



**Evidence for
Excellence in
Education**

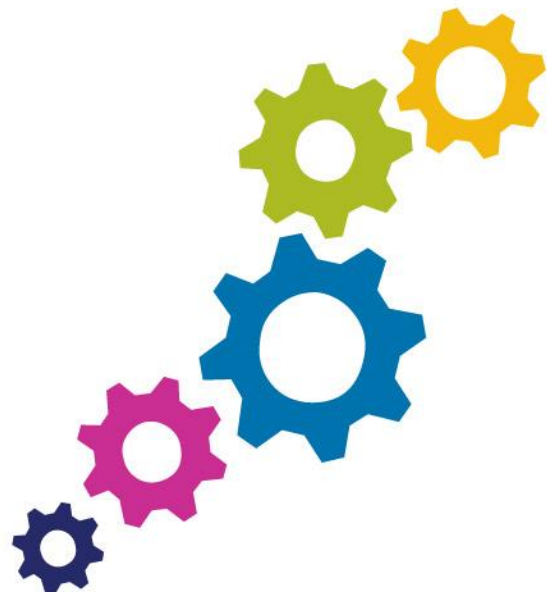


Research Summary

Teachers' Use of Research Evidence

**A case study of United Learning
schools**

**National Foundation for Educational
Research (NFER) and United
Learning**



Teachers' Use of Research Evidence: A case study of United Learning schools

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Introduction

What makes for an evidence-informed school? The main purpose of this research project was to explore how teachers use evidence in the classroom, and what they feel are the most effective approaches to engaging with research and using it to inform their practice.

This summary sets out the key findings from 17 telephone interviews with members of the senior leadership teams (SLT) within a sample of United Learning schools and 39 face-to-face interviews from seven case-study schools.

Key Findings

Key findings from the case-study data focused on the perceived benefits of engagement in research evidence and suggestions for developing an evidence-informed culture.

Perceived benefits

- Overall, engaging in research evidence was perceived to encourage practitioner reflection and open-mindedness: 'Engaging with research gets you thinking, it challenges you and makes you evaluate carefully your teaching methods and the reasons behind them' (Head of Department).
- Teachers' openness to adopting different pedagogical approaches was considered to make lessons more engaging for learners, and engaging with research was seen to encourage this: '**Using research evidence can give you new ideas; it helps to stop you getting stale and using the same teaching strategies over and over again, if you do this the kids get bored**' (teacher). This is in addition to a widely held belief that research evidence is beneficial for teachers and learners, by identifying proven techniques for teachers;
- Interviewees also believed that teachers benefit from research evidence through its use to inform professional development and through the confidence acquired from implementing new approaches: '**research provides evidence that a teaching strategy is effective. This in turn gives you more confidence to try out something new in the classroom and to take a risk**' (teacher).
- SLT members explained the benefits of using research evidence in terms of its ability to drive school improvement initiatives; to substantiate the reasons behind change; and to underpin staff professional development: '**[Engaging in research evidence] provides a process for thought and examination of practice. It opens minds and prevents teachers becoming compartmentalized within their own subject areas**' (governor).

Developing an evidence-informed culture

- Creating the right environment to nurture a culture of evidence-informed practice (EIP) was considered important by interviewees. For example making it explicit to staff where SLT use research evidence to inform decision making; senior leaders filtering evidence and providing practitioners with examples on how to translate research into practice in the classroom; and nurturing staff confidence by allowing them to take risks with practice (informed by research evidence): **'It is ok to fail in a lesson, as long as we learn from it. With that shift, we are more open-minded and it gives teachers the confidence to experiment. The research informs how they experiment'** (Deputy Head).
- Creating the time and space to engage in research evidence was also viewed as important for example by ensuring it is an item on departmental meeting agendas and saving teachers time where possible: **'I would not expect my staff to wade through information they need to be directed to the research'** (Head of Department).
- Making it easy for teachers to engage with research evidence will also encourage an evidence-informed culture by, for example, making research findings accessible; identifying context-specific evidence for teachers; and using appropriate internal and external support. One illustration focused on the use of social media: **'Twitter helps us to discover research and we can then go away and dig deeper into the research'** (Head of Department).

Conclusions and ways forward

Although this study has indicated that the use of research evidence to inform and improve practice is in its infancy, it also suggests that there is recognition within the profession of its potential.

The findings from this study provide some starting points (techniques, approaches and strategies) for developing a research-engaged culture within schools. The study also highlights challenges, for example that the enthusiasm for research engagement within schools is by no means universal. There is therefore a need for a systematic approach that allows teachers to act on robust evidence when appropriate or contribute to teacher-led enquiry, each in their appropriate place. In order to promote evidence-informed practice, the findings also suggest the need for support at different levels, from external agencies, local authorities and academy chains, and from within school themselves.

Finally, we recommend building on this study with further research in schools that develops a range of tried and tested strategies for schools to adopt, to enable teachers to use research evidence to inform their practice.

Background

This small-scale exploratory study was devised to provide some current examples of the ways in which schools are developing different approaches to the use of evidence to inform practice. The project stemmed from the recognition that existing teaching practice is not systematically evidence informed. We wanted to explore how, if at all, teachers are using

research evidence in the classroom and what teachers feel are the most effective approaches to engaging with research evidence, and integrating it into teaching practice.

United Learning and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) commissioned and jointly-funded this study of the way in which United Learning schools use research evidence.

Methodology

In autumn 2013, we conducted 17 telephone interviews with members of the senior leadership teams (SLT) (typically a head or deputy head) within a sample of United Learning schools. As a result of these exploratory interviews, seven schools were selected as case-study schools (schools where there was evidence that research was, to an extent, being used to inform practice).

We carried out the school visits between January and April 2014. In total, 39 case study interviews were conducted with key staff, including seven SLT staff, 17 Heads of Department, nine classroom teachers, four teaching assistants and two governors.

It should be noted that the schools and staff that we interviewed had been identified because they were engaged in evidence informed practice.

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