Understanding quality of evidence use

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There is no shortage of initiatives aimed at increasing the use of research evidence across many sectors of public policy (Boaz, Davies, Fraser & Nutley, 2019). Within education, there are growing expectations internationally that schools and school systems will use research evidence to underpin and inform their improvement efforts (BERA, 2014; White et al., 2018). These kinds of developments can be seen to raise important questions about how we understand and conceptualise the quality of evidence use.

Improved evidence use in education requires clarity about not only what counts as quality evidence, but also what counts as quality use. To date, there has been wide-ranging debate about the former, but very little dialogue about the latter. There is a well-developed literature around understanding and appraising the quality of different kinds of evidence (for example, Nutley, Powell & Davies, 2013), but little in the way of an equivalent for understanding and appraising the quality of different kinds of use.

This piece shares some early ideas about how quality evidence use might be conceptualised in relation to education (Rickinson, Walsh, Cirkony, Salisbury & Gleeson, 2020). The ideas presented are based on findings from the first phase of the Q Project, a five-year study seeking to understand and improve the use of research evidence in Australian schools. This first phase involved a systematic review and narrative synthesis of 111 relevant publications from health, social care, policy and education. The aim was to explore if and how quality of evidence use had been defined and described within each of these sectors, in order to inform the development of a quality use framework for educators.

Our analysis found a definite lack of explicit definitions or descriptions of quality of evidence use across all sectors. With a few important exceptions (for example, Parkhurst, 2017), we did not find well-developed articulations or discussions about what 'using research evidence well' means or involves. In all sectors, though, there were lines of thinking that touched on quality use indirectly, often in connection with evidence use improvement or capacity building.

QUALITY USE OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Drawing on these ideas, we have developed an initial framing of high-quality use of research evidence as: 'thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence, supported by a blend of individual and organisational enabling components within a complex system'.

As shown in figure 1 on page 27, this definition sees quality evidence use as:

- comprising two *core components* ('appropriate research evidence', 'thoughtful engagement and implementation')
- being supported by three *individual enabling components* ('skillsets', 'mindsets', 'relationships') and three *organisational enabling components* ('culture', 'leadership', 'infrastructure')
- being shaped by *wider system-level influences*.

This framing works from the starting point that quality evidence use needs to encompass the nature of both the evidence and the use. At its core, therefore, are two interconnected aspirations – for the research evidence to be appropriate, and for the engagement and implementation to be thoughtful. This framing also builds on the idea that quality evidence use needs to be supported by a range of individual, organisational and system-level factors. That is, there is a need for:

- *education professionals* with not only the knowledge and skills to understand research evidence (*skillsets*), but also the values and dispositions to be open to its meaning (*mindsets*) and the relational sensitivity and capacity to work with others to determine how to use it in context (*relationships*)

