Journal Club: A mechanism for bringing evidenced based practice into school?

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Abstract
Supporting the teacher to consider the value of using evidence based practice, and the contribution to this of the school-based Journal Club, this paper provides an account of an examination of teacher perceptions within one case study school. The examination, undertaken in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a Masters in Education degree, revealed there to be a gap between conceptual understanding and teaching practice, and that that gap was argued to be the consequence of the circumstances in which the teacher found themselves operating. Identified influences included the pressure of work, particularly the issue of the availability of time; but the extent to which the teacher had previously had involvement with research activities was also noted. Highlighted is the risk that a Journal Club can be perceived as little more than a 'talking shop'; specifically that there is a fear that the potential a Journal Club has to support the individual to adopt an evidence based approach to their teaching may not be revealed and that the presence of that fear has an inhibiting influence on engagement.

Key words
evidence based practice, Journal Club, teaching practice, research, case study, pressure, reflection.

Introduction
There is both popular (e.g. Wiltshier, 2007; Green, 2014) and academic (e.g. Cook & Cook, 2013; Cooper, 2014) argument that the effectiveness of the teaching role can be enhanced through evidenced based practice and, thus, that teaching should be an evidenced based profession. However, it can be questioned whether an active evidenced based approach is commonly or effectively applied in the context of school life. Biesta (2007) highlights, for example, that narrowing the gap between research, policy and practice has proved to be problematic in the United Kingdom; acknowledging that whilst evidence based practice has been promoted over many years, and there are pockets of good practice, significant shortfalls remain.

Journal Clubs are one mechanism for supporting an evidenced based approach. Journal Clubs usually entail the meeting of a group of professionals who select one or more research articles related to an area of interest or a perceived problem. The research is expected to involve enquiry and be centred on a research question (Pine, 2008). Journal Clubs have proven themselves to be popular in a number of professional disciplines (Young & Vilelle, 2011; Lizarondo et al., 2012), with one benefit arising being the opportunity to 'unpick' a practice or an approach. It is difficult to refute that where an individual can identify and understand the benefit which arises from an approach, that they are not more committed to the changed practice. Since change is a regular feature of school life and 'the way that change...is studied is significant to the understanding which is derived' (Beadle, 2017:14), why Journal Clubs are not more generally used within the schools sector is unclear.

With the intention of contributing to a raising of the profile of Journal Clubs within the school context and encouraging the school-based practitioner to consider the value of the approach to their own

practice, this paper provides an account of an examination of the perceptions held by teaching staff within one case study school relating to the use of evidence based practice broadly, and to Journal Clubs specifically.

Literature Review
Evidence based practice
Evidence based practice is explained by Mcinerney & Suleman (2010:91) to refer 'to decisions based on the best available, current, valid, and relevant evidence'. Whilst the mechanisms for gathering that evidence might vary, a popular approach is the purposeful trialling of ideas, often referred to as initiatives (Howlett & Howard, 2015). The approach is one which has gained popularity in disciplines such as medicine, where it is argued that it is as a result of this approach that outcomes for patients and the treatment of diseases have improved significantly in the last century (Goldacre, 2013; Biesta, 2007). Medicine is regarded to now thrive on a culture of evidence based practice and this might well explain why the United Kingdom government has previously encouraged a movement towards 'evidence based policy making' (Evans & Benefield, 2001).

Whilst, as Goldacre (2013) highlights, medicine and teaching are two different professions, there are parallels to be drawn between the two. Two examples are the desire to be up-to-date with subject knowledge and the aspiration to explore, and ensure the 'service user' benefits from, practice innovations. It is therefore reasoned that the teaching profession, similarly to the medical profession, benefits from the use of evidence based practice. Indeed, in many countries a need to engage in active research is a requirement in order to climb the educational ladder (Goldacre, 2013). Furthermore, Cooper (2014,:1) identifies that 'The term 'evidence based' is being heard increasingly often in conjunction with education reforms'.

Formally structured education-related research is one source of 'evidence'. Indeed, a recent article by Taylor et al. (2016) concluded that greater emphasis needs to be placed on the value of educational research; that it is through the learning to be derived from formal research that the best educational programmes can be implemented. The argument hinges on a cyclical effect; improvements in practice lead to more rigorous evidence being gathered and this, in turn, further informs practice. The result meets the aspiration of all teachers; the provision of the best education for students and the achievement of the best learning outcomes.

