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Mike Coldwell is Professor of Education and Head of Centre for Research and Development in Education at Sheffield Hallam University. From 2015 to 2017, he led the evaluation of the Evidence-informed Teaching System in England study for the English DfE. His work focuses broadly on education policy, teacher development and careers, and evaluation methodology.

ABSTRACT: (228 words)

This chapter addresses evidence-informed teaching in the English context. The chapter makes the case for considering England as having elements of both high and low social cohesion, with a paring back of the role of Local Authorities (districts) alongside the growth of more powerful but smaller Multi-Academy Trusts. Within the context of a highly regulated accountability regime, this places England in the hierarchist, with elements of fatalist, quadrant of the cohesion/regulation matrix. England has a well-developed infrastructure for supporting research use, including the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), a very well-resourced charity acting as the What works Centre for school education. Despite this, use of research evidence amongst teachers is low, and this has changed little since the mid-2010s. The chapter draws on institutional theory to explain this finding. The following explanations are provided: a lack of resources, coupled with a strong, politicised accountability system and a hollowed out middle tier to support schools, contributing to a lack of prioritisation amongst school leaders. However, England's well-developed infrastructure has enabled the EEF to play a significant and evidence-led role in supporting schools in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The chapter concludes by suggesting a series of suggestions to improve use of research in England. These include alignment of policy with research evidence; support for school leaders; work to explicitly link research to the evidence forms; and supporting research brokerage.

Main Body: (3812 words)

The English context includes some of the most well-developed research use infrastructures, coupled with rapidly changing local and national political and organisational contexts. These rapid changes are taking place against what was already a background of economic tumult, as the UK leaves the European Union, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. This provides a particularly interesting case for analysis drawing on the theoretical approach taken in this volume.

To begin with, it is not straightforward to classify the English education system in relation to social cohesion. Until the mid-2000s, the main structuring institutions of English education were Local Authorities (LAs), local government bodies akin to US school districts. The role of LAs was transformed under the 1988 Education Reform Act, which delegated a range of powers to the school, whilst creating a new regulatory structure (which I discuss below). The power and centrality of LAs has further reduced under successive administrations as more schools became independent academies, responsible directly to central government. Over the past decade, following the 2010 Academies Act, LAs' statutory role has gradually become restricted to a narrow range of functions primarily to ensure all children have access to schooling, and that the law is upheld in areas related to children and young people's education. The large majority of English secondary schools are now academies, although around two thirds of primary schools are still under LA oversight[1].

On the face of it, using to the cohesion/regulation matrix (Chapman, 2019; Hood, 1998 – see introduction), this indicates a gradual shift over this period from a high or medium to a low degree of social cohesion. A recent paper by the editors of this volume, in fact, makes this case: Malin et al (2020, p. 4) summarise the English system "as being characterized by high autonomy and accountability". However, since the 2010 Academies Act, the creation of academy chains have increasingly been organised into a set of new structured networks. Crawford et al (2020, p.2) explain that these entities are "often created by explicit agreements that bind some academies together in groups" which are "contracted directly by the Department for Education (DfE) to run a group of academies". These groupings, formalised as single legal entities, are known as Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), often operating across LA boundaries (and in some cases operating across the country). With centralised leadership, recruitment and other policies, as well as often using a shared curriculum, MATs are in fact far more powerful organising entities than LAs were. This is due to a two-stage process of changing governance in England. In the first stage, as Woods and Simkins (2014) point out, the powers and responsibilities of LAs have partly been shifted upwards from the local to the national and partly down from the local to the school, with academies becoming directly responsible to the Secretary of State for Education. This produces what Greany and Higham (2018) characterise as 'coercive autonomy', whereby schools have been given more 'operational power' without 'criteria power' which now rests with central government, "where criteria power confers the authority to define the aims and purposes of a service, while operational power concerns the authority to decide how the service is to be provided" (Greany and Higham, 2018, p34). In the second stage, the growth of MATs means that far fewer stand-alone academies exist, so the MAT takes on operational power away from the individual school. It is important not to over-state the impact of MATs, since the large majority of schools operate outside of these structures. Nevertheless, they are becoming increasingly important: according to BESA (2020), in 2019 there were 1,170 Multi Academy Trusts containing at least two schools in England (BESA, 2019). An indicator of the importance of the MAT is the development of the role 'Head of School', reporting to

