

Research in view

A regular feature by Andrew Morris



Good research evidence seems to be gaining an ever higher public profile. Even TV news programmes refer to evidence from the National Institute of Clinical Excellence or the International Committee on Climate Change.

In education, there is still a way to go. Adversarial contests between party spokespersons, union leaders and self-appointed gurus seem to take precedence over systematically assembled research evidence.

There are signs that the culture is gradually shifting. Sound evidence is becoming more widely available, thanks to significant past investments and the legacy of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme and the research centres funded by the DfES and DIUS.

There has also been a gradual, but sustained, improvement in the linkage between producing research evidence and using it in policy and practice. The National Educational Research Forum has been succeeded by a Strategic Forum for Research in Education (www.sfre.ac.uk/) and more recently a Coalition for Evidence-Based Education organised by the Institute of Effective Education at York University – all initiatives that bring together the diverse parties to work on developing more effective links.

At the same time new tools have been developing apace to bring research evidence closer to potential audiences. The *Educational Evidence Portal* (www.eep.ac.uk), the LSIS research website (www.excellencegateway.org.uk/research), *Inside Evidence* and the IfL's *REFLECT* are examples of this. In a sense these developments simply reflect a wider global trend – in health care, environmental action and science policy for example – towards greater public engagement by professionals, service users, and lobby groups.

So the commitment to a participative, sector-led approach from LSIS is timely and welcome. For research it implies a broader agenda, to include not only government-related initiatives and matters of academic interest, but also issues that confront people working at the front line. A secure base of accessible, relevant evidence to inform practice and decision-making would mark a huge step forward in educational improvement. However, to expect sound and relevant evidence to be to hand, as and when it is called for, is a huge “ask”. There is a long way to go to make sure it is produced and organised for practical use on an adequate scale.

An important aspect of the change needed will be getting the voice of practice heard in the agenda and budget-setting for research. Another will be blending practitioners' knowledge of context with rigorous research so that practice can be developed effectively. An interesting description of one attempt to do this is given in the study on integrating research-based principles into the work of numeracy teachers (see page 2).

There are many ways in which practitioners engage in or with research – through higher degree study, collaborative research projects or smaller-scale action-research (see example from one practitioner on page 5). The sector can justifiably pride itself on the tradition of practitioner-based research schemes developed in recent years, from the LSDA regionally based research scheme through the NRDC practitioner research initiative to the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) practitioner research scheme. LSIS is continuing this tradition by funding a fifth year of the leadership scheme and also introducing the new Research Development Fellowships (see back page).

Applying its own medicine, LSIS decided wisely to research action-research before launching into it. The study, undertaken very recently by Ecotec, showed that the action research approach is widely acknowledged as relevant and useful and, although its definition is somewhat open and imprecise, there seems to be a reasonable consensus about its nature and benefits. It is defined in the report as:

‘research undertaken by a practitioner or group of practitioners, involving some form of enquiry into, or reflecting on, their actual practice, and involving some form of personal professional development as a key outcome which often also links to institutional development or the wider accumulation of public knowledge and understanding’.

It is seen as providing both knowledge that may be useful to individuals, communities and institutions, and high quality professional development experiences for the people involved.



The study points to the importance of various kinds of support: local institutional managers backing the work, participants being briefed and trained at the outset and receiving ongoing support from experienced researchers. Collaboration is seen to be beneficial. The aspects that need strengthening are associated with impact – funding and support is needed to improve reporting and utilisation of the research outcomes and

a searchable database is needed to enable studies to be located and downloaded. Fortunately the new LSIS research area on the Excellence Gateway has the potential to support this.

The willingness of LSIS to back action-research, study its strengths and weaknesses and plan to make its outputs accessible to the sector is a huge step forward. It seems to me that the sector is marking out an approach to research suited to its distinctive needs, building on, but not mimicking, the traditions of higher education and government-led research.

Andrew Morris in an independent consultant writing here in his own capacity.