Harnessing Research on Education in the UK: A Case Study of the ETC Teaching School Alliance, Hampshire

One sentence summary: ETC teaching school alliance is made up of 31 schools, of all phases, and is situated in the south of Hampshire - recent analysis relating to the alliance suggests that involvement in research learning communities by its teachers has begun to transform teaching and improve student outcomes.

Context

The teaching school alliance (TSA) that forms the focus of this case study (the 'ETC TSA') is made up of 31 schools, of all phases, and is situated in the south of Hampshire.[1] The work of the alliance is coordinated by its Director who, early in 2015, began to develop its approach to engaging in research/the roll out research-informed practice in conjunction with UCL Institute of Education. To achieve research engagement within the alliance, a model known as Research Learning Communities (RLCs) was proposed and agreed upon. The Director canvassed schools within the alliance to order encourage their participation and to ascertain which areas/research base they would like focus on. In total eight schools expressed an interest in participating (this eight comprising four primary schools and four secondary schools). These schools also expressed an interest in two focus areas: growth mindsets and assessment for learning (AfL). Correspondingly two RLCs were established (comprising of two groups of four schools) with each specializing in one of the focus areas. In total 16 practitioners from eight schools were involved.

The ETC RLC approach – detailed below - is congruent with other current research to practice partnerships in England. For example The CamSTAR (Cambridge, School Teachers and Research) Network, which works with teachers and schools on professional development through practitioner research (see: https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/networks/camstar/). To an extent the nascent Research Schools Network (a partnership between the Education Endowment Foundation and the Institute for Effective Education, University of York) is also another approach in this mould (see: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/our-work/research-schools/)

Impact analysis of the case:

a) A description of where and how research on education is having (or has had) impact on education policy and/or practice;

The Research Learning Community approach used by ETC has been successful in facilitating participating teachers to engage with research in relation to two specific areas of teaching and learning: Growth Mindsets and Assessment for Learning. The RLC approach also appears to have enabled participants to use this research

[1] http://etcalliance.co.uk

evidence to develop research-informed teaching strategies that are being used to tackle/improve particular aspects of teaching and learning activity with schools. Evidence also suggests positive impact resulting from the introduction of these research-informed practices, both for teachers and for learners. To date the RLC approach has not had any impact beyond the schools involved (for example in terms of communities or with employers).

b) An analysis of factors that contribute to educational research having impact on education policy and practice;

The main drivers for: 1) research engagement by teachers within the ETC teaching school alliance; and 2) the impact of research both on teaching practice and pupil outcomes, is ETC's involvement in Research Learning Communities (RLCs). By way of background, Research Learning Communities are an approach designed to bolster the capacity of schools, their leaders and their teachers to engage with and use research evidence to develop new and effective teaching strategies. As an approach, RLCs build on both Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (e.g. Stoll *et al.,* 2006; Stoll, 2008; Harris and Jones, 2012) and Networked Learning Communities (NLCs) (e.g. see Earl and Katz, 2006; Stoll *et al.,* 2011; Harris and Jones, 2012). Unlike PLCs/NLCs however, in RLCs there is an explicit focus on teachers learning from and building upon existing academic knowledge (Brown, 2016). As a result, Research Learning Communities involve small groups of teachers coming together from a number of schools to focus on tackling key issues related to teaching and learning (Rose, 2014). Because participating teachers then return to their schools to engage in parallel research-related activities, RLCs are designed to achieve research-informed change at scale (Brown, 2015).

The RLC approach is spotlighted in a recent OECD publication as one way to establish effective learning organizations (OECD, 2016). Underpinning the RLC approach are three core ideas (Brown, 2016). The first of these is the notion that teachers and school leaders do not become research informed simply by being presented with research evidence; instead that two things should occur. To begin with teachers need to engage in a facilitated process of scaffolded learning, designed to help them make explicit connections between research knowledge and their own assumptions and knowledge. The aim of this process should be to help teachers create new understandings in relation to a given issue or problem, culminating in the development of new practices, strategies or innovations informed by research and directed at tackling specific issues of teaching and learning. Following this teachers then need to practice using these innovations. As they do so in a variety of situations and contexts, teachers will subsequently develop expertise in their application, as they begin to understand how, where and why their use is likely to be most effective.

The second of the core ideas underpinning the RLC approach is that the successful roll out of new practices or is dependent on effective change leadership. In other words, initiating innovation represents the introduction of something new and potentially counter cultural. As such, there is a risk that new practices are rejected by those required to adopt them. Correspondingly, the effective scale up of research-

informed interventions will be dependent on there being 'the right people in the room': those most likely to make change happen in schools (e.g. those with the influence and authority to lead change). This means these 'right people' must be identified and selected to take part in connecting research to practice activity: with their participation ensuring that the implementation of research-informed practices is both prioritized and remains top of mind. In the case of RLCs the notion of the 'right people' is connected to school leadership. The participation of formal leaders is vital to ensure a vision of research use is promoted within schools, with school leaders simultaneously encouraging, facilitating and supporting their teachers to develop and adopt research-informed practices. Also key however is the involvement of informal leaders – opinion formers within staff rooms who are often turned to by their colleagues for trusted work related expertise and advice and who can use their position of high social capital to achieve buy in and support.

