

Engaging In and with Research to Make a Difference for Learners

In September 2014, the Institute of Education (IOE) at University College London (UCL) launched its network for schools interested in engaging in and with educational research. This resource supports network schools undertaking collaborative, evidence-informed investigations focused on an aspect of learning or organisational improvement. It draws on research and practice developed at the London Centre for Leadership in Learning (LCLL) at IOE over a number of years in partnership with individual schools and alliances or networks.

At its heart is a process that asks a series of inter-linked questions.

- What difference do we want to make for our students by engaging in R&D?
- What do we need to find out about in order to make that difference?
- What's already known about this issue both within and across our schools and from research?
- How can we better understand the current situation in our school(s) in relation to this issue?
- What might we change and do differently?
- How will we know if we've made a difference?
- How can we share and consolidate our new-found learning so our changed practice is sustained?
- What kind of professional development supports deep, sustained improvement?
- How can leaders facilitate evidence-informed practice?

Background

The evidence that research can impact positively on teacher practice and school improvement is strong. The challenge is how to make it happen.

(Greany, T in Brown, C (ed) 2015)

These resources support an approach to collaborative practitioner enquiry which enables schools to evidence the difference that engaging in and with research makes for staff professional learning and ultimately pupil learning and outcomes. The resources combine an approach to impact evaluation developed at LCLL (Early and Porritt, 2014) with elements drawn from three national R&D projects.

1) Teaching Schools R&D Network National Themes Project (2012-2014)

IOE with Sheffield Hallam University worked with 64 teaching school alliances to investigate two research themes: what makes great pedagogy; what makes great professional development that leads to consistently great pedagogy? This project connected senior leaders and classroom practitioners to the existing knowledge base (Husbands and Pearce, 2012; Stoll, Harris and Handscomb, 2012) and provided a sustainable model for deep professional learning through an R&D methodology called Connecting Professional Learning (Harris and Jones, 2012).

2) Middle leaders as catalysts for evidence-informed change (2013-2015)

This Economic and Social Research Council-funded knowledge exchange project led by Professor Louise Stoll in partnership with Challenge Partners argues that middle

leaders are often the most effective drivers of evidence-informed change. The project seeks to answer four questions:

- a) What do we know about effective middle leadership within and across schools that changes teachers' practice?
- b) What are powerful ways to share knowledge about excellent middle leadership practice within and across schools?
- c) What evidence-based tools can be designed collaboratively ... to track changes in teachers' practice as a result of middle leaders' interventions?
- d) What leadership conditions in schools help develop and embed cultures of shared outstanding practice?

3) Research Learning Communities (2014 – 2016)

This project, funded by the Education Endowment Foundation and led by Dr Chris Brown, is investigating who in schools is best placed to promote the use of evidence. The research is exploring the relationship between 'research champions' identified via social network analysis questionnaires, and leaders in more senior roles in terms of how they promote research engagement and mobilise evidence within and across schools.

The resources are not intended as a step-by-step guide to action research. Rather, they are designed to:

- stimulate deep, collaborative professional learning
- enable practitioners and leaders to interrogate research and evidence in relation to their contexts
- structure enquiry within and across schools
- support the evaluation of the impact of research engagement on pupil and professional learning and outcomes.

Though accessible to schools and applicable in a range of contexts, the resources are best used by experienced R&D facilitators. They represent a selection of those designed by the Bespoke Programmes Team at LCLL to tailor R&D to meet specific needs and interests.