

Exploring the Field – 'What works'/Evidence-Based Practice

Overview

Compared to EEI research, 'What Works' (WW) research or evidence-*based* practice is far more rooted in policy and practice. WW is increasingly being driven and coordinated by designated 'What Works Centres' funded by governments, charities or other educational bodies. In England, two charities – The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Sutton Trust are the government designated and funded 'What Works Centre for Education'. The EEF and Sutton Trust WW centre are part of a wider WW network across all areas of public policy¹. International equivalents to the EEF include Evidence for Learning in Australia, the What Works Clearinghouse in the US and the Spanish/Catalan presentation and contextualisation of EEF evidence by EduCaixa (see further reading for links). There are also universities, commercial and charitable centres and researchers within them with similar aims (see below). WW research is therefore funded and produced at an industrial scale by dedicated WW organisations, but not restricted to these, with many researchers and teams/centres of researchers providing an evidence base for effective practice whose work could be characterised as having a WW methodology. Perhaps the most famous example of large-scale WW research emanating from academia is John Hattie's work summarising more than 1,600 meta-analyses of more than 96,000 individual studies (also see Chapter 5).

WW and Evidence-Informed Practice

Many WW groups have both an academic and a policy/practice presence, seeking to make WW research accessible to users and maximise its potential impact. There are, therefore, strong links between what we are describing as evidence-informed practice (EIP) and WW/EBP. Many of the evidence-informed practice (EIP) group examples provided in our separate 'Explore' guide are concerned with both evidence *creation* and *use* – i.e., they have contributed to a WW knowledge base as well as having expertise in applying WW research and/or fostering practitioner research traditions. There are organisations, like the EEF in England, whose functions spans both the creation and use of evidence. The distinction between EBP and EIP is therefore not clear cut – something we discuss in Chapter 3. We see EBP as a subset of EIP with a particular emphasis on using WW research evidence.

Academic WW research and Policy/Practice-Based WW Research

There is overlap in the body of research and in the personnel between WW organisations like the EEF and WW research being conducted in universities. There is a complex interplay between dedicated WW centres and academic research(ers), with WW research being communicated in academic fora such as research journals, conferences and academic

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network>

programmes; with academics advising and working for and in WW centres, and academic WW research being incorporated into e.g., the reviews produced by WW organised housed outside of academia. Much evaluation or review research completed by the WW group ends up being published in various academic journals dedicated to publishing research relating to effectiveness, evaluation and evidence review. One notable example is the *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness (JREE)* which arguably also represents a point of contact between WW and EEI research (see Note 8.1 in the online technical annex about the role of randomised controlled trials in EEI and whether JREE meaningfully connects EEI and WW given its content and community). WW research published in academic outlets also often gets recycled back into practice-focused WW work, with academic publications and 'grey literature' reports (often in the form of trial studies and reviews) picked up by the various WW evidence clearing houses and systematic reviews. WW organisations therefore both create and draw on a global evidence base beyond the research they have commissioned or conducted themselves.

For our (methodological) purposes, WW has been described as an approach to conceiving, producing and using evidence than something organisational. We have focused in the book on dedicated WW organisations outside of academia (notably, the EEF), but we have done so mainly because these represent the most defined and largest-scale examples of WW research. What the above discussion touches on, however, is that there is a strong organisational aspect to what research is being conducted, its audience and purpose, and how it is funded. The rise of dedicated and well-funded WW research centres has created a space where WW research emanating from *inside* of academia is incentivised (through the 'impact' agenda) to be geared towards practice (something core to dedicated WW centres), and research from dedicated WW research centres seeks the rigour afforded by academic peer review and access to research and technical expertise required for WW research.

In summary, we provide a small number of links below, mostly with a view to providing examples of the WW research methodology. A far broader and more differentiated account and set of examples would be needed to better understand the organisational and political aspects of WW research, and the relationships between research in and outside of higher education.

What Works Resources and Research

A comprehensive body of EEF evaluation guidance and resources:

- <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/evaluation/evaluation-guidance-and-resources>

The EEF's Toolkit, Evidence Reviews and Guidance reports:

- <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/>
- <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/evidence-reviews/>
- <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tools/guidance-reports/>
- <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tools/diy-guide/diy-summary/>

The IES What Works Clearinghouse in the US:

- <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/WWC>

Evidence for Learning in Australia:

- <https://evidenceforlearning.org.au/>

The Spanish/Catalan presentation and contextualisation of EEF evidence by EduCaixa

- <https://educaixa.org/es/repositorio-evidencias-educativas>

An interactive database of Hattie's meta-analyses:

- <http://www.visiblelearningmetax.com/Influences>
- Also search "visible learning 250+ influences" for a handy summary sheet.

Books

- Davies, H. T., & Nutley, S. M. (Eds.). (2000). What works?: Evidence-based policy and practice in public services. Policy Press.
- Elliot-Major, L. and S. Higgins (2019). What Works?: Research and evidence for successful teaching, Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Gorard, S. (2020). Getting evidence into education. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hammersley, M. (2013). The myth of research-based policy and practice. Sage.
- Higgins, S. (2018). Improving learning: Meta-analysis of intervention research in education, Cambridge University Press.

Articles

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.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2006.00241.x>

Biesta, G. (2010). Why 'what works' still won't work: From evidence-based education to value-based education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 29(5), 491–503.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-010-9191-x>

Burnett, C., & Coldwell, M. (2020). Randomised controlled trials and the interventionisation of education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 47(4), 423–438.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2020.1856060>

Connolly, P., Keenan, C., & Urbanska, K. (2018). The trials of evidence-based practice in education: A systematic review of randomised controlled trials in education research 1980–2016. *Educational Research*, 60(3), 276–291.

Davies, P. (1999). What is evidence-based education? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 47(2), 108–121. <https://www.cebma.org/wp-content/uploads/Davies-What-is-Evidence-Based-Education.pdf>

Dawson, A., et al. (2018). "Methodological challenges in education RCTs: reflections from England's Education Endowment Foundation." *Educational Research* 60(3): 292–310.

- Edoald, T. and C. Nevill (2020). "Working Out What Works: The Case of the Education Endowment Foundation in England." *ECNU Review of Education* 4(1): 46-64.
- Higgins, S., & Katsipatakis, M. (2016). Communicating comparative findings from meta-analysis in educational research: some examples and suggestions. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 39(3), 237-254.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727x.2016.1166486>
- Nelson, J., & Walker, M. (2019). Evidence-informed approaches to teaching: Where are we now? In: NFER.
- Oakley, A. (2002). Social science and evidence-based everything: The case of education. *Educational Review*, 54(3), 277-286.
- Peterson, A. (2016). Getting 'What Works' working: building blocks for the integration of experimental and improvement science. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 39(3), 299-313. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727x.2016.1170114>
- Simpson, A. (2017). The misdirection of public policy: Comparing and combining standardised effect sizes. *Journal of Education Policy*, 32(4), 450-466.
- Thomas, G. (2020). Experiment's persistent failure in education inquiry, and why it keeps failing. *British Educational Research Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3660>
- Thomas, G. (2022). Evidence, schmevidence: the abuse of the word "evidence" in policy discourse about education. *Educational Review*, 1-16.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2022.2028735>