Related, however (the third core idea), is that is if evidence-informed practices are to spread widely, then those involved in the connecting research to practice activity, as well as having influence and authority, must also have the *ability* to deliver effective change on the ground: that is, they must explicitly know both what is required to lead change effectively and also their own role in making long lasting change happen. In keeping with the suggestions made by Stoll and Brown (2015), therefore, RLC participants need to understand how to lead educational change in a theory-rich way.

To realise these core ideas, the RLC approach requires a minimum of two participants from each school involved: one participant needs to be a senior leader, while the second needs to be a teacher who carries informal influence with their peers (an 'opinion former'). RLC participants are required to engage in four one day workshops (W1-W4), over the course of an academic year (Oct to June). Workshops are structured as follows:

- In W1 participants focus on understanding both academic research and current teacher held knowledge concerning their teaching and learning issue, how to broker research knowledge within their school, and what impact might look like, including what (and how) to collect in order to establish their baseline (i.e. the here and now) picture.
- In W2 participants explore the baseline in more detail, develop research-informed approaches to improving teaching practice and consider how these approaches might be trialed effectively through joint practice development.
- In W3 participants refine their approaches. The workshop is also used to introduce the idea of whole school change as well as change tools/approaches.
- In W4 participants examine impact and how to share knowledge of impact more widely.

Within workshops a series of facilitated activities help guide participants on a journey that begins with engaging with research and that ends with them rolling out research informed strategies that have evidence of impact throughout their schools (Brown, 2016). In between workshops, intersessional tasks are used to help

participants work with their peers to: share research evidence within their school; to trial new research informed approaches to teaching and learning; to roll out widely new research informed approaches to teaching and learning; and to measure and share the impact of these within their school and across other schools. The result of these assumptions and activities is the impact that is set out in section D.

c) An evaluation of how the case study reflects the overall education ecosystem in the country in which the case study is located

Teaching Schools was announced in 2010 by England's Department for Education, and form part of the current UK government's stated policy of giving schools more freedom and increasing responsibility for managing the education system. Teaching schools have a remit to form alliances with surrounding partner schools and to work with these alliances in order to improve teaching and learning in the round. Teachings schools also have a role in engaging schools within their alliance in research and development activity; this role requiring them to work with partner schools in order to both define and disseminate effective research-informed practice.

Teaching schools/teaching school alliances are now a core part of the English Education system: with recent analyses suggesting that by 2016 there were 692 teaching schools in existence, representing 538 teaching school alliances. At the same time, the take up of Research Learning Communities by teaching schools/teaching school alliances is relatively low. RLCs were originally trialled in some 55 primary schools as part of a randomized control experiment (see Rose, 2014). Beyond this, while RLCs have been adopted by a number of school communities across the country including secondary schools and in cross-phase approaches, their total reach to date is unlikely to be more than 150 schools. This suggests this specific case is atypical of other approaches taken by teaching schools (or schools more generally) seeking to become research engaged.

d) Evidence of impact on education policy and/or practice.

A 2016 study of the ETC Research Learning Community (Brown, 2016) used the 'ladder of research use' scale (Knott and Wildavsky, 1980) to assess how the approach impacted on participants' engagement with research. This scale asked the extent to which respondents agreed with the following statements, with responses measured using a five point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree':

1. *Reception:* the research [within the RLC] was well communicated
2. *Cognition:* I understood the findings of the research
3. *Discussion:* I discussed with others within my RLC group/activity groups how the research might be used
4. *Reference:* I could relate the research findings to my area of focus
5. *Effort:* I used the research in subsequent exercises (when thinking about the approaches I might use to address my area of focus)
6. *Influence:* I applied the research as part of the interventions I subsequently developed

Results from the 13 participants to are set out in table 1, below. As can be seen, responses to the survey suggest a predominantly positive viewpoint, with participants expressing agreement that, as a result of engaging with RLC activty they had been able to both engage with research knowledge and use this to develop interventions to tackle key areas of teaching and learning within their schools.

Table 1: responses to the 'ladder of research use' scale

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Reception	5	8	-	-	-	13
Cognition	1	11	1	-	-	13
Discussion	4	9	-	-	-	13
Reference	3	10	-	-	-	13
Effort	4	8	1	-	-	13
Influence	2	10	1	-	-	13

Furthermore, Brown (2016) also found that all 13 participants indicated that they had made positive attempts to use the evidence-informed strategies they had developed.

