



Evidence Summary

Teachers in the UK Prefer Research Evidence that is Synthesized, Practical, and Locally Available

A Review of:

Williams, Dorothy and Louisa Coles. "Evidence-Based Practice in Teaching: An Information Perspective." Journal of Documentation 63.6 (2007): 812-35.

Reviewed By:

Stephanie Schulte
Education and Reference Services Coordinator
John A. Prior Health Sciences Library
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio, United States of America
Email: schultes@ipfw.edu

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Abstract

Objective – The objective of the study was to explore how teachers in the United Kingdom use research literature to inform their practice. Special emphasis was given to the effect of the teachers' information literacy and their level of ready access to research information.

Design – This study was primarily a qualitative study utilizing mixed methods, including individual interviews, focus groups ("literature review groups"), and an online discussion forum. Qualitative data

was supplemented by a questionnaire survey.

Setting – The qualitative portions of the study took place in the United Kingdom across five education authorities; however, it is unclear where these authorities were geographically. The survey was distributed across Scotland, England, and Wales. The study was conducted during 2002 to 2003.

Subjects – Nursery, primary, and secondary teachers, school librarians, school library systems, and education authority advisors (EA) in the United Kingdom.

Methods – The 28 interviews (54% primary teachers, 39% secondary teachers, 7% special education) and four focus groups (each with three to five participants; 15 participants in total, including teachers at various levels from primary, secondary, and nursery schools) were conducted with volunteers from a random sample across five education authorities. Recruitment was done by sending written materials to schools. Those interviewed represented five authorities. Focus groups were conducted in just four authorities. It is not clear when the individual and group interviews were conducted (time of day and year). Volunteers were given the option to receive funding for a substitute teacher in order to participate, though none took advantage of this offer.

The interview process used a vignette technique to elicit teachers' attitudes to a situation in a non-threatening way. Interviewees were asked to comment on two situations that might make them seek information. One was adding a new subject or new aspect of an existing subject into the classroom. The second dealt with a "new pedagogical challenge." Though the topics of the vignettes were provided, the exact way the topics were presented was not. They were asked how they would advise another teacher in these situations then relate their thoughts to a real situation they had faced. Interviews were about one hour in length. Twenty-five of the 28 interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. Extensive notes were made for the other three. Transcripts and notes were analyzed using QSR N4 Classic content analysis software. Themes related to information literacy and information seeking, including barriers, were noted.

Four literature response groups were given examples of research information (journal articles, reports, etc) related to information computer technology (ICT) and class size.

Each topic had information from various evidence levels and included both print and electronic format. Again, the discussion topics were provided in the article, but the exact way the topics were presented was not. Over 2 to 2.5 hours, teachers read the materials, made notes, and discussed the information as a group. For the ICT information, groups were asked to discuss presentation of the information. For the class size information, groups were asked to discuss content of the materials. Discussions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed with the content analysis software.

A total of 3899 questionnaire surveys were distributed to teachers (3000), head teachers (500), school librarians (250), education authority advisors (100), and school library systems (49). Response rate was exceptionally low in the teacher and head teacher categories, with only 10.9% of teachers and 15.6% of head teachers responding. Response rates in other categories ranged from 31.2% to 55%, with the highest response rates from education authorities and school library systems. The survey served to gain an understanding of attitudes about using research in practice across a broad spectrum of stakeholders. The survey instrument itself, which was not provided in the article, was piloted prior to the study, but there is no mention of reliability or validity analysis.

To supplement study data, participants who had stated they would be interested in participating in an online discussion were sent preliminary findings and asked to comment on themes using the online discussion forum. Only 21 posts were gathered using this method.

Overall, the methods used in this study are appropriate for the questions that were posed in the article. Qualitative studies are useful for gathering data where little is known and where more data would help

identify possibly hypotheses for further study.

Main Results – Teachers in this study relied on a small set of resources and preferred what was readily available at their own school. These teachers most frequently used colleagues, in-service events, the Internet, newspapers, and reports typically found in schools as sources of information. Sources that information professionals would consider quality evidence were rarely mentioned. These teachers also tended to prefer sources that present information in a practical context. Not surprisingly, time was identified as a major barrier to accessing research information in addition to limited access to resources. The Internet was identified as the preferred point of access, citing ease of use, speed, and convenience as the reasons for this preference. Comments suggested a preference for synthesized information sources.

Teachers indicated they felt the responsibility for disseminating research information fell on head teachers and EA. They also noted that access to information from their own school library was a problem. They felt librarians and libraries in schools were meant for students, not for teachers, and also expressed that school libraries typically did not provide access to research. Comments suggested that the structure of teaching in a classroom itself does not allow teachers to use information as is needed for evidence-based practice. There were concerns expressed about lack of school library funding available to supply research evidence needed by teachers.

School librarians and school library services respondents did indicate that they provide a broad range of services aimed at teachers, such as alerts to literature, information skills training, and advice on resources. However, their sources of research for teachers were limited in nature. Librarians indicated that

teachers did not ask for research information, but if demand were there, they could respond accordingly. Teacher comments suggest that librarians might want to consider being more proactive in distributing information.

Though teachers expressed high confidence in their abilities to find information, comments about search habits and practices contradicted this. Most remarks suggested searching techniques that were not sophisticated or showing higher levels of information literacy competency. The respondents were concerned with evaluating the quality of information sources but found this appraisal to be more difficult if the authors did not explain the impact or change in practice that should come from the findings.

The participants in this study were likely biased toward using research information more than other teachers. This is an important limitation that the authors do address. Additionally, the response rate for the survey was quite low for the teacher subset. Despite this limitation, data from the questionnaire was used appropriately to confirm and clarify data from the qualitative portions of the study.

Conclusion – In order for teachers to appreciate the value of quality research evidence enough to regularly seek it out and place it into practice, a culture of evidence based practice must be embraced and supported by their school authorities. This study indicates significant potential for school librarians and systems to support this culture through proactive dissemination of research, provision of local access to materials, and education related to information literacy. School librarians must evolve from their typical student-centric role to accomplish this.

Commentary

Though this is a qualitative study conducted primarily with a small sample of nursery, primary, and secondary teachers in the United Kingdom, the study data provide a wealth of information for all school governing bodies and librarians to consider. This article is quite long and provides ample comments and explanatory notes on the data gathered. This level of detail is excellent for those forming new hypotheses to test, which is one of the main reasons behind qualitative studies. However, one can get bogged down with so much detail. The authors could have done a better job summarizing the themes present in the data through additional tables and could have also expanded on the implications of the findings. Just like the teachers in the study, it is likely that many practising librarians appreciate concise, synthesized information that shows practical implications.

Though we do know that teachers came from various levels across several authorities, we do not know which authorities they actually represent or the overall socioeconomic status of their school system. Schools with more financial resources could possibly support evidence based practice in teaching more so than financially or socially disadvantaged schools. Another concern about the data from this study is that the study took place over five years ago. It is possible that today's teachers have improved access to research or improved support for incorporating research into practice than they did five years ago.

As an exploratory study should do, this study brings out questions that librarians need to work to answer. What shortcuts could school librarians provide to busy teachers and education administrators? It is evident that research will not reach the classroom efficiently if local access to

synthesized, practically written materials is not available. School librarians can work to improve this situation, customizing as needed for their target populations. Furthermore, there appears to be a need for more active collaborations with teachers and school librarians to facilitate the information literacy competencies of both the teachers and their students. Even with the methodological limitations considered, this article serves as another call to action to school librarians.