[1] As of January 2020, 77% of secondary schools and 35% of primary schools were academies (Department for Education, 2020)

a CEO or 'Executive Headteacher', responsible for a number of schools in a MAT. Unlike in the USA, for example, where the district superintendent has significant power over the work of school principals, the headteacher in England retains considerable independence (although responsible to the school governing body), so the development of the 'Head of School' role indicates a new and far less autonomous role within a more tightly controlled structure.

Therefore, whilst England has seen a reduction in nationally mandated local, and democratically overseen, cohesion in of its schooling system, these new school groupings have begun to reimpose more tightly knit models at a smaller scale. Schools and MATs are crucial in relation to research use in schools (Coldwell et al, 2017), since significant engagement with research evidence requires the support of school and MAT leaders. Alongside the strength of MATs as organising bodies, there are other structuring organisations. In England, there still exist relatively strong trade unions (including head teacher/principal unions) and since 2017 a subscription-based professional body for teachers, the Chartered College of Teaching, has gradually increased its membership and influence. Any teacher of children and young people up to the age of 19 can become a member and it has a growing membership of around 40,000 at the time of writing. The inter-relationships between these differing organisations are complex and continue to play out within a highly politicised arena, as I discuss below. For example, different MATs operate in differing relationships with the educational philosophy of the English Department for Education; and the Chartered College attempts to position itself as politically neutral whereas trade unions operate to varying degrees in alignment with the main opposition party (the Labour Party, in 2021). There are thus differing alignments and fault lines between these organisations; and, as I note below, the politicised and contested nature of what is seen to constitute research evidence contributes to these differences. In this context - whereby the dismantling of the LAs has partly been replaced by these new structures and structuring organisations - I would place England as being in a dynamic situation, moving into the high social cohesion half of the cohesion/regulation matrix.

There is little doubt where to place England's system in relation to regulation, however. Since the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), the English school system has developed a range of accountability measures forming what Jones (2003) describes as a 'regulatory system'. In addition to the school inspection body, Ofsted, league tables of test results are published annually: and English children across their compulsory school careers from entry at age 4 to exit at age 16 are subjected to some of the highest levels of testing in the world. Previously, my colleague and I (Coldwell and Willis, 2017) have argued that England is an example of what Supovitz (2009, p. 213) refers to as a 'test-based accountability system', one that is "based on the belief that attaching incentives (either positive or negative) to standardised achievement tests will improve student performance". This extends into pre-service teacher preparation, which is also is regulated via Ofsted inspection, within a statutory framework; although currently there is no statutory requirement for teachers to undertake professional development activity. Since the 1988 Education Reform Act, parents and carers have been able to express a preference as to which school their child/ren attend/s (prior to this point, children usually attended whichever school's 'catchment area' their home was located in). This has led to a further source of accountability: to parents and carers, who themselves have access to the published test result league tables noted above. Since school budgets are largely set according to the number of pupils attending the school, parental choice of school is extremely important as a source of accountability. This combination of measures indicates that England is very definitely a high regulation system: as Greany and Higham (2018, p. 11) note, the recent "increase in operational autonomy for schools is more than balanced out by changes to the accountability framework."

Taking the two paragraphs above together, then, my analysis suggests that England is (just) located in the hierarchist quadrant – certainly for those schools within MATs – with elements of the fatalist (indicating low cooperation).

