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14th Feb 2021

Professional Development

Research In Schools – Are You Serious!

The prospect of schools using and doing research as a fundamental part of their outlook, purpose and practice has been long heralded ... but achingly slow in its realisation.

The spark of this ambition has led to a slow burn and at best a precarious, guttering flame. The movement has many passionate advocates and, yes, there are examples of some schools grasping and holding aloft the research engaged beacon. However, we still appear to be a long way off from research-informed practice being a part of every school's DNA. Perhaps the problem has been that champions of research engagement, and I count myself guilty among them, have built their hopes upon a process of gradual development when what's needed is something more fundamental, akin to a challenging revolution.

In one of his TED talks, the great Ken Robinson, who sadly died recently, quoted Abraham Lincoln to exemplify Robinson's call for a creative "learning revolution." "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new so we must think anew and act anew."

The staid incremental approaches of the past may no longer be fit for purpose to address the visceral challenges of the present. What is needed is less evolution and more revolution. And this may be particularly the case to secure real movement in schools becoming places where research shapes decision making, informs pedagogy and helps to transform classroom practice.

This call for such a dynamic gear shift is the focus of this special double issue of Professional Development Today. Each of the thirteen contributions are adapted and developed from chapters in the recently published book: The Research-Informed Teaching Revolution: A Handbook For The 21st Century Teacher, Edited by Chris Brown, Jane Flood and Graham Handscomb; John Catt Publishing. David Godfrey provides a review of this book at the end of this issue.

We hope you enjoy the refreshing challenge these articles bring. In the drive towards school research engagement it's time to get serious ... and to rise with the occasion!

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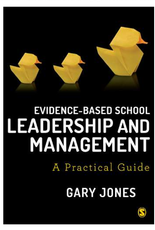
20th Mar 2021

Professional Development

Blogging Is Knowledge

Gary Jones explores the power of blogging and knowledge brokering in enabling practitioners to make the most of research and engage in evidence-based practice.



This article describes my experiences as a blogger and how I first came to be writing about evidence-based practice. Then a number of key themes around knowledge brokering will be explored – such as sourcing and sharing research evidence, stimulating discussion, and supporting individuals interested in making use of research. In particular there will be a focus on how blogging and knowledge brokering play a sustaining role for the individual blogger. I conclude by reflecting on any impact and success that I may have had in my role as a knowledge broker.

Personal Journey – the rise of the knowledge broker

I started blogging about education in the spring of 2014 as a result of a 'professional disappointment' – which involved not being appointed to a senior position and ultimately to a change in employment status. As such, blogging was designed to provide an outlet for my interest in educational leadership and management as I tried to find a new role. Initially the blog was influenced by my 30 years of experience of working in further education, where I had seen at first hand both the negative consequences of educational innovations being adopted without proper scrutiny of the supporting research evidence or where teachers, managers, headteachers, governing bodies and local government had selfishly prioritised their own narrow interests over and above the interests of pupils, parents and other stakeholders.

However, three quite separate events then went to influence the contents of my blog posts. First, in the summer of 2014 I came across an article by Adrian Furnham in The Sunday Times which introduced me to work of Rob Briner, Eric Barends and Denise Rousseau on evidence-based management. Second, in September 2014 I attended the researchED national conference, which got me thinking about evidence-based school leadership as the vast majority of the sessions at the event had a focus on teaching and learning, with little attention seemed to be being paid to the role of research and other sources of evidence in the decision making of senior leaders in schools. Third, in December 2014 I attended a researchED one-day event intended to support school research champions.

At this event, it quickly became apparent that there appeared to be a lack of awareness, particularly among school research leaders, of the work being done on evidence-based practice outside of schools. Indeed, most of the presenters at the event thought they were 'designing the plane whilst flying it' – whereas they were merely re-inventing the wheel.

As a consequence, I've ended up writing around 250 blog posts – see www.garyrjones.com/blog and my book, Evidence-Based School Leadership and Management: A Practical Guide – on a range of matters relating to evidence-based or evidence-informed practice. Reflecting now on this experience as an edublogger and de facto knowledge broker and mobiliser, the following themes seem relevant: the knowledge broker as stimulator; the knowledge broker as supporter; the knowledge broker as source and sharer; and knowledge brokering as a form of sustenance for personal value and self-esteem?

The knowledge broker as stimulator

For me, the knowledge broker can act as a stimulator, someone who is trying to provoke or stir up a discussion of some of the issues at hand. That is not to say that the attempt to provoke and stimulate discussion is designed to be deliberately mischievous; rather, what I'm trying to do is get readers to maybe pause for a moment and just challenge some of their assumptions. For example, currently there is a lot of time and effort going into trying to get teachers to make greater use of research. However, at the moment there appears to be very little (if any) evidence that research use by teachers has any positive impact on the outcomes of pupils. So the question needs to be asked as to whether encouraging teachers to make use of research is a good use of their time.

Moreover, I've also posted about ethics and the research & evidence-informed school and whether there needs to be greater awareness of ethical issues when schools seek to be research informed. If not, the well-intentioned efforts of schools to engage in 'research' through school randomised controlled trials lead to some pupils being unnecessarily disadvantaged.

Finally, if you are going to try to stimulate debate, you will have to be able to 'defend' a position you have taken. For example, I've argued that Professor John Hattie's claim that an effect size of 0.4SD is representative of a year's worth of progress is an edu-myth. This led to me being asked to take part in a podcast with Professor Hattie, which, at the time of writing, has yet to take place.

The knowledge broker as supporter

The knowledge broker can be a supporter of individuals undertaking the hard work of being school research leads. Certainly, in early 2015, I felt that I wanted to support colleagues who were engaged in this task and who didn't necessarily have the time to access and make sense of some of the resources already available. As a consequence, I wrote a series of blog posts which focused on how school research leads could help colleagues develop well-formulated and answerable questions by using techniques and approaches which have been developed in both medicine and social science. This was followed by a series of posts which looked into how school research leads can go about creating journal clubs within their schools.

However, this support element of knowledge broking should not be seen as one directional, with me, the educational blogger, simply supporting others. I have received extensive support and encouragement from a range of individuals – academics, teachers, school leaders and 'movers and shakers' – who I have often contacted for advice or insight. For example, if I've ended up writing about something which I've not been quite sure about, I've often tried to contact someone who might actually know something about the subject and ask them for their views. In addition, I've been fortunate enough to attend a large number of conferences, allowing me to actually meet a range of people, put faces to names and develop a support network which is not entirely reliant on electronic communication and social media.

The knowledge broker as source and sharer

One element of knowledge brokering and mobilisation is the process of sourcing the knowledge' that you want to share. Now to some extent, this process of sourcing and sharing knowledge has been both structured and random. As my writing began to focus on evidence-based practice and the school research lead, I ended up working through the process of what it takes to an be an evidence-based practitioner, so I would look for resources that explored these elements. These sources might be websites which had resources on evidence-based practice in medicine and healthcare. Alternatively, I might look at generic textbooks which looked at how to go about conducting research within the context of schools. Or I might look at journal articles which had a focus on research and evidence-informed practice within schools. And of course, I kept a constant lookout for resources produced by the Education Endowment Foundation.

On the other hand, sometimes I would end up writing a range of posts which were the product of a conversation on Twitter. For example, as a result of one such Twitter conversation I've written a number of posts on the work of Professor Tone Kvernbekk on the role of research evidence in evidence-based practice. This subsequently led to a number of blog posts on the work of Professor Nancy Cartwright on randomised controlled trials and systematic reviews and their limitations for identifying what will work in your setting. Alternatively, posts might be the product of coming across an article in TES or Schools Week and subsequently seeking to look at the evidence behind the headlines. But sometimes, posts might be the product of a bit of a 'lucky dip', where I put search terms into Google or Google Scholar and then hope to find something interesting and useful to write about.

Knowledge brokering as sustenance

If I am to be honest, I have to admit that there has been a selfish or egotistical element to my knowledge brokering. In large part I started edublogging because I was 'professionally lost'. I no longer had my leading position within an organisation to provide a sense of purpose for my work. Indeed, although I had effectively decided to retire early, I still felt too young to retire from the fray. As such, I used my blogging as a way of creating a new, though unpaid, role for myself.

Blogging and the associated self-promotion of my work gave me a reference point for my working day. I would either be writing a blog, reading about evidence-based practice or searching the internet for resources – plus there was quite a bit of Twitter and social media. Indeed, I was fortunate enough early on in my blogging to get a bit of support from a range of individuals on Twitter – people who appeared to like what I had to say and felt that it was useful for school research leads or individuals who wished to become school research leads. As such, there is little doubt that blogging was an important part in sustaining my own personal sense of value and worth.

So, although in this context my blogging was focused on sharing, supporting and stimulating, the primary beneficiary of engaging in the blogging and knowledge brokering was me. Indeed, I think anyone who is engaged in knowledge brokering, especially if they are blogging, needs to spend some time reflecting on their motivation for doing the work. It also makes sense for the readers of the blog to spend some time thinking about why the blogger has written the particular post. Sometimes it might be relatively transparent from the blog itself, but in all likelihood, there is a hidden story behind the post.

Impact and success

For the independent knowledge broker, reflecting on your impact and successes is quite challenging. In terms of impact, you just don't know to any real extent who has read your blog and whether anyone, as a result of having read it, has done anything worthwhile. You end up relying on some pretty imprecise measures of success such as how many unique visitors, visits or page views you have for your posts. You might use the number of retweets or likes that you get on Twitter to help you get some sense of impact. Or you might have people email you directly asking for further guidance. Alternatively, you might use the number of invitations you get to speak at educational conferences hosted by schools and other organisations as some kind of indicator of whether your work is having any kind of impact.

As for successes, in my own terms the work I've undertaken could be judged as some form of success. I written guest blog posts for the Teacher Development Trust, the British Educational Research Association and the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring. I've met individuals who have said I have influenced their work in schools. Indeed, someone even mentioned to me that a session I had facilitated on how to formulate questions had ultimately resulted in them leading an Education Endowment Foundation national trial. I've spoken at national and international conferences organised by, for example, the Chartered College of Teaching and the World Association of Lesson Studies. Nevertheless, to go back to why I first started edublogging and knowledge brokering, it has fulfilled its main objective: it helped me manage the period of time between full-time employment and retirement and has allowed me to maintain a sense of purpose and usefulness. As for whether it has actually been useful: well, that is for others to judge.

Top tips for knowledge mobilisation

- **If you are interested in blogging, just give it a go. Indeed, even if you don't publish your post, the very process of writing 750-1000 words on a topic may help clarify your thinking about the matter at hand**
- **Spend some time thinking about how you can improve your writing, so it becomes both more efficient – by using fewer words – and more effective in getting people's attention and persuading them with your argument.**
- **Think about how you are going to share your blogposts. At first, you might want to adopt a 'soft-launch' by sharing your posts with a few trusted colleagues – though make sure you don't just ask for feedback from colleagues who are going to say nice things. You may then want to think about how you share your work via social media.**
- **Don't be frightened to contact other people interested in research use in schools – be they academics, practitioners or other bloggers. My experience has been that people are more than willing to answer emails, provide assistance and share resources. Occasionally you might get an 'abrupt' response, but in general it's the exception rather than the norm.**
- **It's worth have a looking at work being done in other related fields – such as improvement science and implementation science. There is also a whole range of resources produced in areas such as evidence-based medicine and evidence-based healthcare. These have the potential to help teachers and school leaders become more effective evidence-informed practitioners.**
- **This work is never done and there are always new things to learn and think about. As a knowledge broker or mobiliser – or whatever term you want to use – there's always new knowledge to mobilise and news ways to mobilise that knowledge.**

Dr Gary Jones is the author of Evidence-Based School Leadership and Management: A Practical Guide. Prior to his recent work – in blogging, speaking and writing about evidence-based practice – Gary worked in the further education sector and has over 30 years of experience in education as a teacher and senior leader.

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17th May 2021

Leading Professional Development

Evidence-Informed Teaching And Teacher Professional Status

Cat Scutt explores the research literacy, skills and culture needed to become an evidenced-informed profession.

Mutual benefits

Engaging with research and evidence has a whole host of short and longer-term benefits for teachers and school leaders, including, critically, the positive impact we would ultimately expect to see on student outcomes[1].

One of these potential benefits is the mutually supportive relationship between research use and teacher confidence, the trust and autonomy afforded to teachers, and the status of teaching as a profession. These areas are closely linked to teacher job satisfaction, which relates to teacher retention – and this, too, of course, ultimately leads to more experienced and effective teachers, in turn leading to better outcomes for children and young people[2].

Notions of professions and professionalism

It is worth starting by reflecting on what we mean by teaching as a 'profession', and how the idea of being evidence-informed links to this. Whilst definitions of a profession are contested, Gomendio[4] and others note a number of features that distinguish a profession from a semi-profession, including:

- **A high level of public trust and confidence**
- **An extended training period**
- **A collective body of knowledge and expertise, built on a theoretical base, that is shared by members of the profession**
- **High levels of professional autonomy, with limited amounts of supervision.**

It is easy to see how these can be linked to the idea of a profession being evidence-informed; a strong, shared knowledge-base seems dependent on teachers having an understanding of the best available research evidence, whilst public trust and high levels of autonomy seem more likely where teachers' expertise and up-to-date knowledge of the best-evidenced approaches are acknowledged.

Clearly, strides have been made towards teaching being an evidence-informed profession over the past few years; much has changed since Ben Goldacre's plea for evidence to be built into education[4]. Movements such as ResearchED and organisations such as the Education Endowment Foundation and the Chartered College of Teaching have gained momentum, with ever-greater numbers of teachers and school leaders recognising the impact that engaging with research can have. But although the progress to date is encouraging, there is still much to do[5]. The level of research-engagement varies substantially across the system[6], both between and within schools. So how can we best continue the journey?

Understanding evidence-informed practice

Any discussion about research and evidence use would be incomplete without some consideration of terminology. A range of terms around research use and engagement are used, often largely interchangeably – including 'evidence-based', 'research-informed,' and even 'evidence-enriched'[7]. Whilst it could be argued that this is just a question of semantics, there is something important going on here that is worthy of consideration. Arguments for one term over another tend to centre on two questions; firstly, what is meant by 'research' or 'evidence', and secondly, the nature of how this is used in teaching practice.

Whilst there is undoubtedly huge crossover between the terms 'research' and 'evidence', particularly in regard to published research evidence, some have noted that the former implies not just making use of research conducted elsewhere, but also of conducting one's own research. Whilst the value of engaging with research is increasingly universally recognised, there remains debate over whether teachers should or can reasonably expected to carry out their own research, given the time involved, as well as whether sufficiently robust impact evaluation is likely to be able to take place. The term evidence, meanwhile, could be argued to encompass a wider range of sources to inform decision-making, including school data or even pupils' views, in addition to academic research; this broader thinking is valued, but in some cases the term 'evidence' is also associated with a need to 'prove' oneself and overbearing approaches to monitoring and accountability.

Both the terms 'research' and 'evidence', then, have their advantages and disadvantages. But it is the question of whether we should be aiming for the profession to be evidence-informed, or evidence-based, that is particularly pertinent when thinking about the relationship between use of research evidence and teacher professionalism and autonomy. It has been argued that use of the term 'evidence-based' risks suggesting that teachers should act solely on research evidence, reducing the value of teachers' professional expertise, whilst 'evidence-informed' more clearly recognises that research evidence will only ever be one part of the picture in informing teachers' decision-making.

Gary Jones[8] argues, however, that this position misunderstands the whole principle of evidence-based practice. Sackett et al's definition of evidence-based practice in medicine as "the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients… integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research"[9] clearly highlights that professional expertise is as much a part of evidence-based practice as the use of published research.

Therefore, whilst it is perfectly reasonable to use the terms research-informed, evidence-informed, research-based and evidence-based largely interchangeably, it's important to recognise why some researchers and practitioners may prefer one over the other. For the purposes of this article, the term 'evidence-informed' will be adopted, defined as 'the critical use of the current best available evidence from research alongside teachers' experience, expertise and professional judgment, to inform approaches to the teaching of individual students and groups of students in context'[10].

Connecting research and practice

Critically, this definition recognises the three strands of evidence-informed practice – published research, teachers' professional expertise, and the context in which they are working – and to avoid any sense that research will tell teachers precisely what to do. Evidence will not provide a silver bullet for the many and complex problems that teachers face on a daily basis. And, as Dylan Wiliam reminds us, context is key: "everything works somewhere and nothing works everywhere"[11].

However, by combining their professional expertise and experience with the best available evidence, teachers can make more informed decisions about the best approaches for their own specific context and their intended outcomes, and feel confident that they are doing so. This is not always about changing what we do; sometimes research reaffirms or adds depth to something we already know; sometimes it challenges our existing practice, helping us to spend less time on ineffective practices; and sometimes it brings new ideas to our practice.

Using research evidence in this way can also help teachers to articulate the reasons for the choices they make in the classroom; education blogger and teacher David Didau has even gone as far as to suggest that this form of dialogue could form an effective part of teacher observation[12]. Supporting teachers to engage with research and be able to explain both what is happening in their classrooms, and why, can thus be part of a move to provide teachers with greater professional confidence and autonomy.

Barriers to teaching as a evidence-informed profession

This is all very well in theory, but using research to inform practice is far from straightforward; approaches to supporting teachers to engage in evidence-informed practices can struggle to have impact[13]. From being motivated to make use of research, to practical issues such as having access to relevant, high-quality research and the time to engage with it, to the difficulty in changing habits and the skills required to design, implement and evaluate new research-based approaches, there are significant challenges across many of the steps of involved in evidence-informed teaching.

Whilst a recent study by NFER for the Education Endowment Foundation[14] found that teachers are, on average, reasonably positive about the idea of using research, the myriad pressures and demands on teachers' time can make it hard for research engagement to be prioritised. The time required to locate, filter and read extended research reports is significant, and in some cases, of course, there simply isn't high-quality research that answers the questions teachers may have. Research expertise is necessary for teachers to be able to identify research that is both relevant to their practice and sufficiently robust to be valuable. There is therefore an increasing interest in helping teachers to develop the 'research literacy' required to critically appraise original research, consider the implications a piece of research may have and what conclusions it is reasonable to draw from its findings. And even where the implications of research are relatively clear, changing long-established habits and practices is difficult, particularly in a high-paced environment like a classroom.

A number of organisations offer useful resources to help to overcome some of these barriers. The Education Endowment Foundation provide useful 'toolkits' of research overviews as well as guidance reports to support implementation in practice and a national network of Research Schools offering CPD, support and regular communications to help teachers to engage with research effectively. The Learning Scientists publish blogs, resources and podcasts the science of learning, whilst ResearchED's conferences and magazines give teachers the opportunity to engage with and debate the latest research findings and practice. The Chartered College also provides access to an extensive education research database and curated research summaries, as well as a termly practitioner journal, Impact.

A culture of research engagement

However, even where all of the barriers above are addressed, any move to encourage teachers to be evidence-informed seems destined to fail if they are not working in a school environment that is also evidence-informed. If a teacher understands the evidence about, for example, marking and feedback, and yet a school's policy requires extensive written marking or 'verbal feedback' stamps on all pupil work, the teacher will not feel able to work in an evidence-informed way, and their professional autonomy will be limited; this is likely to lead to the same sorts of frustrations experiences by teachers where the professional development they engage in does not align with school practices[15].

