

# Chapter XLI

## Conducting Survey Research in Education

**Ernest W. Brewer**  
*University of Tennessee, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*Survey research is prevalent among many professional fields. Both cost effective and time efficient, this method of research provides insight into the attitudes, thoughts, and opinions of populations. Because there are several types of survey research designs and data collection instruments, the researcher has the flexibility to determine which methods will work best for his or her particular study. Regardless of the method, the researcher must carefully select an existing instrument or construct the data collection instrument, as this is the key to a successful survey research study. This chapter discusses and defines survey research, provides the basic structure for conducting such research, describes the challenges surrounding survey research, provides recommendations when developing survey research studies, and presents information regarding future trends associated with survey research.*

### INTRODUCTION

From the Gallup polls to the internet, surveys have become more and more popular in finding out what people think about certain topics and issues. As noted by Berends (2006), survey research can be used for “monitoring important trends in society, testing our theoretical understanding of social processes, providing information to firms through market research, guiding politicians through polling of public opinion on key political

issues and strategies, and providing key indicators of what is going on in our society” (p. 623). Even more important during an election, polls demonstrate the vital significance of determining people’s beliefs, attitudes, and opinions. Although many people understand the importance of such large-scale surveys, this type of information-seeking is also valuable in smaller-scale research designs. Frequently used in education, surveys provide constructive feedback to educational administrators regarding teacher job satisfaction,

burnout, educational climate, parental attitudes towards school board decisions, student opinions regarding class options, and much more beneficial information. In doing so, changes can be made and ideas can be adapted to increase the success of schools and educational programs.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the importance of survey research as a practical and effective method of data exploration. Specifically, this chapter will provide information regarding the basic components of survey research, including the steps involved in conducting this type of research, the controversies and issues surrounding survey research, as well as solutions and recommendations to counter such issues. Finally, this paper will discuss trends and technologies driving the future of survey research.

## **BACKGROUND OF SURVEY RESEARCH**

### **What is Survey Research?**

Ideal for use in education, survey research is used to gather information about population groups to “learn about their characteristics, opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 183). This is done by administering a questionnaire, either written or orally, to a group of respondents, and the responses to the questions form the data for the study (Berends, 2006; Best & Kahn, 2003; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Mertler & Charles, 2008; Polit & Beck, 2006). Gay et al. (2009) define the questionnaire, or survey, as “an instrument to collect data that describes one or more characteristics of a specific population” (p. 175). Some researchers may be able to work with the entire population, which is referred to as a census (Berends, 2006; Gay et al.; Mertler & Charles, 2008). However, most survey research is conducted with a sample of respondents from the

target population. If proper sampling techniques are employed, the researcher can generalize the attitudes and ideas from the sample to the larger population (Fraenkel & Wallen; Gay et al.; Leedy & Ormrod; McMillan & Schumacher).

### **Why Do We Conduct Survey Research?**

As previously mentioned, survey research is used to gain insight into the thoughts, ideas, opinions, and attitudes of a population. It is descriptive in nature, so unlike experimental designs, the researcher does not manipulate variables (Burns & Grove, 2005). Instead, the survey researcher describes and draws conclusions from frequency counts and other types of analysis. Although it is descriptive research, survey research may serve as a stimulus for more in depth analytical research. Many correlational and causal-comparative studies include survey research as part of the data collection process (Burns & Grove; Mertler & Charles, 2008). Researchers turn to survey research because it offers a flexible design and is appropriate for gathering a large amount of data from many different types and sizes of populations (Mertler & Charles; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Polit & Beck, 2006). Finally, survey research is ideal for working with large and/or geographically dispersed populations when other methods of research are not always feasible (Best & Kahn, 2003; O’Sullivan, Russell, & Berner, 2003; Rubin & Babbie, 2008).

### **Comparison of Different Survey Methods**

Survey researchers employ two different methods of research: cross-sectional and longitudinal. These two methods vary dramatically in their types of samples and data collection procedures. Each method has advantages and disadvantages, and it is up to the researcher to select the design that works best for the study at hand.

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