

How action-led research improves teacher practice

Anne-Marie Duguid, SSAT Director of Education, focuses on the aspects of research that teachers can best use to improve learning and teaching in the classroom

If we accept the notion of schools as learning organisations, teachers can and should contribute a significant amount to new knowledge creation through practitioner research. 'In this way teachers are part of a thinking, questioning and knowledge creating profession' (Livingston and Shiach, 2009: 83) where teachers are 'seen as professionals with a knowledge and a conceptual framework, instead of technical executors' (Vanderlinde and Van Braak, 2010: 308).

And as John Hattie says, 'the biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers'. Research engagement increases our 'agency', our sense of purpose, our curiosity, our decisional and professional capital. It could also help to increase teacher retention. Not only that, but students seeing their teachers as role model learners (rather than 'already knowers') helps to evolve the school culture to a deeper learning orientation.

As part of a short film with the Open University* leaders of research-engaged schools** – Annie Eagle (Romsey School) and Chris Dale (Samuel Ward Academy Trust) joined Anne-Marie in a discussion about the why and how of engaging with research. They shared their distinct ways of approaching research.

Why and how to engage with research

Time is the biggest scarcity in schools, and many teachers might consider that this will limit them from getting involved in action research. But in fact, in the longer run being research engaged and expanding your skills as evaluator of your own impact will help with efficiency in your role as a classroom practitioner. Research helps us to target the right interventions rather than feel overwhelmed with every intervention: it is not a luxury item. The process of engaging in research will help you improve your professionalism, practice and outcomes for students.

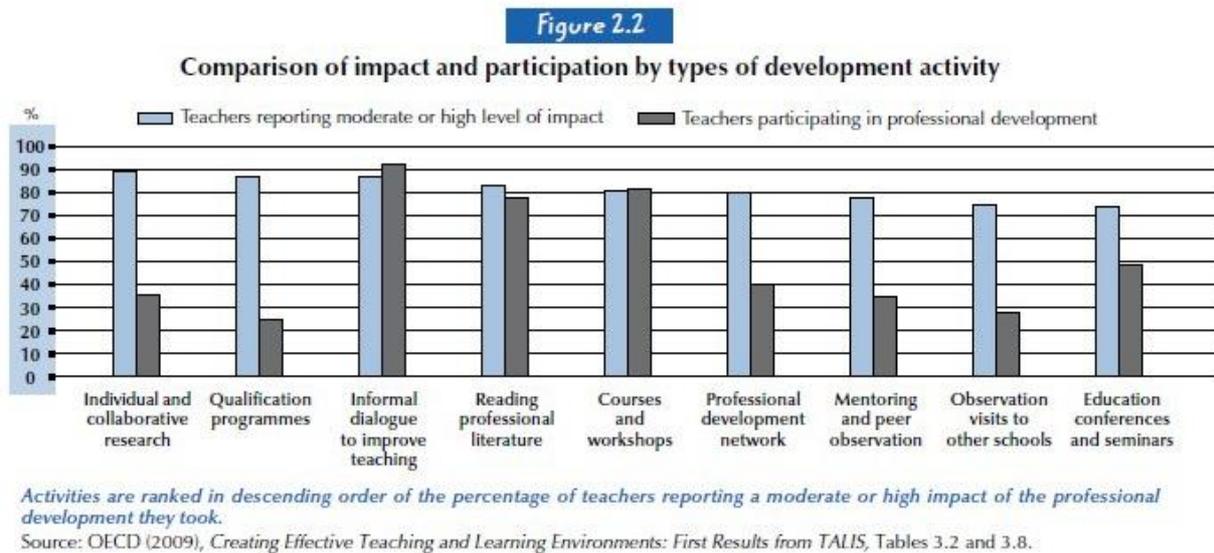
Drilling down to what works in your context is key. Understanding the difference between enjoyment and impact is important, as is knowing that KS4 or KS2 results are only two of many measures.

For teachers and school leaders, the important aspects of research to concentrate on are understanding and translating it into valid conclusions that can be used to improve teaching and learning. SSAT's 4 Es approach sums up a process that enables this:

- Engage with the evidence (eg, literature review, EEF toolkit).
- Enact in your classroom through action/practitioner research, cycles of inquiry.
- Embed: does it work in a different context, class, school? (Trial and refine).
- Extend: scale up, and support the spread and use of knowledge.

The focus of the research is vital, if it is to be a process for professional learning: it must be a school improvement/ development priority (not 'one of my favourite things'). So what is this for your school? White working class boys under-achieving? Ensuring that middle attaining pupil premium students know specifically how to improve their learning in mathematics? Whatever the focus, the process of engaging in research, then trialling and reflecting on implementation in the classroom should be a key part of professional development.

In the report, *Building a high-quality teaching profession: Lessons from around the world* (Andreas Schleicher, OECD 2011), teachers reported that individual and collaborative research had the most impact in their professional development – yet was among the least participated in (see figure below).



Teachers are doing it every day, making moment by moment decisions: revising what they do and refining on the job. While we do not have scientific lab conditions, our classrooms are glorious places to experiment and develop new approaches and ways to unlock understanding, because of a deeper engagement of how learners can learn most effectively, through seeing how research results can be adopted within our cultural context and different school curricula.

Every teacher wants to develop, to learn from a teacher in the next classroom or indeed from another continent. But there is a lot of noise out there and teachers need support to learn to filter. Context is everything.

References:

Livingston K and Shiach L (2009) Co-constructing a new model of teacher education. In: Campbell A and Groundwater-Smith S (eds) *Connecting Inquiry and Professional Learning in Education: International Perspectives and Practical Solutions*. London: Routledge.

Vanderlinde R and van Braak J (2010) The gap between educational research and practice: views of teachers, school leaders, intermediaries and researchers. *British Educational Research Journal* 36: 299–316.

***SSAT and The Open University are partnering to produce a digitally badged online course for any practitioner wishing to engage in research in schools (due to launch Feb 2018). – [Register your interest in the Improving Practice through Research short course.](#)**

****Both schools noted are also [Lead Practitioner Learning Centres.](#)**