A culture of research engagement is about more than just school policies being evidence-informed, however. It's also about creating a culture where teachers are given time and space to collaborate around research use, and where the value of this is recognised.

Moreover these principles extend to the system level, too[16]; it is hard for schools to aim to take evidence-based decisions if these clash with what is expected in national policy or accountability systems, or simply if the system itself does not seem evidence-informed. System-level policies around, for example, grammar school expansion, have been widely criticised for its failure to be grounded in evidence. But we also need a system where teachers have career pathways and opportunities around research use, and where there is a mutually supportive relationship between research and practice, and between researchers and practitioners.

Building teacher professional status through research engagement – next steps

Engaging with research can play a key role not just in developing teachers' practice and improving student outcomes, but also in building teachers' confidence, job satisfaction and supporting teacher retention. However, all of this relies on effective and appropriate approaches to developing teachers' knowledge, skills and confidence in engaging with and using research in practice. So how can we best support and develop our teachers to make the best use of research to inform their practice?:

Top Tips

1. Firstly, any efforts around research engagement need to emphasise that research won't tell you what to do – it can only inform, not dictate. Research will be one source of decision-making, alongside teachers' professional expertise and knowledge of their context. Professional development needs to emphasise this, using research as a tool for discussion rather than as a roadmap.
2. Secondly, if we want teachers to be evidence-informed in their decision-making, we need to ensure they are working in an environment where this is supported. That includes ensuring that policies (for example marking policies) are evidence-informed; breaking down the practical barriers to research engagement – such as a lack of time and access to research; and, crucially, creating motivation to engage with research by ensuring that it's seen as a worthwhile endeavour.
3. Finally, research engagement is a continuum and it is is helpful to have the means to chart this. If you are a teacher interested in evaluating where you are on your journey to evidence-informed practice, or a school leader who wants to evaluate your school's level of research engagement, you might find the Chartered College of Teaching's free 'evidence-informed teaching' self-evaluation toolkits useful; these were developed by researchers from Durham University, Sheffield Hallam University and UCL Institute of Education based on their work on research engagement carried out for the Department for Education[17]. They also include examples and recommendations for teachers and schools at every stage of research use.

Cat Scutt is Director of Education and Research at the Chartered College of Teaching

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Author
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28th Mar 2021

Professional Development

Getting Evidence To Frontline Practitioners – No Easy Task

Using evidence to shape decisions in schools and colleges is a very hit and miss affair. Andrew Morris draws on examples of actual practice which model collaborative ways to do and use research.

Making connections

Teachers make crucial classroom decisions on a minute-by-minute basis and, unusually amongst the professions, they mainly do so alone. A multiplicity of ideas and influences shape these decisions – previous experience, peer influence, government regulations and inspectorate expectations. Somehow, evidence from research has to find its way into the mix.
The means by which such evidence reaches the practitioner is, at least in England, haphazard and the tools needed to put it to use, under-developed.

The various bodies responsible for setting the research agenda, producing research, developing useful materials from it and using them to improve practice add up to a kind of ecosystem. This article is about efforts to develop collaboration across the poorly connected parts of this ecosystem.

Paradoxically, perhaps, the argument is not itself based on research evidence; it is a reflection on initiatives at local and national levels with which I have been involved, over the decades as teacher, college leader, research manager and, ultimately reformer. Better skip this article if you are looking for effect sizes or a systematic review! A strange thing to find oneself saying, given how important they both are.

Local level – tackling a number of hurdles

Very immediate challenges lie at the heart of projects based in frontline organisations – schools, colleges, early years and adult education settings. It may prove difficult to enthuse colleagues to engage with research at all and of those that do, few feel they have sufficient time to read the existing evidence beforehand. The need for understanding of a range of methodological options and relevant theory presents a further challenge.

Many institutions have solved the first problem by starting small, often through the enthusiasm of an individual research champion and by working closely with an issue that is salient at that moment. Where this proves fruitful and manageable, others may join in once the idea has proved beneficial. For example a small infants school took this approach when deciding how to respond to lower performance identified in data on reading compared to other areas. Three teachers looked into the research evidence, selected and tried out new approaches and evaluated them. The following year other teachers were persuaded and the governing body and parents became seriously interested subsequently.

The second challenge – skills and knowledge – is often met by working in partnership with external researchers. There are various models for this. In a curriculum project I co-led in London in the 1990s, an academic and I, then a college leader, co-designed the overall project framework, based on theoretical and practical considerations, while practitioners proposed mini-projects based on issues they saw as of direct importance to them. The projects, on topics as diverse as careers education and block timetabling, were carried out by practitioners while academic researchers monitored, advised and ultimately evaluated these. Another project in Warwickshire, took a different approach in which college practitioners devised and carried out projects and met together for discussion with academics who also produced theory-based papers relevant to the projects.

In these, and other, cases the full potential of collaboration was not realised because of the relative distance between the two communities and a design that did not seek transformation by combining the two types of contribution. Practitioner work tended to be localised to the context in which it was carried out with insufficient recourse to generalisable theory whilst the academic outputs went largely unread within the wider practice community.

Practitioner ownership and support

A specific scheme I led at the Further Education Development Agency was designed to address this disconnect by bringing together people from multiple colleges with a university through the Learning & Skills Research Network. The approach proved effective because practitioners designed and carried out research, and managed projects on issues of their own choice, with inputs from the universities on methodology and existing literature. Analyses were carried out jointly and outputs communicated locally and nationally; advances were made by meshing the different forms of knowledge and skill. The brief lifetime of projects, however, dictated by annualised Government funding, and the relatively uncoordinated choice of topics limited the overall effectiveness of the scheme.

Practitioner-researchers and research champions in schools and colleges tend to see the support and recognition offered by their senior team as crucial. Capacity for research is severely inhibited where this is absent. Studies of the role of senior teams in fostering a research culture suggest that they can make a difference by modelling research use themselves, ensuring research evidence is brought to bear on routine activities such as senior management, and governors' meetings and in professional and organisational development.
In an effort to reduce the cultural separation of researcher and practitioner I worked on ways to intensify the degree of collaboration. In one city-wide project aimed at reducing bullying, initiated by Coventry Local Authority, a number of interventions had been planned by practitioners as part of the city's strategy for schools.

The innovation was to add a peripatetic researcher to the mix. Travelling around the schools rather than sitting in a distant university, he advised on each stage in the process – defining the question, consulting the literature, designing the intervention and evaluating its effects. By strengthening the practitioners' sense of ownership this dramatically bolstered the teachers' sense of professionalism and confidence. Engaging them with the literature as they planned their project led many to modify the design of the interventions, to good effect. A city, region or locality may offer a helpful framework and source of funding for introducing evidence to policy interventions on issues such as bullying.

Other models build-in explicit research training for practitioners as they work alongside full-time researchers. This was an approach used effectively in a project, Transforming Cultures in FE, in the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme in the 2000s. Project funding enabled the practitioners to be released from frontline duties to contribute their experiential knowledge to an empirical study based on theoretical insights in sociology. A more systemic training approach is the Education and Training Foundation's 'Practitioner Research Programme' for the FE and Skills sector. Practitioners' with proposals for action research are offered a short residential training experience plus individual coaching with established university researchers as they develop and implement their action research ideas. Over many years, this effective method has seen the gradual development of a research-capable community whose graduates go on to energise networking activity across the country.

The challenges of collaboration

These examples of locally-based practitioner research collaborations demonstrate something of the range of approaches that can be taken and suggests some of the benefits and drawbacks of so doing. But there is a further consideration: what can we learn about the way in which successful collaborations form in the first place?

There are many challenges. Individual practitioners' concepts of research may differ radically according to the discipline or vocational area in which they have been themselves educated. Preconceptions about qualitative and quantitative approaches or views about what researchers refer to as epistemology (the theory of knowledge), for example, may lead to initial clashes that take time to resolve. Peers attempting to collaborate between schools or colleges that are in effect competing for students, may be more interested in guarding successful ideas than sharing them. And, of course, the perennial issues of shortage of time and absence of leadership support may affect any project plan.

Collaboration between academia and practice faces even tougher challenges, with the conflicting pressures of those who need to work and publish within their academic discipline and those who need to bring home something of more immediate practical value for the organisation that employs them.

A comparative study within the European EIPPPE network in the 2010s assessed various forms of collaboration between schools and universities over the use of evidence. By combining experiential knowledge of different schemes in several countries with theory-based models of knowledge exchange, it developed a way of analysing the process and made proposals about effectiveness. The most important of these was that, from the very outset of a collaboration, all parties need to confront fearlessly the actual situation on the ground. This can be very challenging, where current practice is threatened, as it was in a case in the study involving mainstreaming of special needs pupils in rural Sweden. Time taken to confront differing perceptions at an early stage pays off in the long run as the parties work out, in an atmosphere of equal regard, how their respective types of knowledge can be combined to best effect. A comprehensive literature review of school-university partnerships more generally, including research collaboration, was published in 2014 by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement.

National level- –the need for coherence

At national level, the fragmented pattern of responsible bodies has resulted, historically, in lack of coherence in the planning and funding across the research ecosystem as a whole. Academic studies are commissioned in one arena, applied research in others; knowledge for practice is mobilised for schools separately from colleges and evidence for the training of teachers and leaders in yet others. Professional development activity, which should be a key conduit for the application of evidence to practice, is not organised as a system at all. This degree of incoherence redoubles the importance of collaborative approaches to research and evidence-use, at least to minimise duplication and at best to widen the scope of research and increase its impact on practice.

The incompatibility between the rapidity imposed by short-term funding and the slower processes of academia make a combined assault on the lack of useful classrooms knowledge difficult to pull off. With the publication of the 1998 Hillage report, which took a critical look at England's educational research system and the publication of What Works in 2000 it became clear that similar deficiencies extended across the entire education system and indeed beyond to other sectors.

Strategic initiatives to make progress

The National Education Research Forum (NERF), set up in response to the Hillage report, enabled the idea of collaboration to be applied not to research itself, but to activities aimed at improving the wider knowledge system within which research sits. As a place for the research, policy and practice communities to debate system improvements, the Forum failed to make significant progress however. Valuable papers were produced on fundamental issues such as research capacity, funding and impact, but action to follow it up stalled. Government, academics and the Research Council proved unable to develop a more integrated system and a Funders' Forum likewise failed to develop a more coordinated agenda for commissioning. There was insufficient trust about the legitimacy of the process and the chance of high level collaboration melted away as the parties continued to dispute.

A programme of development activities, however, based on practical issues such as developing an evidence portal and encouraging evidence-use in schools and colleges, did manage to make progress. Representatives from leading organisations in research commissioning and production, teacher development, teacher training, curriculum development and policy development proved willing to overcome their differences. In this spirit of collaboration they worked together with teachers, leaders and professional associations, in the context of practical action. Independent, third-party chairing and championing were critical factors in this.

The NERF initiative was followed by a Strategic Forum for Research in Education, set up in 2008 by two research bodies to review the 'system for the provision and use of knowledge'. Through its conferences and papers it further clarified issues but gained equally little traction with policymakers and decisionmakers in the long run.

The subsequent Coalition for Evidence Based Education(CEBE) chose, in the light of the previous national initiatives, to foster collaborative activity through practical projects rather than abstract debate. Despite being an unfunded network of voluntary collaborators, CEBE has outlived all previous initiatives and developed a number of significant projects over the ten years of its existence. In the Education Media Centre, journalists, researchers and publishers work together to enhance the role of research in media reporting. Evidence for the Frontline, provided an online question and answer service for school teachers about the evidence base for specific classroom issues and Leading Research Engagement offering practical guidance to support research leads in schools and colleges. Evidence & Leadership, explores the role of leaders in fostering a culture of research-use within their organisations and Assessing Claims in Education draws on work in the healthcare sector to offer practitioners advice on how to judge claims about research evidence.

These collaborations, once again, demonstrate the willingness of individuals in universities, schools and colleges, foundations, research institutes, training and support bodies and media organisations to work together to strengthen the many weak links in the knowledge ecosystem. As small-scale, voluntaristic projects however they remain fragile, dependant on the willingness of participating organisations to jointly invest in them.

Conclusion – towards a more integrated system?

In my experience, the principal challenges to efforts to connect research, practice and policy are best understood as cultural rather than instrumental. The resistances to change are deep and the reform processes slow. Habits, attitudes, beliefs, incentives and rewards dominate all our ways of being and working and these differ significantly between the communities. Collaboration is a social process, involving actors with quite different backgrounds, offering distinct sets of skills and under differing pressures; this can slow things down and lead to extra costs. Effective collaboration often seems to rely on the presence of an independent third party or broker, capable of steering the diverse parties though their wrangles – and there's evidence to back this up.

With the recent rise in availability of evidence-based guidance a new challenge arises: it is forced to compete with the plethora of other types of guidance with which teachers and their leader have to contend daily. Practitioners and other decisionmakers are having to judge which sources can be relied upon and which come top in the competition for attention.
These doubts, new and old, herald a new phase in the maturation of the evidence movement. In any area of science, leading-edge research is a subject of controversy; different studies reveal different aspects of a problem. Some may appear contradictory, at least in the short run; much of it may be inconclusive, from a practical point of view. But research marches on and, as multiple sources of evidence begin to accumulate, a degree of clarity may emerge as seems to be the case today in areas such as formative assessment and metacognition. Other areas remain unresolved.

A fundamental issue that remains more or less untouched as yet is the paucity of evidence on teaching and learning in subject and vocational areas outside the core subjects and also on pastoral and other non-academic aspects of learning. While academic research in the disciplines of sociology, economics and psychology throws light on crucial issues of equity, economic effectiveness and cognitive capacities in general, there is much less investment in research on specific approaches to, say, how best to teach gravitational theory or run a Geography field trip, let alone on tutorial grouping or careers education. It's as though doctors had plentiful evidence on germ theory but precious little on how to treat malaria, specifically. Equally important is a more systematic approach to professional development, so that evidence from applicable research percolates continuously into the thinking and actions of practitioners.

Education still lacks an "NHS" type structure to commission research on the specifics of teaching and an NIHR (National Institute of Health Research) to link together basic science, applied science and practice development. The Education Endowment Foundation is making great advances on the former of these, in relation to school teaching, but to achieve a more integrated system will require an extension across the whole of education and coordination with the agendas of the Research Councils and major Foundations. These and other important issues have been identified in a significant 2017 report by the Royal Society and British Academy which proposes a body to debate research priorities and develop research strategies, involving researchers, practitioners and policymakers, and for a better geographical spread of research capacity to facilitate collaboration between the research and practice communities. Let's hope this call, mirroring that from NERF 20 years earlier, will hit the right political moment and be realised. © Andrew Morris 29th December 2020

Top Tips ... for developing your practice

- **By working closely with an issue that is salient at that moment, others may join in once the idea has proved beneficial**
- **Engaging with relevant previous studies as you plan your project may help you improve your initial design**
- **Forming a small team helps diversify the range of research perspectives and skills**
- **Including a link to someone with research experience outside your institution may strengthen your project**
- **Respecting your own experiential knowledge as you engage with academic perspectives helps in reaching outcomes that are both sound and practicable**
- **Spending time with your team at the beginning of a project, to get agreement about the precise nature of the problem being addressed, reduces the risk of failure**

Originally a physics teacher in FE, Andrew Morris subsequently become a deputy director of Islington Sixth Form College. Keen to make research evidence more influential in teaching, he worked as a research manager for FE, then as Director of the National Education Research Forum. In his current role as chair of the Coalition for Evidence-Based Education he works on practical projects linking research, policy and practice.

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Personalised CPD

How Can Schools Use Evidence To Improve Teaching?

Steve Higgins sets out how the Education Endowment Foundation's Teaching and Learning Toolkit can help make evidence school friendly so that it can be readily used to improve practice.

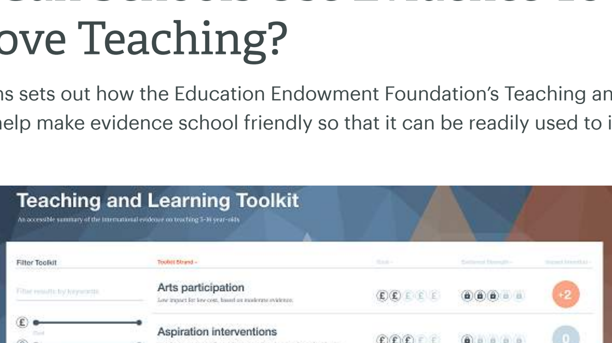

Figure 1: The EEF's Teaching and Learning Toolkit

Making evidence accessible, accurate and actionable

This article provides an overview of the Toolkit the Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) Teaching and Learning Toolkit and summarises what I see as the potential contribution it makes to research-informed teaching and to professional development and learning in schools. It focuses on the challenges of making evidence both accessible and accurate as well as in a way that is sufficiently actionable to ensure improvement. Publishing summaries of evidence doesn't automatically translate into schools improving their teaching practices. Sometimes people misinterpret what you intended.

I've heard accounts of schools devoting extra hours to marking pupils' work under the impressions this would deliver effective feedback. Marking pupils' work focuses on feedback delivered and the efforts of the teacher, but not whether the feedback was received, understood and acted upon by the learner. One local authority in Scotland attempted to use the information in the Toolkit as justification for increasing class sizes, ignoring the finding that pupils in larger classes tend to do a little bit less well, on average. The overall argument is that reducing class sizes is only moderately effective and very expensive, so it is not cost-effective as a strategy to help learners. Challenges like these are at the heart of research-informed teaching.

The EEF's Teaching and Learning Toolkit

The Toolkit was originally funded by the Sutton Trust to summarise evidence from educational research to challenge thinking about effective spending for what was then the new pupil premium policy in England. This policy aimed to increase spending in schools to benefit children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Toolkit was subsequently adopted by the EEF and is now in widespread use in England, with just under two thirds of headteachers saying they consult it. Similar approaches to evidence synthesis and translation, as well as adoption of evidence in policy-making, are growing in popularity, reflecting a global movement towards more effective engagement with research and evidence.

In the Toolkit a number of educational approaches or programmes are listed, and categorised in terms of the evidence from research for their effectiveness, the cost and average impact. The aim was to create something like a 'Which?' consumer guide for education research, covering topics of interest and relevance to policy and practice. The UK Government has cited the Toolkit as an exemplar for its network of 'What Works' centres. This commitment to spend public money on the most effective practices is important and impressive, but the 'What Works' label can imply a certainty that I believe oversimplifies what the research actually means. Research can only tell us what has worked in the past, not what will work in the future. I argue further that it can only offer indications of what may work under certain conditions.

The Toolkit website (see Figure 1) summarizes the messages across different areas of education research with the aim of helping education practitioners make decisions about supporting their pupils' attainment in schools. It is designed to be accessible as a web-based resource for practitioners and other educational decision-makers. It combines quantitative comparisons of impact on educational attainment in an approach sometimes called 'meta-synthesis'. This is where the findings from different meta-analyses are combined to give an overall effect. This is similar to, and was inspired by, John Hattie's approach in Visible Learning. The aim of the synthesis is to provide information and guidance for practitioners who are often interested in the relative benefit of different educational approaches, as well as information from research about how to adopt or implement a specific approach. What distinguishes the Toolkit is the inclusion of cost estimates for the different approaches to guide spending decisions along with an indication of the robustness of the evidence in each area.

