

Research-informed schools evaluation: Development of the Ashford Research Champion model to increase school networks' use of research

Protocol for the study funded by the Education Endowment Foundation

1.1 Introduction

NatCen Social Research is delighted to be carrying out this study which aims to explore how networks of schools can make their organisations more research informed by training and supporting teachers to use evidence-based practices and improve pupil attainment.

The Ashford model is based around tight networks of schools and is a pilot study, focused on assessing whether the model is practical and feasible. Therefore, randomisation could only be possible at the level of schools, and as such we do not recommend creating a comparison group (i.e. a randomly allocated control group of schools) at this developmental stage. The focus of our formative evaluation will be on a process evaluation that seeks to capture the changes in schools as they take part in the project. However, we will also capture quantitative data on teacher awareness, understanding and action, and how this progresses over the duration of the project, as well as on pupil performance.

The Ashford Research Champion model is a project which aims to test whether a “Research Champion” working across a group of schools can increase the awareness, understanding and use of research in the classroom. The Research Champion is a teacher who will work on the project part-time (60% FTE) so that they can continue to teach.

The Research Champion will be working with six schools (two primary and four secondary) from the Ashford teaching alliance to deliver the intervention. At each school there will be a lead research contact (Research Lead), ideally from the senior leadership team. (These will be recruited by the Research Champion.) There are main three aspects to the intervention:

1. Termly symposia attended by a minimum of three teachers from each school (including the Research Lead)
2. Six half-termly twilight sessions before and after the termly symposium attended by a minimum of two teachers from each school
3. Research Champion to act as a research broker – visiting the schools six times a year to talk through their research needs.

The intervention aims to help staff at the participating schools to:

- a. Understand the key findings of specific educational research.
- b. Apply educational research findings in the classroom and at a strategic development level.
- c. Establish a stronger culture of evidence-based enquiry and practice.

These three aspects are expected to help improve the quality of the teaching and learning in each school.

1.2 Evaluation design

1.2.1 Logic model

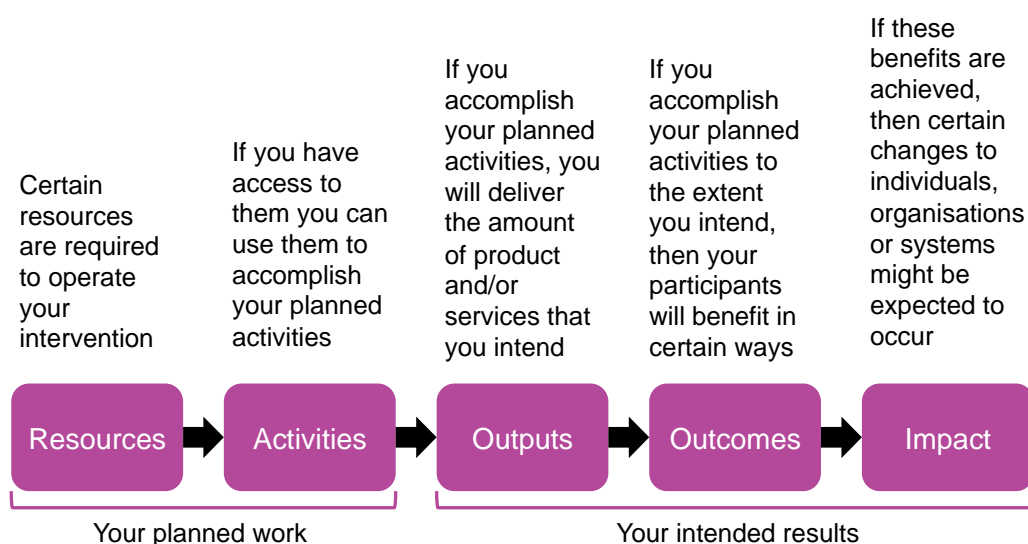
As evaluators, we will work collaboratively with the project team to understand their delivery model and build up an 'impact map', or logic model.

A logic model approach holds that programme interventions, in almost all cases, are based on an underlying logic or theory and a set of assumptions about how an intervention works. At its core, this approach provides an explanation of how a group of stakeholders expects to reach a commonly understood goal.¹

This approach promotes a systematic and visual way to represent a shared understanding of the component parts of a programme. The development process considers the programme's planned work and its intended outcomes. A logic model separates the key components of a programme which are usually structured in a linear model as shown in the diagram below (see Figure 1). Mapping a programme in this way helps to visualise and understand how human and financial investments can contribute to achieving intended programme goals and can lead to programme improvements.

