How do you know 'what works' works for you?

Susan Graves, Alexis Moore, John Dickinson

*Edge Hill University, Lancashire, UK*

This research investigates the ways in which Senior Leaders in schools and colleges regard research as instrumental to developing practice. The development of an evidence based profession is one which is much debated within the educational world (Cordingley, 2000; Hammersley, 2001; Cooper et al, 2009; Levin, 2010; Harris et al, 2013) and comparisons with the health profession, where it is suggested research is more closely related to practice, have been implied. This study collected empirical data from Senior Leaders in schools and colleges in order to discover the points of contact where university researchers and practitioners can meet to develop meaningful knowledge transfer networks. The literature on educational effectiveness research tells us that in order to transform practice, research needs to be relevant to it (Cordingley, 2008; Levin 2010) and that developing a community of expertise to develop a dynamic interaction between research, policy and practice relies on the effective communication of ideas (Coburn and Talbert, 2006; Harris et al, 2013). Indeed, the transformation of research knowledge into classroom practice involves a mix of complex processes which relies on the development of good communication networks, links between researchers and practitioners and greater involvement of practitioners in the research process (Hemsley-Brown & Sharp, 2003).

A purposive sample (Robson, 2002) of senior leaders from maintained primary, secondary schools and further education colleges (n15) in local authorities in the North West of England were interviewed. The data was gathered using an e-survey sent to participants prior to one-to-one, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews over a period of 6 months. Levin’s conceptual framework (Levin 2013:11) which suggests three overlapping contexts in which knowledge mobilisation in education happens, namely: production, mediation and use, was used in this project to frame the questions and analyse the data. Initial findings suggest that there are many channels for mediation both internal and external to institutions that aim to bring research into practice, however there may be weaknesses in the relationships between production and mediation and between mediation and use. The data from the compulsory sector suggests that external dynamic social communication networks such as Twitter and Facebook are increasingly influential in terms of the mediation of research findings to practitioners both virtually and through networks such as Teachmeet. However, the data gathered from the post-compulsory sector suggests that research knowledge mobilisation is dependent on the profile of higher education within the colleges and on their internal organizational culture.