Figure 1: The EEF's Teaching and Learning Toolkit

Bananarama: it ain't what you do it's the way that you do it

The Bananarama principle is named after Bananarama and Fun Boy Three's 1982 hit single 'It Ain't What You Do'. Most people smile at the joke, but even if they don't the song is something of an earworm and tends to stick in your head. It can also be seen as an important principle for research-informed teaching when acting on the findings of research. The initial point was a simple one: it wouldn't be what schools spent, but the way that they spent the pupil premium that would get resultsThe deployment of teaching assistants, reducing class sizes and ability grouping are all examples of the Bananarama.

The principle underscores the power but also limitations of evidence in helping a teacher decide what to do in a classroom: how an approach is implemented is vital and just as important as its content. This principle reflects the spread of findings in each area of the Toolkit. In the meta-analyses there are examples of successful and unsuccessful approaches. The overall average gives you an indication of what typically happens when an approach is adopted. Evidence can be helpful, but it is never going to be enough. Put more formally Bananarama also reflects a statistical argument. The range of effects within a Toolkit strand is greater than the difference between neighbouring strands. This suggests that although people have been successful (or unsuccessful) on average when adopting an approach there is also a spread of effects that we should take into account. The Toolkit only tells us what has worked from other studies "on average", and contains all of the statistical risks of averaging averages involved in this kind of synthesis.

I think of this evidence as providing practitioners with a "good bet" for what is likely to be successful or unsuccessful in a new context, based on how large the average effect is, represented as the average months progress icon, as well as the spread of the effects, which gives an idea of the riskiness of the bet.

We also have to remember that average impact in these studies is based on a comparison with a control group or "counterfactual" condition. In averaging the effects, we "average" the comparison conditions. As we become more certain that something is likely to be effective, we become less certain about what it is actually better than. This is important because an already highly effective school is likely to be better than the "average" comparison or control school. Any typical gains found in research may well be harder to achieve in an already successful classroom or school. Overall, the larger the effect and the narrower the spread of effects, the more likely the average is to be useful other contexts. The smaller the average effect and the wider the spread of effect the riskier it becomes

You need to know what to stop as well as what to start

This line of reasoning also suggests that we need to be clear about what we should stop doing. Whenever schools adopt something new, they must stop doing something else. There is little or no spare time in schools. We rarely reflect on this, so it can be hard to tell what gets squeezed out when we start something new. Research can also help us think about this, by providing information about things that have not worked, or tend not to work so well, on average. Research like this has clear limitations in its specific applicability. It tells what's worked, on average and over there, for someone else, it does not tell us what will work here. It is only once we understand these limitations that we can use it appropriately.

Partnership between research and practice

My work in developing the Toolkit with the EEF and trying to communicate what I think it means to teachers has led me develop a model which represents my understanding of this challenge. Some of the responsibilities in the model are from the perspective of the researcher (see Figure 2). These involve the research being accessible, accurate and actionable. This immediately sets up a series of tensions for the researcher, represented by the connecting lines in the diagram (Figure 3), to summarise findings accurately but succinctly in a way which educational practitioners can understand and put into practice. Accuracy refers mainly to how findings are summarised in relation to what was found (answering the question 'did it work there?' or addressing the internal validity of the study).

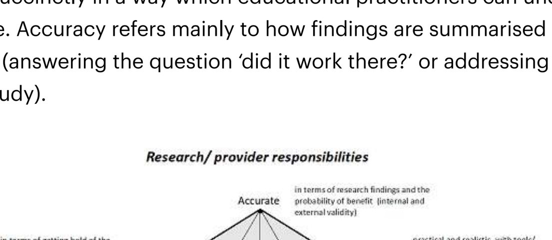

Figure 2: A model of research and practice responsibilities in research adoption and application

Understanding how research might be relevant in a new context is problematic in education. This is not least because we have almost no replication in education research and the samples of schools, teachers and pupils are not randomly selected. It is therefore hard to estimate how likely it is that an approach might be equally successful somewhere new. We know that accessibility is a key issue both in terms of getting hold of research evidence, but also in terms of understanding it. One of the main drivers behind the development of the Toolkit website was to create an accessible but accurate resource for education professionals. Academic journal articles are constrained by genre, form and the history of the discipline, and are rarely an easy read for the busy teacher.

How you distil findings into actionable steps is even more challenging. I've likened this before to picking the strawberries out of the jam. You can sometimes see that the fruit is there, but it is so boiled and crystallised by the meta-analytic jam-making process that they no longer look or taste like strawberries!

Applicable, appropriate and acceptable

From the practice perspective, I believe there are also responsibilities in terms of the research being applicable, appropriate, and acceptable. A good fit between research evidence and the practice context is essential, but I think this needs to be the responsibility of the teacher or school as they best understand how to meet the educational needs develop the capabilities of their pupils. It is important to know that it is likely to be applicable in terms of subject, age and approach. One of my worries about research from fields other than education is being clear about how the findings might apply in a classroom and a specific curriculum context. Psychology research on motivation, or neuroscience research into brain function are not directly applicable, though the findings often appear seductively suitable. When these findings are tested in the classroom, they may not always have the effects expected.

It is important to identify whether research is appropriate for the particular teacher and the pupils involved. To increase the chances of it being appropriate I think it should meet an identified need or a perceived problem, rather than being plucked from the top of a list of effective strategies, or chosen at random from successful research findings. Identifying a problem or challenge is more likely to create a match between the research context where it successfully made a difference and the new setting. It is likely to replace problematic practice that needs improvement, rather than replacing something at random, which may actually be working well.

One way of looking at the Toolkit is that it is like an encyclopaedia of solutions to educational challenges which others have found in the past. The extent of the impact and distribution of the effects gives you a probability of how likely it is to be useful in the future. The problem is that the actual questions to which we have all of these solutions are no longer attached as they are buried in the original research. It is therefore important to consider whether a particular research-based practice is appropriate as a solution to the challenges a particular school or teacher faces.

The final practice dimension is how acceptable the findings are. At one level, they have to be educationally acceptable. Some kinds of behavioural change may be very efficiently achieved with pain or discomfort, but they would not be educationally or ethically acceptable. The next level is more difficult to address. To stand a chance of being successful in supporting change, research findings have to be acceptable to the teachers involved. If the findings conflict with deeply held beliefs about effective practice then they may either be rejected and not attempted, or even adopted resentfully and set up to fail. I have always argued that, as a classroom teacher, if you presented me with a robust and rigorously researched reading intervention which was consistently successful when evaluated, that I could guarantee to make it fail in my classroom. Teachers are the gatekeepers of their own practice.

There is an irony here that I have experienced. The teachers who are to be more open to research-based approaches often seem to be the ones who are already highly effective. They actively seek to improve their practice and to increase the range of strategies they have to address teaching and learning challenges. They are eager to try out approaches backed by research. By contrast, I feel that sometimes those I thought might benefit most from trying out such strategies are perhaps the ones most likely to find them unacceptable or be unwilling to try something new. There is a clear role her for professional development here to explore and understand teachers' beliefs when supporting changes in classroom practice.
Shared responsibility built on professional expertise.

We need to be clear about the limitations as well as the potential benefits of research-informed practice. Research can understand patterns of effects and help us identify 'good bets' based on the accumulation of findings across studies.

The applicability of these findings is then problematic as we cannot be sure how these general findings apply to a specific context or a particular class of learners. The findings are likely to be helpful, on average, across a large number of classes and schools, but this may not help an individual teacher or a particular school to identify what will work for them.

This suggests that research-informed practice should be a partnership between researchers and practitioners where each partner takes responsibility based on their professional expertise. The Toolkit aims to offer an overview of the relative benefits of different areas of education research. It does not, and cannot give precise recommendations for research-based practices to an individual teacher.

Top Tips

- **Do start with a problem or a challenge you want to solve. You are more likely to find a solution from research which will help improve learning outcomes for children and young people.**
- **Think about what you will stop doing. How will you create the space to do what you think will help?**
- **Identify a solution from research that is appropriate and applicable to your context.**
- **Remember Bananarama: it ain't what you do it's the way that you do it! You will need to commit to the solution you have chosen and watch out as you develop it to make sure it is actually helping.**

Steve Higgins is Professor of Education at Durham University. A former primary school teacher he is passionate about the use of evidence from research to support decision-making in schools. He is the lead author of the EEF's Teaching and Learning Toolkit and is interested in understanding how best to engage with policy-makers and education practitioners to use research to support effective learning in classrooms.

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21st Feb 2021

Professional Development

How Can We Help Teachers To Promote Evidence-Led Teaching?

Stephen Gorard argues that improvements in education research have not been accompanied by the means of getting this research used in education practice. He explains what needs to be done to help teachers sift out and use high quality evidence.

Who judges the evidence?

Robust research evidence, adjusted to a local school or area context, and combined with professional judgements about priorities, should lead to a better education system. This, in turn, should help each new cohort of students to gain more from their schooling. However, while it is reasonable to expect teachers and school leads to be aware of context, and to be able to judge what their improvement priorities are, who judges which evidence is robust and relevant?

Multiple systematic reviews of education research, in which all of the published and unpublished work on any topic is sought and then synthesised, have revealed that much of what is described by its authors as being 'research' is nothing of the sort. In addition, many reports of apparent research are indecipherable even to other professional researchers, and most of the remaining clearer reports portray research that is fundamentally flawed and should not be trusted or acted upon. There are good studies and, if found among the rest, they can be aggregated to begin to provide a basis for evidence-led teaching. However, this raises the question of who makes the quite complex judgements about which studies can be trusted, how this evidence is aggregated fairly, and how the synthetic results are best conveyed to their intended real-life users.

The double standard in evidence use research

Over the last 30 years, governments and funders worldwide have sought to improve the quality of evidence produced by publicly-funded research . Understanding of effective interventions to inform education policy/practice has improved since the US Institute of Education Sciences, Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in England, and other initiatives. There has also been considerable progress in methods of summarising and synthesising research results, with the work of Evidence Centres and others. Evidence of what works, or not, is increasingly available for the first time.

However, good research evidence is still underused, and poorer research perpetuated. Education policy-makers generally say that they want, and use, good evidence, but do not always act correspondingly. In terms of practice, only a minority of teachers incorporate evidence-led practices into their planning, relying instead on personal experiences, advice from other teachers, and CPD not underpinned by research evidence. Initial teacher training often has little input from those with relevant knowledge of current evidence.

The suggested barriers to greater use of good evidence include the time needed to engage with the often volatile research on any topic, users' lack of skill in finding, interpreting, and implementing evidence, individual, team, or system attitudes and behaviour, rapid staff turnover, and administrative changes. Potential users may also be unaware of the evidence that is available, feel unable to act in accordance with evidence because they lack the authority or resources to change existing practice, or have other priorities and pressures. This is dangerous because the use of flawed research is not cost-effective, fair to those most in need of evidence-led improvement, such as disadvantaged students, and it is also not cost-effective.

A major problem is that the improvements in substantive education research have not been matched by an equivalent growth in knowledge of how to get that research into widespread use. The mechanisms for promoting research use in education have rarely been robustly evaluated. Most published research in this area suggests barriers to evidence use, theorises about use, about the role of context, and there are many, many published models of how research might be used. However, any evaluations of these approaches are largely limited to asking those involved how research use happens, rather than providing robust evidence on the effectiveness of any routes/models. By "robust" here we mean involving mixed approach, complex, large-scale, replicated studies with suitable counterfactuals, capable of supporting causal claims. A recent review of translational work for early-years education found no RCTs, for example, among 231 pieces.

A large proportion of available research funding goes towards conferences, workshops and stakeholders' engagements – yet there is no good evidence that these investments are effective. Most approaches have not been tested, and the few trials that have been done are not encouraging. The programmes that are most widely adopted by schools are usually produced by big corporations, despite being based on no evidence that they are beneficial to students. Considering how much has been spent on substantive education research, the relative paucity of causal knowledge about how to get that evidence into use is neither efficient nor cost-effective. We must apply the same standards to research use as we do, quite properly, to generating the substantive findings in the first place. There is an unacknowledged double-standard here.

What does the existing limited evidence say?

A recent review found a total of 33 studies (or reviews that included such studies) that addressed, with at least minimal quality, the causal question of how to get evidence into use. Most robust studies were in health, or fields other than education. There is little robust causal evidence on the types of intervention that actually encourage teachers to take account of research in their decision making. Most studies do not even assess whether practice changes after dissemination, let alone whether student (or patient) results improve as a consequence. Generally, research on practitioners' uptake of evidence is based on self-reports and interviews. It is shocking how much of the research into evidence use is not itself robustly evidence-informed.

This means that much of the improved evidence in education generated in the past 20 years could have been wasted or at least not used most effectively because we have so little idea how to put evidence-into-use. The findings of high quality substantive research have not become embedded in practice, while too much lower quality evidence is still being actively promoted by developers, researchers and funders. This is a huge problem. See the review for fuller details on the evidence summaries presented in this section.

It is clear that simply making evidence available to users is not an appropriate method of general transfer, and this is so whether access consists of full open access to research articles, or where the results are combined and modified into a research summary, or even a Toolkit. These essentially passive approaches reach only a subset of their intended audiences and do not promote regular or sustained use of evidence. Such summaries are also being increasingly criticised for their bias, or an overly causal approach to quality control. There is no evidence yet that just linking users and researchers in research projects, perhaps via user groups as encouraged by research funders, is effective.

Although training and workshops are popular, they do not generally promote research use – whether defined as change in user attitudes, their behaviour, or benefit for students (18, 19, 20). This is part of the reason why there is no value in simply asking stakeholders what they think works in getting evidence into use. It must be rigorously tested. The Literacy Octopus trials evaluated the impact of providing teachers in a total of 13,323 schools with research summaries and evidence-based resources to improve teaching, with or without light-touch support. After two years, there was little or no increase in any of six measures of teachers' use of research, and no improvement in pupils' Key Stage 2 English scores compared with the control group. The additional support made no difference either way.

Schools having research leads or champions to interpret and collate relevant evidence for them is a slightly more promising approach, and led to small positive 'effect' sizes in one UK study. However, there was a high turnover of leads, as noted in other studies. Other studies have also found research leads make no difference to student attainment, or future teacher behaviour. The University of Bristol evaluated the use of Research Learning Communities, in which experts discussed research evidence with evidence champions from 60 intervention schools. This study of 5,462 pupils showed no improvement in test outcomes compared to 59 control schools after two years.

Evidence use seems to need ongoing monitoring and auditing to confirm that evidence is being used, and is being implemented properly. This moves us closer to a government-mandated and enforced procedure for evidence use. A prolonged audit and feedback intervention was effective at persuading dentists to undertake anti-biotic prescribing in line with the current evidence. There is further evidence from a systematic review of health care interventions that top-down audit and feedback is the most effective way to get evidence into use, at least for the short term and often combined with other approaches. It is not yet clear how this could be translated to teaching practice.

Evidence-based interventions in health can be implemented at an individual level or at a 'population' level. The former would inlcude the prescription of metformin for those diagnosed with diabetes, which is a treatment that requires initial and continuing actions by the patient.

An example of the latter is the fluoridation of water to prevent dental caries. The latter have a lower cost per individual treated, and are more reliable than individual treatments. Such an intervention has to be so heavily engineered that its evidence-base is no longer clear to the user. A practice example would be clinical guidelines for nurses, wherein all clinical practice policies and procedures are required to be evidence-based, often enforced in health settings via the use of report cards. It is likely that if evidence is to improve education successfully then more of an enforced or population-level measures need to be developed, validated, and implemented. However, these approaches have not been clearly evaluated, and so considerably more research would be needed to decide that.

Top Tips: implications for teacher development

It is probably not feasible for teachers, in general, to decide which studies are robust in any area, and then to synthesise their findings. However, for all users including researchers it would help greatly if there was less research to sift through. We need to agree quickly on some basic standards for education research, so that the task of sifting is made easier by excluding much of the majority "research" that is just a waste of time and money.

Research funders need to stop funding research that is nowhere near trustworthy, and to help build up libraries of successfully tested programmes. This would increase the proportion of potentially useful substantive research available.

We need a mechanism to identify high quality evidence, engineer this into fairly a more usable format, and present it actively or iteratively. This would bring benefits to both policy and practice.

We need trusted conduits to do this job (trusted to do it without fear or favour). Research leads in schools are one possibility. Toolkits are another. But both models need rapid improvment, especially in terms of assessing and calibrating studies on the basis of their trustworthiness. Another area for improvement is initial teacher development courses. Each of these would help teachers to retain an appropriate level of autonomy, while not being part of the traditional, and largely ineffective, CPD model.

Teachers need to overcome resistance to using and learning about research, so that they do not simply have research-led approaches imposed upon them.

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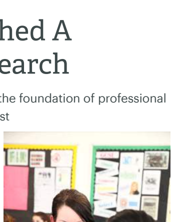
Professional Development

How Our Primary Established A Meaningful Culture of Research

Lindsay Palmer recounts how research engagement became the foundation of professional growth both within her own school and its Multi Academy Trust



Evidenced-based and research-informed

The Mead Community Primary School began developing the use of research informed practice more than seven years ago. The original aim was twofold:

i. to support staff to understand the nature and potential impact of engaging in research, and see themselves as practitioner researchers
ii. to ensure that all professional development activity was evidence based and research informed, developing a culture of research engagement

This article outlines how this approach was introduced and how, as the Academy Trust grew, it was developed and extended from one school to three schools across the whole Trust. Critically this includes a focus on the conditions needed to establish a professional research culture and how this has become the foundation to a Trust-wide approach to professional learning and a core strategy for school improvement.

Research informed practice is now fundamental to Trust development activity with all teachers and leaders actively research engaged. During the past few years our approach has evolved from initial tentative steps to Learning Sets, research book clubs, Teacher Research Groups, Lesson Study, research projects with the Local Authority and the leadership of an Education Endowment Foundation randomised controlled project. What we do is by no means a finished product. It is work in progress, aiming to fully embed a research engaged approach throughout the Trust.

Introducing the concept of research engagement

It was decided to use a Teacher Development day to explore the concept of research engagement more fully to staff The day was planned in order to support all staff to gain a better understanding of research in the context of their own roles. Activities were designed carefully to consider the staff's wide range of experiences and qualifications and explore research concepts in ways to promote lively discussion and professional dialogue, including how research is used in the context of daily life e.g. buying new shoes or a new computer.