Programme logic models are useful in the design and planning stages of a programme and in implementing programme components and activities. Logic models are used also to identify data collection points for monitoring and evaluation purposes and to devise an evaluation plan. Finally, evaluations underpinned by logic models help to understand how well a programme is functioning, whether it is achieving the desired outcomes and where the programme has encountered delivery challenges.²

Figure 1. How to read a logic model (adapted from W. K. Kellogg Foundation)



¹ Anderson, A. (2007). The community builder's approach to theory of change: A practical guide to theory development. The Aspen Institute. <http://www.epa.gov/evaluate/pdf/eval-guides/logic-model-development-guide.pdf>

² W. K. Kellogg Foundation. (2004). Logic model development guide. <http://www.epa.gov/evaluate/pdf/eval-guides/logic-model-development-guide.pdf>

On the evaluation of the Ashford Research Champion model, we will develop a logic model in consultation with stakeholders in the early stages of the evaluation, so that the project team could use it to inform their programme activities. The logic model will also inform our development of research instruments (e.g. topic guides) and will generally support our formative evaluation of the Ashford Research Champion model. We will include the logic model in the final report on the evaluation, together with our reflections on whether the model needs any adjustments before a full trial of the intervention in the future.

1.2.2 Process evaluation

The design of the process evaluation draws on the fact that this is a pilot study, which is meant to be flexible and interactive in its nature. We will aim to inform the project team of the research findings as they become available, and we will be able to adjust the proposed methodology if necessary so that it suits best the aims of this formative evaluation.

We will speak to the Research Champion and participating teachers (including Research Leads and other teachers) to explore what mechanisms they believe are leading to outcomes or changes in their practice, by carrying out in-depth interviews with them.

We propose an initial face-to-face meeting with the Research Champion (Ashford) to discuss and start developing a logic model (see section 1.2.1). In addition, we will carry out at least three telephone interviews with the Research Champion throughout the school year 2014/2015, to discuss the progress of the programme, any issues which came up during their delivery of the programme and any learning to inform the evaluation.

We will also speak to a range of participants (teachers at participating schools) including those at a senior level, designated contacts (Research Leads), and other teachers in schools. This will involve interviewing (mostly on the telephone) the following staff at each of the six schools throughout the 2014/15 year:

- The Research Lead in each school (interviewed in the beginning (around November 2014) and then again in the end (from March to June 2015)).
- Two other members of staff in each school who have had some involvement with the network through attendance at events, or have responsibility for improving teaching and learning in the school (one interview with each staff member scheduled flexibly during Spring and Summer school terms).

We will select members of staff to speak to in consultation with the Research Champion and the Research Lead in each school and depending on the activities undertaken in each school. We will aim to cover a range of seniority levels (e.g. head of department, head of year, class teachers).

In addition, we propose to observe the three symposia which will bring together the Research Champion and a minimum of three teachers from each participating school (one symposium per school term).

This results in a total of up to 27 interviews, plus observations of the three symposia, which will provide a valid, robust picture of the intervention, and how it works for the whole range of participants.

The evaluation will run in schools during the academic year 2014/15 with schools recruitment starting in June 2014.

It will be important to understand:

- What role the Research Champion and Research Leads play
- How they support teachers
- What skills/resources are necessary for teachers to engage more with research
- What research they used and how
- Implications for everyday teaching practice

- What other circumstances need to be in place for optimal impact
- Additional resources/costs involved
- What is/isn't working

The interviews will be mostly by phone (sometimes in person if linked to researchers attending a programme event) and arranged directly with participants.

We will pull out the key issues from across all of the schools as well as processes for bringing about change and mechanisms which may lead to the success of such a project. We will also look at the key features of the Research Champion role and consider sustainability and future roll out. The final report will use case studies to illustrate our key findings.

1.2.3 Quantitative data collection and analysis

In order to understand teachers' views and experiences of using research to influence teaching and the process of making schools more research-informed we will survey teaching staff in all of the participating schools. All teachers at schools participating in the Ashford model will be asked to complete a short online survey at two points in time: in September-October 2014 and again in June/July 2015. The total size of the issued sample will be around 340 teachers.

The survey will be a standardised questionnaire of up to 20 minutes in length used across all the evaluations in the Research Use in Schools round. NatCen will receive the final questionnaires from NfER which will specify all question text, introductions, textfills, routing and response validations required to produce the web survey. We are happy to provide comments on early questionnaire drafts to NfER and EEF.

Schools will be required to provide NatCen with a list of teaching staff which includes full name, email address and role/position which will form the sample for the web survey. The Memorandum of Understanding with schools states that they will be expected to provide this information and encourage participation in the survey. NatCen will contact the Head teacher and Research Lead at each school by post about the survey and all teaching staff will be sent an email inviting them to complete the survey online with details about completion. NatCen will send updates to the Research Champion with details about numbers of completed surveys in order to encourage response. We have assumed a response rate of 75 per cent (around 250 completed questionnaires) for planning and cost purposes as participation in the survey will be considered a key component of the programme with schools so teachers are expecting to take part. However, achieving this high response rate is dependent on Research Leads and the Research Champion actively encouraging survey completions.

Respondents will be sent a number of reminder emails by NatCen team to encourage participation, in addition to contacts from the Research Champion and the Research Leads. A helpline and an email address will be available to respondents for any queries or concerns they may have. There will also be a page on NatCen website with information about the study. A link to that web page and contact details for any queries will be included in all correspondence with potential respondents.