Within this mainly hierarchist system, there is evidence that research use in English schools is relatively low amongst teachers. This evidence includes a series of studies – including three linked survey projects (Nelson and O'Beirne, 2014; Nelson et al, 2017; Walker et al, 2019) and a mixed methods mainly qualitative England-wide study (Coldwell et al, 2017). All these studies found that leaders and teachers prioritised certain evidence forms over others; this finding is relatively stable over time and across the four studies cited above. Essentially, teachers' experiences in relation to the classroom and the pupil, and speaking to other teachers, are far more important than other research forms, especially academic research including randomised controlled trial (RCT) evidence. For example, most recently, Walker et al (2019, p. 4) identify that "teachers were much more likely to draw ideas and support from their own experiences (60 per cent of respondents identified 'ideas generated by me or my school'), or the experiences of other teachers/schools (42 per cent of respondents identified 'ideas from other schools'), when deciding on approaches to support pupil progress". Looking back across the other studies cited above, there was little change in this pattern since 2014.

On one level this is rather surprising. As I noted in the introduction, England has a well-developed infrastructure, underpinned by the work of the Education Endowment Foundation, England's 'What Works Centre' for education, which has operated as an independent charity founded with a £200m government endowment funding RCT studies and other work since 2015. The EEF has funded over 150 trials at the time of writing: it is claimed that around a half of English schools have been or are currently involved as partners or participants in EEF RCTs (Nevill, 2019). Further, there is a range of accessible evidence syntheses – from bodies including the EEF in the form of its Teaching and Learning Toolkit – aimed at providing advice to schools on effective ways of improving educational outcomes for children especially from more disadvantaged backgrounds. These are supplemented by themed Guidance Reports (focussed on areas from teaching literacy and mathematics at specific age phases to behaviour and the deployment of teaching assistants). Other established sources include the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) focussed on systematic review; the Institute for Effective Education; and the Chartered College for Teaching's work, via its house journal, 'Impact', which also has themed issues on areas such as cognitive science, developing learning cultures and curriculum design. Further, the English system is characterised by a range of research-focused networks and bodies, including grassroots teacher networks such as Research Ed, Women Ed and Brew Ed, variably important subject associations, and a range of third sector groups including the Teacher Development Trust, Centre for the Utilisation of Research Evidence in Education (CUREE) and the National Foundation for Educational Research. In addition, over the past four years, a network of Research Schools – now 37 in number - has developed, charged with "encouraging schools to make use of evidence-based programmes and practices" (Education Endowment Foundation, n.d.) via events and professional development activity.

As discussed in the introduction to this volume, institutional theory (Powell and Dimaggio, 1991) provides an explanation for this persistent low take up of research evidence within English schools, by helping make clear: the context within which schools as organisations operate in England militates against widespread research evidence use.

Turning first to the national political context, the key issue must be the impact of a decade of austerity, leading to tighter budgets: as Malin et al (2020, p.7) note, "the ability for school leaders to put in place structures within their school to enable teachers to engage effectively in collaborative EIP development have been limited by the budget cuts which have ravaged the education and wider public sector in England". Coupled with the strong accountability pressures identified above, this means schools are strongly incentivised to focus on meeting immediate accountability requirements which – as discussed below – may not align with the use of research evidence.

A further, and qualitatively far less important, feature in England is the politicisation of research use in recent times, which has taken place in the broader context of a highly politicised education system. Whilst the English National Curriculum (established in the 1988 Education Reform Act) becomes less important as it doesn't apply to secondary academies, and pedagogies are, in general, not mandated, the strong accountability regime noted above has been commandeered to secure engagement with particular policies. Via a combination of school inspection, policy changes, ministerial pronouncements and – crucially – specific testing, a set of approaches are prioritised, underpinned by some particular evidence forms. A key example of this politicisation, as Martin and Williams (2019) point out, is the influence of synthetic phonics in lower primary/early years literacy.