Activities such as these enabled facilitators to gain a deeper understanding of the skills and attributes staff already possessed. It helped staff to see that they are, and can be engaged in meaningful research activity, and that research is not an activity that belongs solely to 'white coated boffins in laboratories and in unread impenetrable articles in esoteric journals.' [i]As the training day continued colleagues were supported to understand that in stark contrast to this stereotype when schools and teachers are committed to research it can be "rooted in the day-to-day life of the classroom and the ongoing business of the school itself and its relationship with the community."[ii]

During the latter part of the training day the concept of Learning was introduced. We defined a Learning Set as a collaborative group of teachers working together to undertake action research activity in a specific area, and explored how they would form the basis of development in key school improvement priority areas. Although the areas of focus were predetermined by school priorities, colleagues were able to choose which Learning Set to join. It was vital to the development of a valued research culture that colleagues were able to follow their own interests and be motivated by the research focus. A framework for action research was given to colleagues in order to support their thinking and research development. The framework supported the process of developing a research question, capturing baseline date, research methods and data collection. Colleagues were supported to develop research questions that were achievable, building on their own hunches that were integral to current classroom practice rather than additional to workload.

During the course of the year the Learning Sets continued to meet regularly ensuring that the focus on enquiry-based practice was sustained so that disciplined innovation and collaborative enquiry were embedded and became the normal way of teaching and learning rather than the exception.[iii] The leadership team committed to allocating staff meetings, team meetings and further training days for Learning Set meetings to ensure that staff had dedicated time for this aspect of their work.[iv] The priority placed on this allocation of time supported the developing culture of research within the school and served to ensure additional workload for staff was minimised.

Establishing a culture of research engagement

During the initial cycle of Learning Set research activity, the focus of the leadership team began to shift from simply supporting the group's ability to meet and progress, to considering how to make research approaches self-sustaining and impactful in the long term. The Leadership team aimed to help colleagues to see how their own professional, pedagogical development and school development connected to research literature and evidence. Leaders shared research summary documents, and supported colleagues to consider their findings and how this could impact on decision making and school priorities. For example, aspects of the Education Endowment Foundation Teaching and Learning Toolkit were examined and discussed in relation to Learning Set foci. In addition, well known researchers and educationalists were invited to work with school staff at further training days, for example Professor Steve Higgins and Pi Corbett.

Teachers were now interacting with research and evidence-based practice in several ways; for example, Learning Set research groups, current research documents and through listening to researchers in person. The impact of this approach placed research and evidence-based practice at the front and centre of all professional and pedagogical development.

As the Learning Sets began to near the end of their first cycle focus shifted to how best to disseminate and capture the results and impact of each group; what Stenhouse referred to as the "importance of inquiry being made public."[v] A Learning Conference was planned for a teacher development day as a culmination to the Learning Set cycle. Each Set would have a forum in which to share their work and outcomes. The day was also supported by Professor Graham Handscomb who led a key-note address, in order that colleagues received external feedback and indeed validation, further embedding the importance and value of research. During the Learning Conference Learning Sets were allocated a space within the school to display their research journey.

As expected from primary school teachers the displays were amazingly creative and somewhat competitive! Over 70 staff attended the Learning Conference including Teaching Assistants (TAs). As a school the ambition was to include Teaching Assistants into the next Learning Set cycle. It was felt important that the TAs understood what the teachers had been working on and how it related to practice development. Staff visited all of the displays and had opportunities to discuss outcomes and impact with group members.

Learning Set leads produced a case study of their group's research, outcomes and impact. These were published on the school and Teaching School websites and informed school development and policy. For example, the 5-point scale[vi] considered during by one Set continues to be a fundamental part of not only the Mead School's behaviour policy but also now across all the Trust schools. The school and Trust have adapted the 5-point scale framework in order to support whole school, group and individual pupil behaviour.

The first cycle of Learning Sets had led to demonstrable impact on school development and practice. Teachers appeared to understand how research and evidence-based practice can be used to good effect on personal and whole school development. A culture of research had certainly been established but it was now vital to sustain and develop this further.

Embedding a culture of research engagement

Through feedback and discussion, leaders identified the key aspects of activities undertaken to date that had contributed positively to the successful development of a research culture within school. These included:

- **Research foci being contextually relevant and practically useful that linked directly to school development leading directly to knowledge creation[vii]**
- **Practitioners being able to direct their own thinking and research based on hunches and interests, supported by leaders**
- **Practitioners being involved in not only their own research but the research of others.**
- **Prioritising time and resources to enable practitioners to dedicate quality time to research activity and dissemination [viii]**

However, leaders were aware that the concept of research engagement needed to be kept at the forefront of thinking without it losing its appeal to staff. With that in mind during the past seven years a range of strategies and activities have been undertaken over to maintain and further develop focus and interest.

A second cycle of Learning Sets was undertaken for teaching staff. The foci were once again driven by school improvement priorities. In parallel to this teaching assistants also took part in their own learning sets. A joint dissemination event was held which enabled both teachers and TAs to share their research journeys and outcomes. A short time after the second Learning Set cycle The Mead Primary School was joined by two further primary schools, forming The Mead Multi-Academy Trust. Trust leaders were determined to embed research engagement across the Trust, within each school but also collaboratively across the schools.

The Leadership Team recognised that this had to be balanced alongside other key development needs within the schools. As such, it was decided that only members of the middle and senior leadership teams within the new schools would take part in research activity alongside staff at The Mead. The aim was for these members of staff to become 'research champions' in their own schools. In addition, all staff at the new schools joined training and development activities which continued to have a strong evidence-based research engaged basis. In this way research engagement and activity became part of professional dialogue in the new schools raising its profile in a less formalised way, ensuring staff became familiar with the 'language' of research and its impact on practice first-hand.

Over the following year or so engagement in research activity expanded to include more and more staff across the three schools. The Trust is now in a position where all teachers are engaging in Teacher Research Groups (TRGs). . These TRGs are now fully established and membership consists of staff from all three schools (schools are geographically a maximum of 15 minutes apart by car and as such cross-school meetings are easy to manage). The value given to the groups continues to be demonstrated by a commitment to shared staff meetings across the schools to enable groups to meet and dedicated meeting time during teacher development days. The TRGs now focus on shared Trust wide priorities. Recent groups have considered nurtured learning provision, the use of journaling techniques in maths, assessment and feedback in writing and reading approaches in key stage 2. There has been demonstrable impact on teaching and learning approaches, including the implementation of a whole class feedback approach and the publication of guidance related to the use of journaling.

Dissemination approaches have also developed and have been streamlined. TRGs are now asked to complete an academic poster to delineate their research question, journey and outcomes, rather than longer time-consuming case studies. These will be shared both internally and externally. There continues to be demonstrable impact on pedagogy and approaches across all Trust schools as a result of research activity. For example, last year one TRG considered feedback and marking and as a result developed a new approach to whole class marking that was piloted. This is now a fundamental part of marking across all Trust schools which has impacted significantly on reducing teacher workload.

Research activity has had a fundamental impact on teaching and learning, including the development of new or revised approaches to marking, assessment and feedback, planning, and on specific teaching approaches such as the use of manipulatives in maths. The value given to research-based activity by staff across the Trust has become so high that the nature and reach of activity has been developed further:

- **A number of staff have been involved in the management and development of a randomised control trial with the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). This two year funded project to develop, trial and implement a maths Intervention Programme (https://mathscounts.co.uk). This enabled a number of staff to be involved in much larger formal randomised control trial, supporting the development of their understanding of research methodology. The project resulted in the Maths Counts intervention project being revised and further established within Trust schools and beyond. A significant number of children at risk of underachievement have now been supported through the programme.**
- **In some of the Trust schools staff have developed their own research 'book clubs'. A book is chosen and is read and discussed over an agreed period of time. Staff have valued the opportunity to reflect on their reading and engage in professional dialogue. Texts have been linked to keynote speakers at training days or to school and Trust development priorities. Staff have told the leadership team that they would have been unlikely to engage with this type of literature had the book club not existed.**
- **Teachers from all Trust schools are now also engaged in Lesson Study. The Trust was lucky enough to be supported by colleagues from Three Bridges primary school in Southall, London to introduce this model. Staff from Three Bridges sat alongside Senior Leaders from the Mead Trust for the first Lesson Study week. This supported staff from The Mead to take the model forward and develop it further. The Mead Trust is now committed to each year group from across the Trust working together at least once per year on a focussed Lesson Study week. This includes releasing all staff from teaching commitments in order to fully engage. Thus far the focus of the Lesson Study has been on maths teaching, There is demonstrable impact on teaching and learning in maths as a result of this approach. All Lesson Study activity is recorded for internal use and published externally on websites.**
- **Teachers from across the Trust took part in a DfE funded research project relating to workload (supported by Professor Graham Handscomb). This project explored the role of subject specialists in the development of planning. The project resulted in significant changes being made to planning approaches which impacted significantly on teacher workload. [ix]**

Research as the foundation for professional growth

If you were to ask staff across the Academy Trust about the role research plays in the development of the school, the Trust and their own practice I am confident their answers would be emphatically positive. Research and evidence based practice is 'who we are' and 'what we do'. Staff are supported to be engaged 'with' and equipped to engage 'in' enquiry orientated practice, which BERA suggests teachers need to be to be at their most effective.[x] Research activity is now woven into everyday practice and all aspects of professional development. Indeed, even the term professional development is no longer used in order to try and convey a more person centred and individual approach, by using the term 'professional growth'. Appraisal documentation values research engagement for both teachers and teaching assistants and there is an expectation that engagement in research activity is part of these roles (see figures 1-2 below) .

Figure 1 – Extract from Teaching Assistant Appraisal Handbook (Palmer, 2018)[xi]

1.	**Knowledge and understanding Teaching Assistants are expected to:**				
		Basic	**Main**	**Senior**	**HLTA**
1.1	**Share responsibility for ensuring their own knowledge and understanding is relevant and up to date by reflecting on their own practice, liaising with school leaders and identifying relevant professional development to improve personal effectiveness.**	Seek support to identify appropriate sources of information (eg websites, books, articles etc) to develop knowledge and understanding of relevant current educational developments. Understand the nature of reflective practice. Begin to reflect on the effectiveness of own approaches to teaching and learning. Seek advice to adapt approaches to improve outcomes for children. Participate in research and enquiry activities with increasing confidence.	Actively engage in further reading to develop knowledge and understanding of relevant educational developments. Begin to relate wider reading to own practice. Actively engage in reflective thinking through discussion with colleagues and class teachers. Adapt teaching and learning approaches in the light of reflection and seek further support as required. Share ideas and approaches with colleagues.	Confidently relate wider reading to own practice. Actively demonstrate self-questioning and reflection on own role, with increasing insight. Support colleagues to develop their practice to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Contribute to the evaluation of research and enquiry to support the capture of evidence and impact.	Demonstrat self-questioning and reflection o the pedagogica role of the Teaching Assistant, adjusting own practice accordingly. Support, coach and mentor colleagues to reflect on practice anc explore alternative strategies for teaching and learning. Understand the importance of research evidence and how thi can be gathered. Consistently demonstrat wider reading and how this impacts on own practice, and the practice of others.

Figure 2 – Extract from Leadership Appraisal Handbook (Palmer, 2019)[xii]

Domain Two		
Pupils and staff		
	TLR	[illegible]
2.3	**Establish an educational culture of 'open classrooms' as a basis for sharing best practice within and between schools, drawing on and conducting relevant research and robust data analysis.**	[illegible]

Reflection on the journey travelled

Seven years ago one school set out to implement a more research based approach to school and staff professional development. It has not been a smooth journey. It has needed a huge amount of commitment from leadership at all levels including the allocation of time and resources. Expanding the approach from a single school to a Multi-Academy Trust of three, presented significant challenge. It took time and patience to develop the model to work effectively within the new context.

However, when reflecting on the past few years it is clear that the Trust has moved from an approach to professional learning that relied on 'explicit rational discovery' to 'tacit rational discovery'. An approach that truly values individual input and encourages collective discourse and collegial support.[xiii] As Aristotle suggests, "collective deliberation by the many is always preferable to the isolated deliberation of the individual."[xiv] The journey will of course never end. Approaches and process require continual reviewing in the light of current school / Trust contexts to ensure they remain fit for purpose and impactful.

Key recommendations and top tips

When reflecting on the past seven years of research engagement there are a number of aspects that have been key to its success and long term sustainability and would be recommended for any school or Trust wanting to implement a culture of research engagement and practice.

- **Develop a culture of research**

Focus on a whole school approach that will impact on everyone. Take time to ensure all staff are involved and understand the nature of research engagement and what it means for them. It needs to be an attainable approach. Not as something that just academics do, that is removed from everyday classroom practice. Know your staff and find those who have some understanding of research activity and use them as 'champions' for the approach.

- **Start from personal interests**

When implementing a first venture into research activity enable staff to explore their personal interests and hypotheses where possible. As with any new initiative focussing on current interests sparks curiosity and engagement. Experience at The Mead shows that even the more sceptical of staff saw value when the starting points were directly effecting their own practice and interests. The success of the first research activity is vital for securing its long term sustainability.

- **Time and resources**

A full commitment from leaders is needed to effectively embed research engagement. In order for research activity to be part and parcel of professional practice it needs to be given the same priority as other areas of practice and thus needs clear time commitment for staff meetings and training days. Experience at The Mead shows emphatically that as a result of research engagement teacher workload can be decreased. However, it is vital that the actual act of researching does not add to workload.

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Leadership

How To Use Research-Informed Teacher Development To Achieve School Improvement

Maria Cunningham and David Weston report on their investigation into the conditions that enable teachers to draw on educational research to secure school improvement impact

The research behind improving teachers is often focused on processes and structures: what types of courses, how they are presented, what follow-up is required and how the experts or facilitators work with participants to embed the ideas. However, as any professional will know, learning does not only happen discretely through formal training or in structured processes. Learning also arises informally and through collaboration. The amount of learning that takes place depends significantly on the teacher's working conditions – the organisational team culture, the approach to leadership, the types of collaboration, the effectiveness of communication, the sharing (or not) of goals and values.

From our work reviewing and supporting hundreds of schools, the Teacher Development Trust team has seen that there's a stark difference between thinking that you have a good Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme, and knowing that it is having an impact. The main challenge at play is that the ways in which teachers improve are complex and we are not always able to attribute them to specific events or activities.

Culture and communication matter. There is now a significant research base to suggest that we not only need to think about the content and process of teacher CPD, but also to put far greater effort into ensuring our schools are consistently providing supportive professional environments for all staff. In this article we refer to this emerging research, alongside our own findings from over 500 learning organisations ranging from infant schools to colleges, academy trusts, independent schools, special schools and international schools. In each one the Teacher Development Trust (TDT) carried out an in-depth diagnostic review of the processes, culture and leadership of professional development by triangulating data from whole-staff surveys, interviews and examination of paperwork.

Culture and Change

We find that the more that teachers are drawing from the world of educational research, the more they are able to strengthen their understanding of how students learn and use evidence to inform their teaching. Yet it is a school's organisational systems and processes which will allow this approach to become truly embedded and enacted by all instead of just a proactive few. Using research to develop teaching requires a culture of support and trust.

The evidence base supports this; leaders need to deliberately focus on creating a professional environment where collaboration and openness thrives. In 2014, Kraft and Papay found that in schools where teachers kept improving, the professional environment was particularly conducive to collaboration around improving teaching practice. Teachers had plenty of opportunities to meet and discuss lesson planning, assessment and curriculum. In these schools with high quality environments, teachers also reported much higher levels of trust in their peers with a real shared sense of mission to do everything possible to help pupils learn.
Upon reviewing further available research about the impact of teacher working conditions on student attainment, we have found that the five aspects most closely associated with improved pupil outcomes were:

- **Creating effective teacher collaboration to explore student data, plan and review lessons and curricula, and plan and moderate assessments,**
- **Involving teachers in whole school planning, decision-making and improvement,**
- **Creating a culture of mutual trust, respect, enthusiasm in which communication is open and honest,**
- **Build a sense of shared mission, with shared goals, clear priorities and high expectations of professional behaviours and of students' learning,**
- **And facilitating classroom safety and behaviour, where disruption and bullying are very rare and teachers feel strongly supported by senior leaders in their efforts to maintain this classroom environment.**

The idea of school culture has long been viewed as particularly tricky or complex, because it is more difficult to measure than other characteristics or features of the school environment. One of our flaws as an education system is that we tend towards the measurable and in doing so might overlook key points which are fundamental to school improvement.

When the Teacher Development Trust reviews culture in schools, we start by exploring staff attitudes to professional development: is it seen as an activity for just sharing ideas or is it seen as a tool to help teachers meet pupils' needs? Are staff empowered to try out new approaches they learn, or are they risk-avoidant? Do staff members feel comfortable thinking critically about each other's practice, or are they too afraid to be seen as impolite?

Research, Innovation and Evidence

Leaders can help to put research at the heart of school practice by visibly engaging with the available evidence to underpin all decision-making. To identify whether this takes place, we might look, for instance, at the school development plan. To what extent are priorities set with reference to key research? Are they evaluated in ways that draw on evidence-informed assessment tools? Are interventions and expert partners chosen on the basis of research?
For example, one school's focus on literacy was underpinned by an initial diagnostic reading assessment using a carefully validated and research-based test across each year group. Interventions were then carefully matched to the findings. Another school overhauled its performance management process after reading a systematic review of the latest evidence about effective appraisal and goal-setting.

Staff notice when leaders model the use of research in their own decision-making. It encourages a culture of critical-thinking, where research is something that everyone uses, rather than something that is cherry-picked and imposed.

It is just as important to consider whether individual staff engage with research at a classroom level, or within teams. This includes exploring the extent to which staff members have access to research summaries and digests, whether they have opportunities to work with researchers and Higher Education Institutions. At one secondary school in our network, a Teaching and Learning team runs research briefings every Tuesday evening after the normal school day has finished. In each session, the work of a key education researcher is summarised, then the findings are discussed in subject teams, examining how the ideas might relate to each teachers' own pupils. Staff have access to further reading (accessible summaries plus original papers) and topics are picked up later within teachers' structured enquiry into their own practice.

Starting with the end in mind

Drawing from the evidence base helps leaders and teachers to make more informed decisions about what to do to improve outcomes. Helpfully, resources such as the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Teaching and Learning toolkit increasingly allow practitioners to make best-bets about the potential impact of various interventions on students. However, successful practical application also requires a careful diagnosis of what the pupil-need is in the first place, and the very same principle must apply when planning professional learning for staff.
When thinking about improving teaching and learning, we recommend that leaders keep two key questions at the front and centre of their planning;

- **What are the intended impacts from our CPD programmes?**
- **How will we know if we've met these aims?**

The table in Figure 1 is based on Thomas Guskey's five critical levels of evaluating professional development. In schools with a truly embedded evaluative culture, leaders will share these levels as part of their organisational vision so that all staff are aware of how they can each actively participate in ongoing formative evaluation; contributing to the process of checking that CPD meets its objectives in the best way possible, and supporting adaptation or refinement to ensure that it continues to better do so in future.

When staff are informed of, or better still, involved in identifying the intended aims of developmental activities or programmes, then needs analysis and evaluation more readily goes hand-in-hand to form a virtuous circle of continuous professional learning. Models such as collaborative enquiry or Lesson Study which feature in-built evaluative stages can be powerful vehicles for helping individuals to understand and break down the impact of their CPD at a range of levels – on themselves, on pupils, on the wider school – and to inform next steps accordingly.