Educational policies are typically implemented using a 'top down' approach, but there is often a lack of trust as to whether those policies have been effectively trialled (Davis, 1999). The literature, evidenced through the similarity of argument presented over an extended time period, e.g. Davis (1999) as compared with Taylor et al. (2016), identifies this to be a long-standing concern. It can therefore be questioned why this concern has not already been addressed.

There has been acknowledgement of the many barriers to implementing a culture of evidence based practice within the education sector. Some teachers are regarded to mistrust research, preferring to defer to their own 'lived in' experiences (Foster, 2014). This might well be the result of failing to appreciate the relationship between research and classroom practices (Foster, 2014). Movement towards removing teacher training from academic institutions might well compound this effect since it is the academic institutions which are regarded to place particular emphasis on bringing together findings from evidence based research and the techniques which make teaching more effective; what Friedrich (2014) discusses in terms of the integration of research and practice.

Reflective Teaching
During Initial Teacher Training (ITT) teachers are taught to engage in a process of regular reflection. Reflection on taught lessons is one example. There is a risk that the process of regular reflection can

become overlooked once that ITT has been completed. The effect is a hindering of the development of a culture of reflective practice in school.

The opportunity to continue to engage in reflective practice, or to return to the practice of actively using reflection as part of a professional routine, is one mechanism for responding to the difficulties faced as a teacher. Offering an example of those difficulties the literature acknowledges the risk of demoralisation faced by teachers. Brookfield (1995) writes, for example, about the risk of falling into the trap of feeling like a failure, citing poor behaviour and outcomes as offering this potential.

Reflection can be used to inform change, certainly stopping the effect of stagnation. It also promotes a mind open to adapting or revising teaching techniques (Loughran, 2002), acknowledging that a response to change is increasingly a requirement of the professional persona. As Farrell (2012:15) highlights:

> ...reflective practice is not isolated introspection; rather, it is evidence based, in that teachers need to systematically collect evidence...about their work and then make decisions (instructional and otherwise) based on this information.

Teachers who engage in reflective teaching are applying principles which are also at the heart of evidence based practice (Tice, 2004; Pollard, 2008). They are able to account what they are doing, how this has worked in (for example) their classroom and what impact the approach they have taken has made on their students' learning. Furthermore, they are confident to change their practices in the light of their observations, acknowledging success as well as areas that would benefit from further examination (Moore, 2007). As Foster (2014) highlights, all new ideas come with the same goal; the improvement of educational outcomes.

Journal Clubs

One mechanism which supports reflective practice and contributes to a bridging of the gap between reflection and evidence based practice is use of the 'Journal Club'. Journal Clubs have been common in the medical sector for a number of years (Denehy, 2004) and have received much attention within the medical related literature (e.g. Denehy, 2004; Sidorov, 1995; Kleinpell, 2002; Dirschl, Tornetta & Bhandari, 2003). Within the school sector, however, the practice has received significantly less attention.

Bringing together initially for the purpose of discussion a group of likeminded professionals, Journal Club meetings generally entail the selection of one or more research articles related to an area of interest, or a perceived problem. The research is expected to take the form of an enquiry and be centred on a research question (Pine, 2008). The selected article is critically examined and the findings are then related to those professionals' contextual environment. As Goldacre (2013) highlights, it is this application of the findings to practice which is central to any improvement being garnered. Where that application involves professional colleagues, this can serve to positively enhance the perception that educational research is relevant to their professional practice (Pine, 2008).

Why Journal Clubs are not more generally used within the school sector is unclear. This paper, an account of an examination of the perceptions held by teaching staff relating to the use of evidence based practice broadly and Journal Clubs specifically within one case study school, contributes to the filling of this gap.

Method

This study was undertaken in fulfilment of a Master of Education degree course assignment. The data was gathered in accordance with the respective University's ethics procedure. The limitations of the

study, specifically that the data was gathered over a relatively short time scale and using one case study, are acknowledged.

