

The self-improving school system from the classroom out

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When thought about at the level of the school or classroom, the self-improving school system involves teachers collaboratively engaging in evidence-informed practice to improve teaching and learning.

With this think piece I briefly explore what evidence-informed practice is and its relationship to effective teaching and learning. I then set out the different ways teachers engage with EIP, before illustrating the role of school leaders in fostering the collaborative use of research evidence by teachers in their schools.

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Evidence informed practice

Evidence informed practice (EIP) is the process of teachers accessing, evaluating and applying the findings of academic research in order to improve their teaching practice (Walker, 2017). Considered to be the hallmark of high performing education systems (Furlong, 2014; Supovitz, 2015), EIP is regarded by many as a prerequisite for effective teaching and learning (Furlong, 2014; See *et al.*, 2016; Walker, 2017). Research has also identified substantial benefits from EIP for both teaching practice and in terms of pupil outcomes (e.g. see: Mincu, 2014; Supovitz, 2015).

While efforts to transform education into an evidence-informed profession are now decades old (Nelson and O'Beirne, 2014), EIP has recently come to the fore in school reform efforts in a number of counties and provinces worldwide. These jurisdictions include but are not exclusive to England, Ontario, the Netherlands, Norway and the USA (Malouf and Taymans; 2016; Østern, 2016; Peurach, 2016; See *et al.*, 2016; Walker, 2017). The stated goals and outcomes expected of the implementation of EIP in these areas include: continuously improving school standards; the development of innovative

approaches for delivering education both now and in the future; a 21st century teaching workforce that acts collaboratively to improve through research and development activity; and students with the skills required for the knowledge economy (Drucker, 1998; Godfrey, 2016; Malouf and Taymans, 2016; OECD, 2016; Østern, 2016; Peurach, 2016; Walker, 2017). In England EIP is directly associated with the idea of the self-improving school system.

How teachers engage with research

Recent studies examining the use of research evidence by teachers (e.g. Brown and Zhang, 2016;

case study

A case study of Hazelwood Learning Federation

The Hazelwood Learning Federation is a family of three small Church Infant Schools based in the Hampshire villages of Rosebush, All Saints and Southampton Common, who all work closely together under the leadership of the Federation Headteacher and Governing Body (the names of the federation and schools have been changed to preserve their anonymity).

The vision of the three schools is to ensure children grow up to lead safe, happy, healthy and successful lives by providing the highest standard of education and the opportunity for each child to attain their own, full potential. One of the Federation's improvement plan objectives is for it to become an evidence-informed self-improving Federation where schools collaborate to rigorously evaluate the quality of the education they offer, understand what they need to do to improve, to take appropriate evidence-informed action and evaluate the impact of their actions, enabling them to achieve together.

To meet this objective, the executive headteacher of the Federation developed a model of professional learning where (as from the 2016/17 school year) four of the statutory staff professional development (INSET) days allocated to schools in England will be dedicated solely to evidence-informed professional development. Using a cycle of enquiry approach, the aim of the model is to enable teachers to engage collaboratively with research, to develop new practices, to trial these practices, to measure their impact and then roll out the most successful within and across schools in the Federation.

Interviews were held with all of the Federation's teaching staff used to explore both the context for the roll out of the Hazelwood's model for research engagement, and what is required from this approach if it is to move the Federation towards the optimal position of high research capital. Detail on the evidence-use types of teachers in the federation emerging from these interviews is set out opposite:

Stoll and Brown, 2015) suggest that it is possible to characterize teachers' EIP behaviors according to a combination of their attitudes towards using research for school improvement and teachers' actual engagement with research.

Conceiving teachers' research-use attitudes and engagement as forming the axes of a 2 x 2 matrix (see Figure 1 overleaf), these studies point towards four evidence-use 'types': with type 1 use representing teachers working collaboratively using research to address school improvement priorities; type 2 use teachers are those willing to work collaboratively to engage

with research, but who lack the skills/experience required; type 3 teachers are those who work individually, using research to tackle 'local' issues of teaching and learning; and finally, type 4 teachers who reject any form of research use.

Drawing on the idea of other forms of capital such as social and cultural capital (e.g. Boudieu, 1986), I suggest that the notion of research capital (RC) corresponds to situations in which teachers both can and wish to use research collaboratively to improve teaching and learning: with higher levels of research capital being more optimal in nature.