Evaluation Level *Based on 'Evaluating Professional Development', (2000) T.R. Guskey*	What is being evaluated?	How will we measure this?
Participant Reaction	Initial satisfaction with experience	• Questionnaires/Surveys • Focus group discussions • Informal feedback and drop-ins
Participant Learning	New knowledge and skills of our teaching staff	• Performance management/appraisal records • Team, department or faculty meetings • Collaborative enquiry professes • (Low-stakes) teacher observations or video • Teaching and Learning Journals
Organisational Support/ Challenge	The school's support and facilitation	• Focus groups and interviews • Teacher Development Trust CPD Diagnostic Review • Collated appraisal data
Participants' use of new skills and knowledge	Quality of implementation	• Questionnaires/Surveys • Team, department or faculty development sessions • Teaching and learning meetings • (Low-stakes) teacher observations or video • Student feedback and interviews
Students' learning outcomes	Students' learning outcomes (performance and attainment, attitudes, participation, skills and behaviour)	• Student Interviews • Attainment Data • Pastoral Data • Student Work • Lesson Study or Collaborative Enquiry findings

Figure 1 - A table demonstrating the five critical levels of evaluating CPD within a school

Internal vs External Expertise

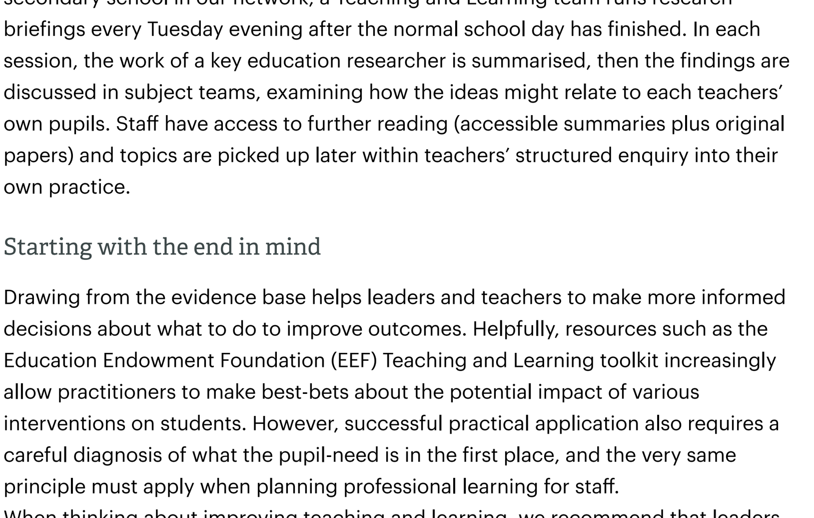
If raising the quality of teaching means bringing evidence-informed practice into the classroom, then this by extension involves looking outwards. Engaging with external expertise allows both exposure to the latest research, and support in translating this effectively into the day-to-day. It also offers new perspectives and can disrupt the current thinking or beliefs of staff. It is important that staff are sufficiently challenged, both to catalyse their own learning and to sustain their engagement with their practice.

In the complex and hard-to-navigate marketplace of training provision for schools, it is so important to ensure that all colleagues are drawing from content that is informed by a robust evidence base, not being tempted by the consultant making the boldest claims. In the best schools, there is an organisation-wide culture of constructive challenge based on evidence, such that teaching staff are confident in constructively critiquing their colleagues.

When engaging with a CPD provider, leaders should check that they are clear in setting out the "why?" and request that any background reading is provided to both them and the participants. Regardless of whether the CPD comes at a cost or is freely available, we constantly remind schools to be discerning customers and not to be afraid to be critical in ensuring that any claims being made by providers about good practice are actually valid and up-to-date. This should never be an after-thought and when considered by all, contributes to a school-wide culture of professionalism rooted in scholarship.

Distributed Leadership

Bringing all of these elements together requires some careful thought about systems and leadership. In the most effective schools we visit, the leadership of teaching, learning and professional development is distributed. Key stakeholder groups can include:
Senior leaders – ensuring that the whole of the SLT sees teaching quality and evidence as their role, not just one member.



Middle leaders – seeing them as leaders of professional learning in each of their areas, with their most important task being growing the capacity and knowledge of staff in their teams, while ensuring they can influence the design of whole school plans and processes.
Teaching and Learning teams – a dedicated group of experienced and expert practitioners who have been trained in supporting others, using methodologies such as mentoring or coaching as well as helping them engage critically with research.

In schools where this works well, leaders work hard to ensure that all meetings are focused mainly on sharing knowledge and collaborating to improve practice, rather than on administrative issues and briefing. This is true of whole staff meetings which are repurposed where possible as professional development, as well as of middle leader meetings which become joint planning and discussion, along with curriculum planning and moderation.

Key ingredients

So, what have over 500 schools told us about putting research at the heart of school practice? We've found that it's as important to think about people and culture as about processes and resources. Updating professional practice requires trust and time. It's a process of change which affects individuals, teams and organisations. Bringing research into schools is necessary, but not sufficient.

Ultimately, schools can only improve when the practice in them improves. Our key message is this: school leaders need to take the leadership of staff learning just as seriously as pupils' learning. When schools become great learning environments for adults, everyone will benefit – pupils, staff and wider society.

Top tips:

- **Leadership: ensure that all efforts are aligned to produce the most effective collaboration, teamwork and learning for adults**
- **Time: think creatively about staff timetables and work demands so that there is significantly more safeguarded time available for the highest quality team dialogue, planning and reflection.**
- **Mentoring and coaching: ensure that every teacher has the opportunity to work with a skilled coach and a more effective practitioner, and later to progress to take on these roles.**
- **Culture and communication: ensure that every leader in school has the skills, knowledge and disposition to foster a culture where the highest quality conversation happens, where colleagues trust and respect each other, where difficult issues are aired and resolved, where every voice is valued and heard and where staff feel safe, supported and engaged.**

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The Teacher Development Trust is the national charity for effective professional development in schools and colleges. We help schools to put people development at the heart of school improvement, unleashing a vibrant research-rich staffroom culture that ensures that staff thrive and pupils succeed.

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9th Apr 2021

Blogs

Making Research Usable For Teachers

Is research out of touch with the very people who need to use its insights – teachers? Karen Wespieser argues for a more authentic connection between researchers and the classroom

Narrowing the gap

Let's start with a confession. I am not a teacher. Apart from a short stint as a teaching assistant back in 1999, I have never been directly employed by a school. Despite this, I have spent nearly 20 years involved in designing research and policy that tries to help schools improve the outcomes for young people. Over this time, whilst the edu-support sector has grown it seems to me that the distance between those in the classroom and those of us trying to help has increased exponentially.

I want to outline some of the reasons why I think this gap has grown and how it can be narrowed.

Fieldwork is now the exception rather than the norm

In the early noughties, in my first job as a research assistant at one of the country's largest dedicated education research institutions, I spent most of my time zipping up and down the country visiting schools, interviewing those who work in them and collecting information from the chalk-face. Fast-forward twenty years and for most research projects I am involved with, fieldwork is now the exception rather than the norm. While there are a number of grass root organisations encouraging teachers to become more engaged with research and policy makers? Where are the organisations encouraging researchers and policy makers to engage with teachers?

One reason fewer researchers visit schools is a ground-shift in methodologies over the past twenty years. Once, if you wanted to find out something about, say, teacher retention, you would need to conduct a large-scale survey and triangulate that data with case studies or interviews. Now there is the school workforce census; a tidy dataset that compiles a number of different school reporting functions and stretches back in its current iteration to 2010. The school workforce census provides a one-stop-shop for researchers – or anyone else who's interested – with a clear picture of what is going on in-terms of staffing in every school in England. The same is available for pupil level data, funding data, and soon, destinations data which through database wizardry is being analysed by combining data from DfE, HMRC and the DWP. So, with this amount of information, it is perhaps not necessary, and certainly not encouraged to bother schools with research requests.

The problem with "ivory-towers" research

Another key change in the research landscape, is the introduction of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in 2011. Overnight, the EEF became the biggest funder of school research in England[i]. The scale of funding had an unprecedented influence over research methodologies. The EEF are unapologetic about their penchant for randomised control trials (RCTs) and meta-analysis (the combing of quantitative findings from studies which are not identical to provide more robust estimates). In just six years, the EEF more than doubled the amount of available evidence from trials in education in this country and boasts that it has commissioned more than 10 per cent of all known trials in education around the world (ibid). As with the big data created by the government's national datasets, EEF trial data is predominantly quantitative. Only around a third of RCTs include a process evaluation[ii]; the part of the research that gets into schools, speaks with teachers and leaders and attempts to understand why an effect observed in the data is happening.

Don't get me wrong, these quantitative methodologies are not bad in themselves. Far from it, they have allowed insights and developments the like of which we haven't been seen before. The problem is, with finite research resources, studies using these methodologies are prioritised over other types of research; the types of education research where researchers and teachers meet, and context and culture can be considered.

Perhaps the biggest problem with these quantitative approaches though, comes at the end of the research process. Researchers who have spent their careers in front of screens, interacting with binary values rather than real people will find it considerably harder to write a report that will change the behaviour of teachers that they have never met, or influence the outcomes of children that they have never seen. Take, for example, some of the best-known research into bullying[iii]. The researchers examined the effectiveness of anti-bullying programmes and which intervention methods are most likely to reduce school bullying. To do this, they conducted a meta-analysis looking at more than 600 studies, but they did not meet with any teachers or pupils. Because of this ivory-towers approach, the recommendations from this really interesting research are targeted at policy makers and researchers. There are no suggestions about what those at the front line should do, even though you would imagine that 'improving the school playground environment through reorganisation and/or identification of bullying hot spots' (ibid), would be easier for schools to do than policy makers!

The final barrier is that too often we can fool ourselves that researchers are already interacting with the school workforce. Admittedly not in real life, but online. Teacher bloggers and interest groups on Facebook and Twitter are lively fora for potential interactions between different stakeholders. But, what we need to remember is that only a minority of teachers are represented – guestimates range at around six to ten per cent – and that this minority are likely to be quite different to the majority of their colleagues (if nothing else, the considerable time some individuals put into their social media suggests a different type of engagement to their colleagues who prefer to use social media solely to keep up-to-date with family and friends). Compare the proportion of teachers who are using social media professionally, with the proportion of journalists or MPs taking this approach and you will see that you have a minority talking to the majority; something it's all too easy to forget inside a social media bubble.

As with my critique of quantitative methodologies, I am not saying that engaging with teachers via social media is a bad thing, nor am I suggesting that we should criticise those that do. However, we do need to be aware that when high-profile bloggers or 'twitterati' are invited to represent the profession on research steering groups, DfE working groups, or are name-dropped by the Education Minister, that this isn't a new relationship between teachers, researchers and policy makers, but simply a clique that has probably always been at the centre of our education system.

It is in keeping with the zeitgeist these days to claim to be a 'research-engaged teacher'. Where I think there is a growing gap is in the number of teacher-engaged researchers and policy makers. Big data, quantitative methodologies and social media have led to a situation where those seeking to support teachers no longer need to visit schools to do their jobs. Despite this, there are more reasons than ever that they ought to visit schools. Far from this being a burden on busy teachers working in those institutions, I truly believe that many would welcome these visitors with open arms.

How to be a teacher-engaged researcher

If research methods no longer necessitate going into school on a regular basis, how else could these engagements take place? From a research perspective, it could include steering groups, advisory groups, or participatory workshops which bring together every-day teachers, school leaders and researchers. Practical inputs could be sought on the design of surveys or interview schedules, data interpretation, and perhaps most importantly, how to ensure that research reports include useful and timely recommendations for teachers and leaders. EEF Guidance Reports utilise this model and have resulted in a range of useful outputs, such as 'Preparing for Literacy'[iv], and 'Metacognition and Self-regulated Learning'[v].

It needn't all be related to the day job either. A simple way to gain insight about day-to-day school life is through volunteering. This could be as a school governor or trustee. In exchange for sharing your unique experiences, perspectives and insights, you can gain significant insights into schools' challenges – and celebrations – and get a true feel for the cycle of the school year. Alternatively, you could join a student mentoring programme, or simply offer to sit and listen to children read.

Finally, make sure you engage outside of your echo-chamber. A simple way to do this could be to follow hashtags and not just individuals. #UKEdResChat and #CogSciSci both brings together teachers and researchers together in a constructive way, and you don't even need to join Twitter to read the interactions.

Perverse incentives

Witnessing this gap is one of the reasons I started the #UKEdResChat twitter events. The initial aim of the chat was to bridge the gap between researchers and teachers, but it became apparent very quickly that there were far more teachers participating than academics.

There are a number of regularly occurring themes in the chats; how can teachers access research? How can teachers find the time to read research? How can teachers interpret the quality of research?

The responses, predominantly provided by the teaching community on twitter, frequently lie within the research users and not with the research creators. They suggest research mediators, synthesis created by third parties, a greater focus on research in initial teacher training.

But more can be done by the academic community and the incentives within it that create barriers to work with teachers. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) priorities academic impact over practical impact; you get a higher 'score' for explaining your research to your academic peers than you do to the people you are actually researching for. The language required by journals and by doctoral study is, by definition, academic. But need it be academic to the point of excluding mainstream readers? Could plain English be used more frequently?

Teacher led and teacher informed research

Of course, this article has been a generalisation of the issue. Just as there are some schools and some teachers who are more engaged with research than others, there are also researchers and research institutions that are more engaged with teachers than others. There are some wonderful examples of these collaborations, my call is simply for more!

Maybe we always view the past through rose-tinted glasses, and maybe it's simple nostalgia that makes me feel like there was a more authentic connection between researchers and the classroom in the past. But the teacher-led movement to engage in research should not be one-sided. Academics should never again be characterised as 'the blob'. Researchers need to step up and engage. This shift is essential if we want to narrow the gap between research and practise.

Top tips

- **Make use of steering or advisory groups to ensure there is a dialogue between researchers and teachers throughout the research process**
- **Think of different ways that researchers can be present in schools – as governors, as mentors, as readers, as researchers-in-residence**
- **Engage outside of your echo-chamber by following hashtags on social media not just individuals.**

Karen is a social researcher and has worked in the education sector for twenty years. She is passionate about increasing and communicating the use of evidence in education to positively impact the lives of young people. Karen is the Chief Operations Office at Teacher Tapp and Parent Ping, a school governor, trustee of education charity Parentkind, and a mum of two. In December 2020 she was awarded an MBE for services to children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, particularly during the COVID-19 response.

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Author
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14th Feb 2021

Professional Development

Putting Practitioner Research At The Heart Of Learning In The Classroom

Vivienne Marie Baumfield argues that the debate about teachers' research engagement needs to be cast in terms of their understanding of what has worked and not worked in the classroom and how this contributes to a body of knowledge. She sees the key to maximising this engagement as lying in partnership working.

Areas of agreement and dispute

What an individual teacher does in the classroom makes a difference; in fact, research on school improvement has shown it explains up to 75% of classroom level variance in pupil learning.

Confirmation of the importance of understanding how teachers decide what to do in their classroom has focused attention on provision for their professional development but without consensus on what is required.

Conflicting views on what teachers need to know and how they can learn what it is that they need to know reflect differences of opinion on what the work of a teacher actually involves. One source of disagreement is the role of research in the classroom and is the focus of this article.

Whilst there is broad agreement that teachers should use evidence to inform their practice, the extent to which this means engaging directly with educational research and if they do, whether this is as producers or consumers of knowledge is disputed. We can improve the situation by seeking better understanding of what might at first appear to be opposing points of view; such as the often polarised 'what works' debate.

Teacher Professionalism: understanding 'What Worked'

Focusing on 'what works' is associated with an instrumental view of teachers' work and the promotion of a technical-rationalist approach to teacher development. It is an association often seen as being in opposition to the idea of being a reflective practitioner and, therefore, diminishing the professionalism of teachers.

In fact, a concern to test an idea by seeing whether it useful in real classroom settings is an integral element of critical reflection on practice and to any claim to be a professional. The problem is not basing decisions on evidence of 'what works'. What undermines teacher professionalism is reliance on external prescription without being able to evaluate its relevance in the context of their own classrooms.

Given the complexity of what happens in classrooms and the powerful effect of context on outcomes, teachers play an important role in mediating research and their perspective should be valued. Lawrence Stenhouse, an early advocate of the importance of teachers as researchers, characterised the relationship of academic research to teaching as offering intelligent propositions to be tested in action.

If this relationship is to reach its full potential, teachers need to be confident in their ability to engage with research, they need to develop research literacy, and work closely with academics who are willing to listen. Policy makers play a crucial role in facilitating productive relationships between researchers and teachers; they determine expectations and can support or hinder collaboration through the management of working conditions.

Shifting our focus to what teachers know, how they know and what they need to know offers a way of thinking about forms of knowledge that avoids simplistic theory versus practice binary oppositions, opening up different ways of thinking about the relationship between teachers and research.

Rather than advocating research as something external to teaching that teachers 'use' or which some teachers might 'do' as a bolt-on activity, we can ask how their understanding of what has worked and not worked in the classroom contributes to a body of knowledge for, in and of practice that any claim to be a profession requires.

The capacity of teachers to engage in research has been questioned in terms of the limited resources available, not least the demands on their time, and implications for the quality of any outcomes. We do, however, have examples of how such problems can be addressed by working in partnership.

School-university research partnerships

In 1997, the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) with the Centre for British Teachers (CBT) launched a School Based Research Consortium (SBRC) programme, which aimed to:

Improve the accessibility of the existing stock of knowledge; improve the quality and relevance if research; help teachers play a more active role in conceiving, implementing, evaluating and disseminating research.

Interest in the potential of school-university research partnerships gained momentum in England in the period following a number of reports highlighting a damaging gap between educational research and the practice of teaching. In 1998, the School University Partnership for Educational Research (SUPER) was established by researchers in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge and a group of local headteachers.

The experience of the SBRC and SUPER demonstrated that building partnerships is challenging but it can be done and important lessons were learned. The fundamental principle is to find a shared interest in understanding a problematic situation and this is not difficult to do when the focus is on classrooms and finding ways of improving the educational experiences of students. Inquiry is the trigger; as the rocket scientist Werner Von Braun pointed out, 'research is what I do when I don't know what I am doing'.

It is the desire to find solutions that promotes collaborative effort. What is already known is not ignored, it is not about 're-inventing the wheel' but it is by first engaging in research through inquiry that engaging with research is supported. This process of professional learning through inquiry is consistent with what we know about the importance of unsettling the taken for granted and bringing in new perspectives, making matters of fact matters of interest, for workplace learning.

Participation in a school-university research partnership creates a community of inquiry within which a common language for research develops. Inquiry opens up learning so that problems are interesting rather than threatening and participants speak of the 'wow' factor as they make new discoveries. It is not uncommon for everyone involved to emphasise that it is a rediscovery of why they came into education in the first place.