To assess in more depth the impact of the RLCs, six in-depth semi-structured interviews were held with pairs of ETC RLC participants (i.e. the views of 12 participants were sought altogether). The interviews examined whether the RLC approach helped participants develop and roll out new, research-informed, practices; and if so, whether roll out of these practices had any impact on teaching and learning activity within their school. Interview questions were guided by Wenger *et al.'s* (2011) *Value creation assessment framework*; a model for impact assessment which is designed to provide a way of gauging the benefits that accrue from teachers' participation in given professional development activity.

Changes in teaching practice: Interview data from all six discussions suggested that the focus on achieving research-informed improvements in teaching and learning was having a positive impact on teaching practice. For example, the focus of participants in primary school #4 had been on improving teachers' understanding of the effective characteristics of learning, and understanding whether this approach might positively impact on writing outcomes for summer born children (which are typically lower than those of their older peers). Changes in teacher practice noted here by participants included: 'changes to teachers' planning activity to move away from curriculum specific foci'; that 'learning values are now driving teaching practice [rather than end of year goals]'; that teachers were 'more actively looking for effective learning behaviours'; and that across the school there was a more general focus on 'getting children to use the language of learning [so reflecting on their own learning'.

In another school (primary school #1), participants had been working with teachers to help them use pupils' mistakes as a way to enhance learning outcomes. It was noted by participants that, as a result, teachers were now effectively evidencing children's mistakes as well as helping pupils to explicitly consider their thinking processes as a means to learn from mistakes. Likewise these participants were now regularly observing teachers in the school praising effort and perseverance rather than simple achievement (or lack thereof). They also noted that teachers were now regularly sharing their experiences as well as impacts and benefits that had resulted from using the mistake typology, in order to maximize its effectiveness across the school.

Changes in pupil outcomes practice: In addition to changes in teaching practice, participants from three of the schools could also provide detail on emerging impacts on student learning that had resulted from these research-informed changes. For instance, one primary school respondent noted how:

> *at the beginning of the project we met with a group of mixed ability children and asked them to complete a problem solving task. Using our observation schedules we found that they literally asked no open or probing questions* [opinion former: primary school #3].

As a result of this initial investigation, participants from this school devised approaches to help teachers develop children's questioning skills and worked with teachers in their school to ensure these strategies were used effectively. The results have been positive:

> *the children demonstrate an understanding of the importance of questioning and are now using questioning themselves to reflect upon and assess their learning* [opinion former: primary school #3].

As touched on above, participants in primary school #1 had sought to develop a 'growth mindset' amongst their pupils by introducing children to the idea that making mistakes forms an integral part of the learning journey. They explored with children the notion of a mistake 'typology'; one which differentiated between different forms of mistakes, so highlighting which mistakes were most likely to lead to enhanced learning and progress (and, correspondingly, which mistakes could and should be eliminated through due care and attention by children to their work). Having succeeded in ensuring that all teachers in the school also regularly and consistently used the mistake typology as part of their teaching - as well as treat specific forms of mistakes as an acceptable way to learn - respondents noted from their interviews with children and via the scrutiny of pupil's work that:

> *Children are starting to understand in more depth how mistakes are part of the learning journey and are demonstrating more confidence in using mistakes. Its no coincidence that they are attempting more challenging tasks* [opinion former: primary school #1].

The focus for primary school #4 was to improve writing amongst summer born children; this group being much less likely than older children to meet mandated progress targets during their first year at school. Participants illustrated this issue with the school's writing data for 2015, which highlighted that only 60% summer born children met their year 1 Early Learning Goals for writing in comparison to 83% of Autumn born children. Having engaged with both the research base and the knowledge creation activities, these participants came to understand that year 1 represents the first time that children are measured against a curriculum specific expectation rather than one related to age. In turn that this meant year 1 teachers were focusing on and rewarding performance in relation to specific curriculum areas rather than in terms of how children approached their learning in the round. It is noted above that this understanding, combined with the development of research-informed strategies for how writing outcomes could be improved, subsequently resulted in participants instigating a number of changes to school practice, with these changes reflecting a shift in emphasis towards teachers valuing the process of learning and rewarding the learning values exhibited by children, and a move a way from focusing on curricular related progression. Participants argued that these strategies worked extremely well; ultimately leading, they suggest to an rise the number of children meeting their writing Early Learning Goals in 2016 to 86%: an improvement of 26% on the year before.

Overall therefore, subject to the limitations of relying on self-reported data, it would seem that the RLC approach has been successful in facilitating participating teachers to engage with research in relation to two specific areas of teaching and learning. The RLC approach also appears to have enabled participants to use this research evidence to develop research-informed interventions; with the aim of these interventions being to improve particular aspects of teaching and learning activity with their schools. In addition, and while still early days, there is also some evidence to suggest positive impact resulting from the introduction of these research-informed practices, both for teachers and for learners.

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