A short questionnaire was sent to all teaching staff within the mixed form entry, age 11-18, case study secondary school. The questionnaire was comprised of four questions:

1. Do you think that schools should be evidence informed?;
2. Are you, or during your career have you ever been, in a research group?;
3. Do you think that being a reflective practitioner improves your lessons and planning?; and
4. Do you attend the school's Journal Club?

Each question was accompanied by a choice of answers e.g. yes, no and maybe. Likewise, each question was accompanied by space for the participant to explain the answer they had given. The approach taken, following the argument of Bryman (2012), was selected on the basis of being a mechanism for rapidly gathering a large amount of background data whilst accommodating the insight provided by what Crotty (1998, p.28) terms the 'lived in' experience.

Small group interviews, taking a focus group approach and involving a total of six members of the teaching staff (for the purpose of this paper labelled A to F), formed the second stage of the data gathering exercise. The focus group arrangement permitted facilitated discussion embracing group dynamics (Bryman, 2012; Vaughn Shay Schumm, and Sinagub, 1996); the participants being colleagues within the studied school. Since the research time was limited, the principal investigator did not want to risk any decrease in the number of participants. This would, furthermore, have changed the approach to a 1-2-1 interview and thereby resulted in an inconsistent approach to data gathering. Instead, the potential of the approach to facilitate the opportunity for the participants to immediately engage with each other's ideas and to generate an animated discussion which might provide rich data regarding perspectives was deemed preferable to the other mechanisms which had been considered; methods such as the Nominal Group Technique (Sumsion, 2000).

Three groups were formed; those who were founders of the school's Journal Club, those who had not been founders but were members of that Club, and a third group comprised of non-members. These groups met in turn. In total 4 of the participants (Participants C to F) were identified to have attended Journal Club. Each group discussion was ignited by a generic 'What do you know about Journal Club' approach, with discussion probed using detail drawn from the analysis of the data from the 31 completed questionnaires returned in the first stage of the data gathering exercise. Each group was recorded and those recordings were transcribed, anonymised and analysed using an open coding approach. The approach taken was intended to contribute to a mitigation of any effect produced by general awareness within the case study school that the principal investigator was a founding member of the school's Journal Club. It also served to provide a check mechanism with regard to the accuracy of the first stage (questionnaire) exercise.

Findings and discussion
For the purpose of this discussion, and in accordance with the purpose of this paper, the findings are organised under two headings; evidence based practice and the Journal Club.

Evidence Based Practice
In exploring teacher perceptions regarding evidence based practice, the strength of the support for the approach was apparent. Indeed, there was suggestion that an evidence based approach should be at the heart of teaching. Participant A, for example, stated that 'schools are proactive in looking for different ways to teach and the most effective ways to teach'. Likewise, Participant C highlighted that 'teachers see the value in doing tried and tested things...which is why schools are proactive in

being evidence based'. The sentiment demonstrated a clear parallel with the work of Goldacre (2013) in relation to there being a correlation between the use of research and the identification of interventions which might support not just achievement, but also improvement of the mechanisms by which that achievement is harnessed.

Almost without exception the Participants made mention of evidence serving to ignite and support progressive change. All but one participant suggested that being reflective as a practitioner, reflection based on their own observations and on their consideration of other research activities, had the potential to improve their performance. Furthermore, there were two phrases which were notable in the responses as a result of their repeated use; 'forward thinking' and 'moving things forward'. Allied with the work of Foster (2014), who draws out the value to be derived from assessing the readiness of a school to address change, the underpinning sentiment was clearly identified to be one of progression.

Taken as a whole however, the participants demonstrated less consistency in their responses about the reasons underpinning their motivation for progression. This might well have been a consequence of the nature of the research activity, however the impact on the participant of a process of rote cannot be entirely discounted. The participant teachers were, for example, familiar with teachers' standard four; specifically the requirement to 'reflect systematically on the effectiveness of lessons and approaches to teaching' (DfE, 2011:11). Two participants were, however, seen to clearly articulate their understanding in relation to progression and in both instances the need for continual adaptation in order to respond to students needs was apparent. Participant B highlighted that 'without evidence based practice we won't evolve to support the changing needs of our students', identifying that if there was any influence from rote the underpinning ethos remained student centred. Likewise, Participant E stated that 'it is incredibly naive to think you have teaching nailed because every student and every class changes'.

