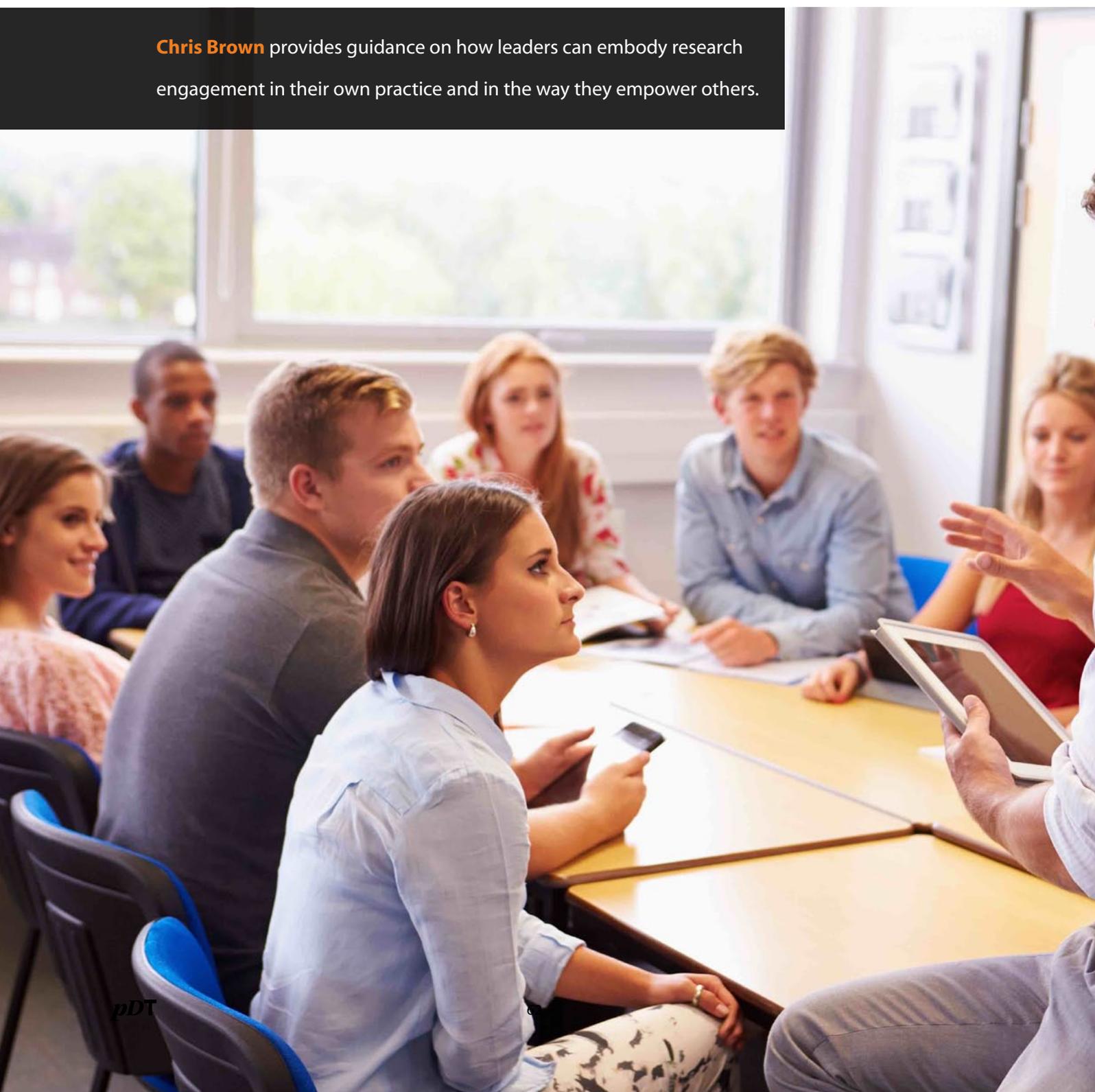


# Achieving evidence-informed school improvement: a check list for school leaders

**Chris Brown** provides guidance on how leaders can embody research engagement in their own practice and in the way they empower others.



**E**ngaging with research and evidence as part of a process of effective professional development has substantial benefits for both teacher practice and in terms of pupil outcomes (e.g. see Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003; Cordingley, 2013; Mincu, 2013; Supovitz, 2015).



