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What makes useful evidence for educational leadership practice? An interview

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I'm interviewing Eric Addae-Kyeremeh about his views on the pressing question 'What makes useful evidence for educational leadership practice?' as advice for leaders in educational settings; so, welcome Eric.

Eric is Senior Lecturer in Leadership and Management and a Chartered Fellow of both The Chartered Management Institute and BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT. He is currently the Associate Head of School − Innovation in the School of Education, Childhood, Youth and Sport with overall responsibility for teaching and learning innovation, business development, and staff professional development. He is also an active member of BELMAS.

So, Eric what counts as evidence and here we're talking about specifically that which is relevant for educational leadership practice?

Well, evidence will encompass a range of data types and information used to support or contradict a claim, assertion or even a hypothesis as you find mainly in the sciences. Unlike anecdotes or an individual's opinion, evidence is broadly supposed to provide some objective basis to help us make decisions and draw some sensible conclusions. So what actually counts as evidence I think requires you to use a critical eye to look at what actually will help you make those informed decisions, because that's what it's all about.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) present an interesting perspective that can be used as a lens for looking at what could count as evidence or useful intelligence and knowledge to support educational leadership practice. So, firstly they describe 'knowledge for practice' which refers to the kind of formal knowledge that is often located in what people call academia. So, we're researching practice to be able to provide this huge spectrum of knowledge or evidence that will inform practice going forward. Some of this type of evidence can be contestable but in the main is very helpful in numerous ways from thinking about micro innovations that have impacted pupil attainment to much more system level evidence that have been generated as part of large-scale change or quality improvement. Then there's 'knowledge in practice' which is what we as educational leaders would have experienced over the years through our own practice leading and evaluating change, implementing improvement plans, evaluating innovative approaches to learning, dealing with difficult situations, making sure that we are communicating effectively with our teams and so on. Then there's 'knowledge that would be brought in based on the practice of others' that we work with, within the same educational setting. So, we're looking at things happening in the school's classrooms, things around the school boundaries - all informing our practice. So, using this lens gives us an idea of how different types of evidence can be used to inform our practices.

So, what different sources of data are available to educational leaders for them to be able to use as evidence?

A first source of evidence could be what I'll describe as experiential evidence or practitioner expertise which, in a school for example, would reside in collective knowledge of what works and what doesn't. In some cases leaders may have worked from first-line management to middle

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management and progressed to senior management and through all those years gathered a lot of evidence in terms of what works and what doesn't work so practitioner expertise for me could provide a useful evidence base, when captured. The professional and decisional capital that resides in the school or educational setting is valuable evidence that must not be forgotten. I am aware some academics might not share this view, and would argue that this is problematic as it is rooted in specific personal views but I think a great number of practitioners base their decisions on experiential evidence. The second type is general management and information data collected or generated within the school or college environment or a Higher Education Institution (HEI). For example, we're increasingly gathering a lot of information and evidence about classroom practice; information about performance, progression across a year group, progression through Key Stage one and two, etc. we are looking at spending that has gone on pupils with free school meals and other measures linked to 'pupil premium' funding and how that is impacting the work these children are doing in the classroom. In every setting we're probably looking at disadvantaged groups or we're looking at those with special educational needs and other groups of students and how to support them based on the data we collect about what is happening in relation to measures of their learning and progress; then we're making what we consider to be appropriate interventions. So that is a massive evidence base that we use to inform our practice. A third type is academic, research evidence that is available; that which you and I are involved in generating. That sort of work, where we're researching and examining what works in various different areas of education in schools, Further Education settings and HEIs through to non-formal education, is trying to bring out enough evidence in terms of what people are doing as to illuminate effective practices that people have tried. Sometimes research is about asking broader, very difficult questions around issues of social justice, race and gender, special educational needs, inclusion and our own leadership practice. There's a fourth type – mainly relevant reports that inform our practice - the kind of other published work or 'grey literature' which would not be published in an academic or peer reviewed journal. So, any publication that may be coming out of government like policy directives from a Ministry of Education for any specific country and from stakeholders (including professional associations, the unions etc.) who contribute to the improvement of schools and educational settings. These organisations commission all sorts of enquiries and publish all sorts of information, which provide evidence that we can draw on to inform our practice.

How can these different data sets be useful to educational leaders?

I'd say this will depend on the type of evidence we are talking about. I say so because some of the evidence drawn from management information data held in various formats in the educational setting are much more straightforward to interpret and use than others. For example, evidence we generate about attendance and progression of students will be useful in developing and targeting specific interventions for these students or groups of students. Educational leaders will also gather evidence around their institution to inform decisions around quality improvement plans and to assure stakeholders that they have clear strategies in place to continuously improve. These data sets are readily available. However, the data sets and evidence that reside in published journals can also help direct practice and how resources are used. So, when we know from research evidence that particular strategies have worked elsewhere in a similar setting to ours, we can support our staff to try those strategies they aren't using already. But I must say evidence around the quality of learning, teaching, and assessment is complex because sometimes our ability to draw associations with particular variables can be elusive. Mainly because it is often challenging to establish causality when we know a number of issues may be impacting on why a pupil is not learning effectively for instance, or why students find a particular subject difficult. These are important questions that leaders are always interested in but the management information evidence can only tell part of the story. So, the educational leader may want to draw on other sources as well, including research conducted by others that are peer-reviewed and published. But then one has to be careful when drawing on such evidence because sample size, scope, scale and the context within which the research was conducted could impact on the findings and the conclusion presented by the researcher(s).

