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## Evidence for Excellence in Education



## Creating a research-engaged school: A guide for senior leaders

This year the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), in partnership with United Learning, conducted a research project on the uses and perceived impact of engaging with research on teaching and learning (*Teachers' Use of Research Evidence: A case study of United Learning schools*).

The work contributes to the growing debate around evidence-informed teaching practice. There is a widespread belief that significant improvements in educational outcomes could be made if teachers engage with the best evidence of 'what works' and develop their practice accordingly. Our joint research sought to gain a clearer picture of what current 'evidence-informed practice' looks like, the perceived benefits of engagement and how to develop a culture of evidence-informed practice.

## The findings – current practice

Much comes down to individual senior leaders or teachers taking a personal interest within their schools. Evidence-informed practice is far from being an embedded culture or a systematic interest in most schools.

However in those we visited, where research was seen as an important focus, several themes emerged:

- Staff were engaged in carrying out action research projects or used evidence to inform their own practice – from formal master’s projects to small-scale action research.
- Research findings increasingly informed whole-school continuing professional development (CPD) agendas and whole-school improvement.
- Supportive senior leadership teams (SLT), collaborative partnerships and creating the right environment were viewed as crucial. Additionally, time and space to act on research findings; engage with research; and access external research expertise are critical.
- Most argued that there were tangible benefits to engaging with research.

## The challenges

There were clear messages on the most important barriers to pursuing an evidence-informed approach to teaching:

- **Lack of time:** making evidence-informed practice a more significant priority.

**“It’s time, not funding, that is the biggest challenge.”**

- **Lack of clarity:** a shared understanding of what is meant by teachers engaging in evidence-informed practice, including what resources ‘count’ as evidence to inform practice.

**“Teachers will give you 10 other terms that mean the same as action research, but they’re unaware that it’s the same thing. It all needs to be made clearer.”**

- **Lack of access:** where and how do teachers find rigorous and relevant research material? How are teachers supported in their own action research?

**“If you don’t go looking for it, it doesn’t necessarily come to you.”**

- **Lack of relevance:** the need for clear, practical and context and subject-specific research that has a direct and measurable impact on teaching and learning.

**“At the end of the day most teachers are interested in what will work where they teach, not what works in general. Teachers don’t value research for the sake of it.”**

## The benefits of evidence-informed practice

### Case study: Using research evidence to reflect on and evaluate current practice

One head of science had engaged with research conducted by the Association for Science Education on what makes an effective practical. He used this research to reflect on and evaluate the practicals in his school and how effective they were. He discovered that they varied considerably in terms of their purpose, quality and effectiveness.

This has led the science department to question the purpose of some of its practical science lessons. This analysis will lead to changes and modifications to practical activities to ensure that they are effective at facilitating learning.

### Case study: External links and partnerships to facilitate research

One school has created strong links with two local universities. Teachers are accessing support from academics at the universities to help them with their own action research. The school also participates in university-led research projects.

The school has also entered into a coalition of research schools across the local area, set up by a local university and comprising a group of schools committed to participating in research to inform their development. The headteachers involved meet regularly to plan, share and learn from one another’s inquiry-based research.

**“If kids do better because of better teaching informed by research then it benefits everybody, the kids, you as a teacher and the school as a whole.”**

**“It provides a process for thought and examination of practice. It opens minds and working across departments prevents teachers becoming compartmentalised within their own subject areas.”**

**“Staff become excited about planning lessons again.”**

**“... training on action research has helped staff become reflective practitioners almost overnight. They don’t otherwise have the opportunity to reflect ... ”**

**“It means the maximum impact for the minimum effort.”**

**“Research gives teachers a framework around which to develop their teaching.”**

**“... allows schools an opportunity to see beyond the school gates ... how the school fits into the educational map. It helps teachers have the space to think and challenge their practice. It’s healthy.”**

# Where next? Key questions for schools

When it comes to evidence-informed practice, schools are at very different stages. While the schools explored in this report had all gone some way to build a research-engaged culture, most also stressed that they were still in the early stages of doing so.

The questions below are designed for you, as a senior leader, to explore your own current situation and decide how you might take research-engagement forward in your school, this year.

## 1. How would you assess the current position of your own school with regard to the use of evidence and research to inform your practice?