The purpose of this article is to provide school leaders with a better understanding of how to harness these benefits. As I note in my latest book “Leading the Use of Research and Evidence in Schools” (Brown, 2015), true research-engagement within and across schools will require school leaders to address both the ‘transformational’ and ‘learning centred’ aspects of becoming research and evidence engaged. With this in mind, I draw together the core themes emerging from the book into these two aspects and provide a definitive summary ‘checklist’ for school leaders seeking to develop their schools as evidence-informed. I begin with two factors that cover the ‘transformational’ acts of enabling research use to be embedded as an organizational goal. The remaining three checklist items focus on the ‘learner-centred’ aspects of research engagement: i.e. ensuring research and evidence use can lead to improved teaching.

**■■■ CHECKLIST ITEM 1 Modelling and championing research engagement: does your approach to research and evidence use demonstrate your own commitment as well as facilitate the efforts of others?**

#### **Promoting vision and providing resource**

As Clare Roberts (2015) argues, school leadership must actively and demonstrably buy-in to research and evidence use for it to become part of a school’s ‘way of life’. This means that school leaders must not only promote the vision for and develop the culture of a research engaged school (including the promotion of the values required for learning communities to operate), they must also provide the necessary resource and supporting structures so that sustained and meaningful research use can become a reality, and resulting changes in practice employed widely. For example in terms of making available time and space for teachers to come together, ensuring there is access to research, and as has been highlighted by Tom Bennett (2015), upskilling teachers so that they are able to engage critically with research. Distribution of research leadership can be effective but teacher researchers’ chances of success must be maximized: the vision for success must be clear and the path for reaching the vision cleared.

### Walking the talk

It is also important that research use is not simply viewed by school leaders as ‘someone else’s job’. The active involvement of senior leaders with research activity is vital because having first hand involvement and experience in research use ensures that it remains top of mind and so a priority; also that any issues in engaging with research and evidence are encountered first-hand. In addition, involvement enables senior leaders to ‘walk the talk’: not only to demonstrate their commitment, but to also engage in more learning centred leadership practices such as ‘modelling’, ‘monitoring’ and ‘mentoring and coaching’ (dialogue), thus ensuring wider buy-in across the school (e.g. Southworth, 2009; Earley, 2013). As both Stoll (2015) and Earl (2015) note, a key characteristic for senior leaders to model is having an ‘enquiry habit of mind’: senior leaders actively looking for a range of perspectives, purposefully seeking relevant information from numerous and diverse sources and continually exploring new ways to tackle perennial problems. Modelling could also materialize in senior leaders registering for their own higher level degrees.

■ ■ ■ **CORE THEME 2 At the heart of the organisation: does your approach to research and evidence use have buy in throughout the school?**

### Formal and informal influence

A key aspect of many definitions of leadership is that there must be a process of influence. As we see in Finnigan *et al.*, (2015), leadership activity as a form of influence can be undertaken by more than just those possessing ‘formal’ responsibility. This notion is also reflected by Jim Spillane and colleagues (2010), who argue that, perhaps more than formal leaders, it is informal leaders who determine the fate of reform initiatives. As a consequence the implementation of new initiatives, such as research and evidence use, must attend to the informal aspects of an organization: i.e. the organization as lived by organizational members in their day-to-day work life.