Martin and Williams (2019, p.44) note the influence of synthetic phonics "made its way from a series of experimental studies in one Scottish region into national government policy an teaching practice", cemented by the introduction of the 'Phonics Screening Check' in 2011, an assessment of phonic decoding for 5 and 6 year olds. The introduction of synthetic phonics in policy on the basis of psychological theory and small scale RCTs, without the nuance of additional or alternative approaches to early literacy advocated by researchers working with other methods, contributed to the politicisation of research evidence; and similar arguments have begun to emerge in relation to the prioritisation of cognitive psychology.

There is little evidence that this politicisation of evidence has much influence in the work of most teachers and leaders. The strong accountability framework is the biggest driver here, influencing the curriculum as indicated above. However it does link to the grassroots movements; with Research Ed run by avowed traditionalist (or what is known on social media as 'trad' educator) and government adviser Tom Bennett; and others such as Collective Ed taking either a directly progressive ('prog') or at least less clearly aligned approach. In this political context, EEF and CCoT attempt to play a non-aligned position; and researchers from other traditions set themselves in opposition to both the RCT-led EEF What Works movement and the 'trad-centred' approach.

The educational policy response to the COVID pandemic demonstrates how this policy context influences the way research evidence is being utilised in a time of unprecedented change. Firstly, a set of teaching resources (including online recorded lessons) were produced during the first wave lockdown, in Spring 2020, by teachers working as part of the virtual 'Oak Academy'. Whilst well-received by many teachers, these resources were criticised by some researchers and teachers as drawing too narrowly on 'trad' approaches (for example, drawing on cognitive science rather than other perspectives), illustrating the politicisation issue noted above. Secondly, and at the time of writing, the EEF is working under the direction of the English DfE to mobilise a national programme of subject-focussed catch-up tuition aimed at helping ameliorate the expected gap in learning experiences between the most and least advantaged learners. The commissioning phase explicitly required the organisations involved to use a set of research-informed approaches. This example shows how the well-developed research use infrastructure in England can be utilised at scale, bearing in mind the fact that the DfE is leading this activity, which may influence what research is

advocated. Whatever the case, in the coming months and years this will provide a fascinating opportunity to test out the mandated use of evidence-informed practices, an approach for which, according to a recent review of research use (Gorard, See and Siddiqui, 2020), there is little current evidence available.

The local and regional context within which schools work is also of particular importance. As noted above, the inconsistent engagement with research evidence alongside other evidence forms in England could be described as patchy; and this mirrors a wider problem in the English system within which, despite the strong national accountability regime, there is piecemeal and differential support for school improvement more broadly as the role of the district LA has fallen away (as discussed at the start of this chapter). In some MATs, there is very strong support; and in fact, some 'well-positioned' headteachers (Coldron et al, 2014) are able to monetise this by selling services to other schools. In other MATs – and in some schools non-aligned to MATs – there is little support; and indeed little engagement where it is available. As Greany and Higham (2018, p.100) note, this variability is linked to the lack of what is often referred to as a 'middle tier' between the school and central government: "if schools are left to find their own improvement solutions, then in a quasi-market context it is inevitable that some will have more capacity than others to succeed. Therefore…[…] the middle tier must play a mediating role." Targeted recent initiatives have partially 'reintroduced' a middle tier in some geographical areas in the form of 'Opportunity Areas', 12 local authority areas identified as having specific needs in improving outcomes for children and young people. This is of relevance, as targeted and variably evidence-informed initiatives can be taken up by schools in these areas. However, in broad terms, this tier is still lacking, with no sign of its return[2].

Finally, turning to school leadership contexts, from an institutional theory perspective, school and MAT leaders are crucial in the English system. They are particularly important given the specific English context of the missing, or at least highly variable, 'middle tier' as discussed throughout this chapter. Therefore, work with school leaders on integrating research and other evidence forms a very important dimension in England, and there is research evidence available on the circumstances that are amenable to research evidence use. A key message from Coldwell et al's (2017) evaluation of the evidence-informed teaching system in England, supported by many other studies (e.g. Brown and Zhang, 2016) was that schools that prioritise positive risk-taking in a no-blame culture are more likely to see effective research use. Recently, Walker et al (2019) found that while about three quarters of teachers in their representative study found positive climates and cultures for engagement both in professional learning and research evidence use, far fewer (about 40%) had time or resources available. The indications from these studies are that amongst teachers there is generally a positive attitude to academic research amongst teachers in England, even though actual use of such evidence is low.