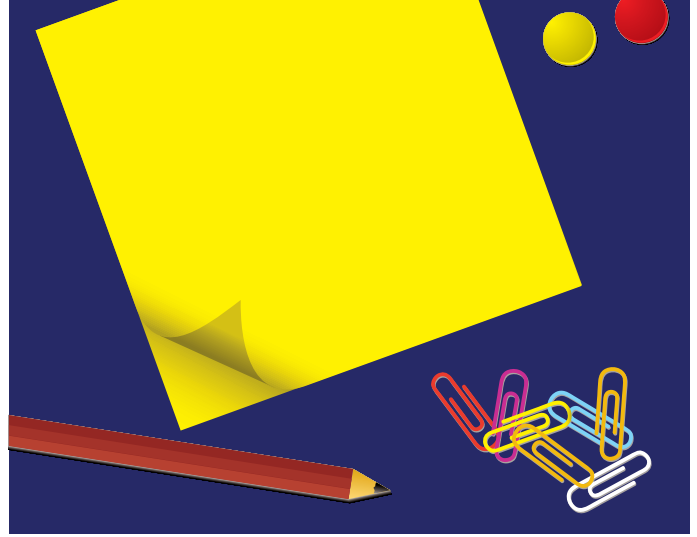
- How many teachers or other members of staff are using research in some way to improve their practice?
- How many staff members are conducting or accessing external research? What support do they receive?
- What part does evidence play in your decision-making process on whole-school teaching and learning?
- What opportunities are there for your staff to discuss evidence?

## 2. How do we make evidence-informed practice a priority?

- What incentives do you think your staff needs to engage with or conduct their own research?
- What are the best ways to create the right environment and the time and space to do this?
- Who should lead on the use of evidence within your school? An SLT member? A 'knowledge champion'? Individual heads of subject or heads of department? How would their role work?
- What structures and support do you need to put in place to make engaging with evidence a priority?

## 3. How do we translate research resources into better teaching and learning in class?

- Research priorities: what are the big research questions we still need to know more about to really understand how children learn?
- What level of expertise do individual teachers require in order to make good practical use of (and to challenge or conduct) research? Do they need access to external research organisations or universities?
- How do we measure the effectiveness of research-based approaches in developing teaching and learning?
- How can we encourage action research findings to be shared, both within and between schools? How do we make best use of external research evidence? Does such evidence need to be routinely accompanied by practical interpretation for the classroom?
- Whose job is it to translate 'research jargon' into everyday language?



A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing answers to the questions.

## Moving forward – developing a menu of options

The following menu of potential ‘enablers’ or building blocks for developing a research-engaged school culture is by no means exhaustive, but is based on the experiences of the case-study schools:

Timetabled space for ‘action research’ projects within schools’ CPD programmes	
School-based funding for teachers’ own action research projects.	Subscription to <b>subject association journals</b> as a source of context-specific research.
Appointing a ‘ <b>knowledge champion</b> ’, who takes the lead on finding and disseminating relevant evidence/material or coordinating action research.	Providing access to <b>academic library catalogues, online research resources</b> or <b>external research experts</b> .
<b>Modelling research</b> – providing examples of how new ideas could be implemented in practice. This could include lesson plans, schemes of work or sourcing case studies and filmed content from other schools.	Moving to a model of <b>joint practice development (JPD)</b> or ‘ <b>lesson study</b> ’ for in-house CPD, encouraging groups of teachers to develop their own research skills and agenda, and use lesson observations to track progress.
Research-focused discussion during <b>subject or department meeting time</b> on a regular basis.	Sharing research projects across schools in similar contexts via <b>subject networks</b> or <b>excellence visits</b> .
Developing a whole-school approach and structure for <b>defining, implementing, tracking, sharing and celebrating small-scale action research or JPD projects</b> that culminates in ‘light-touch’ outputs for the classroom (reflection videos or training materials, for example).	

## Reference

Judkins, M., Stacey, O., McCrone, T. and Inniss, M. (2014). *Teachers’ Use of Research Evidence: A case study of United Learning schools*. Slough: NFER. ISBN 978-1-910008-26-3. Available: [www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/IMUL01](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/IMUL01)

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