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GENEVIEVE'S CASE STUDY: SKILLSETS FOR UNDERSTANDING AND APPRAISING APPROPRIATE RESEARCH

This practitioner case study shares the journey of Genevieve and the skillsets she used to define a suitable focus for a research-informed change at her school, and then identify and appraise appropriate research. Genevieve's story highlights three key learnings that you could consider in relation to your own work:

1. ***Planning and data literacy skills can help to identify an appropriate focus for a research-informed change.***
2. ***Analytical and critical thinking skills are important for appraising whether research is appropriate.***
3. ***Relational skills and networks can support you to understand and appraise appropriate research.***

WHAT WAS THE CONTEXT?

Genevieve is a classroom teacher at Sandy Hills School, a small government special school located in Queensland. She teaches students with intellectual disabilities, many of whom are also on the autism spectrum. In Genevieve's school, one of the core improvement priorities for the coming years is to better use evidence-informed strategies to support students' learning. In her own practice, she commented that she understands *"the importance of looking at the evidence and looking at the best practice"* and reported that she regularly engages with research to deliver the best outcomes for her students.

> "[We don't want to be] walking in and going 'Oh, I'll just do this because I've done [it] in my last school and this works', but rather looking at what is the best research out there for the students, what's been trialled before and found to be successful."

WHAT WAS THE FOCUS?

Genevieve explained that the current reading and writing program at Sandy Hills School is informed by research, and has a strong evidence base demonstrating its value for supporting *"students with disabilities in various areas"* at the school. However, recently, she noticed that some of her students were not progressing as expected in the current writing program. This prompted Genevieve to consider how she could identify appropriate research in order to revise the program and better meet her students' varied needs.

Genevieve's aim to use 'appropriate' research was underpinned by her acknowledgement that not all research would be applicable to her school context. She commented that knowledge of her students was critical: *"Just because the research says 'This is how it's done' – it might be how it's done, but we may need to look at a slightly different way for [our] students"*. For this reason, she first engaged with student data, conversations with colleagues, as well as consultations with the Department of Education regional representatives to determine what constituted *'appropriate'* research in her context and what purpose it would serve. Following this, Genevieve then accessed and appraised high-quality research evidence to inform her revision of the reading and writing program. This practitioner story focuses specifically on the skills that Genevieve utilised across these steps.

HOW DID GENEVIEVE PLAN FOR A RESEARCH-INFORMED CHANGE?

To begin, Genevieve wanted to develop a deep understanding of what was currently occurring in classrooms with the reading and writing program, to ensure that any research-informed change would address students' varied needs. She drew on her

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planning skills to identify and get her *"own evidence together".* Bringing together different sources of data and professional information was crucial to help Genevieve identify productive areas in which to focus her efforts.

First, given that Genevieve's school had been implementing the reading and writing program for a number of years, she accessed student learning data over time and used her data literacy skills to identify patterns in the students' outcomes. This allowed her to understand that while the program was suitable for younger students (i.e., Prep and Year 1), many of the older students were *"progressing past"* the program's scope or range and were plateauing in terms of their literacy outcomes. To complement this understanding, Genevieve leveraged her relational skills to engage in conversations with her colleagues about their current practices. Together, they developed a *"continuum"* to collectively determine how well their current practices *"align[ed] with … the best practice and the evidence"* gathered.

Next, Genevieve wanted to gain insight into whether other schools in her area were facing similar issues. She drew on her networks to organise *"conversations … with the regional [departmental] office – just to ask them 'What are other schools doing?'"*. Not only did these conversations allow Genevieve to understand if schools nearby were facing similar issues, but also how they were working to address them. She explained that seeing *"what other schools have taken on"* was helpful because *"if a number of schools are using [a research-informed strategy], it must have something good about it"*. Importantly, though, Genevieve did not see these examples from other schools as a *"recipe"* to be directly imported into her school, but rather as a *"starting point"* for her own thinking as she engaged with different research.

To bring these three sources of information together, Genevieve used her analytical and thinking skills to consider what appropriate research meant in her context. Specifically, appropriate research was: i) rigorous; ii) would be able to be implemented collectively in her context; and iii) relevant to her students' needs.

HOW DID GENEVIEVE UNDERSTAND AND APPRAISE APPROPRIATE RESEARCH?

Given that Genevieve wanted her research-informed change to have a positive impact on students' learning, a key aspect of research being appropriate was whether it could be considered as rigorous and trustworthy. Drawing on her research-related skills and knowledge that she developed during her postgraduate coursework, Genevieve assessed whether research was recent and had a suitable study design. For example, it was important for her that research was current *"as opposed to [being from] 20-30 years ago, because of how quickly times change".* She also thought that studies might be appropriate if they involved large numbers of students over time, rather than a small case study, as this helped her to determine whether a research-informed strategy had a consistent evidence base of success. Finally, Genevieve believed that appropriate research came from quality sources, such as ongoing and established projects or researchers, as compared with research that reported only on *"one off"* projects.

At the same time, Genevieve emphasised that appropriate research needed to be able to be implemented in her school context. As a small special school with only 4.4 equivalent full-time teachers, appropriate research-informed strategies were ones that could be implemented in mixed-year level classrooms and could leverage the skills of the team of teacher aides who rotated between four classrooms on any given day. Again, Genevieve used her planning and relational skills to collectively consider, alongside her colleagues, whether research would align with their whole-school pedagogical and organisational approaches.

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> "You look at what the evidence says and then think, 'Well, really, does it fully categorise what I'm looking for?'. ... They might be students on the autism spectrum, but then if I add in they've got other medical conditions or they've got intellectual disabilities on top of it, I'm [reading the research and] going: 'That's great for that part of them, but it's not necessarily great for the other parts of them.'"