### Hearts and minds

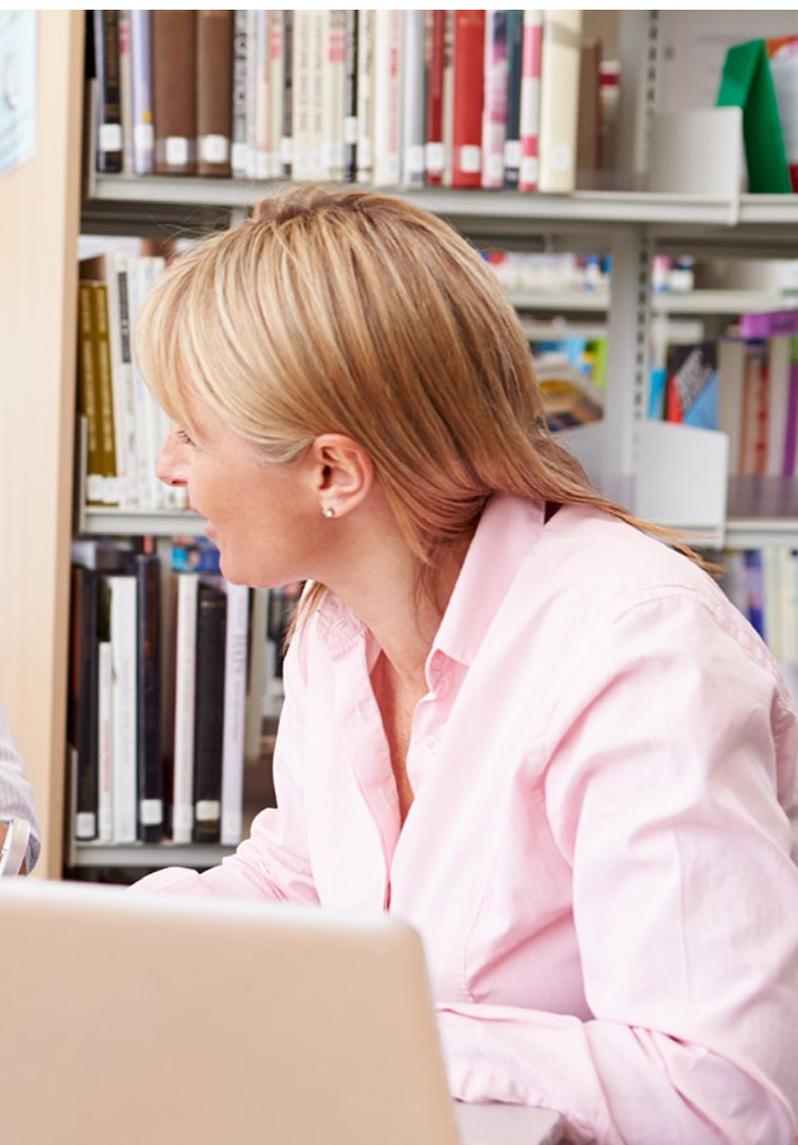
“Attending to the informal organization”, it is argued, “we expand our focus beyond formally designated leaders in a school’s advice network to also include those individuals who are key advice givers, but who have no formal leadership designation” (Spillane *et al.*, 2010: 30). As Louise Stoll and I argue (2015), one of the core issues in bridging the gap between evidence and practice is the need to influence teachers’ values and beliefs and change their behaviours. By bringing into play the informal organization, this means that the vision of school leaders needs to be grounded in



collaborative ideals and be consensual. Also that any vision for research engagement needs ‘on the ground’ champions, including middle leaders, if it is to be more than embedded simply at a surface level.

■■■ **CORE THEME 3 Improvement focussed: does your approach to research and evidence use ‘start with the end’ in mind and ensure progress towards this end is tracked?**

Much current evidence suggest strongly that professional development that makes a difference needs to start with



the end in mind (Earley and Porritt, 2009; Stoll, 2006, 2015; Stoll, Harris and Handscomb 2012; Taylor and Spence-Thomas, 2015). In other words, you to be clear about intended outcomes before we begin any professional learning activity. There are two key benefits to this approach: first, it provides a point of focus – a goal or vision for which you can strive. Second, starting with the end in mind also provides a way to measure impact and so assess how effective your efforts have been in achieving this vision. I look at each of these in more detail below:

- **Providing a point of focus:** a technique often used within The London Centre for Leadership in Learning is to ask teachers, ‘what difference do you want to make?’ and ‘what will success look like?’ Specifically, we encourage teachers to think deeply about, in relation to a given issue of teaching and learning, what pupils will be ‘achieving’ and ‘doing’, ‘how pupils will be feeling’, ‘what will pupils be saying’ and ‘how will pupils be responding [to potential new initiatives]’. We then ask teachers to repeat the exercise in terms of the actions and behaviours they will engage in that will lead to this change in pupils. Getting teachers to think about future success in this way means that they come to a common understanding of, and a vision for, what needs to be achieved: this helps ensure the views of school leaders and staff are in alignment and provides the foundation for action.
- **Evaluating your efforts:** the next step is to ascertain the current actions and behaviours of pupils and teachers. Crucially, this involves turning each of the changes envisioned above into measurable qualities and gathering ‘baseline data’ in relation to these, either by harvesting readily available data or by collecting new data (e.g. see Earley and Porritt, 2014). Once vision and baseline have been established, teachers can then engage in learning conversations and practical action (see below). Learning conversations and practical action should be focused on:
  - developing approaches that demonstrate proposed relationships between teacher

learning and improved student outcomes, via changes in teaching practice; and

- conceiving, trialing and refining activities to achieve the required changes in practice that will result in improved pupil outcomes.