This means, in terms of school and school system improvement, it would seem preferable for schools to have a high number of teachers who are type 1 evidence users. It is also clear that, based on their attitudes and experience, if type 1 teachers have the highest levels of research capital, then type 4 teachers have the lowest; with type 2 and type 3 teachers possessing intermediate levels of RC. Ideally then, schools that are seeking to be research engaged should be attempting to foster type 1 behaviour amongst their entire teaching staff. A case study of these behaviours in Hazelwood Learning Federation is set out below:

Type 1 teachers in the federation had a firm understanding of the benefits of employing research, felt it provided an exciting vision for the future and felt that senior leaders (both at school and federation level) were encouraging them to experiment using research-informed approaches to realize these benefits/this vision. Teachers in this quadrant believed in the importance of collaboration and in maximizing the benefits of being in a network and because of this, viewed EIP as having value that went beyond the individual classroom: i.e. that EIP should involve collective endeavour to enable teachers to harness the benefits of the social capital potentially available to them. At the same time, respondents in this quadrant also regarded research use as providing them with a secure knowledge base upon which to engage in collaborative networked activity.

Type 2 teachers recognized that senior leaders were encouraging them to use research-informed approaches and were happy to consider engaging in EIP, since this both represented a natural extension of and supported existing collaborative activity (e.g. networked learning conversations). They also saw EIP as helping them fully develop an enquiry habit of mind. Although these teachers were yet to fully understand the practical benefits of evidence informed practice, they were cognizant of the costs required to engage in EIP effectively.

Type 3 teachers, perhaps because of time pressures, held different views. While they understood the benefits of employing research, they considered EIP primarily as a 'tool': something relevant to tackling local (classroom level) issues, rather than something to be used collaboratively to tackle the strategic and more distant goals of the network. As a consequence, teachers in this quadrant were more likely to use research solely to develop their professional autonomy: to try out new strategies and build up a repertoire of research-informed pedagogies that focused solely on day to day student issues.

Type 4 research users: only one respondent indicated that they rejected any form of research use. While it is not desirable to report on the findings of one individual for reliability and ethical reasons, of interest is that while respondents located in the other three quadrants universally linked EIP to solving problems, developing an enquiry habit of mind (OECD, 2016), becoming a reflective practitioner and developing as 21st century learning amongst pupils, this respondent linked EIP directly to performativity and accountability.

The role of school leaders in achieving self-improvement from the classroom out

Effective school leadership is vital to improving school outcomes (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004; Leithwood and Louis, 2012; Earley, 2013). A number of key characteristics have been identified as important in relation to effective leadership, which can be divided into the 'transformational' aspects of leadership and 'learning centred' leadership (Day and Sammons, 2013). The first is described as a process based on aligning the commitment of those in a school to organizational goals, vision and direction (Bush and Glover, 2003) and has been shown to have positive impact in relation to the introduction of new initiatives or the remodeling or restructuring of school activity (e.g. Leithwood, 1994). The second is seen to relate to the efforts of school leaders in improving teaching in their school and their focus on the relationships between teachers as well as the behaviour of teachers *viz*-*a*-*viz* their work with pupils.

Relating these twin aspects of leadership to evidence-use has a number of implications for school leaders seeking to capitalize on the benefits of developing EIP within their school. In particular, if the goal is to develop type 1 behaviours amongst their teachers then school leaders have three key roles to play:

Role 1: Giving teachers hand-on experience of EIP in a safe environment: First-hand experience is vital if individuals are to buy-in to new ways of working, such as that represented by using research evidence (e.g. Fullan, 2011). Teachers also need to feel able

to experiment if they are to fully engage in EIP type activity (e.g. Katz *et al.*, 2009; Roberts, 2015). Key to increasing EIP therefore is that school leaders ensure teachers are able to access, engage with and apply research when attempting to improve their practice and that they can recognise the impact of doing so.

Role 2: Developing a school culture that encourages research use: School leader support is also key to fostering a culture of research-use. As Earl and Katz (2006: 20) argue, 'leaders have the challenge of convincing everyone who works in a school of the merits of using [evidence] for productive change and creating the conditions in which [evidence] can become an integral part of school decision making'. As well as establishing a vision for research use, therefore, school leaders should be fostering conditions that include coordinated and protected time and space, as well as access to relevant research resource (Galdin O'Shea, 2015).

Role 3: Ensuring networked collaboration within and then across schools: Senior leadership

support is also essential for collaborative activity to take root and flourish (Rinçon-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). Support in these areas is most effectively delivered via a mixture of transformational leadership strategies as well as school leaders 'walking the talk': showcasing the research-related behaviours expected of staff (Stoll, 2015). In particular, however, senior leaders should promote the idea of 'community' while also ensuring staff are both encouraged and supported to engage in research-use in a networked way. Here all staff must move beyond the superficial exchange of practices and resource and towards meaningful research-related collaboration that has demonstrable benefits for both individual teachers and the school. Indeed, it is the use of networks in ways that produce a multitude of benefits at a variety of levels that is likely to be key to unlocking the potential EIP has for classrooms and schools. Once we have embedded such working and benefits at these levels, the next step will then be to move to engage in networked collaboration across schools.