There's also an issue about easy access to such rigorous research studies for educational leaders and practitioners working in non-HEI settings in many countries. There is now a movement towards ways we make some of these peer-reviewed papers available through open access journals and, where possible, share some of the outputs of our work through other open forums. ResearchGate and Academia.edu are both examples of channels where we're beginning to see lots of publications appearing and need to be promoted to practitioners. There are also other repositories within various HEIs because we are being encouraged to make our work available more openly. Whilst you may not get access to the full peer-reviewed paper, very often abstracts of it are being made available in the public domain but this is still the biggest challenge - to make knowledge open and freely available. Very often that's what practitioners within schools and colleges need because within a HEI we do get access to that but without their registering on HEI courses how can practicing leaders have access to that wide range of resources that are available but located behind a subscription wall? A school or college may not have money to support leaders to register with a professional association but that would at least give some access. Then the next challenge is, because of the busy schedules that people have, not having the time to read but, in the main, I think the main issue is one of access.

How can these different data sets be useful to educational leaders?

Evidence is essential for leaders and for, much more broadly, practitioners. We've heard a lot about this in the news about the public sector. We often hear that public sector workers should use evidence-based practice as is

commonly found in the practice of law, medicine and security services. These professions use evidence in a variety of ways to make decisions but I think it's mainly about what I'll describe as knowledge or what some would describe as intelligence say in the security world for instance. We need to ensure that the judgments and the decisions that we make as leaders, and as practitioners, are founded on some really, really useful information and evidence base that can be used to help us bring about school improvement and better learning outcomes for the students, for the pupils that we're working with. As leaders we always have to be very careful in terms of our reliance on any one type of evidence because we have to look at it with a very critical eye. We have to make sure that the evidence base is robust. Also, very often evidence can easily be contextualized and sometimes what works in one context may not necessarily work in the context that you may want to apply it to. So, we've got to be very careful in terms of what we are selecting. Mainly what educational leaders want to be able to do as practitioners is to use this evidence to inform their day-to-day decision making about improving standards and pupil outcomes. That's the key thing that educational practitioners want to be able to do.

What would you say was the way forward for harnessing the power of evidence for informing educational leadership practice?

As part of quality assurance and condition improvement demands from various stakeholders, you will find that schools and other educational settings are making use of a broad range of evidence to inform practice and management decisions. But in many of these schools and college settings there's over reliance on management information data as a main source of evidence. Sometimes the expert evidence available within the institution is forgotten so you find that external consultants are drafted in every now and then to complement the evidence generated by the management information sources but without really capturing what is already known.

Many schools and colleges also don't have access to peer-reviewed journals which in my opinion is hugely disappointing as knowledge and evidence that resides there is invaluable. So I'll say the direction of travel will be to make more knowledge, intelligence and research openly accessible. And I think there's been some movement about this in the last couple of years with the emergence of many open access journals. I think that's one of the things that will go a long way to help educational leaders and practitioners in terms of their gaining access to peer-reviewed publications. Of course publishers have to generate some revenue to keep the publishing houses operational so you wouldn't expect publication to be freely available but making more peer-reviewed evidence available is important for our practice as

leaders: For me that's one of the things that needs to be done.

The question is whether the open access movement is doing enough or whether the state should get involved and this remains to be seen. For example, I understand in Scotland teachers registered with the General Teaching Council of Scotland have access to online resources through EBSCO. So the question is, is it something that has to be picked up across various countries to ensure that teachers are actually getting that level of access to published work? That's the key knowledge and evidence base that is missing for them. From an academic point of view I think most universities are moving in that direction by making some of their scholarship and research available on their own institutional portals like open research online (ORO) from the Open University as well as encouraging academics to publish in open access journals. Then there's the use of social media so through Twitter, for example Twitter chats and through blogging. An example would be, among other places, the BELMAS blogs for instance and BELMAS tweets. Lots of colleagues within the BELMAS community do tweet their work and you can find some of their work on the BELMAS blogs and also on Academia.edu. When you connect to these individuals very often they'll be talking about some of the new findings from very interesting pieces of work they've been doing; so, I think it's looking promising.

There are a lot of resources out there but again, back to what I said earlier on, you've got to look at this evidence with a critical eye and not assume that something that was tried in a classroom of 18 will work in a school setting where you've got 30 pupils in a class or in even in some of the countries we've worked sub-Saharan Africa where you get over 60 children in a class with fixed seats that can't be moved around easily for group work, etc. So, although there are lots of avenues or platforms for knowledge sharing, care has to be taken about our choice of what counts as evidence.

Alison: thank you very much for your time and for your insights, Eric.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Reference

Cochran-Smith M and Lytle SL (1999) Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. *Review of Research in Education* 24: 249–305.