Clearly, practical activity must go hand in hand with evaluating how quickly and to what extent this action is helping teachers move from baseline to vision. And if part of the vision is a more general aspiration for the school to become research-engaged, a proposed scale for measuring this is set out in Brown and Rogers (2014). Also important is sharing success with peers and other schools – this is covered in more detail in, below.

Following evaluation and sharing, practices should be collaboratively refined, radically changed or removed as appropriate. This means that research engagement activity should not be considered one-off in nature and must be undertaken within the context of a wider iterative ‘cycle’ of enquiry and improvement: for example the Connect to Learn (C2L) approach developed by Harris and Jones (2012) and used by Carol Taylor and Karen Spence-Thomas (2015).

### ■ ■ ■ ■ CORE THEME 4 Developing expertise: does your approach to research and evidence use have teacher learning and practice at its core?

#### **Making connections**

As Saunders argues (2014; 2015), effective research use doesn’t mean replacing teacher knowledge with academic knowledge or with the ‘what works’ knowledge produced by bodies such as the Education Endowment Foundation. Effective research use actually stems from developing expertise; ensuring that teachers are able to bring together ‘what is known’ (i.e. formal knowledge) with what they know about their context, their pupils and what they currently see as effective practice (i.e. their experience and the experience of others). In a similar vein, as we see in Supovitz (2015), effective data use is that which helps teachers make connections and examine the relationships between what they do (teaching activity) and its outcomes

(how students fare in response). Engaging in this type of process, described by Louise Stoll as knowledge ‘animation’ (2008; 2012) and by Sue Rogers and myself as knowledge ‘creation’ (2014), means that teachers at once have a wider understanding of both the causes of problems relating to teaching and learning and practical understanding for how these might be addressed.

#### **Maximising the collaborative dividend**

There is increasing evidence that when done well, it is professional learning in collaborative communities that is the type of CPD most likely to lead to improvements in both teachers’ practice and student outcomes (Stoll *et al*, 2006; Veschio *et al*, 2008; Lomas *et al*, 2011; Harris and Jones, 2012; Sebba *et al*, 2012). What makes an effective Professional Learning Community (PLC) and examples of PLCs are set out in Stoll (2006) and Brown (2015). At the London Centre for Leadership in Learning (UCL,IOE) we have coined the phrase *Research Learning Communities* to refer to PLCs that have the specific purpose of increasing research use in schools.<sup>1</sup> A core benefit of the RLC approach can be attributed to the nature of the learning that can take place within them. To maximize the benefits of this learning (i.e. to ensure RLC activity results in the type of knowledge creation outcomes I mention above), RLC participants need to take part in ‘learning conversations’: considered thoughtful (rather than superficial) discussion and



challenge, focused on matters of teaching practice, that consider evidence of actual and potential forms of practice and that are undertaken with a view to developing both improved practice (i.e. new approaches to issues) and, as a result, outcomes for students. The key characteristics of effective learning conversations can be found in Figure 1.

### Space to innovate

Following learning conversations, there must be a period of practical activity to allow teachers to trial, refine and build an understanding as to when and how it is appropriate to apply proposed new approaches to issues

of teaching and learning (i.e. to develop their expertise). In Hélène Galdin-O'Shea's work (2015), for example, both 'lesson study' and 'joint practice development' are held up as examples of how research-informed ideas can be transformed into research-informed realities. Time to practice means that RLC participants have the opportunity to build school capacity by engaging and sharing their expertise with others (e.g. via processes such as 'modelling', 'monitoring' and 'mentoring and coaching'), who can then also begin to practice what they have learned. This has the added benefit of RLC participants, gaining further understanding through extended practice.