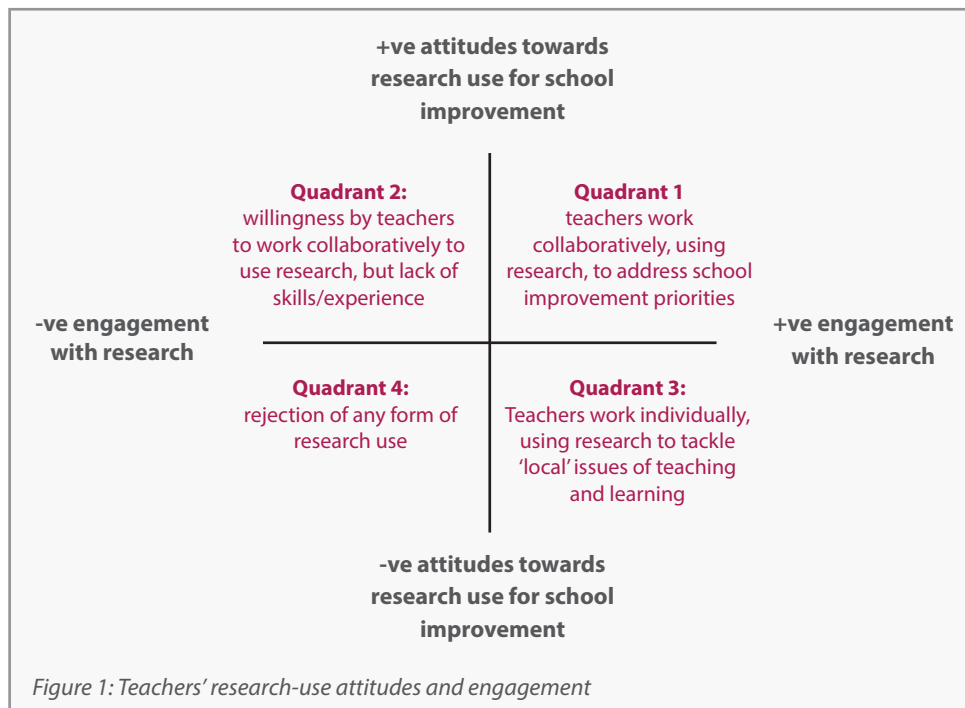


Figure 1: Teachers' research-use attitudes and engagement

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Can language be sexist?

“

We need a lot of manpower to run this school.

These weapons are manmade.

These new GCSEs and A Levels are a competitive process. It's every man for himself!

”



Are the above phrases sexist? If you take them at face value then one could argue that perhaps they are. We need a huge amount of woman power as well as man power for Portsmouth High School to function effectively. There is no way that we can claim that weapons are exclusively manmade, if we think back to World War Two, for example, then one could maintain that weapons were mainly woman made. As for the examination quote, it is definitely every woman for herself too, above all if we look at statistics from recent years suggesting that girls are outperforming boys.

As a languages teacher I have become accustomed to pupil reactions to the gender of words. Only last week did I hear

an outraged pupil exclaim, “Why are all the best Spanish words masculine?”. Now this pupil may or may not be correct in her

opinion (personally I can think of a plethora of superb Spanish words which are feminine) but one cannot deny that the possible sexism of language is certainly a topic of controversy. A.A. Milne, the author of Winnie the Pooh wrote, “If the English language had been properly organised ... there would be a word which meant both ‘he’ and ‘she’, and I could write: ‘If John or May comes, heesh will want to play tennis,’ which would save a lot of trouble.” What exactly did he mean? Is he referring to the possible sexism of language? We

will never know. As I pondered this I found myself on the Cambridge Dictionary website reading the 'English Grammar Today' section (because I know how to have a good time). Sexist language was defined thus: 'language which excludes one sex or the other, or which suggests that one sex is superior to the other. For example, traditionally, he, him and his were used to refer to both sexes, male and female, but nowadays many people feel that this makes she, her and hers seem less important or inferior.'

Is this really true? Some people think that sexism of language is an ongoing struggle against discrimination but others claim it is an artificial issue. Do the words that we use really influence how we think? Well this is where it is worth considering the theory of linguistic relativity.

