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EVIDENCE BASED TEACHING - WHY NOW AND ARE WE SURE WHAT IT IS?

Diane Lloyd considers the role of evidenced based teaching in the wider context of professional development.

The standards for professional development (2016) give a clear steer on the need for a greater focus on research informed teaching. They state that all professional developments should:

- Have a focus on improving and evaluating pupil outcomes
- Be underpinned by robust evidence and expertise
- Include collaboration and expert challenge
- Be sustained over time

But how can this be achieved and what is research informed teaching?

'Professional development' takes many forms and has been considered by Ofsted to be one of the most important things in raising standards. There has certainly been less centrally driven professional development on offer in recent years. The focus on teachers undertaking research into their practice as a form of professional development has come to the fore recently in a number of key documents. The Carter Review (2015) of initial teacher training recommended that teaching should be evidence based and that research should be embedded at every level, suggesting that the teachers' standards should be more explicit about the importance of teachers taking an evidence based approach. A precursor to the Carter review was a perspective presented by Goldacre (2013) who gave a clear rationale for the education community to consider;

"I think there is a huge prize waiting to be claimed by teachers. By collecting better evidence about what works best, and establishing a culture where this evidence is used as a matter of routine, we can improve outcomes for children and increase professional independence."
Goldacre (2013:7)

The Department for Education in Educational Excellence Everywhere (2016) outlined the need for more robust engagement with research, in stating that professional development should:

have a focus on improving and evaluating pupil outcomes... be underpinned by robust evidence and expertise...include collaboration and expert challenge ...be

sustained over time and prioritised by school leadership.

The DfE are not suggesting that teachers do this alone but that there should be collaboration and expert challenge in research informed practice. The National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) state that practitioner enquiry can play a significant role in enabling teachers to develop a deeper understanding of learning and practice which should lead to changes in attitude and practice. The DfE state that schools should be in control of their own improvement and that this makes it easier for teachers to learn from each other and access best practice. However, the Sutton Trust (2014) argue that expertise external to the group of participating teachers is necessary to challenge existing assumptions and develop the kinds of new knowledge and skills associated with positive outcomes for students. This expertise can come from within or outside the school.

A debate considered by numerous authors is the difference between professional development and researched based practice in education. Helen Timperley et al (2007) published a best evidence synthesis of the impact of professional learning and development and stated that the distinction was best summed up as

- Professional learning is when teachers are being seriously engaged in their learning and at the centre of the process
- Professional development is experienced as a participatory activity.

She states that in addition the learning itself should be driven by both teacher and student needs as without this there is little motivation to make any improvements that come to light.

One of the criticisms of off-site workshops or courses is that teacher's starting points are not considered and often the information or skills are not integrated into practice which can result in a focus on short-term improvement (Hargreaves 2000). They can also be very passive and when taken from one school to another are rarely put into the context of the actual school or planned with the school staff as opposed to senior leaders. However, Timperley (2007) proposed that one-off development opportunities may be sufficient if the learning involves an increased awareness of new ideas and therefore does not disregard the principle entirely. This was one of the



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largest studies into teachers' professional learning and did conclude that one off opportunities to learn and develop may be sufficient if the learning involves comparatively direct transmission of information or increased awareness of new ideas. A study published by Durham University in 2015 by Cordingley et al, showed that subject knowledge and general pedagogical knowledge are equally as important to the teaching profession. This is reflected in their findings that staff prefer cross-curricular and department development time, wishing to collaborate on subject specific knowledge and skills and also to converse and share ideas on general teaching pedagogy.

Where schools are encouraging staff to undertake research informed teaching a question to consider is whether these should be linked to staff performance reviews or not. Should staff choose their own area of research or should it be based on school improvement plans? Certainly a school could use the research to evidence the impact of new initiatives eg the use of pupil premium funding.

The research certainly questions whether all learning should be based on performance management targets. This leads to questions around sessions after the school day being chosen for teachers rather than having a choice based on their own defined needs. The performance management schemes in education have set out frameworks to improve teacher learning. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2005) believe that policy approaches to teacher development are likely to be unsuccessful since they often view learning as acquisition and that learning means acquiring and practising new knowledge or skills that were previously absent. In this research the culture of professional development within the school and how it could be improved were questioned. The findings suggest that whole school culture needs addressing so that staff are given more time to learn independently and personally rather than in prescribed groups discussing directed topics. Hodkinson and Hodkinson support the idea that

much learning is unplanned and that sometimes it only has significance over a long timescale.

There are critics of teachers' undertaking research and education being a research informed profession. Dylan William in his recent article for the TES believes that classrooms are too complex and no single research is going to offer the answers to such complex environments. He states that teachers do need to know about the research to make more informed decisions about their teaching approaches but there are a number of authors saying that the research itself should be left to the university. The question remains though, how do teachers get access to this research in the university?

There is no doubt that there is currently a focus on teacher research, with less central professional development. Schools are wanting to see the impact of any professional development and teachers undertaking their own research could have interesting results that really do change classroom and whole school practice. It leaves an interesting question of would a school be able to argue its own research findings to an Ofsted inspection team?

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