A second factor which might account for the identified motivation for progression was the desire to enhance the perception of professionalism associated with the teaching role. Parallel was drawn with the work of Loughran (2002) in identifying that experience alone was insufficient. Exhibition of professionalism was identified to be allied with a requirement to avoid simply repeating practice because that repetition offered reassurance; a measure of comfort. Here the phrase 'old tricks' was specifically used. As Participant E acknowledged, 'if you keep doing the same thing over and over again that isn't working, it will never start working'. The enhancement task was not seen as requiring significant change to occur but, instead, was viewed as amounting to small or marginal improvements, potentially arising as a result of reflective practice, which precluded significant performance gaps arising over a period of time. An example is drawn from the contribution of Participant D who, appearing to emphasise the earlier mentioned parallel which can be drawn between reflection and evidence based practice, identified that:

> ...if every year you implement a new task or activity in the scheme of work (SoW) and see if that works, that's evidence based practice and improving your own practice.

Since this approach to teaching additionally fits into 'the enquiring teacher' model highlighted by Menter et al. (2010), illustration is provided of the parallel to be drawn between professionalism and a willingness to seek out change. Also highlighted is the potential for the associated understanding to be contextually applied. As Participant F highlighted:

> We need to see what is working within our own classroom and context, as well as what is not, so we can preserve the best practice for our students. It's our duty I would say.

Those completing the questionnaires were asked whether they had ever been part of a research group. Whilst 45.2% of the participants suggested that they had been part of a research group, a larger percentage (54.8% of the participants) provided a negative response. Most of those who had previously engaged with research group activities identified that this was the consequence of an association with a Higher Education Institution (HEI), for example when undertaking some form of leadership training or when completing a Masters degree. This appears to endorse suggestion in the literature that it is academic institutions which place emphasis on bringing together findings from evidence based research and techniques which make teaching more effective. It also highlights the potential influence of HEIs. A failure to be exposed to this context is likely to have ramifications with regard to expectations both for the individual and for others. As Participant B stated:

> Because evidence based practice is promoted in our school I think people are aware of what on earth evidence based teaching means in the first place. I'm sure there are plenty of [teachers] though that I would talk to and don't know exactly know what that actually means.

Goldacre (2013) suggests that although in some areas there is enthusiasm for teaching to become evidence based, a palpable lack of enthusiasm can also be identified. Even where enthusiasm is present, the task of identifying and harnessing that enthusiasm can prove problematic. However, it cannot be discounted that a perceived lack of enthusiasm might simply be the consequence of teachers not knowing exactly how to carry out small scale research within their classroom; perhaps limiting themselves to reflection on existing practice alone. Likewise, for those committed to evidence based practice, any absence of evidence can prove unsettling. For example, when asked if they thought the case study school generally used an evidence based approach, Participant D responded:

> no I think they implement things on a whim without evaluating what the long term outcomes are.

Appearing to concur with this, Participant F stated,

> I think a lot of policy in schools are not presented in a way that links to evidence...teachers are having to follow policies without being convinced with the research...teachers want more evidence so that they know what they are doing is actually founded on something rather than plucked out of the air.

Journal Clubs
The majority of teachers who participated in the study identified that they had not attended the school's Journal Club. Indeed, amongst those who completed the questionnaire, just over one third suggested that they had involvement with the Club. Of this number, 19.4% highlighted that they regularly attended the Club, with a further 16.1% suggesting that they attended on an occasional basis. Whilst clarification of that 'occasional' perception might have provided further insight, it is clear that even where a Journal Club is readily available, engagement is limited.

Although the predominance of Journal Club members participating in the second stage interviews is acknowledged, support for the practices encouraged by the Club was a constant theme across all categories of participants. Participant A, who has not previously attended the school's Journal Club stated, for example, that 'I think it is a good thing to keep fresh ideas coming in and to keep evidence based practice coming in'; indicating that this was a benefit which they saw as being derived from the Journal Club's presence in the school. Participant D, who attended Journal Club, was seen to play down the emphasis on the journal element, focusing instead on what could be derived from the resulting discussion. The general sentiment expressed was that the mere presence of a Journal Club encouraged engagement with reflection on evidence based practice, although it can be questioned

whether the effect within the case study school of a Journal Club being present would have been quite so distinctive if that Club did not benefit from a body of regular attendees. The sentiment expressed reflected the work of Pine (2008) and Goldacre (2013) in highlighting the value of creating a network of reflective professionals within a school:

> it's not just about the journal is it; it's about that chance to have a conversation about what people are doing as well

(Participant D).