It would be misleading to suggest that working in school-university partnerships does not present difficulties. Working across institutional boundaries can be hard to sustain over long periods of time. Tensions also arise around the reconciling of what is learned from close study of specific contexts and what has more general resonance; between what participants themselves find convincing and what they think will convince others

But these are not issues confined to school-university research partnerships and indeed such ways of working can contribute to wider debate on the nature of evidence. Working together to resolve a problematic situation heightens awareness of research as a complex process requiring sustained reflection on methodology and the evaluation of evidence. It amounts to nothing short of the re-professionalisation of teaching as evidence informed. The key points to be learned from the experiences of teachers and researchers in the SBRC and SUPER are:

- **Teachers need access to tools for inquiry that can be integrated into their daily teaching practice**
- **School leadership needs to promote a 'safe to fail' environment to support responsible experiments in practice**
- **Opportunities to work collaboratively, within and across schools, are essential to teachers' professional learning**
- **Powerful professional learning environments require people with a diversity of expertise and perspective with a common interest in addressing real classroom situations.**

Working in a Community of Inquiry

The greatest satisfaction I have experienced working in a school-university research partnership is from devising simple tools to support pedagogical inquiry. Useful sources for finding ideas to use and develop can be found in materials designed to promote student learning such as thinking skills or formative assessment. Many of the ideas can be incorporated directly into lessons and have a 'mirror effect' as encouraging students to inquire opens up learning and encourages teachers to inquire.

Lesson Study, an approach to investigating learning that originated in Japan and is now worldwide, provides a structure for embedding teacher research in the classroom. Mentoring and coaching promotes knowledge exchange and professional learning in collaborative networks

Whilst the impetus for putting research at the heart of learning in the classroom is the interest of individual teachers in inquiring into their practice, if it is to be a powerful professional learning environment it needs to be collaborative and include a diversity of perspectives and expertise.

Schools and universities share an interest in education and already work together. Faculties of Education and schools work in partnership to provide Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development. Universities are committed to widening participation and need good relations with schools to understand how to encourage a wider diversity of students to apply and support transition into higher education.

There are academics across the university with an interest in making connections between the school curriculum and their discipline and who want their research to have an impact. All of these aspects have the potential to promote partnerships to support teacher research.

In 2014 Research Councils UK and the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement commissioned the School-University Partnership Initiative (SUPI) Learning Project with the aim of learning from existing work on school-university partnerships and exploring the potential to improve their quality and impact.

The SUPI report concluded that working in partnership offered real benefits provided practicable and sustainable ways of achieving these could be found. The key to success is to challenge the dominance of the idea that universities produce knowledge to be applied by teachers, which creates hierarchies of knowledge and barriers. If we shift our attention to the role of inquiry in learning, and in professional learning in particular, we discover a powerful driver for research that is collaborative and generative.

Range of collaborative opportunities

Teachers today can draw upon a wealth of experience relevant to the development of teaching as a research informed profession. I have focused on what I know best, the potential of school-university research partnerships, and whilst I think these are still an under-used resource for supporting teacher research, there are other opportunities to collaborate. The Education Endowment Foundation supports teacher engagement in and with research through the 'tool-kit', research reports and access to funding.

The British Educational Research Association has a Practitioner Research Special Interest Group and funds grants for school-based research. In order to reap the full benefits of what has gone before we need to overcome the adverse effects of a tendency to forget and the proliferation of labels that obscure what we have in common. Access to what we have already learned needs to be improved but there should also be opportunities to test and discover new possibilities. Working together can help us to question what has worked, how and for whom and propose new intelligent proposals to be tested in action.

Top Tips

Build on what we know from the work of effective school-university partnerships to make optimal use of existing links between schools and universities.
Promote the sharing and development of tools for pedagogical inquiry
Work with teacher associations and unions to encourage policy makers to recognise the importance of spaces for inquiry in professional learning
Make optimal use of existing external networks by finding mutual interests in supporting classroom-based research.

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Author
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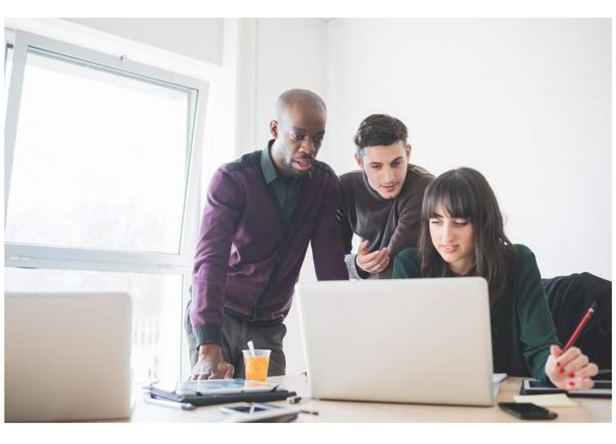
Professional Development

Searching For The Diamond In The Mine -Evidence That Classroom Practice Works

Jonathan Haslam sets out the tough challenges that need to be tackled if we are to achieve genuine evidenced-based reform in our schools.



And there are no letters in the mailbox
And there are no grapes upon the vine
And there are no chocolates in the boxes anymore
And there are no diamonds in the mine
Leonard Cohen

Being clear about evidence-based reform

It's been a privilege to work on evidence-based reform over the last ten years. To watch as the landscape has changed, more robust research has been carried out, and interest in using that research has grown. I

think we're at an important stage in the movement, and perhaps equally at risk of falling back as moving forward. The risks come mostly, I think, from the danger that evidence-based reform won't deliver the results that people expect. More on this later, but first, let's go back ten years.

When I first began working on evidence-based reform in education, it seemed that here was a place where I could make a difference. If we could get the research evidence down from the library shelves, simplify it into words of less than six syllables, and get it out to teachers and schools, we could improve outcomes for children. It seemed like a substantial prize.

There many building blocks of evidence-based reform, and as I have explored each in turn, I have come to see that there are challenges and limitations to each of them. Taken together, they are so substantial that I think we need to be clearer about what evidence-based reform can and can't deliver, so that everyone involved in education is clear about what they are getting themselves into. I'm still a believer in evidence-based reform, because the alternatives are worse, but we need a better understanding of the challenges.
So what are the challenges?

The state of the evidence

There is an awful lot of research evidence out there ...but there is also a lot of awful research evidence out there. The poor research evidence tends to exaggerate the potential impact of new approaches and innovations. As a general rule of thumb, the better the research, the smaller the impact. When we were looking for research to include in our Best Evidence in Brief newsletter (http://www.beib.org.uk/), if we find, for example, a meta-analysis that shows a large effect size this raised alarms and a red flag.

The large effect has usually come about because the meta-analysis includes poor quality studies (e,g., of a short duration, researcher-designed measures, etc). These kinds of studies are unhelpful not just because they're not very good, but because they raise the expectations of the degree of change that we might see in the classroom. John Hattie's notion that only interventions with an effect size over +0.40 are educationally important is unhelpful.

To set my stall out early, I think it is reasonable to expect that, if you implemented the currently available best evidence across all aspects of school practice, you would see an average improvement of +0.30, maybe +0.40 if you're lucky. This is well worth having, but it doesn't, for example, quite close the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their peers.

We don't have enough good evidence upon which to rely. For example, the ratings for around 40% of the strategies listed in the EEF toolkit are based on limited evidence or worse (including important issues such as performance pay, and setting or streaming). So we can't yet be confident about the conclusions of this research. It may be that in the future, new studies overturn the current recommendations. In a way this is great, it reflects the progression of science and learning. But this is an uncomfortable situation to be in when we want to influence practice. Practitioners want a "right answer" – should we stream or not? So equivocation on the evidence isn't very helpful, even if it's true.

Most interventions are no better than business-as-usual. Of 100 randomised controlled trials conducted by the Education Endowment Foundation, around one in five has evidence of a positive impact (i). This is something of a shock to the system. One of the objections to randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in education has been that it is unethical to deny the children in the control group the "treatment", because there is an expectation that this shiny new treatment will work. Now we find that almost the opposite is the case.

It is much more likely that the treatment will not work (although thankfully it also usually causes no harm). In addition, although the EEF have conducted more than 100 RCTs, that still isn't enough useful evidence. Evidence 4 Impact (https://www.evidence4impact.org.uk/) collects evidence on the interventions available to schools in England. The idea is that, if schools are considering an intervention, they should look for those that have evidence of effectiveness. Of the 171 interventions on the site, 16% have evidence of impact, 11% have been evaluated but showed no evidence of impact, and 73% have not been evaluated.

What does the fact that most interventions have no positive impact mean for the new ideas and initiatives that teachers and schools are trying every day in classrooms up and down the country? Not as part of a research project, but as part of everyday practice. Most new ideas come, not from research, but from colleagues in your own and nearby schools. Are they having any positive impact? The short answer is that we don't know. My view is that good teachers can make just about anything "work" if they think it's a good idea, and trying to improve your individual practice is a good thing. At the very least, it keeps you interested, enthusiastic, engaged, and it probably does no harm.

But there isn't great evidence that teachers are continuously improving on their own. So small changes that are being introduced probably aren't making much difference, and are unlikely to be a source of undiscovered diamonds. But I'll come back to this later.

The impact of teachers and schools

The greatest influence on a student's achievement is the student themselves (i.e.: their own attributes – prior achievement, motivation, socio-economic status, etc). Next in importance are their peers in the school. The impact of school itself comes in a distant third (ii, iii). Within school, in each class, the effectiveness and therefore impact of an individual teacher is important, but it is proving difficult to identify effective teachers and improve less effective ones (the Gates Foundation spent $575 million in the US trying to do this, with no impact) (iv).
This noise in the system makes it difficult for teachers and schools to identify the impact of changes in school practice.

Changes in the composition of the school (in classes and cohorts) can change outcomes in much more dramatic ways than those resulting from improving teaching and learning. It also makes it difficult to identify "better" schools. Schools may be "better" simply because their current student body is "better" (regardless of attempts to level the demographic playing field). Visiting better schools to identify their successful strategies isn't a bad idea, but it can be difficult to ascertain whether their success is actually due to those strategies, what those strategies are, and whether you can implement them in your own school.

Within a school, or a small group of schools, it can be difficult to identify the impact of new approaches. The Institute for Effective Education (IEE) supported nearly 30 small-scale evaluations run by schools. The main learning point for the schools running these evaluations has probably been how difficult it is to organise a "fair test" within a school. The constraints of school organisation (timetabling, teacher-class allocation, curriculum structure, etc) make it difficult for schools to isolate and evaluate the impact of a single change in practice. Yet such evaluation is essential. For, although it's not generalizable, and may exaggerate the impact of the intervention as small-scale studies tend to do, it's an important first indicator of whether the intervention should be scaled up or scaled back. Often too, it provides useful information on the implementation of change across the school (for example, the extent to which other teachers can take up "your" idea effectively).

Securing evidence-based reform at scale

What do these challenges mean for the hopes of delivering evidence-based reform across the school system?

The evidence-based interventions available to schools are mostly built around practices with evidence of effectiveness – interventions to improve students' reading or maths skills, social-emotional learning, classroom talk, and so on. And, as we have seen, only a small proportion of those interventions have been shown to be positive.

Schools or practitioners can, of course, implement by themselves approaches that are supported by the evidence, though all the evidence suggests that this is challenging. Simply defining what the approach is can be surprisingly difficult. The EEF toolkit has feedback as its top-rated strategy, but using feedback correctly is difficult. Dylan Wiliam identifies that, of eight ways to deliver feedback, only two result in a positive outcome (v).

The EEF's implementation guide advises that schools should "Specify the active ingredients of the intervention clearly: know where to be 'tight' and where to be 'loose'" and "Make thoughtful adaptations only when the active ingredients are securely understood and implemented" (vi). The problem with this advice is that the active ingredients or core components of an intervention are rarely, if ever, available to schools and practitioner. (vii).
It's also difficult for practitioners and schools to go directly to the research and try and implement research-proven strategies from there. Numerous EEF-supported pilots and trials have attempted this with no impact (e.g., viii, ix).

There are a few schools and school organisations trying to do this, and they make for interesting case studies (such as the Aspirer Teaching Alliance, where teachers are "drenched in opportunities to engage with the evidence" (Megan Dixon, presentation at Chester ResearchED, March 2017) but it's yet to be shown robustly (no matter how much I love them) the extent to which these schools can improve outcomes for themselves and, perhaps more importantly, for others.

Before lockdown, I interviewed 30 practitioners in schools such as Aspirer – "research-sensitive schools" trying to make the most of research evidence. What came across was the need for leadership that emphasised the moral purpose of the project, a focus on teaching and learning, maximising the opportunities (formal and informal) for professional development, and a culture that supported trust and open-ness. It was also clear that this needed to be a school-wide approach, that, though practitioners are gate-keepers to what happens in the classroom, it is difficult to make meaningful change on their own.

Whole-school improvement programmes that are based on the best evidence do exist. One such, Success for All, has been evaluated in more than twenty trials and has shown an average effect size of +0.29. This gives an idea of the amount of improvement that evidence-based reform can deliver. It would be enough to close perhaps 50-75% of the gap between disadvantaged students and their peers (although the peers would also improve).

Put another way, it would ensure that many more disadvantaged and previously lower-attaining students had the reading and maths skills to help them access the future curriculum and then succeed beyond school. A future whole-school improvement programme where the school uses research evidence itself might achieve more or less than this, but this is the area of impact we can expect.
This level of impact is only possible with intensive, whole-school implementation of evidence-based reform. Less intensive implementation than this will clearly have much less impact. So, for example, introducing metacognitive strategies across school or using retrieval practice starters is likely to have much less impact, impact that may be almost undetectable. What kind of impact are teachers and schools expecting from introducing such approaches, and how will they know if they have achieved it?

The evaluation projects that we have supported have shown that this evaluation can be done, but it is not easy, or commonly carried out at the moment. It is more likely that teachers and schools will rely on the existing approaches they have to evaluate change. This may be fine, but as with the implementation of many new approaches in schools (the social-emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) programme comes to mind (x)) is likely to result in a mix of beliefs about the effectiveness, from enthusiastic evangelist to disappointed sceptic. And here lies the risk, that evidence-based reform might end up being treated like any other fashion within schools – embraced or dismissed based on belief rather than science.

I think there are a number of issues that need further discussion and communication in order to ameliorate this risk:

- **The potential impact that evidence-based reform can have within the school system. Let us all be clear about how much change can actually be achieved. How is this then presented to the wider community of parents and public? Can we agree a culture of realistic expectations?**
  The effort that is required, from teachers and schools, to achieve this impact. To achieve the most impact requires "relentless" effort, but how should we balance this with the workload, mental health, recruitment and retention challenges that schools face?
- **More and better evaluation of the impact that changes to practice are having, whether at a small-scale in-school level, all the way up to continuing randomised controlled trials, particularly of the interventions that schools are actually using.**
- **And as always, in any research-based article, more research, particularly on issues that are important to schools, but under-researched.**

I still believe that evidence-based reform is the best way of achieving significant, worthwhile improvement in outcomes for children, but I think it is vital that we have a shared understanding of how difficult these gains are to achieve, in order to avoid disappointment and disillusion with the evidence-based movement.

Top tips for practitioners

It seems likely that sustained, school-wide engagement with research evidence is required to make a significant difference to pupil outcomes.

For individual practitioners, though, there is still benefit to be had from engaging with the research evidence, providing a rich source of ideas and challenge. Where it exists, research evidence provides a secure foundation and framework for practice.

Interest in research engagement has never been higher, and there is a vibrant, supportive community out there from whom you can benefit – distilling, reflecting, and applying research in practice.

Jonathan Haslam was until recently the Director of the Institute for Effective Education and has been working for the last twelve years to help practitioners and policy makers use research evidence in practice. He has been involved in a wide range of projects supporting evidence use, including the Research Schools Network and Evidence for the Frontline.

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21st Feb 2021

Professional Development

Teacher Research Engagement – Overcoming Barriers

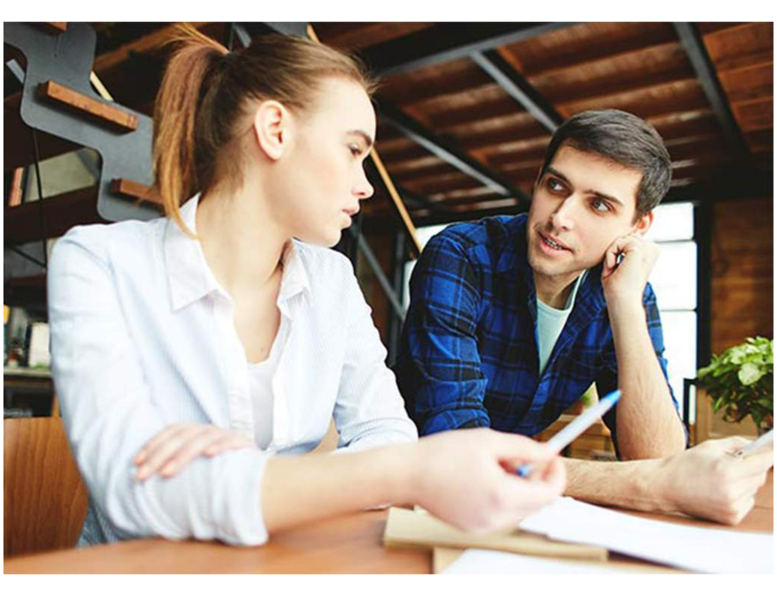
Obstacles to teachers engaging in and with research can be a combination of their own reservations and voices of dissent from policy makers and school leaders. Claire Harley proclaims the importance of research informed practice and how barriers can be removed.

There has been a notable shift towards research engagement in schools. Exponentially, charities, universities, academics, consultants, teaching schools and other external organizations have declared support for the use of educational research in schools. The pursuit of research informed practice can positively support the teaching profession and should be encouraged , but how can this be achieved?

Who should be included in this pursuit remain points of contention? The role of policymakers and school leaders in evidence-based education is causing some to call into question what we really mean by evidence (Biesta 2010). Within the education system, there is a voice of dissent that does not accept the need for research engaged practice. We may not hear them vocally on platforms such as 'EduTwitter', but if we go into the staffroom after briefing (when SLT have left) we will hear the occasional groan and the conversation between busy teachers who ask one another when they will simply have the time to implement this or that.

This article approaches the topic of research informed practice as a potential force for good in teachers' practice, for me it links back to my favourite quote by essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson: "I cannot remember the books I've read any more than the meals I have eaten; even so they have made me." Imagine the potential of an education system where each adult who comes into contact with children makes decisions based on a wealth of knowledge; where practice is improved by informing practitioners thinking.

There are, however, educators who do not identity research as part of their work. Before we look at the barriers and reservations teachers have about engaging with educational research, I think it is important to state that many of these concerns are legitimate. Rather than seeing our less enthused colleagues as old fashioned, uncommitted or unacademic, we remember that progress is much more likely to be authentic and entrenched if all feel valued and listened to as part of the process. If anything, there is room for a level of healthy cynicism; the critical eye can be a welcome barrier to the implementation of gimmicks or time-consuming and ineffectual policies. Research informed practice highlights the issues surrounding the motivations and justifications school leaders use as part of their decision-making process.



As such, the need for trust between teachers, school leaders and policy makers is magnified. The pursuit of research informed practice is a noble one, but in our search for 'what works' we may have created as many problems as we have solutions for the teaching profession. This article approaches these issues from a teacher-centered perspective, using my experience as a research lead to offer potential solutions to barriers to research informed practice.

Barriers to Research Informed Teaching and Potential Solutions

I have been fortunate enough to work with teachers in my role as middle and senior leader, research lead and through my engagement with teachers at conferences. Through my own experience, the literature on the subject, and questions raised by teachers, I believe to be some of the key barriers to educational leadership of research engaged practice are:

- **Fear of failure**
- **Belief that engagement with educational research is not part of a teacher's role**
- **Ability to engage with academic literature**
- **Lack of time**
- **The problem with the individual**

Of course, there may be other issues that lead to a lack of support for research informed practice, but this article can be viewed as a useful starting point for discussion within school.