Key lessons for practice and policy

In their review of approaches to what they referred to as evidence-informed decision-making across sectors, Langer, Tripney and Gough (2016, p. 4) stated that approaches "that support the communication of and access to research evidence were only effective to increase evidence use if the intervention design simultaneously tried to enhance decision-makers' opportunity and

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[2] The manifesto and legislative programme of the current (late 2020) Conservative administration, elected in December 2019, indicates no return to LA control, and the main opposition party (Labour) manifesto for that election, whilst recognising the middle tier issue, stopped short of promising such a return (Coldwell and Twiselton, 2019)

motivation to use evidence." Gorard, See and Siddiqui (2020), in a more recent education-focussed review broadly support this position, whilst finding that there is limited evidence of what makes for effective support. These positions chime with the analysis of the English system in this chapter. The picture in England is not one where there is a particular problem with the availability of research or indeed research synthesis; on the contrary. Whilst there have been repeated criticisms of the quality of much educational research in England, from Tooley (1998) to the present (Gorard, See and Siddiqui, 2020), the scale of RCT evidence emerging from the EEF in particular is impressive (over 150 current trials, as noted above) with associated syntheses. Clearly, however, there are issues around support structures and implementation; prioritisation; and the political context.

Firstly, at the policy level, Coldwell et al (2017) identified a need to align wider policy with research evidence, and this continues to be particularly relevant in a highly regulated system such as England. Gorard, See and Siddiqui (2020, p. 579) note that the use of research evidence is highly partial: "Policy-makers often select only a subset of the available evidence, specially where the research was conducted or paid for by their department, in order to help validate their political judgement" and this is a key issue. The EEF-led support for schools around catch up tutoring and provision of resources to support schools in teaching and learning during the pandemic has been strongly led by research evidence, which is promising.

Secondly, in the English system as highlighted above, at an organisational level the headteacher and, increasingly, MAT CEO or Executive headteacher, is the key point of power to enable change to happen. Therefore, focussing support and development at this level is needed.

Related to this, there is an ongoing issue with linking research evidence with other evidence forms. It is naïve for researchers to suggest that teachers should change their practices solely based on research evidence except in rare cases where there is a very clear evidence; and even where this is the case, as indicated above in relation to synthetic phonics, there are caveats and nuance is needed. There are several avenues to explore here in the English context. For example, Brown, Schildkamp and Hubers (2017) have written explicitly about integrating school data with research evidence; Cain (2015a, 2015b) has explored differing knowledge forms; and the application of Implementation Science (IS) as a field, largely growing out of healthcare, has been a source of interest in England for the EEF. The notion of implementation in IS notably more nuanced than might appear from its title. It is rarely conceived of as direct application; rather, where successful, it involves the integration of research with other forms. Most interesting is the new approach to RCTs from the EEF which has begun to trial work on the everyday practices of teachers – the Teacher Choices trials (Coe, 2019) the first of which, for example, compares retrieval quizzes with discussions, as lesson starters.

Finally, there is much interest in England in the role of mediators to bridge the research evidence/practice gap, and evidence is developing in relation to how this can be done most effectively. Maxwell et al (2019, p. 5) suggest that mediation at a local level is likely to be most effective where what they call 'brokers' have a range of attributes including being "professionally credible and skilled adult learning facilitators" and being able to "provide challenge as well as support" and "have strong communication, interpersonal and organisational skills", and Gorard, See and Siddiqui (2020, p. 591) note what they call conduits "must be firm, honest, independent and credible to all parties". As debate continues in England about the need for a new middle tier (Greany, 2020), the role of evidence brokerage and mediation needs to be part of this conversation.

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