with more K-12 educators rating privacy as extremely important, and more higher ed educators rating privacy as very important (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6. Importance of Student Privacy



Regarding the adequacy of privacy measures being taken in research being conducted with digital learning platforms, more K-12 educators were unaware of the measures being taken ($N = 10$) compared to higher education educators, who were most likely to say that the existing measures were adequate ($n = 6$).

Figure 7. Adequacy of Privacy Measures



When asked what additional safeguards participants would like to see implemented, several participants indicated the need for consent. Specific examples given in open-ended responses included that "Students understanding and knowing what is happening to their data and their actions/history of actions" is important. Another respondent shared that it was important that "No student data is shared" and the critical need for de-identifying student data.

Discussion

RQ1. What are educators' *shared* perceptions about the potential benefits, challenges, and ethical considerations involved in educational research being conducted on digital learning platforms?

These findings revealed shared foundational beliefs across K-12 and higher education. Participants in both groups expressed a commitment to improving student outcomes, held student data privacy as a high priority, and demonstrated a generally positive perception of DLP research. More participants in each group reported awareness of DLP research than a lack of awareness. No participants in either group reported negative feelings about it, although several in each group were neutral.

Both groups also showed overlap in the factors that most motivate their interest in DLP research, with access to evidence-based strategies and understanding how students learn among the most frequent selections across both contexts. This convergence suggests that practitioners at both levels value actionable insights that can improve their effectiveness and their impact on student learning. Regarding student data privacy, the vast majority of participants across both groups rated it as either "very" or "extremely" important, with no participants in either group rating it as "not at all important."

RQ2. How do educators' perceptions *differ* between K-12 and higher education participants?

Differences in educators' contexts drive variation in priorities, awareness, and perspectives on the potential benefits, challenges, and ethical considerations of conducting research in DLPs. The survey responses revealed a clear distinction in research culture: research participation is typically not a core responsibility for K-12 educators, whereas it is an expected part of higher education roles, aligned with the institutional ideal that professional practice should be both research-based and knowledge-generating. K-12 practitioners often operate from a more pragmatic, student-centered perspective. Additionally, the systems in which these educators work differ, with higher education settings generally offering more autonomy, while K-12 decisions about curriculum and technology are often centralized at the district or school level.

Perceived Benefits, Challenges, and Ethical Considerations for K-12 Practitioners. Although our survey revealed that K-12 practitioners were not well aware of research with DLPs, we found that the potential benefits K-12 educators see in this type of research are consistent with the K-12 research culture. K-12 educators want research to provide direct, local benefit and actionable pedagogical supports. They care first and foremost about "what works best for [their] students." Results showed that K-12 educators saw less of a benefit for research to improve digital learning platforms' functionalities, features, and tools. This is potentially related to how K-12 teachers view DLPs as a tool. For example, some teachers may use a learning management system primarily as a file repository and therefore not see how research based improvement would be meaningful to their students' learning.

When considering the challenges of such research in K-12 settings, there appears to be a disconnect between research and K-12 classrooms. One respondent said:

Most K-12 research I've seen does not take into account what is happening outside of the computer/digital learning platform: role of the teacher, peers, intrinsic motivation (rushing through to get it over with; taking it slowly to waste time by moving the mouse occasionally so the platform doesn't time out; clicking randomly, etc.).

This may contribute to K-12 educators feeling that their classrooms are subjects of research rather than partners with researchers. Combine this disconnect with the often-reported statistics that say teachers lack sufficient time in the school day for necessary administrative tasks (e.g., grading, reporting, answering emails; Lin et al., 2024), and research becomes an even greater challenge.

Contrasts in K-12 educators' responses to items related to student data privacy illustrate a gap between awareness and implementation. They view student data privacy as extremely important, likely because of the training required of K-12 educators on federal regulations like FERPA. However, these mandatory trainings are often passively consumed, and some teachers perceive administrators and central office staff (e.g., IT departments) as the protector of data. For example, one K-12 respondent called for "more internal evaluation board transparency." This potentially explains why despite data privacy's importance to K-12 educators, they also report that they are largely unaware of measures being taken to protect student data with DLPs—platforms they are using daily with their students.

Perceived Benefits, Challenges, and Ethical Considerations for Higher Education Practitioners. For practitioners in higher education, the benefits of DLP research align with the overall research-centric culture in that context. They are more aware and have more positive feelings towards this type of research than their K-12 counterparts. For context-specific questions (see Appendix A), higher education respondents indicated that they found research outcomes either somewhat or very applicable to their teaching, and they reported that their sources for evidence-based instructional practices included published literature, research studies, online databases, interviews, and surveys. They also noted that their departments and administrators are supportive of implementing research-informed practices and in participating in that research.

With regard to data privacy, higher education practitioners are more aware of the privacy measures being taken and also report less concern than K-12. This is likely because college/university students are over the age of 18 and are able to give their own consent. From a data protection standpoint, higher education instructors and institutions need to have adequate privacy measures in place, but from a research standpoint, students own their own data and can consent to studies. Still, respondents indicated that additional safeguards could be put into place to ensure that students "understand and know what is happening to their data and their actions/history of actions."