### Figure 1: The key characteristics of effective learning conversations

Louise Stoll (2012) suggests that the following are features characteristic of high quality learning conversations between adults:

- **Focus on evidence and/or ideas.** Learning conversations are focused, with the specific focus reflecting one of two important perspectives. First, the conversation's focus can centre on existing and effective practice within the school/network. Second, the conversation reflects ideas about innovation and transformation where, for example, it explores creative ways to engage learners and extend learning. Because the second focus will require elements of the first, many conversations weave these two perspectives together. Both require all those participating in the conversation to be committed to the focus (which in itself will need to be linked to the overall values and vision of the RLC). As we see in Supovitz (2015), to facilitate this aspect of the learning conversation, work may be needed to present evidence in a way that is most useful for teachers.
- **Experience and external knowledge/theory.** Access to outside expertise deepens learning conversations. Whether delivered personally, through writing, or via other media, independent ideas are injected to stimulate reflection, challenge the status quo and extend thinking. Such ideas can help promote greater depth in conversations. For *Research Learning Communities* 'formal' knowledge (e.g. academic research) is key and is seen as holding as equal importance as practitioner held knowledge in developing new solutions to issues of teaching and learning. Clearly 'formal' knowledge has to be of quality and these issues were addressed by Tom Bennett (2015).
- **Protocols and tools.** Learning conversations can often be framed more clearly when supported by frameworks and guidelines that help participants structure their dialogue and interrogate evidence or ideas. Teachers also need opportunities to look at and discuss 'artifacts' of their practice, not just test results (see Stoll, 2015).
- **Facilitation.** Facilitation isn't the same as external expertise. It can come from inside or outside the group, but it's needed to elicit and support intellectual exchange, as well as maintaining open dialogue and, sometimes, injecting new energy into the conversation. Skilful facilitation can often lead to a productive balance of comfort and challenge.

### ■ ■ ■ CORE THEME 5 Peer power: does your approach to research and evidence ensure that the right people are in the room?

#### **Catalysts for evidence-informed change**

We have seen that the vision of school leaders needs ‘on the ground’ champions if it is to be more than embedded simply at a surface level. In similar fashion, aspects of learner centric leadership also need support from teachers who agree that specific approaches to improving teaching and learning are required, and are happy to promote them to peers. In other work, Louise Stoll and I (2015) detail how we selected middle leaders for this role, but not just any middle leaders - we wanted those keen to tackle and promote evidence-informed change. As we soon discovered, the most effective ‘catalysts’ were influential within and beyond their schools. This meant that their peers were willing to learn from and engage with them.

#### **The power of evidence champions**

Social network analysis (SNA) and methods (Daly, 2010) provide another way of identifying who has influence in the school. A good example is the Research Learning

Communities project I am currently leading with a range of primary schools across the country (Brown, 2015). I have used SNA to identify the teachers to whom others turn for support in terms of pedagogic expertise, research informed advice on teaching and learning, and in terms of collaborative activities (such as joint lesson planning, the exchange of teaching materials etc.). These central and influential people, along with senior leaders in their schools, were then chosen as the project’s *evidence champions*. Between 2014-2016 we will be regularly bringing together evidence champions into learning communities, with activities designed to help them increase the awareness and use of evidence throughout their schools and to measure the impact of doing so.

#### **Fuel for research engagement**

Another way of thinking about ‘who is in the room’ is to consider what expertise and resource is required to make research engagement happen, and if necessary, to seek this from external sources. Louise Stoll and I partnered with Challenge Partners<sup>2</sup>. (a group of 300+ schools across England who work collaboratively to improve teacher and pupil outcomes). We gave the schools involved access to ‘formal’ research, skilled facilitators, a network of middle leaders that could form an instant learning community covering many sites, and a central coordinating function that could negotiate release and cover across 15 schools, pay cover costs and help ensure schools were all broadly moving in the same direction at the same time. Louise Stoll also makes the point that teachers and leaders need critical friends who will ask challenging questions (e.g. see 2006; 2012; 2015). As Greany suggests, academics are often very well placed to ask these challenging questions (see Brown and Greany, 2014; Greany, 2015). Indeed, school-university partnerships are now playing a vital role in England’s increasingly autonomous school system, with its core ambition of enabling schools, networks and clusters to ‘self-improve’ (see Handscomb, Gu and Varley, 2015). Again the success of these partnerships will be a function of school leaders who can foster the support required, but who can also ensure adequate time and space is created for researchers and practitioners to come together.



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**Endowment Foundation to work with 100+ primary schools in England to increase their use of research.**

#### Notes

1. See: <http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects/research-learning-communities/>
2. See: <http://challengepartners.org>

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