



Limitations of evidence-based practice

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What's the idea?

As an evidence-based practitioner, it is important that you are consistently challenging your own pre-conceptions of 'what works'. Accordingly, it is important to be aware of the limitations and weaknesses of evidence-based practice when used as a basis for making decisions.

What does it mean?

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) provide a number of reasons why the case for evidence-based practice can be overstated:

- » evidence-based decisions can be tainted with self-interest
- » cast-iron evidence can get rusty later on
- » evidence-based principles are used very selectively
- » evidence isn't always self-evident
- » evidence on *what* to change isn't the same as *how* to change
- » positive initiatives based on evidence in one area can inflict collateral damage

- » people can cook the data
- » evidence-based teaching is only somewhat like evidence-based medicine
- » evidence comes from experience as well as research (adapted from Hargreaves and Fullan, p. 47).

As someone who is interested in evidence-based practice, the temptation may be to ignore these limitations. Instead, take this opportunity to reflect on these challenges to evidence-based practice and decide for yourself whether they are sufficiently robust to fatally undermine the case for the use of evidence in schools. Alternatively, you may want to identify how these issues can be addressed through well-thought-out counter-strategies.

What are the implications for teachers?

Hargreaves and Fullan argue the following: "So-called evidence can be unclear, ambiguous, compromised, out of date, indecipherable, contested or just plain wrong. This is not a reason to fall back on intuitions or personal preference

as the sole base for teaching. We just need to be a bit more humble and careful about what we are claiming. Teachers with professional capital are not driven by data or overly dependent on measurable evidence - but they inquire into and adapt the best ways for moving forward, making intelligent, critical and reflective use of measurable evidence and considered experience alike. They are committed to knowing and showing what impact they have on their students, and to fulfilling their responsibility for making this transparent to the public they serve." (p. 48)

So, evidence-based practice is not a certain or a perfect solution, but it can be a safeguard against ineffective or harmful action. An evidence-based practitioner does more than read research. They engage with, collaborate around, and interrogate a variety of evidence sources in systematic, considered and critical ways.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- » Biesta G (2007). Why "What Works" Won't Work: Evidence-Based Practice and the Democratic Deficit in Educational Research. *Educational Theory* 57(1): 1-22.
- » Brown C (2015) Evidence-Informed Policy and Practice in Education : A sociological grounding. London: Bloomsbury.
- » Hargreaves A and Fullan M (2012) Professional Capital: Transforming, teaching in every school. Abingdon: Routledge.