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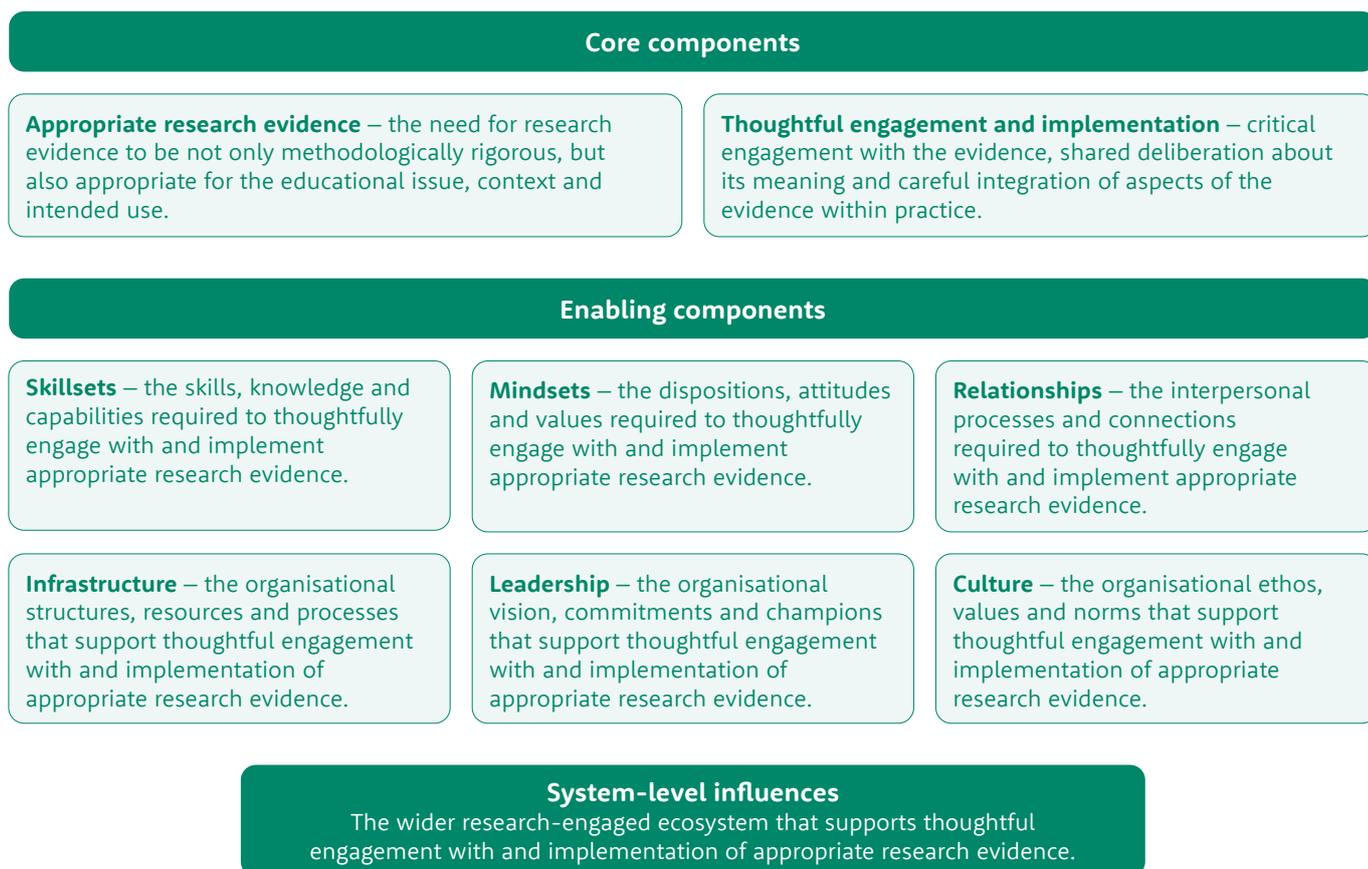
Core components

Appropriate research evidence – the need for research evidence to be not only methodologically rigorous, but also appropriate for the educational issue, context and intended use.

Thoughtful engagement and implementation – critical engagement with the evidence, shared deliberation about its meaning and careful integration of aspects of the evidence within practice.

Enabling components

Skillsets – the skills, knowledge and capabilities required to thoughtfully engage with and implement appropriate research evidence.

Mindsets – the dispositions, attitudes and values required to thoughtfully engage with and implement appropriate research evidence.

Relationships – the interpersonal processes and connections required to thoughtfully engage with and implement appropriate research evidence.

Infrastructure – the organisational structures, resources and processes that support thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence.

Leadership – the organisational vision, commitments and champions that support thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence.

Culture – the organisational ethos, values and norms that support thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence.

System-level influences
The wider research-engaged ecosystem that supports thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence.

Figure 1: Components of high-quality use of research evidence

- *education organisations* with not only the structures and processes to enable staff to engage with evidence (*infrastructure*), but also the ethos and values to make evidence use a cultural norm (*culture*) and the leadership and commitment to demonstrate and promote its significance (*leadership*)
- *education systems* that support quality evidence use not only within specific individuals, institutions or contexts, but also through co-ordinated interventions across multiple levels and with varied stakeholders.

NEXT STEPS
What we have outlined is an early conceptual framework based on analysis and synthesis of relevant literature. It has not yet been empirically tested or validated. The next step will be school-based empirical investigation to better understand what using research evidence well looks like and involves in different contexts. This process, along with continued stakeholder consultation and feedback, will enable further development and elaboration of the framework. We see this as an exciting and critical area for more sustained attention, discussion and investigation in the coming years.

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