The survey findings indicate that similar to how K-12 educators feel a disconnect from the world of research, researchers feel a disconnect from practitioners as their partners. One higher ed respondent commented, "Research needs to get to practitioners, involving practitioners helps to increase that [research] pipeline." This disconnect is often fueled by institutional barriers; in K-12 settings, the pressure of accountability and a lack of time can make external research feel "extractive," where studies are imposed on a classroom without regard for local context (Ming & Dickson, 2025). Conversely, in higher education, while faculty are incentivized to produce research, they are rarely rewarded for using that research to improve their own pedagogy (Ming & Dickson, 2025). This creates a cycle where research is conducted on practitioners rather than with them.

Limitations

Our relatively small sample size limits generalizability of our findings, and based on participant responses on awareness of this type of research, we attribute the small sample to that. We conclude that research in DLPs is still a niche topic. We recruited participants through the SEERNet network, our own networks, and through social media, and note that selection bias is plausible. We did not collect demographic or geographic data in order to not increase the length of the survey further, so we are unable to assess the diversity of our participants. Further, because we were unable to recruit educators to participate in focus groups, we were also limited in the depth of data we were able to collect. Additional research is needed to fully understand how practitioners value this type of research.

Future Directions

Collecting educators' experiences in a focus group would enable us to better understand the nuance driving participants' experiences with research and DLPs, which we were unable to conduct as part of this study due to lack of participant interest. As we expand knowledge of what DLP research entails, we hope to encourage interest in focus group participation.

Conclusion

At the start of this study, we set out to better understand practitioners' perspectives on research being conducted within DLPs. As a result of this study, we have started to uncover patterns in perspectives and important next steps for the field. While we discovered a shared commitment to student success, we also uncovered a significant gap between the "lab" environment of the researcher and the "lived" experiences of the educator. To close this gap and move the field toward a "research with, not research on" model, we propose the following path forward:

Cultivating a Collaborative Research Culture

These findings articulate a need for clearer and more frequent communication with educators about the process and value of DLP research, ensuring they understand why this work is important to them, how it directly impacts their students, and precisely how their data is secured. We need to move beyond the extractive model of research—where data is pulled from a classroom without returning value—and toward Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs). This involves engaging practitioners in the early stages of study design to ensure research questions align with actual classroom needs. When educators are treated as partners rather than subjects, research becomes a value-add rather than an administrative burden.

Aligning Outputs With Pedagogical Needs

Practitioners at all levels care deeply about having access to research-based strategies and understanding how people learn. While platform developers often focus on UI/UX, researchers should prioritize translating findings into actionable pedagogical supports. By providing practitioner-facing summaries that explain exactly how a finding can change daily teaching, we fulfill the primary goal of both K-12 and higher education: improving student outcomes.

Closing the Transparency Gap

K-12 educators view student privacy as "extremely important," but many remain unaware of the specific measures taken by DLPs. We must work to bridge this gap by moving beyond passively consumed compliance training. Platforms should provide transparent, plain-language documentation that clearly explain de-identification processes. Building this trust is essential for long-term educator buy-in and ethical data usage.

While K-12 and higher education bring unique lenses to this work, only by working together can each of their needs be met: higher education can generate knowledge for the field, and K-12 practitioners can understand what works for their students. By centering collaboration, we can ensure that digital learning platforms become the foundation for a more effective, inclusive, and reciprocal educational research ecosystem.

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Appendix A: Survey Items

Identity

- Q1: From what perspective are you taking this survey?
 - K-12 Only Items
 - Q3: Current K-12 Role
 - Q4: Primary teaching/coaching discipline
 - Q5: Years in Education
 - Q6: Grades You've Worked With
 - Higher Education Only Items
 - Q23: What is your primary teaching discipline?
 - Q24: How long have you been teaching?
 - Q27: Type of institution
 - Q28: How do you typically teach?
 - Q29: What learning platforms do you use in your teaching?

Research Involvement (All Participants)

- Q7: Have you ever been involved in research on a learning platform?
- Q8: [If Q7 is yes] Please describe your role in that research.
- Q9: Interest in Participating in Research

Awareness of Research (Higher Ed Only)

- Q29.1: How applicable are research outcomes?
- Q30: Which evidence-based methods or instructional practices have you employed in your teaching?
- Q34: What are your sources for evidence-based methods or instructional practices you have employed in your teaching?
- Q31: Which of the following, if any, are barriers to implementing research-informed practices in your teaching?
 - There are no barriers
 - Administrative barriers
 - Time to implement
 - Resources/cost concerns
 - Lack of applicable research
 - Concerns about privacy
 - Concerns about consent/IRB
 - Other
- Departmental Support
- Administrative Support

Awareness of Research (All Participants)

- Q11: Are you aware of research being conducted within learning platforms?
- Q12: How do you generally feel about research being conducted within learning platforms?
- Q13: Importance of each goal
- Q15: If you knew research was being conducted on a learning platform, how would that knowledge influence your decision to adopt that platform?
- Q16: [If Q15 is more likely] If you knew research was being conducted on a learning platform, what would most strongly influence your decision to participate in that research? [Select all that apply]

Ethical / Privacy Questions (All Participants)

- Q18: How important is student privacy?
- Q19: Are there adequate privacy measures?
- Q20: What additional safeguards, if any, would you like to see implemented?

Final Comments (All Participants)

- Q21: Is there anything else you'd like to share about the potential benefits of research in learning platforms?
- Q22: Is there anything else you'd like to share about the potential challenges, drawbacks, or concerns related to such research?

Suggested Citation

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