Reasons for avoiding engagement with the Journal Club specifically and, in some cases engagement with both reflective and evidence based activities more generally, was almost always explained in relation to the issue of time and, specifically, the impact of workload on the time available. Participant C identified, for example, having 'other responsibilities which dictate whether I can attend or not, when or if I do I find it very beneficial!', whilst Participant B suggested that they '...would like to [attend Journal Club], especially as I would like to complete my Masters at some stage… after school commitments have left me unable to'.

It was noted that none of the Journal Club founders made mention of time constraints either in relation to Journal Club engagement, in relation to engaging with evidence based research or with regard to being a reflective practitioner. This appeared to reflect the cited conviction that the Journal Club process offers value. However it cannot be discounted that the strength of this value may have become more apparent after the initial engagement with the process had been established; after those individuals had effectively 'tried out' the Journal Club and identified for themselves the contribution it has the potential to make to their teaching practices.

In the light of the time issue, it can be questioned how proponents of the approach might convince others to take on what superficially may appear to be an additional burden. In relation to this issue of burden, there was some general reference to seeing value and to how that value might reveal itself. The sentiment echoed Goldacre's (2013) work with regard to fulfilment of requirements in order to climb the professional ladder. However, simply being able to see value was not identified as being sufficient to drive through a resolution to the identified time issue.

A potential barrier to engagement might be the limited interaction which the teachers had had with experienced researchers within the education profession. More than half of the participating teachers suggested that they had never been actively involved in educational research and a number identified the difficulties associated with providing that learning opportunity. Whilst Journal Club was regarded as providing a positive opportunity, unless action resulted from discussion of the respective article, the highlighted 'distance' between theory and practice remained. The risk, therefore, is that Journal Club can be perceived as little more than a 'talking shop'.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to provide an account of an examination of the perceptions held by teaching staff within one case study school relating to the use of evidence based practice broadly, and to Journal Clubs specifically. With this paper contributing to a raising of the profile of Journal Clubs, the principal investigator being a founding member of the studied school's Club, it has been identified that the participants acknowledged the value of evidence based practice. It was, furthermore, evident that the participants saw how research contributed to an evidence based framework and that that research could have been undertaken by themselves or by others. The contribution of evidence to understanding the reasons for adopted change was indicated. The desire to continually improve teaching practice, in the words of participants to be 'forward thinking', was acknowledged to be central both to the teaching role and to the conveyance of a professional image. However, the

mechanism by which internalisation of this desire has been generated was less conclusively identified and this would be worth further investigation.

The study revealed a gap to exist between conceptual understanding and teaching practice; that participants knew what they should do but that the circumstances in which they found themselves had an inhibiting influence. Also identified as having the potential to influence the participant perspectives was the absence of previous involvement with research activities. Any understanding of research may have been largely theoretical, for example acquired through the descriptions provided by others. With regard to research, the influence of HEIs has been acknowledged.

Active participation in the case study school's Journal Club was not identified to be strong. However, the potential benefit of the presence of a Journal Club within the school was indicated and there was general support for the bridging of the gap between reflection, evidence based practice and the factor which was highlighted to central to the participant responses; a desire to maximise student learning. The Journal Club was perceived as facilitating the meeting of that bridging need. The lack of participation in the Journal Club was identified as having potentially been the consequence of the aforementioned limited practical research experience, and thus the ability to use that experience to underpin reflection upon the research undertaken by others (as detailed in the Journal Club articles selected). Also noted is a risk that the Journal Club could be perceived as little more than a 'talking shop'; that participants feared that the bridging role which Journal Club has the potential to fulfil may not be revealed in practice. Strong indication was provided that many of the difficulties associated with effective engagement with the Journal Club process are time related. Exploration of what measures those who failed to make active use of the Journal Club would be prepared to take in order to rectify that time issue would be worth further investigation.

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