Teachers’ engagement with published research

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Recent policy statements have urged greater use of research findings to guide teaching, with some commentators calling for a ‘revolution’ in evidence-based practice. Seven ‘What Works Centres’ have been established in England, including the Educational Endowment Foundation and Sutton Trust, which have responsibility for ‘what works’ for school-age children.

The research literature suggests that research can influence policy and practice in ‘instrumental’, ‘conceptual’ or ‘strategic’ ways (e.g. Ion & Iucu 2014). Using these categories as a theoretical framework, this paper analyses data from two studies in English comprehensive schools, in which teachers were given research reports about teaching gifted and talented students, and supported, over a 12-month period, to incorporate knowledge from these papers into action research projects of their own devising. Data included 27 individual interviews with teachers; the overarching research question was, ‘How can educational research impact on teachers’ thinking and practice?’

Analysis suggested that the teachers used research in ways which could not be captured by the ‘instrumental’, ‘conceptual’ or ‘strategic’ categories. Rather, research served three functions, helping them to determine a focus for investigation and action, influencing their ways of thinking and acting, and influencing the means for evaluating teaching. Teachers’ engagement with published research also led to six individual and collective thinking processes: a) comparing teachers’ experience and values with what has been researched; b) challenging prevailing ways of thinking and acting; c) developing shared concepts, d) developing criticality, e) encouraging an experimental stance and f) focusing on evidence when teachers evaluate their actions. It is argued that this framework, whilst tentative, provides an appropriately nuanced framework for further investigations of teachers’ use of research evidence.