1.2.4 Analysis of attainment outcomes

Whilst attainment outcomes are not the focus of this development study, it is of interest to EEF to see whether it is possible to detect any changes in pupil performance/progress over the time frame of the intervention. Depending on the findings regarding attainment, this may indicate the anticipated effect size, and therefore, inform the trial design if a full trial is planned in the future. To address this we will perform analysis of Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 outcomes in the participating schools compared to similar schools using the National Pupil Database (NPD). In order to do this we will select schools that have similar characteristics to those participating in the project which we anticipate to include alliance membership, percentage of children eligible for FSM, ethnicity and EAL profile, and attainment. (The design

of this element will be discussed with the EEF separately once the logic model for the intervention is finalised and there is greater clarity about which NPD data is available at the time of the proposed analysis.) This analysis will help EEF to monitor any longer term impact on attainment from any changes in research engagement in the school as a result of the intervention.

1.2.5 Effective collaboration

At NatCen, we have built up valuable learning from the projects we have conducted for EEF over the past years. One of the most important ways in which we can ensure high quality and cost-effectiveness is through the clear allocation of roles and responsibilities between EEF, the programme team, ourselves as evaluators, research participants and other stakeholders. We anticipate working in close partnership with the programme team during the development phase. We would identify what stage their plans are at and what further information they need to inform this. We would test out the practicalities of delivering the intervention which in turn would feed into the design of any subsequent trial. Our evaluation specialists will be closely involved in this study, helping to ensure this formative evaluation achieves its objectives. Because of the intensity of this pilot study, we envisage a close working relationship between the project and evaluation team throughout the project – this is something we welcome. We believe that as non-academic contributors we can add value, based on our experience of regularly carrying out and evaluating similar social research projects, to the management of the overall project and advise on implementing the programme in schools.

1.2.6 Research team

This evaluation will be carried out by an experienced team of researchers from within the Children, Families and Work team and the Evaluations team at NatCen. The key members of the project team will be:

- **Dr Svetlana Speight**, Research Director, will lead the study and will be the overall Project Manager
- **Dr Julia Griggs**, Senior Researcher, will be mainly responsible for the process evaluation and for the analysis of attainment outcomes
- **Alexandra Fry**, Researcher, will be responsible for day-to-day running of the project, including both the quantitative and the qualitative elements
- **Dr Triin Edovald**, Research Director, will support the project team drawing on her specialist knowledge of evaluation design and analysis.

1.2.7 Timetable

We have suggested a timeline for the project based on meetings with the Research Champion and EEF to conduct the development phase between July 2014 and December 2015, which can feed into an application for an RCT in 2016.

Timetable		
Month	Intervention activities	Evaluation activities
2014		
June	Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) agreed between project and evaluation teams Launch event	
July	MoU signed by schools and returned to Research Champion (RC)	
Aug		Questionnaire spec received from NfER (1st week in August)

Timetable		
Month	Intervention activities	Evaluation activities
Sept		Pre-intervention survey fieldwork Face-to-face meeting with the Research Champion to develop the logic model
Oct	Delivery of intervention starts	First interview with the Research Champion
Nov		Depth telephone interviews with research leads in schools Analysis of baseline survey responses complete
Dec		
2015		
Jan		
Feb		Second interview with the Research Champion
Mar		Depth interviews with staff in schools
April		
May		Questionnaire spec received from NfER (1st week in May) Third interview with the Research Champion Depth interviews with research leads in schools Depth interviews with other staff members in participating schools
June		Post-intervention survey fieldwork Third phase of depth interviews continues
July		
Aug		Survey and qualitative analysis
Sept		Early findings to EEF
Oct		NPD data available
Nov		
Dec		Full draft report submitted to EEF

1.3 Evaluator experience

At NatCen Social Research, we can point to a long and successful track record of exploring and evaluating the effectiveness of school-based interventions designed to improve teaching practices and enhance pupil attainment, using both impact and process evaluations. Our current and recent work includes a portfolio of evaluation projects for the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) as well as large-scale evaluations of school-based initiatives such as Every Child a Reader and an evaluation of a Place2Be programme (aiming to support Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) to manage pupil behaviour better). We have extensive experience of designing and managing randomised control trials (RCTs) as well as quasi-experimental evaluations. Our RCTs include an exploration of the effect of music tuition on maths and literacy attainment for primary school pupils, and evaluations of the Teens and Toddlers intervention and the Employment Retention and Advancement Demonstration. Our statisticians also conduct a large number of randomised control experiments in survey fieldwork methodology, testing innovative fieldwork procedures.

The Children, Families and Work Team at NatCen have expertise in how to carry out robust process evaluations and the capacity to undertake this project. We are used to exploring processes which lead to impacts with a range of stakeholders in schools. We understand how to carry these out in a way that involves and engages teaching staff whilst minimising burden on them. We have experience of these in both primary and secondary settings.