Fear of Failure

When we are asking teachers to engage with educational research, we must be aware that in many ways we are asking them to go against the grain of the current educational climate. We should not underestimate the impact that repeated policy changes have had in transforming the role of the teacher into one that follows through educational policy without clear opportunities to critique or shape the landscape. This culture of compliance is one that will impact a teacher's willingness to stand back, look at their practice and question what they are doing. Especially when senior leadership are watching.

This can impact engagement with research in two ways; either the engagement will be surface-level as teachers are unwilling to fully commit to an initiative in case it fails and secondly, because teachers have an underlying need to demonstrate success as a result of the high accountability culture, that confirmation bias yields overwhelmingly positive results. To ask a teacher to adapt their teaching is not as simple as asking teachers to change the way they 'do things' from one day to the next. For teachers, personal and professional identities are interlinked and so engagement with research calls for teachers to reflect on who they are in the classroom. Subsequently, short term action research projects will not always be enough for teachers to reflect on these bigger issues.

This happened when a cohort of teachers I've worked with undertook their first round of action research projects. Teachers adapted their teaching to include strategies that seemed applicable to our context within the educational research.

This was in many ways a valuable experience, but the reflections of teachers focused overwhelming on what had worked, with no real acknowledgement of limitations or lack of success. As the member of the senior leadership team responsible for the project, I made a greater emphasis during the next round of projects on the importance of honest reflection and evaluation. If anything, the ways in which initiatives fail have equal value to the way in which they succeed. Indeed, there are so many variables within a single classroom that we cannot ultimately determine whether something is or is not entirely effective. Perhaps this is best left to larger control trails such as those conducted by the Education Endowment Foundation. Instead, classroom enquiry can be a journey of self-exploration and an authentic reflection of our own practice. If this is something that you engage with as a teacher or school leader, then the emphasis of the process should be on reflection, rather than 'success'. Especially when linked to performance management, a clear policy that outlines that evaluation of both successes and failures is essential.
'That's not my job'

It is very tempting, when a colleague says that engaging with research is not part of teaching, to simply reply "yes, it is". Kindness and open dialogue are key. Maybe they have a point? If you are closed to the idea of debate on the issue, perhaps you have an agenda contrary to genuine enquiry? The relationship between leadership and teachers is magnified with a shared focus through educational research and lack of buy-in from teachers may be an indication of wider systemic issues of trust in a school or MATs leadership or values.

If there are individuals who still feel that research engagement is not part of their role, educational leaders may find themselves in a catch 22. The level of understanding a person has and the extent to which learning is internalized is limited to the extent to which an individual values the knowledge that is being transmitted. Pragmatically, one solution would be to demonstrate the presence of the need for research informed practice in the Teacher Standards and if appropriate through performance management targets.

I cannot stress enough that this should be a last resort to be reserved for teachers who actively resist any form of engagement with research that has been used to develop school policies. School leaders have a responsibility to ensure that all teachers feel included and actively involved in the school's ethos and culture. When the motivations behind a project are centered around improving the quality of education for children, there are very few staff who will not be willing to work together.

Ability to engage with the educational literature

One of the key principles on which effective engagement with educational research is the ability of 'experts' to share knowledge. This must be done with and a focus on relevance for teachers. This is not easy as the theoretical and philosophical and the empirical and the tacit must be consolidated into a codified and practical message for teachers to use as part of their practice. Even with the efforts of organisations such as the NFER and BERA, most of the research surrounding education is written for an academic audience. There are colleagues who have returned to university at some point in their career to undertake an MA in education or their subject/specialism, but for many their teacher training has been the last time that they have engaged with academic literature.

It is thus not condescending to support teachers to rediscover how to critique an argument or find useful books and journals online. If we are charging teachers with research engagement, then a clear guidance handbook and suitable CPD in this area is essential. This could be an important aspect of the research lead's role (discussed later in this article) or you are very welcome to use and adapt one I have created.

Lack of Time

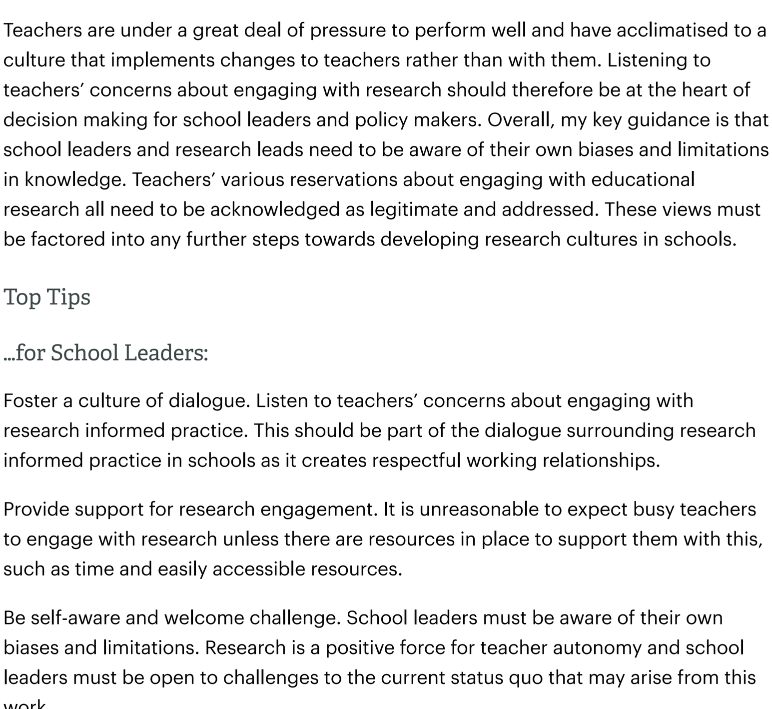
The fact that many teachers feel overworked or under considerable pressure to perform should not be a surprise. Within the UK setting, teachers are under large amounts of pressure as a result of myriad factors such as the pressure of accountability, unrealistic marking polices and lesson preparation. 57% of teachers disagreed with the statement that their stress levels were acceptable, with 82% of teachers and 32% of senior leaders citing workload as the reason for their stress. As it happens, there are organizations that now break down educational research into manageable reads of no more than two or three pages, whilst still ensuring the essential essence of academic rigor. The Chartered College of Teaching's journal Impact is fast becoming seminal to research engagement for the busy teacher. As a middle leader, I allocate time for teachers to read articles published by the Historical Association or Chartered College which are then debated in our meetings. Not only does this deal with the issue of time management, but it also supports the message that this is a worthwhile undertaking linked to our curriculum intent and implementation.

The problem with the individual

As a research lead for a small multi-academy trust, I was often faced with 'imposter syndrome' in my role. When a teacher had an issue in their classroom, I was delighted when they approached me for a solution in the literature. This delight was balanced with a sense of fear that I would not automatically know what to advise and not necessarily know a lot about the topic. This is the issue with the Research Lead – the double-edged sword that both creates a level of importance of and platform for engagement with educational research, whilst at the same time, misleads teachers into thinking that the research lead must have the answers.

There is a history of focusing on influential individuals in education, from Thody's 'gurus' to Decroly and his 'disciples'. Giving excessive influence to individuals, both within a school and beyond undermines the purpose of research engagement. To associate ideas or principles of teaching to individuals means that there is a danger that teachers will accept or reject ideas based on their personal feelings towards school leaders or personalities rather than critically evaluating the ideas themselves.

The goal of research engagement should be to empower teachers in developing their own classroom practice for the benefit of their students. Research engagement must be valued by the teaching profession as a personal journey and process of finding new knowledge rather than a system where we follow the advice of educational gurus.



The general consensus regarding the role of the research lead is supporting teachers engaging with educational research, guiding them in resourcing information that can help them find their own solutions to their areas of inquiry. Another interesting and more difficult aspect of the role is to consider the way in which research engagement highlights questions surrounding power. This means calling-out senior leaders who start using 'the research suggests' when introducing new school policies when no real academic engagement has taken place.

As part of their role, research leads and school leaders aim to remove barriers to research engagement. Part of this process is complexity reduction: linking actions to consequences in a streamlined way. This can lead to the deskilling the very professionals that research engagement should be empowering. I have found myself in a position where I have had to tell school leaders that I do not think their course of action is a true representation of the literature, or that it might not be a good idea to change an entire school policy based on one piece of data. Whilst this is not easy, is it is essential for research leads to do just that to avoid the totalitarianism Biesta warns us against.

A final reflection – be self-aware

Teachers are under a great deal of pressure to perform well and have acclimatised to a culture that implements changes to teachers rather than with them. Listening to teachers' concerns about engaging with research should therefore be at the heart of decision making for school leaders and policy makers. Overall, my key guidance is that school leaders and research leads need to be aware of their own biases and limitations in knowledge. Teachers' various reservations about engaging with educational research all need to be acknowledged as legitimate and addressed. These views must be factored into any further steps towards developing research cultures in schools.

Top Tips

…for School Leaders:

Foster a culture of dialogue. Listen to teachers' concerns about engaging with research informed practice. This should be part of the dialogue surrounding research informed practice in schools as it creates respectful working relationships.

Provide support for research engagement. It is unreasonable to expect busy teachers to engage with research unless there are resources in place to support them with this, such as time and easily accessible resources.

Be self-aware and welcome challenge. School leaders must be aware of their own biases and limitations. Research is a positive force for teacher autonomy and school leaders must be open to challenges to the current status quo that may arise from this work.

… for Research Leads:

Encourage a sceptical stance. Welcome a little healthy cynicism as part of the process of embedding research in practice. Listening to the concerns that teachers have about the introduction of new policies or practices will ensure that decisions are made collectively and having taken into account the context of your school.

Don't be the research know it all! Being the 'guru' of educational research in your school may feel satisfying, but it is ultimately misguided and ineffective. Even as a leader of research within your organisation, giving the impression that you know the answers to all your colleague's questions can lead to unrealistic pressures for you and the danger of linking policy ideas to how they perceive you as a person.

… for Teachers:

Remember your views matter. You know your class(es) better than anyone and usually hold subject or key stage expertise that your senior leaders and research leads may not have. As such, you are qualified and entitled to ask questions.

Use research as a lever for change. Research engagement is an excellent way in which to implement change at school level. If you would like to support change within your school, consider framing your arguments around why the research supports your ideas and how this will benefit the school as a whole.

Remember the source and context of research. When engaging with educational research make sure you consider the source of the information you're reading. Is it a blog or a journal article? Is this from the perspective of an academic or a practitioner? Finally, and most importantly, when reading about 'what works', consider that this actually means 'this worked for them' Contemplate the answer to the question, 'will this work in your context?'

Claire is a history teacher and Head of Department in a secondary school. In a previous role she worked as Research Lead and Senior Leader responsible for teaching, learning and innovation. Her EdD research explores teachers' and leaders' perceptions of research-informed practice.

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9th Apr 2021

Blogs

Why Research Must Be At The Heart Of Professional Practice

Raphael Wilkins vehemently condemns the persistent barriers to practitioner research engagement and calls for a fundamental shift which establishes school based research as the means for continuous quality improvement.

We need to value more research that is undertaken as part of normal professional practice – as an adjunct to school-based research which meets academic criteria. There has never been a more propitious time for school-based research engagement to benefit the teaching profession, the quality of school education, and the well-being of the communities schools serve, but to realise those benefits, the conceptualisation of school-based research needs to become more inclusive.

A climate hostile to agency and reflection

The spread of school-based practitioner engagement with research over the last twenty years has been disappointing. There still seem to be some schools where none of the staff have heard of it; some where headteachers do not particularly like their staff to think for themselves; and some staffrooms ready to sneer at a teacher wishing to improve themselves. The systemic factors responsible for this are clear; I shall also argue, perhaps more controversially, that the practitioner research community has in some ways circumscribed itself more narrowly than necessary.

The systemic constraints have included arrangements for the pre-service education of teachers and the award of Qualified Teacher Status which have done little or nothing to inculcate an expectation of career-long research engagement, or indeed professional development more generally. 'I am fully qualified to do my job: why should I have to do anything more?' is a stance encountered quite commonly.

Secondly, over the period in question, the inspection criteria used by Ofsted took no specific account of a school's professional development culture, nor even, it might be argued, whether school managers treated their staff caringly as human beings. Instead, 'strong' leadership was praiseworthy, even where it was experienced as the kind of unsupportive bullying blame-culture which drove significant numbers of teachers out of the profession in their first five years. I found that widespread leadership style repulsive because it is so contrary to the core educational purpose of a school. No-one wants to buy perfume at a counter where the staff are unwashed and stinking; no-one will buy into joy in learning in a school where teachers are allowed no agency, but instead are looking over their shoulders fearfully.

The third systemic constraint has been the disconcerting extent to which government ministers have felt free to express opinions about, and seek to influence, the details of classroom practice. 'Disconcerting' because educators of my generation were assured during our formative years that such a thing could never happen in England: that following the defeat of fascism in Europe, checks and balances were built into the English system to provide permanent cushioning between the education professional and the elected politician.[i] What is the point of investing time and effort in the long-term research-informed evolution of practice, in a climate of whims and fashions?

A glance worldwide at the range of conditions and expectations within which teachers work in other countries shows, among other things, how atypical globally has been the hostile and distrustful stance of successive UK governments towards the teaching profession.

Research engagement for professionalisation

Little wonder, then, that the school practitioner research movement has not gained greater traction: praise and appreciation are due to those many who have persevered. Of course it has not been an undifferentiated 'movement'; within a broadly common overall organising philosophy it takes different forms and reaches different levels of development according to context, and is driven by a range of motivations.

Somewhere near the centre of my own mind-map of it are teachers undertaking small-scale research projects as part of externally-accredited courses, usually higher degrees. There may be a group of them in the same school, supporting each other. That mode of professional development may be actively enabled and promoted by senior management, who may also arrange for staff more generally to access professional reading and to discuss what research has to say about issues the school is dealing with. The school may draw upon the national infrastructure of 'knowledge wholesalers' digesting academic research for practitioner consumption.

The background to this picture includes the pioneering of teacher-led school development[ii] and of the concept of the research-engaged school.[iii] I told the story of my own attempts to develop and apply those ideas in Wilkins,2011.[iv]

In many schools, this activity is limited in scope and focus: the bulk of what is seen as research-engagement may be qualitative, and while contributed from all faculties, the methodology may sit most comfortably with teachers strong in social science and humanities. Research engagement only thrives where it is supported by middle and senior leaders, and it takes place predominantly in schools which are both successful and stable. In the most successful and confident examples, school leaders value the maintenance of their professional development culture more highly than achieving a particular Ofsted grade. They are the exception, and generally schools in challenging circumstances see (an entirely false) dichotomy between fire-fighting and research engagement, and prioritise the former. Except where research engagement is truly embedded into school culture, it is transient: the champions move on; interest wanes after the degree has been achieved. These comments are my personal impression: for a thorough and insightful analysis see Godfrey and Brown ,2019.[v]

To make substantial progress, something different is needed. When the Chartered College of Teaching was established, one of my valedictory hopes for it was that when the time was right, it would hammer out with Government a working agreement along the lines of the following understanding: '***These*** are matters of education policy which are the concern of Government; ***these*** are matters of education practice which are the concern of the teaching profession.' Although such a treaty is long overdue, I say 'when the time is right' because the deal cannot be struck until the teaching profession displays arrangements and working practices which do credibly offer quality assurance and continuing quality improvement. That is the path which other professions have had to tread, first to assert themselves in relation to Government, and then to become the senior source of expertise. At present, universities accredit professional development programmes in education, whereas in the mature professions, the professional body accredits the university degree.

To take the first steps on that journey towards professional recognition, it is essential that evidence-informed practice becomes the norm across the entire teaching work of a school. A teacher not research-engaged would be like a driver not looking at road signs, but that does require a re-think about 'research', because the kind of research needed for professionalisation is professional research rather than academic research. The key distinctions between the two are that professional research operates within a different ethical framework, counts professional judgement as valid evidence, and stands separately from academic levels of assessment.

Research engagement for total quality

When people describe what research engagement is going on in their school, they tend to omit the analysis of attainment data. Indeed, they may even imply that the 'standards agenda' is somehow oppositional to research engagement and evidence-informed practice. That is strange: the systematic collection and analysis of attainment data, and its use in lesson planning and individual academic tutoring is clearly a good example both of research and of evidence-informed practice, which is going on in most schools in the country. Assessment for Learning is both research and evidence-informed practice. Teachers research every time they assess their students' work, assuming that they intend to learn from the assessment and apply it to future teaching tactics.

These are examples of professional research, like the specialised journalist researching their topic, or the serious novelist researching context, or the biographer researching their subject. They do it to make sure their work is good and will withstand scrutiny. I chose those examples because teachers need knowledge of their subject, their context, and the lives of their students. I avoided examples of professional research from law and medicine, because there is no pedagogic equivalent to case law and clinical records, although Fenwick and Nerland draw interesting comparisons about how professional learning is changing across a range of professions.[vi] They emphasise that professional learning is increasingly globalised, on-line, and networked: trends I explored in Wilkins. [vii] Purposeful, structured, critical professional reading is research. So is getting other people's perceptions, whether through peer review or student feedback. So is a quest to deepen understanding or gain fresh insights through experiences, such as when a Year 6 teacher gains first-hand experience of what is going on in Year 7, or when teachers do charitable work in a school in a developing country during the summer vacation.

The concepts of quality assurance and improvement are quite helpful in illustrating the value of professional research. Near to the heart of any system of quality assurance is the following sequence of questions: in relation to any particular activity:

- **Are there clear standards?**
- **How and by whom are those standards set?**
- **How and by whom are those standards monitored?**
- **How and by whom is performance evaluated against those standards?**

If those questions are applied to students' progress in core subjects, most schools will be able to point to quite robust arrangements for managing quality. What about other areas, including those often featuring in the all-important mission statement? 'Our students are happy': oh really? What is the evidence and process for judging that? 'We have excellent relations with parents': so were they involved in that assessment? 'We enable our students to achieve their full potential': who dares to define, and hence limit, what any particular young person growing up in the modern world will be able to achieve? In all these cases, progressing from sentimental aspiration (or self-delusion) to quality professional practice involves researching the perceptions and experiences of students, parents, staff, and community stakeholders.

Research engagement for the future development of the school system

Quality assurance is not just about fitness for purpose now, but also capacity to respond to change. Some depictions of school research engagement, especially of the 'what works' variety, imply that its purpose is to enable teachers to become smarter and more effective at what they are doing now, in the system as it is. There is nothing wrong with refining methods, except where the implication is that that ought to be sufficient, that the system itself does not need to evolve. Yet the aims, values and expectations of teaching have evolved greatly: compare the present to the days when teachers used fear and punishment to prepare children for their pre-determined station in life. The pace of change will increase: young people themselves are driving that. It is right that teachers, as a profession, consider how the aims and methods of teaching, and the role of school in society, may evolve over the next few decades.

