

**Context and Implications Document for:** What is the evidence on the best way to get evidence into use in education?

Stephen Gorard, Beng Huat See and Nadia Siddiqui  
Durham University Evidence Centre for Education

This guide accompanies the following article:

---

Gorard, S., See, B. and Siddiqui, N. What is the evidence on the best way to get evidence into use in education?, *Review of Education*, [DOI will be added by Wiley]

### **Author's Introduction**

Evidence derived from research is considered important in contributing to improvements in policy and practice. High quality evidence can lead to important gains for individuals, the public, and society. Sometimes evidence does not improve policy/practice directly but instead saves a considerable amount of money from being wasted on ineffective approaches, and so permits more effective use of limited time or funding. Knowing what does not work is therefore also very valuable and too often ignored or downplayed.

In consequence, there have been increasing demands over 20 years from funders and governments for publicly-funded research in education policy and practice to be of higher quality and to have real-world "impact". This increasing emphasis on generating more robust evidence of "What Works" in the UK is exemplified by some of the work funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and other funders, perhaps most notably for education by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in England. These and other initiatives follow or shadow similar ones in the US such as the Institute of Education Sciences, while other countries have since produced their own versions of many of these initiatives.

The situation in terms of research quality now is far from perfect, and most education researchers are still doing wasteful, untrusted and ultimately pointless work. And many of the relevant initiatives have taken wrong turns. There have also been unwarranted attacks on these initiatives by others with vested interests in the status quo. Nevertheless, in combination these initiatives *have* helped to improve the quality and range of research, and therefore the understanding of effective interventions to inform education policy and practice.

Helping embed secure research findings into policy and practice has been a concern for at least as long as the concern about generating improved primary evidence itself. However, the situation in terms of the use of this improved research evidence in policy/practice is less clear. Over 20 years, there has been no equivalent improvement in secure knowledge about how best to get good research evidence into use, or even what difference it makes when such evidence is used. This new paper summarises what is known about how to get evidence into use, and what this means for policy and practice.

### **Implications for Policy**

Those in charge of education reform must be responsible, and demand evidence-led policy and practice throughout the system. Programmes shown not to work **in certain contexts**, or where there has been no robust evaluation, should be actively discouraged, given that there is growing evidence of programmes that do seem to **have worked in specific contexts**. Researchers need to be equally responsible, and resist the clear demand for their evidence to be used, even if it is used incorrectly, by not conniving with invalid use just so that they can claim 'impact'. These are all largely ethical issues, concerning the extent to which all of these stakeholders genuinely care about improving education.

As with any attempt to change or improve behaviour, the role of money could be key in encouraging the use of evidence in policy/practice. Those who fund education research need to be responsible with the money they are entrusted with by tax-payers or charity-givers. The research **that** they fund must be as high quality as possible, and the findings must be made as useful as possible. **Neither** is currently not happening.

**Too much money is wasted on research of no possible consequence.** Policy and practice interventions should always be independently evaluated before reform takes place, instead of using rather haphazard pilots and phased rollout. Clear objectives must be pre-specified, and side effects taken into account.

**And the** most common approach used by funders to promote the use of evidence is to insist that users are linked to **every** project, but there is no evidence that this approach is effective. Evidence translation needs to be more robust, and better evaluated as an integral part of publicly-funded research. Funders and researchers should cease expecting single studies to have use and impact in their own right.

Incentives could be used, at least in the short term, to encourage users to rely more on evidence, and for the public to demand this. Public funds could be shifted more clearly towards only paying for programmes that have been demonstrated independently to have strong promise. Good evidence of effectiveness should be transparent in all policy and practice decisions about new programmes, and only those that offer a good return should be funded. A central repository of effective policy programmes should be built up by funders and others.

### **Implications for Practice**

**There are fewer implications for practice itself from this new study. As with policy there should be a strong expectation from the public and from education funders that the taxpayer money spent on public education should be used in an evidence-led way. But this cannot simply be left to teachers and related staff. Teachers are not *generally* trained, and do not have the time, to find and sift evidence suitable for their practice. Hence the emphasis on policy.**

**One major implication for teaching lies in the initial preparation and continuing development of teachers. This activity should have a solid evidence-led basis. The most up to date robust evidence relevant to practice should be available and its advice practiced. New teachers should be prepared in how to judge the robustness of evidence, so that they can stay up to date. In the UK this is currently not happening enough, or even at all. It would require a kind of revolution in teacher preparation. Initial teacher training courses must be delivered, at least in part, by experts in education evidence. Funding could play a role here. The state should only fund them teacher training courses, and recognise their qualifications, if they become more clearly evidence-led and evidence-relevant.**