

DYT: Driving evidence-based practices

Driver Youth Trust has always prided itself on being an organisation that asks questions – of the complex issues in education, and of those in power – especially in relation to the education of young people with SEND, most noticeably in relation to literacy.

Although all practitioner decisions use evidence, it can be difficult to judge the quality of that evidence. The result can be bad decisions based on unfounded beliefs, fads or ideas popularised by specific individuals or organisations. There have been numerous examples over the past few years, learning styles being one of the most well-known ones.

Further, in my experience the research on effective inclusive pedagogies is disparate, both in terms of scale and areas of focus which makes drawing practical conclusions tricky. So, there is a clear need for a way of working through the complexities of evidence.

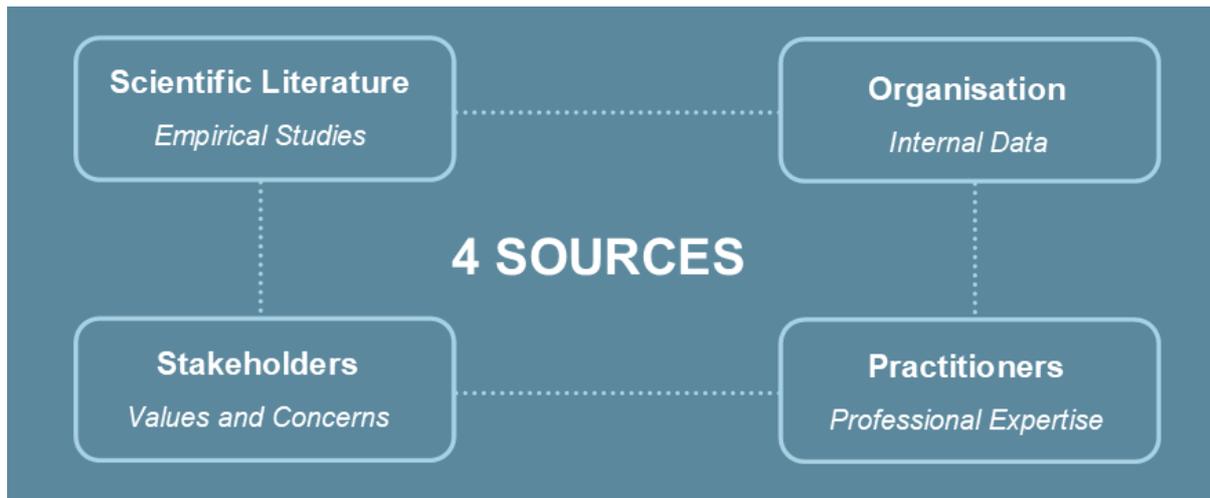
As we await specific educational approaches to mature, informed by evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and others, DYT has taken steps to incorporate learning and practice from psychology and business management to improve on what we provide to our partner schools.

As a psychologist it is an expected part of my professional practice that I should judiciously use the ‘best available’ evidence to inform my decision-making, both as a practitioner and a manager. Using the model put forward by the Centre for Evidence Based Management (CEBM), Driver Youth Trust adopted this approach in schools because we needed to ensure our decision-making was based on both critical thinking and the best available evidence.

In my view the CEBM model overcomes some of the barriers to implementing an evidence-based approach in an educational context and is especially suited to the inclusion and Special Educational Needs domain.

Figure 1 shows the four areas of evidence that our consultants draw upon to inform their practice, which helps direct schools to bespoke solutions. Using traditional sources of scientific literature, as you would expect to find in academic journals, we reflect on the needs of our stakeholders from across the school community, including pupils and their families where relevant. This is combined with other sources of data from the school context as well as our expertise.

I want to explain why such an approach is more holistic than simply drawing on academic research and fits perfectly with the SEND Code of Practice and what we have learnt about engaging pupils and their families.



Below is an example of when I've used this approach to scrutinise the decision-making of a group of schools who wanted to spend a significant sum of money to improve literacy across a number of primary schools. The schools had opted for a structured scheme of work as their chosen solution and wanted to consider whether their investment of nearly £50,000 would be worthwhile.

Scientific literature

The rationale for this project was the need to improve reading attainment. The evidence supplied to support this approach came from the EFF's guidance reports on Key Stage 1 and 2 literacy and other reputable sources. This is certainly a good start, although even the most cursory glance at these reports shows a lack of consideration of SEN or how schools might adapt their practices to be more inclusive.

However, beyond vague promises of improvements to reading attainment across Key Stage 1 and 2, especially for 'disadvantaged' pupils, there was no independent evidence that this approach was better than another or more suited to the circumstances of those schools and more importantly their children.

Organisational data

Overall standards in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2 were especially concerning with just 16% of young people on SEN Support and 6% for those with EHCPs meeting these thresholds. This significant difference clearly shows that reading absolutely needs to be a priority area of improvement for these pupils.

However, are poor levels of attainment in Key Stage 2 really the problem here? Creating a complete picture of school provision cannot be complete without understanding the priorities, practices and leadership of each setting

where we work. This extends to understanding the current school development plan, levels of expertise in existing staff, plans for learning and development and support from outside agencies.

There had been no consideration of the quality of teaching and learning in each of the participating schools or their capacity to take on a large-scale project of this kind. Upon closer questioning it was clear that none of the schools had a current understanding of the levels of knowledge and skill in their teaching staff. This would a better place to start because providing development opportunities without a thorough understanding of training needs risks wasting precious resources and alienating staff.

Stakeholder views

Understanding the values and concerns of stakeholders is something in SEN which we are used to doing, although perhaps less so in terms of school staff. DYT's stakeholders tend to be teachers, teaching assistants and teaching leaders, but we encourage governors, parents and pupils to feed in to our project plans as well.

In the current scenario no-one had elicited the views of stakeholders. Rather decision-making was being made by a small group of people who would impose this new project on their colleagues. Engaging with their voices are not only important for ethical reasons, they actively help to provide of a frame of reference for any work. Failing to engage them means that we cannot reflect on the way in which decisions would be received and whether the outcomes of those decisions are likely to be successful.

Professional expertise

We rely on our people to determine the extent to which evidence is trustworthy, relevant and applicable, which is one of the key benefits to our partner schools. DYT is able to draw upon a range of professional expertise across SEND, literacy, research and policy, leadership and school improvement. The tacit knowledge of our consultants sits alongside that of the other three areas and draws on specialised knowledge they have acquired over decades of professional practice. The ability to critically reflect on their experience and distil practical lessons is a key competence we develop in all of our staff.

This understanding helped to successfully challenge the presumption that the aforementioned intervention was 'right' for those schools. This was not achieved by the constant questioning and feedback as to whether the intervention was effective, although this took up much of our time. Rather it happened because they understood the importance of identifying the precise problem they needed to address before identifying a suitable solution.

As I noted earlier what constitutes good evidence in the education of learners with SEN is not always that convincing, even when it is the evidence should be treated cautiously until we understand the context in which it is to be used. Where little or no quality evidence is available we have no choice but to use whatever we have to hand to supplement our understanding. Practically, this means piloting and testing, systematically, any approach and the intended outcomes.

Evidence in itself is not the answer. Evidence-based practitioners confront a great deal of inconclusive, contradictory and uncertainty information. They rarely have the luxury of robust, applicable or up-to-date information. Instead we need to learn to deal with probabilities, indications and tentative conclusions. Whilst this may seem far from the evidence-based bandwagon sweeping education right now, it is important to understand that critical thinking lays at the heart of this approach. So, question assumptions, check facts, talk to experts and above all, engage with the broadest range of evidence you have access to.