Benjamin Lee Whorf came up with the principle of linguistic relativity. The basic idea behind this is that language influences thought. His research appeared to show that speakers of different kinds of languages were cognitively different from one another as a result of those linguistic differences. For example, Whorf claimed that the Hopi, a Native American tribe, literally had no concept of time because in their language they did not have any words to express it. They had no direct translation for the noun itself and no grammatical constructions indicating the past, the present or the future. Therefore, they could not comprehend time; their reality was fundamentally different to ours. This is a fascinating idea although many people disagree with Whorf's theory. Nevertheless, can we relate



it to the possible sexism of language? Would it be fair to say that the more the masculine gender dominates a language, the more sexist its society is? Turkish, Hungarian and Persian are apparently entirely genderless. The Pipil language, a language indigenous to Central America, uses a genderless pronoun, 'yaja' to refer to he or she. Other languages have attempted to amend their language by borrowing from others. Swedish introduced the gender-neutral 'hen' based on 'hän' meaning he or she in Finnish. Romance languages do not appear to have evolved quite as much. Is it fair to say that languages like French and Spanish are more sexist than Turkish and Hungarian? Is it even possible to make such a judgement call on this unless you speak all of these languages fluently and have lived in societies where they are used?

I do not have all the answers but I lived in Spain long enough to realise that the possible sexism of language is a polemic issue. In Spain, like in England, this is provoking debate especially

in politics and in the world of work, although many would argue that this topic extends to all facets of society. Spanish, being a romance language, means that the masculine gender always dominates. That is to say that grammatically masculine terms are used to refer to groups of men and women, even if in a group of 21 people there is 1 man and 20 women.

Advocates of 'equal language' believe that the fact that the masculine gender dominates makes the language itself more sexist, which in turn influences how society behaves. People who want the Spanish language to change, for example, believe that rather than referring to a group of male and female pupils as 'alumnos' people should say 'alumnos y alumnas'. Is that not just an unnecessary waste of energy and words? Interestingly some Spaniards are using the @ sign as a symbol of inclusion. Rather than writing 'alumnos' or 'alumnos y alumnas', people write 'alumn@s' on social media in order to show that they are not sexist. Nevertheless the @ sign is not even grammatically correct in

this context, which vexes me somewhat, but that is a topic for another article!

It is not only the way in which the masculine gender takes precedence which offends believers of 'gender-equal language' in Spain. If we think about Spanish swearing then female body parts tend to have negative connotations whereas male body parts have positive ones but I am not going to commit any examples to paper at the risk of offending anyone. Look it up yourself if you are interested! For many professions there was not a feminine equivalent until recently, for example words like piloto (pilot) or jefe (boss) have only recently evolved to pilota and jefa when referring to women. Historically it would have been principally men who did these jobs so is it fair to say that the language itself is sexist? Is it not society that is at fault? Whatever you think it is a clear example of language evolving as society does.

Not only do people blame European languages for being sexist, but some take issue with Asian languages as well. Let's take Chinese Mandarin as an example. The characters are fascinating because the culture and history of the language are so visibly obvious. The character for a man for instance, 男人 (nánrén) includes the character for power (力) whereas the character for a married woman, 妇人 (fūrén) includes the symbol for a broom (扫)! Will these characters evolve as gender roles continue to become more equal just like new words have evolved in Spanish as women have embraced professions previously only available to men? Those rejecting this supposed sexism of language

think that people striving for gender-equal language do not possess realistic wishes. They argue that there are bigger battles to fight in terms of equality of the sexes like the gender pay gap rather than gender-equal language.

Surely the important thing is that society changes so that we all have equal opportunities. Does language need to change first or does this happen once the societal change has occurred? I would argue that the sexism of any language depends on the individual and how they

personally employ words. Take Spanish for example, is it a sexist language? On paper, yes. Does this mean that all Spanish people are sexist? Certainly not. Some people are sexist like others are racist or ageist but is it language that is at fault? I do not believe so anyway. Of course it is vital that we think about the words that we use and how they might affect other people, whether these words are sexist, ageist, racist or purely unkind. Does language create reality or is language the product of reality? That is for you to decide.

Lesson study at Portsmouth High School

Lesson Study is a systematic method of researching teaching and learning aimed at improving teacher and pupil performance.

Research shows it significantly outperforms other methods of teaching and learning development in terms of pupil progress. It creates the opportunity to properly listen to the feedback of students about how they learn.

Lesson study works because it helps teachers to:

- See pupil learning occurring in much sharper detail than is usually possible
- See the gaps between what they had assumed was happening when pupils learned and what is actually happening
- Find out how to plan learning which is better matched to pupils' needs as a result
- Do all this in the context of a supportive teaching and learning community which is strongly committed to helping pupils learn and to the professional learning of the members of the group (Dudley, P. 2013)
- Change their teaching to better support learning as a result.

Dudley, P (2011) *Lesson Study: what it is, how and why it works and who is using it* www.teachingexpertise.com