

Position Paper

Evidence Based Policy

The association is committed to evidenced based policy and this commitment is widely shared in the profession, most notably in schools, universities and government. Recently the minister for School Standards declared his faith in a "thorough interrogation of the research" as the basis for policy making. However doubts regarding this commitment must be raised when we examine the way in which research findings have been used to buttress political action in recent years. Research may well have been interrogated but it transpires that there has been little or no impact upon policies such as the expansion of grammar schools, synthetic phonics as the first, fast and only way of teaching reading, the phonic screening check and the segregation of children into ability streamed classes . Such measures are rooted more in political opinion than in the evidence which is disregarded when it doesn't fit social and economic priorities.

Improvement in the consideration of evidence is much needed. Fundamentally, there should be an acceptance that in education, and in primary education in particular, research findings can seldom be immediately transformational. Research contributes to the building up of insights which taken together and subject to the moderation provided by the experience of practitioners can change practice in an evolutionary way.

Care must be taken to examine the validity of research and an essential safeguard is that the work should be peer reviewed. This will help to ensure that there should be no bias either political or commercial. Currently the market-place is seen as an appropriate place for debate and there are many funders who are interested only in sponsoring research designed from the outset to produce outcomes which will have a beneficial effect on sales. Such motivation has had an adverse effect upon research into the teaching of phonics.

It is essential to the search for evidence regarding primary education that we think beyond the simplistic "what works". This instrumental mantra is much used by politicians who are over concerned with performance in examinations. Success in snapshot tests is what works through coaching but is a grossly inadequate measure of primary learning. Such learning is embedded in the whole child and in the early and primary years is more related to the growth of understanding than to performance. Many of the outcomes of primary teaching can only be weighed as evidence over a number of years as children mature and for this reason the value of longitudinal studies of children's lives is emphasised.

Ultimately the value of evidence can only be assessed in the light of the partnership between those engaged in research and the practitioners who may apply their findings. It will assist the maintenance, and to a large extent the restoration, of the integrity of research if government would stop cherry-picking evidence to support politically favoured policies and instead show support for, and confidence in, the links between schools and universities. And the latter should show greater caution before accepting sponsorship of research whenever the intended sponsorship is tainted by the possibility of commercial gain.

The shaping of educational policy should be framed within a set of ethical values which we in NAPE see as bound up with the whole child and the inclusivity of approach. However, the way in which those values are transformed into a set of policies must be informed by the rigorous scrutiny of research evidence and not the language of rhetoric which characterises too much political discourse.