

Sequel to *Using research evidence well in education*: Reflections from the Editorial Team

The case study provided by the Monash Q Project Team sparked off a series of debates amongst the editorial team consisting of **Ros Neilson, Tom Nicholson and Molly de Lemos**, and we have taken the liberty of adding a sequel of our own to the article. We hope that readers will feel challenged, as we did, to relate the questions raised in the Q Project article to their own experiences of using research in the teaching world.

What is your next move when a teacher says, “*Very nice theory, but it’s of no help to me running a class ...*”? The ideas presented in the Q Project article raised a good deal of discussion within the editorial team, and this sequel to their article documents some of our own ideas.

Eleanor, the case study participant in the Monash University Q Project study reported in the previous article, was an experienced teacher working in a school that supported access to research evidence, and she was clearly able to make practical use of evidence to inform day-to-day teaching. What an ideal world! Even within this positive context, however, we felt that several of Eleanor’s comments raised yet more questions for us as we reflected on our own experiences.

Eleanor was working in a small, rural special school, and this meant that one of her first concerns was to check that research “works for your context and cohort.” Our editorial team commented that this need to check on relevance is critically important for staff in all types of schools. The context in which any research is conducted may be relevant, and it is important that we find out when it is relevant and when it isn’t. One example of this challenge is the issue of deciding the extent to which direct instruction research applies equally to high achieving students and those who struggle. Another is the question of language of instruction: does research that applies to learners of English apply to other languages, and do the same researched-based strategies apply to students whose first language is not English? The understanding of possible contextual qualifications is important, and we are aware that more research would always be helpful.

Our editorial team smiled at Eleanor’s quote about the temptation of not using research evidence: “Oh, I’ll just do this because I’ve done it in my last school and this works” ... we felt we had to admit that this approach seems to us to be characteristic of almost everything that humans tend to do. Indeed, the point was made in the article above that much of the professionalism that teachers bring to schools is tacit knowledge. It is perhaps the most experienced and well qualified teachers who don’t assume that they already know all the answers. It is always difficult, however, to keep an open mind about your own assumptions - especially if you don’t have time to re-think before the next class starts.

We gnashed our teeth at the challenge faced by teachers having a preference for what Eleanor called “research generated by universities or other similar organisations”. Which organisations? What if they don’t agree? We felt that, like Eleanor, we have to rely on a consensus approach, trusting avenues of information that have a good track record of empirical

investigation and sound theory. And we noted the qualification that, as human beings, all of us are prone to looking for confirmatory evidence.

We were impressed that Eleanor raised the issue of fidelity of implementation of research. For us all, the issue is not just fidelity in the study that generated the research evidence, but also the potential fidelity with which the research can be translated into practice. We have all seen bits and pieces of effective, research-based programs being used extremely ineffectively, and have all had the experience of just being unable to implement a program in practice that should work in theory.

Eleanor’s reference to collaboration was heartening. We agreed that networking and sharing opportunities are becoming easier and perhaps more common for all of us, and it is important that school systems make time for this to occur.

Finally, Eleanor’s comment on the danger of having information “squished into a staff meeting” was very telling. It is so important for school leaders to take the initiative here, protecting their teaching staff from unreasonable demands that consume more time than is reasonable – the year 2020 has taught us that, if nothing else.

The six questions raised at the end of the Q Project article are huge ones, and they were necessarily left hanging. Our LDA Bulletin editorial team was left concluding that they may never yield easy answers. We feel strongly, however, that they are useful questions to guide us in our endeavours to make a difference to teachers who need support in “running a class.”

We wish the Q Project team well, and we look forward to hearing more about their research.

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