

The Redcliffe Annual Early Years Research Conference

The 8th Annual Redcliffe Early Years Research Conference took place on 15th October 2014 at the Doubletree by Hilton in Bristol.

Elizabeth Caruthers, Headteacher at Redcliffe Children's Centre and Nursery School, opened the event. Promoting the view that teaching is an intellectual activity (not simply a 'craft') Elizabeth stressed that research should be an inspiration for further development and a vehicle for positive change. It can be a framework for self-improvement and should underpin everything that happens within any educational setting.

Dr Sara Bubb

www.sarabubb.com

The first speaker was Dr Sara Bubb, a senior lecturer at the Institute of Education and an Educational Consultant. Teaching schools need to embed research into everything they do, she advised, and subsequent research findings need to feed back into practice. Questioning whether research might be seen as a luxury or an 'indulgence' she argued that research is in fact a way to improve the quality of learning and should always be at the top of the agenda. Through a process of 'enhanced reflection' we, as practitioners, can work together to make positive change for the benefit of our youngest children.



A 'research engaged' school needs to be critical of received wisdom to enable positive change to happen. Fostering an 'aggressive curiosity' can aid this process, simply by encouraging staff to ask why something should be this way, just because it always has.

Research can be most powerful when a setting or school has a 'research lead' or 'ambassador' who can drive the school's research programme, from the conception of an idea through to it's development in practice.

Dr. Bubb identified educationalists and resources for reference and inspiration:

Tom Bennett (@TomBennett71) writes and tweets on education in the Times Educational Supplement and on Twitter. Dylan William (@DylanWilliam), Emeritus Professor of Educational Assessment at the Institute of Education was also suggested to those who tweet. Also worth following is Laura Mcinerney (@miss_mcinerney).

Useful websites are:

www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is an independent grant-making charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational

achievement, ensuring that children from all backgrounds can fulfil their potential and make the most of their talents.

www.ioe.ac.uk

Institute of Education Research and Development Network, University of London.

www.workingouthwhatworks.com

ResearchED is a teacher-led organisation aimed at improving research literacy in the educational communities, with the specific aim of improving educational outcomes for children.

www.nfer.ac.uk

Nfer aims to improve education and learning, and hence the lives of learners, by providing independent evidence.

Nicola Theobald, Spiral Associates

www.spiralassociates.co.uk

Nicola has worked with The Mead Teaching School, Trowbridge for several years, and shared examples of how research can and should be embedded into the culture of a school to enable positive change. A supportive professional culture is crucial, she said, to build an engagement with research amongst all staff. The support of school leaders is central to this and they should be encouraged to model research behaviours. Research should not be an 'add-on' but a central tenet of a school's activities, as teachers are supported to respond to their intellectual curiosities. This process ensures opportunities for teachers to 'refine their crafts'.

Learning 'Setts' have been developed at The Mead to promote researchful practice through reflection, professional dialogue and systematic enquiry. They have been designed to shape, refine and drive development through collaboration, support and challenge. These Learning Setts focus on the impact of a particular aspect of children's learning. Promoting research practice across the school, the Learning Setts identify school priorities for development. Outcomes from the Setts are disseminated through an annual learning conference event. Across the alliance Learning Communities and Joint practice Innovation Hubs have been created, whereby activity is aligned to alliance priorities. All of these research-based groups utilise a common research methodology – 'spiral'.

Elizabeth Carruthers, Head, Redcliffe Children's Centre and Nursery School

www.redcliffechildrenscentre.co.uk

Elizabeth reinforced the idea of creating, supporting and encouraging a fully embedded research culture into early years settings. She acknowledged the challenge this presented, but said it was not an impossible task. Through a process of 'developing a base of critical analysis' (Stonehouse) research can lead to innovation to improve outcomes. Successful research needs to be shared with others (through writing and publishing) to avoid duplication and to maximize its impact on educational outcomes. At Redcliffe, a full library of research publications and books (which was just one shelf a couple of years ago) has been created to provide support and inspiration to staff. Current research projects are always on display on walls to inspire and enthuse. A Research Portfolio is also available, housing details of Redcliffe research projects.



guided by the current needs of the setting.

There are many ways to approach a research project, and Redcliffe benefits from an organic approach; identifying areas of interest based on need and current cohorts, and often developing a research question over many years. Elizabeth stressed that the Redcliffe approach suggests there isn't a 'right' way to approach research and that it should be

Nicola Theobald, Spiral Associates, and Lucy Beck, Website Manager, Bristol Early Years Research website.

www.bristolearlyyearsresearch.org.uk



The new Bristol Early Years Research website was formally launched. This has been a collaboration between the Bristol Early Years Teaching Consortium (led by Elizabeth Carruthers as the Research Lead) and Bristol City Council (Nicola Theobald), to facilitate the promotion of research in early years education. Case studies, early years news, CPD courses, research hubs, articles, research opportunities, courses and funding and teaching school information are all included in the website.

Margaret Mulholland, Director of Development and Research, Swiss Cottage School, Development and Research Centre

www.swisscottage.camden.sch.uk

'Built in, not bolt on.'

This was the theme of Margaret's discussion on the development of a research informed learning community across the Swiss Cottage Teaching Alliance. Here, research is seen to be integral to everyday activities and significantly contributes to school improvement. Research is seen as real, not rarified; something that adds quality to daily practice, without placing unrealistic extra demands on staff.

Swiss Cottage has over 200 children with severe and complex learning difficulties. The culture of the school explicitly states that research must be a driver for change and improvement. It should inform, and make practitioners question the way they do things. With a strong coaching culture and sense of direction, research is encouraged as a pathway to positive change.

Margaret discussed what makes a good research question. It needs to be relevant, she said, and something that will contribute to school improvement. The research question needs to be framed so people can work with it. It has to be manageable and accessible. It needs to be built into ITT courses, and into Masters and Aspiring Leadership programmes. Research shouldn't be seen in isolation, but rather as a series of relevant, evidence informed questions that capture tacit knowledge to enable effective innovation.

Workshops



Matt Caldwell (Network Lead Teacher, South Bristol Early Years Area Network), Emma Butcher (Early Maths SLE, Redcliffe), Nicola Theobald (Spiral Associates) and Elizabeth Carruthers (Redcliffe) facilitated workshops to discuss and reflect on taking research and development forward in the delegate's own setting. Groups were split into those just beginning their research journey, and those who were ready to take their research to the next level. Different case studies were

presented as further evidence that research doesn't need to follow a specified formula but rather can represent the needs, motivations and direction of the setting in which it is carried out.

Sue Cook, Specialist Leader for Initial Teacher Education, Redcliffe Nursery School and Children's Centre.

Sue shared the importance of Ethics in Research and outlined details of her own research and how she managed it from an ethical perspective. She used the University of Leicester code of ethical practice as a starting point, but went beyond its stipulations in the course of her research. Key considerations were

the content of consent forms, the right to withdraw, confidentiality, anonymity and storage and deletion of material. Inclusion was an essential point, especially as 50% of her children had EAL. Non-verbal children were also represented. Sue highlighted the issue of 'power' and how she embraced familiar people and bilingual support workers to invite participation.

The key point was that ethical guidelines are not always enough, and that pertinent, individual decisions need to be made as the research journey progresses.

Tour of Redcliffe Children's Centre and Nursery School