Finally, Genevieve judged whether research was appropriate based on her deep knowledge of the individual students at her school. She explained that the expectations for her students were quite different to those in mainstream schools. For this reason, she recognised the need to consider how the strategies outlined in different research related to, for example, her students' disabilities as well as their developmental and chronological ages. She noticed that there were *"not really many examples around"* of research that specifically addressed all of her students' needs. This meant that she needed to make judgements about which research fit best and/or could be adapted.

To make these assessments, Genevieve first looked for *"extra information to contextualise"* the research findings to her students. Following this, she drew on her critical thinking skills to *"ask questions"* of the research to determine whether it's *"taking into consideration the individual aspects of why I'm wanting the research"*. For instance, she reflected on a specific example in relation to research about developing students' writing skills: *"I'm looking [for] something in there that shows me for students of 18 years of age, but working at a 7 year-old or 6 year-old level, how they should be progressing, or what's the best way [to teach] writing for them"*.

WHY DID SHE CHOOSE THIS APPROACH?

Genevieve had two key reasons for making sure that the research-informed change to the writing program was properly defined and based on robust evidence, and that research selected and applied was appropriate.

> "We're going to start having sessions once a week for teachers, and teacher aides are able to come if they want to, of actually having that time to sit down as a group to be able to talk about things, to explain things, and to go through the bits of research slowly. That gives people the chance to ask if they're not sure."

Firstly, she recognised that all teachers and teaching aides had a strong belief in the purpose of the research, but were *"not great when it comes to looking at research. Quite often they get lost in it"*. She used her analytical and critical thinking skills to recognise that teachers cannot be rushed or forced into engaging with research, and that research use cannot be *"just squished into a staff meeting, which happens quite often in places"*. Time was needed, but also opportunities for teachers to learn how to read and understand the research and ask questions. Genevieve then had to draw on her relational and research use-related skills to *"make sure everyone has a clear understanding of what they're talking about, and seeing [too] if it's something that is feasible"*. She was astute enough to acknowledge that everyone needed to be *"onboard"* with the research and the revised program for it to be *"implemented with fidelity"*.

These principles were important when taking on new staff as well. She provided an example of a teacher who had joined recently, and that it was important that this teacher was provided with an explanation of: *"'This is what we've done at school, and these are the reasons why we have done it … We have a reading [and writing] program and this is how it runs, and these are the reasons why … You may not have used that at your last school, but this is the research that we use in this situation with this group of students'. And then allowing them the time to go and look through it and see what it is"*.

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Secondly, Genevieve also realised that their revised program and research use needed to be explained and make sense to their regional departmental representatives. In particular, they needed to understand that *"we need to look for different ways"* to teach the students at Sandy Hills School. She commented: *"We've had people from our council regional office, and they've openly stated that they're great with curriculum, however, they don't necessarily understand how children learn to write, and [whether] it's exactly the same for children with disabilities or there extra things we need to take into consideration".* Drawing on her relational and critical thinking skills, again, Genevieve emphasised that it was important that all stakeholders understood why and how they were improving the writing program at the school.

Overall, by drawing on specific skillsets, Genevieve was able to ensure that the research selected was appropriate to revise the reading and writing program at her school for improved student outcomes. Because the research she selected addressed a clear need, was trustworthy, and was relevant to students' needs and the school context, Genevieve noted that it could be implemented consistently across the school. This *"made it a lot easier for staff"* to incorporate the research-informed strategies into their teaching approaches and engage in substantive conversations about collectively improving their practice.

> "Knowing that everybody's on the same page across our staff [is of great benefit]. So, knowing 'This is how things are done' and 'That's how it's worked for the writing–reading program' ... any [colleague] can step in if someone's not there, and they know, 'This is what I do. This is how it runs on this day with these kids'."

KEY LEARNINGS

1. ***Planning and data literacy skills can help to identify an appropriate focus for a research-informed change:*** To determine how she could improve her school's reading and writing program, Genevieve gathered evidence and knowledge from a range of sources including student data, colleagues' professional experiences and insights, and conversations with regional departmental office representatives. What sources of data or knowledge can help you to identify a research-informed change at your school? What skills do you have to help you do this? What skills do your colleagues have that you can leverage?

2. ***Analytical and critical thinking skills are important for appraising whether research is appropriate:*** Genevieve used analytical and critical thinking skills to consider a range of factors to assess whether research was appropriate for her context. What factors about your own context are important when appraising research? What characteristics of the research itself would make it appropriate? How would you rate your own and colleagues' research appraisal skills? What can you do to improve your skillsets?

3. ***Relational skills, as well as analytical and critical thinking skills, can help others to understand how and why research has been used:*** By engaging with her colleagues, regional departmental representatives, and schools within her local area, Genevieve gathered data and knowledge about how and why to revise the school's reading and writing program. These skills also aided Genevieve to support others in understanding how and why research had been used. How can you leverage these skills better to plan for or better support the implementation of a research-informed initiative in your school?

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HOW DOES GENEVIEVE'S CASE STUDY LINK TO OUR QUALITY USE OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE (QURE) FRAMEWORK?

This practitioner case study connects with two components of our QURE Framework - ***skillsets*** and ***appropriate research***. This is seen in how Genevieve planned a research-informed initiative, as well as how she understood and appraised whether research was appropriate for her purpose and unique context.

You can find out more about the components of ***skillsets*** and ***appropriate research*** by accessing our Q Project resources and publications.

This case study was generated by the Monash Q Project. The research publications and evidence sources referenced in this story are an illustration of the resources used by the practitioner. Their inclusion is not an endorsement of these sources by the Q Project. For further information, please refer to the Monash Q Project's website.