To that end, conceptual research is important: the development of new ways of looking at things. Often, the questions addressed through empirical research are generated by that. A good example is the mass of empirical research in the fields of equalities and inclusion, which has been prompted by the conception of new paradigms and meta-narratives: new ways of seeing what goes on in the world, and how things ought to be. Conceptual research involves reading widely, pondering deeply, networking actively with people in contrasting contexts, and being open to having one's beliefs, assumptions and priorities challenged.

In Wilkins (2014) I argued that if education aims to help people to make informed choices about what they do now, and what they plan to do in the future, then learner agency must be at the heart of pedagogy.[viii] If pedagogy is to harmonise formal learning in school with the informal learning permeating all other parts of young people's lives, it must to some extent understand and embrace the issues important to students and their communities. The notion of an activist curriculum should be de-coupled from its Marxist roots and applied in an objective and professionally-defensible manner, building on the work of Oyler.[ix] Thus research-engagement becomes part of pedagogy, in which teachers and students co-research issues that affect students' sense of agency.

Research-engagement for future quality also has organisational implications. School leaders may see 'their' school as tight-knit, like a living organism, like a regiment oozing with esprit de corps. Professional research will reveal a range of perspectives. If a school community has 600 members, the one place will be perceived and experienced as 600 different spaces. For a long time in public discourse, the unit of competition and comparison has been the 'school' as a de-personalised administrative unit. Good schools already have porous walls and an external orientation. The more that teaching becomes professionalised and research-engaged, the stronger will become teachers' external moorings and sources of professional identity: through subject and phase associations, peer review groups, community partners, links to external sources of expertise, and informal social media networks. Gradually the school building may come to be seen as the serviced premises in which self-reliant and self-motivated teachers happen, for the time being, to be practising their profession. For school leaders supporting increased research engagement, one of the hard steps may be discerning when to lead, when to support, and when to let go.

Top Tips

My advice to teachers who would be research-engaged:

- **Recognise how much professional research you do already and do it more consciously**
- **Research your students' and colleagues' perceptions and learn from them**
- **Network widely and preferably internationally**
- **Think long and hard about the kind of significant long-term change you want to work towards**

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8th Apr 2021

Professional Development

Why Research Often Has Zero Impact On Teaching – And How INSET Can Make The Difference

Marcella McCarthy describes how research engagement transformed in-service training within her school

Mind the gap – between research and practice!

Some reports suggest that teachers don't engage with educational research, even when projects are put in place specifically to encourage this. In 2016, Paul McLellan gave a talk to the Maths and Science ResearchED conference claiming "There's a gap between the results of academic education research and teaching practitioners".[i]

McLellan cited a piece of research done in Durham University which sought to evaluate the transfer of evidence-based research to a teaching context. The intervention was based on the research done by John Hattie and Helen Timperley on enhanced feedback[ii], and sought to encourage teachers to use strategies with a proven effect size in their own context. Despite the study being run for a year across nine schools, it surprisingly concluded 'Overall, the data indicates that there is no convincing evidence of a beneficial impact on pupil outcomes from this intervention.'

The Durham researchers speculated that the language in which the research was written was inaccessible for teachers, and that this was one of the main reasons that it did not transfer well into schools.

The TES reported on two studies run by the Education Endowment Fund (EEF) which found similar results. In one study, across five schools in Kent, a senior teacher at one school was designated a "research champion", and worked with senior leaders at the other schools to promote engagement with research evidence. However, the report concluded: "There was no evidence that teachers' attitudes towards research, or their use of research evidence in teaching practice, changed during the intervention."

The other study ran for a year in Rochdale, drawing in teachers from ten primary schools, and seeking to give them CPD about using educational research. It concluded that "there was no evidence that teachers at participating schools were more likely to use research to inform their teaching than they had been before it began"[iii].

So, how to bridge the gap between educational research and education? It's not that teachers don't appreciate research themselves. If you speak to teachers who have taken on an MA, or trained to do their NPQML or NPQH, they are enthusiastic about the ways in which research has improved their practice. Sadly, this kind of research is out of the reach of many teachers: for a profession which is time-poor, under pressure and under stress, it's not a priority, and many schools have had to cut CPD budgets for all but exam-related courses. Research is often seen as time-consuming, or only for the ambitious teacher seeking promotion.

Changing the image of research

The problem identified by the EEF, which found teachers didn't respond to being coached into an interest in research, perhaps stems from a lack of insight in applying educational research. To be meaningful, research needs to arise out of the everyday context in which a school works, and also has to have an impact and relevance for the school itself. In the same way that it is hard to teach someone else's lesson without tweaking it to suit your context, it's hard to apply someone else's research. A recent article therefore suggests that one effective means to improve the quality and transmission of educational research might be to allow the teachers to actually do the research themselves.[iv]

However, there are problems when it comes to embedding research-based practice in schools. Firstly, research can be seen as something that happens away from the "real world" of classroom management. Secondly, connected to this, there can be a tendency to think that research is irrelevant–a view so ingrained that sites such as "Teacher Toolkit" even have 'mythbuster' sections to try and defend research-based practice.[v] Thirdly, hard-pressed staff may see research as "one more thing" to do that militates against the dreaded twin priorities of budget and results and saps wellbeing. Because of this, there's a real danger that promoting research-based practice in a school can turn into just another version of the 'hero head' approach, where the impetus for change comes from the top down, and not the bottom up. To close the gap, perhaps we need to rethink our definitions of research, and create a research culture in schools.

Harnessing INSET

Every year, teachers have five days specifically dedicated to training–In-service training or INSET days. These days can sometimes be less than inspiring. Moving from University to Secondary teaching, I found it extraordinary to sit through a powerpoint read out slowly to explain to us all how to teach more excitingly. Coming from an environment where, as a matter of normal expectation, research informed your teaching –and what you discovered today, you might be teaching to students tomorrow–I felt as if the pace and energy that I had enjoyed in University teaching was sometimes diluted, and that INSET days were often wasted time. How to claim back at least some of that time to create a research culture has been the subject of my personal research project over the past year and a half.

As a result of this project, over the last two years we have moved from being a school where 86.6% of staff said that they would like to use INSET days simply "to prepare for the term ahead" to a school where on our last INSET day every single teacher engaged in an individual piece of research, valuable to them and valuable to the school. 93.3% of staff now say that they wish to pursue further active research, 98.5% believe that it will have a positive impact on their teaching, and 100% of staff have asked to repeat the 'research day' experience in future INSET days. This is how we did it.

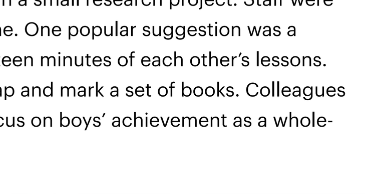
Modelling research in practice

To start the process, we emphasised the ways in which teachers are all researchers already. Someone who goes away to read about a new text or topic before teaching is engaging in research. Being a reflective practitioner, teaching a lesson and then revising it to deliver it to a different group, is research. Trying out a strategy you read about on Twitter is a form of research, albeit not one which may be written up in a journal.

In order to model for staff how research could be brought into practice, we focused an INSET session in the first year upon the issue of boys' achievement, which was a school priority. The session commenced with a presentation of the facts and research about how boys and girls achieve in different areas. We asked staff to consider whether they thought there was an inherent difference in the ways that boys and girls learn, and introduced them to some of the research that addressed the issue, including a spot of "mythbusting" which raised some of the different ways of thinking about the topic.

By sitting staff in cross-curricular groups, facilitated by a member of staff who was not a middle or senior leader (though all staff participated in the groups), we encouraged them to discuss the input with people not in their own subject area. We kept them in these groups to compare books across subjects, encouraging discussion about how learning looked in our school, in our context–a key aspect of teacher-led research. Each group had in it at least one person whom we knew would have the potential to act as a catalyst for others, and the topic provoked lively debate.

Each group of staff was then asked to commit to a plan working with the people in their group over the following term. Various possibilities were suggested: to visit each other's lessons and focus on a specific area of practice; to track a particular student or group of students; to explore a hypothesis about learning in your different subject areas; to do a joint learning walk or even to plan a small research project. Staff were encouraged to try strategies that took little time. One popular suggestion was a 'plenary swap', where teachers visit the last fifteen minutes of each other's lessons. Another was a 'marking locum' where staff swap and mark a set of books. Colleagues were given freedom as to the project, but a focus on boys' achievement as a whole-school priority was encouraged.



The training got positive feedback; people were excited and interested by the idea of looking closely at a whole-school issue, and happy to go and watch others teach. Teachers reported on what they'd done on our next INSET day, and we had some wonderful outcomes, including musicians and scientists comparing how they dealt with practical work, and humanities teachers watching PE staff to find out about how to develop more effective questioning. As the year went on, people further developed their projects, and we started to see real impact. Interest grew. Boys' achievement became something that people talked about, and argued about, and discussed when they were looking at teaching and learning. It might be a coincidence that in that summer's GCSEs, with all results improved, boys nonetheless achieved higher than girls in both progress and attainment, but it felt like a consequence.

Trying new things

With a lot of positive comments from staff about the research projects that they had commenced, it was the negative comments that were the most helpful in planning our next steps. Although many were ready to become research active, a smaller number did not really want to get involved, seeing it as a distraction from their main work. Having started the research conversation, we felt that the next stage was to enquire in more depth about what people wanted and expected from their training. In other words, the conversation had been started, but there was still a lot to do.

'Google forms' was invaluable for this part of the research: it produces instant charts and diagrams to display results, and allowed us to combine multiple-choice questioning with longer and more reflective written answers. We quickly found that there was a demand from staff for input and expertise from outside, but also a new hunger to work independently and start their own research.

One of the positive outcomes from the research focus was that a number of people wanted to start working parties in different areas. One group specifically didn't want to be involved with any school-based projects, but nonetheless determined to meet at regular intervals to discuss different pieces of research. One Head of Department started a new feature of department meetings where colleagues were given an article or book section to look at and reflect on, and then tell people about at the next meeting–it was a huge success, and led to lots of new strategies being trialled.

One of the things that we noticed coming up again and again in the feedback was how much people enjoyed having more autonomy about what they did in INSET time. We therefore trialled some 'carousel' sessions, based on the priorities which we had identified through questionnaires, on the next INSET day. People were able to spend some time attending sessions which were specifically tailored to their interests and needs, and some of our most enthusiastic researchers were also able to share good practice. Feedback from these sessions was extremely positive (87% of staff rating them good or excellent), however, we wanted to try something even more innovative which would encourage the research culture further.

Freedom to research!

What we decided on finally was nothing more or less than to trust staff. We were fortunate to have an INSET day that was at the end of the Autumn half-term, and which did not coincide with INSET days at other local schools. Staff had been asking to visit other schools, and to visit universities as well. We had been encouraging them to read research and felt that the time was ripe to develop further. As a result, we assigned our INSET day as an Independent Staff Research Day. Staff were told that they could use it for any research purpose, whether that was to visit another school to work with colleagues there, to visit a university or place of work connected to their subject specialism, or to do some independent reading. We especially encouraged research relating to their subject area, as part of the feedback we had been given suggested that this was an area often neglected in INSETs that focus on pedagogy.

We asked everyone to let us know about their plans in advance (and any support that they wished for, such as facilitating contact with different institutions). They had a certain amount of flexibility –for instance, the day could be taken in lieu if an activity was undertaken at a weekend, or at another time during half-term–but whatever they chose to do, they had to write a report on it as part of the day. They were encouraged to take time to reflect, but in the event we found people actually working for longer than on an ordinary INSET day, because they were energised and enthused.

To report back on the specific projects undertaken on the day would turn this article into a book: staff took part in a far wider range of activities than expected, and worked with 39 different institutions. So, for instance they:

- **travelled long distances to visit universities that specialised in a particular subject area;**
- **worked with tertiary colleagues at the university next door;**
- **set up active research with other schools;**
- **attended conferences;**
- **went to work with experts such as at the RSC;**
- **attended specific training in a specialist area;**
- **investigated new discoveries in their subject area.**

We got some amazing results, including a gift of a set of microscopes from a local university, and links with schools in China.

A striking element of the feedback was the extent to which teachers felt that it had had an immediate impact on their practice. Comments made by staff reflect this sense of relevance: "Since undertaking the training, I have already made use of the new skills that I have gained to aid my teaching. The skills learnt have improved my efficiency and are applicable across all Key Stages"; "The research I did has shown me ways in which I have failed to take account of previous research; I am saving myself time"; "I have lots of ideas that I want to discuss further and implement in the school"; "I am able to use my research directly in my teaching and sharing that practice with the department. I loved doing it".

What we also noticed was the sheer positivity that came with the freedom to explore and research beyond school, as you can see from the wordcloud created from the feedback. All staff rated the day as "very good" (20%) or "excellent" (80%), and 98.1% of staff reported that they believed the day would have a positive impact on their future work.

Research days are now a regular feature of our INSET programme, and research time on ordinary INSET days is a priority. The gains for the school are huge. Not only do we have an improvement in staff wellbeing, with teachers feeling as though they have more autonomy, but we have had a change in ethos. INSET days are no longer days when staff are passively "done to", but days when they challenge themselves, make new connections, and revitalise their teaching. As one member of staff said "This has been the most productive Inset I have had in my career! Good for professional development and wellbeing."

Top Tips: How to start generating your own research:

1. **Demand that research is given priority within school**

As teachers, you have a strong voice: use it. Ask senior leaders to dedicate INSET time to research, and show them this article if they doubt it works!

- **Recognise that what you do in the classroom IS research**

Write up your ideas when you reflect on a lesson; note the differences between your first version and the updated plan, or try the same plan on a different group of students and evaluate them. That is the start of a research project already.

- **Start small for inspiration**

Compare what you're doing with a colleague; watch someone else with a similar group. Try a plenary swap or a marking locum if you don't have much time. You'll be surprised by what can spark new ideas and inspire you.

- **Realise that you are the expert in your own context**

The fruits of external research about particular groups can be hard to implement outside their original context. You have a unique opportunity to create original research because you understand your particular school better than anyone else.

- **Give yourself time to become more expert.**

Pedagogy isn't the only form of research. Try making contact with a university department to get an update on your subject; ask them if they would like to collaborate with a school study. People don't always see keeping up to date on the latest work in their specialism as 'research', although it is immensely valuable for teachers.

- **Don't be afraid; trying something new is the essence of research. Getting it 'wrong' is also a valuable lesson. If research teaches us anything it is that we test hypotheses–we don't simply seek to reinforce our existing bias. If one idea for building up research doesn't fly, don't despair–just learn from it.**
- **If you're in a leadership position, ask staff what they need, and *trust them*. Each school is different, but most teachers are highly committed, hardworking professionals. It is crucial for their wellbeing and development that they have some autonomy in their professional development. One of the words that came back again and again in our positive feedback was 'trust'.**

Dr Marcella McCarthy was a University Lecturer for ten years before moving into Secondary Education, and has since worked with a wide range of Primary and Secondary schools on teaching and learning. She is currently Deputy Head at The Royal Latin School in Buckingham, and has written numerous articles as well as two books for Bloomsbury: The Spider Strategy and Coaching and Mentoring. She has also contributed chapters to The Leader Reader and The Research-Informed Teaching Revolution.

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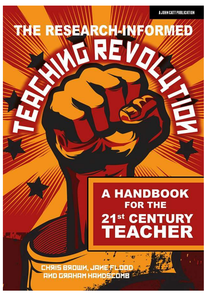
Professional Development

The Research-Informed Teaching Revolution: A Handbook For The 21st Century Teacher

David Godfrey finds in this book an edifying buffet from which readers can gain nourishment in their exploration of research-informed teaching.

*Edited by Chris Brown, Jane Flood and Graham Handscomb. John Catt publishing.



This edited book begins with a beautifully written exhortation by Lesley Saunders to consider the challenging, yet rewarding intricacies of mixing the worlds of educational research and teaching practice. She quotes Robin Alexander's definition of pedagogy, one which embraces the complexity faced by the teaching profession rather than attempting to subdue it, and the benefits of continuing a tradition started (in the UK) by Lawrence Stenhouse in which research and teaching are seen to be intimate partners. The editors then introduce the book with the analogy of the perfect party, where research and teaching is intermingled, promising a guidebook to this party in the concluding chapter. For this review I imagine this party as centred around a smörgåsbord, the buffet-style meal originating in Sweden, served on a table with multiple hot and cold dishes of various foods.

Although I've never eaten an authentic smörgåsbord, I can imagine it would be a welcome centrepiece to a party – along with a glass of wine or two – being able to satiate quickly those who are hungry, while pleasing the guests who wish to select their favourite morsels or perhaps amuse the daring ones who wish to nibble on the spicy unexpected ingredients. The editors of this book provide the table and the space for the buffet and the guests have each been invited to bring a dish of their own to add to it. Fortunately for us, the editors know how to lay on a good spread, inviting a range of people who they will have known could provide an assortment of dishes to suit most palates.

Ok, so what do we get and how should this book be read, or how should our smörgåsbord be eaten? I sampled the chapters over an extended time, savouring one and then coming back later for another, albeit systematically. You could equally select chapters in any order, choosing the ones that seem most relevant or interesting. Chapters are short and easy to read in a relatively short space of time – making them good for busy practitioners. Inevitably, citations and scholarship do not provide comprehensive coverage, but as you work through the chapters, you see all of the debates, issues, evidence and perspectives on this topic known to even the most seasoned campaigners – some of whom have contributed the chapters.

Having had your taste buds piqued, readers then may wish to go beyond this book, to deepening their knowledge of the many fields that overlap in this Venn diagram where research-informed teaching lies: organisational change, ideas about knowledge, the nature of teacher professionalism, the challenges of knowledge mobilisation, teacher professional development and the notion of 'what works' research and so on.

Edited books also have the risk of lacking coherence, order or a meta-narrative. I'd say this is perhaps the biggest criticism of this volume – that the guidebook given in the concluding chapter was not given earlier in some form. I would have liked some signposting to group these chapters more explicitly into sections. Partly as a result of this, I found the chapter by Gorard, coming near the end of the book, jarring, as it came without warning.

His lament on the paucity of decent research to guide evidence-led teaching takes a narrow position on research-engagement, rather dismissing research outside of the quantitative what works' realm. This is fair enough, if our only question is about the ability of research to instruct teachers about the best methods to use to raise student attainment in standardised examinations. He excludes the benefits of research to guide professional development and to illuminate practice by providing a theoretical lens, among other reasons.

His point about the need for more research about research use is nevertheless a fair one, albeit narrowly framed. Gorard's chapter was counter-balanced partly by the following chapter from Karen Wespieser on the need for educational researchers to get closer to the chalk face and indeed most of the preceding chapters embodied how to bring research 'close-to-practice'. In the final chapter, Brown, Flood and Handscomb express the important point that the 'effectiveness' of research-use should not be defined purely in terms of improving test results but using wider parameters, and that teaching should also be led by values and issues of desirability.

Having failed to receive an invitation to the party (I'm not bitter), it seems that I've been brought in at the end – as the food critic perhaps? I'll take it as a complement that my view has been sought. If you see the value of a smörgåsbord as I do, then buy this book. For practitioners and post graduate students who wish to get a good overview of the field of research-informed teaching, this book is a great introduction to sink your teeth into.

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