


Building the capacity to use research in education requires a sustained strategic and systemic effort

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The English education context offers positive elements and challenges for evidence-informed policy and practice. The issues are well understood but [Carol Campbell](#) and [Ben Levin](#) argue there is a lack of a strategic approach to improving knowledge mobilisation in the sector. Renewed attention is needed to build such capacities if schools are to benefit from the findings of high quality research.



Everyone in education, most importantly pupils, will benefit if schools make better use of high quality research evidence on effective policies and practices. While apparently a self-evident statement, we have learned from research on this topic that specific efforts are required if research is to make its full contribution to policy and practice. Recently, we wrote a paper on [Developing Knowledge Mobilisation to Challenge Educational Disadvantage to Inform Effective Practices in England](#) [pdf] for the [Education Endowment Foundation](#) as part of current debates on research use. In this article, we summarize and discuss some of our views.



We acknowledge that there are many voices and views on the use of research in education.

Indeed, England has been at the forefront of such debates – for example, the controversies from the 1990s onwards about the rigour and relevance of education research, a plethora of initiatives to support evidence-informed policy and practice, followed by a current dismantling of many initiatives, and now emerging debates about research design and new actions for impact. There has been no shortage of activity! The English education context offers both positive elements and challenges. While England has been a front-runner in this area, and the importance of the issues is well understood, there remains a lack of a strategic approach or system focus. The bulk of activity has been about research production and dissemination rather than actual support for use. Perhaps most important, the decentralised nature of the system in England makes it harder to bring research to bear at scale. Put bluntly, mobilising knowledge in 20,000 individual schools is not an easy task.

So what to do? Our focus for improvement involves three ‘contexts’ – 1) what research is produced and how it is communicated; 2) the take-up capacity of schools and school systems, and 3) the work of intermediary organisations that create bridges between the research world and schools. All three matter, and they overlap, but in particular there has been inadequate attention to schools’ organisational capacity to make use of relevant research. This is why rather than a narrow notion of ‘applying’ research, we use the term knowledge mobilisation involving support for the interactive, multi-dimensional processes where research – along with other evidence and experience – can be used to inform action and in which there is also a strong feedback system from educators to researchers.

Our approach draws attention to the individual (e.g. teacher, school leader), organisational (e.g. school) and system (e.g. national organisations and agencies) capacities for connecting research to practice. Specifically, to:

Find: A starting point is the capacity to access available research, including capacities to identify a topic or question for investigation, to inquire and search for relevant research, and to access and review identified research.

Understand: Effective use involves understanding and evaluating research evidence, including capacities to assess the quality of research, to synthesise across bodies of research, and to evaluate the potential implications for a particular context.

Share: Research use involves interpersonal and social processes, including capacities to communicate research clearly, to develop networks for sharing learning and developing practice, and to integrate research use into daily practices and organisational routines.

Act on: Research use requires the capacity to take action informed by evidence, involving a shift from general awareness of a research finding to understanding research implications applied to actual policies and practices at the individual, organisational and system levels.

Therefore as well as the capacity of individuals (which is often the focus of research use activities), it is essential to develop organisational capacity and systematic processes to allow full consideration of evidence about effective practices. To do this, schools and local authorities need an infrastructure, such as someone who is identified as a 'research' or 'knowledge mobilisation' lead. Research use should be embedded in daily work such as staff meetings or professional learning communities. Local and national organisations need to have active processes to support knowledge mobilisation through an infrastructure for, and culture of, research use. Research knowledge and effective approaches to mobilising that knowledge should be shared through intermediaries and across networks to overcome isolated activities and to avoid the need for processes to be re-invented in every school.

An excellent example of a system that does knowledge mobilisation well can be found in Gawande's (2007) description of the organisation of cystic fibrosis research and treatment in the United States. The organisations doing this work are closely connected with the research community and with each other. Improvements in treatment are rapidly shared and very quickly inform the practice of all the centres and the practitioners with whom they work. Our experience in [Ontario](#) also suggests that it is possible to improve the culture and capacity for research use across an entire education system.

We suggest that work in England should focus on two areas: 1) Developing stronger networks *among* and *between* educators, research and intermediary organisations, especially by building on existing networks; 2) Developing capacity *within* schools to find, understand, share and act on research. This capacity may be improved through training to improve skills, or through institutional changes which create the time or resources for schools to undertake these activities. Local and national organisations can lead this capacity building work, and there may be benefit in developing certifications in this area. Various national tools could be developed to assist this work, such as job descriptions or process models for knowledge mobilization work.

Crucially, empirical evidence on what actual processes and supports are most effective for knowledge mobilisation, research use and impact for education is currently limited, although some is [starting to emerge](#). As a result, it will be essential to evaluate the impact of knowledge mobilisation efforts with the same rigour as attempts to directly increase educational practices and outcomes.

With a modest but sustained strategic and systemic effort, schools in England can further benefit from important findings of high quality research.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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