

Professional Development Review: Evidence informed practice at Blundell's

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1 Introduction

The concept of “evidence informed practice” is not new (Weiss, 1979) in education, and research has highlighted the significance of its role in the context of teacher development (Hatton & Smith, 1995). Brown and Zhang (2017) see evidence-informed schools as those engaged in academic research and their own action research interventions. Conversely, action research is seen to encourage reflection through a cyclical process of implementing an intervention and measuring the impact, so that teachers can develop their practice on their own terms (Allen & Calhoun, 1998).

At Blundell's, this has been addressed in our revision of the appraisal process. What started as discussion at staff forums, became a guiding focus for what has now become the Professional Development Review (PDR). The core notion of this is that teachers engage in reflective practice and educational research alongside this. Teaching staff at Blundell's conduct small scale interventions and observe its impact on students. Through this reflection, teachers will continue to develop their practice, improving the experience for our students.

2 What does the research say?

Clear benefits can be found in the literature around evidence-informed practice in schools. For example, Sharp et al. (2005) argue that when schools make evidence-informed practice a part of their strategic vision, it positively impacts recruitment. For the teacher, it is a powerful way of developing their autonomy and increases self-efficacy (Mertler, 2019), as they are actively involved in their own professional development (Papanastasiou & Karagiorgi, 2019), which, has a significant impact on teachers' sense of empowerment (Colucci-Gray et al., 2013). This can enable teachers to develop their leadership skills, as horizontal collaboration rather than hierarchical structures, enable staff to feel empowered to take on more responsibility (Dinham, 2009). Overall, these be-

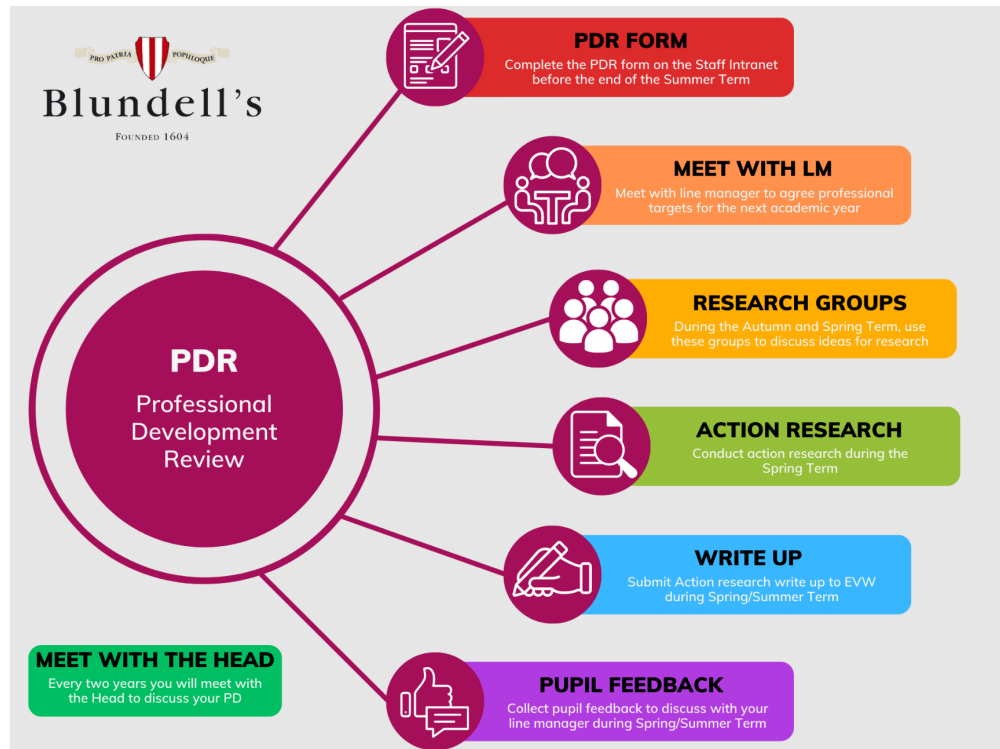


Figure 1: The elements of the Blundell's staff appraisal process, known as the PDR

benefits can be passed on to our classes, as staff explore new ideas to help maximise the learning experience for students.

That is not to overlook the fact that implementing evidence-informed practice in schools can be challenging, and one of the key drawbacks is that teachers are hesitant to engage with “research” (Mertler, 2017). Hancock (1997) argues teachers may experience ‘imposter syndrome’ and be reluctant to read academic journals or conduct their own research. This might imply however, that through the ownership of research engagement, some of this can be counteracted.

3 What happens at Blundell's?

The favourable evidence on evidence-informed practice, has been key in the development of the PDR as an appraisal process. While reformulating what staff appraisal should look like, it became apparent that a driving aim was to support staff in the development of reflective practice, and that use of educational research would be one way that this could happen. Staff are encouraged to explore the science of learning, before designing their action research projects and writing them up. As part of the PDR, staff also meet with colleagues who have similar research interests, allowing for greater collaboration across departments.

Action research projects are conducted as one part of the PDR and usually take the form of small-scale interventions, although may also feature a teachers' reflections on an area of interest. In recent years staff have looked at a range of interest areas including the impact of regular retrieval practice quizzes on performance in mock exams, methods of increasing engagement and designing inclusive schemes of work.



Figure 2: Three volumes into the Blundell's Research Journal

This research has been collated and edited to become the “Blundell's Research Journal”, which is shared internally for staff to access ideas of good practice. In addition to this, there has been a greater emphasis on evidence-informed practice during in-service education and training (INSET) sessions and therefore staff are more aware of research into areas such as retrieval practice, executive function or metacognition. The results of this have the potential for significant fruit in the work of Blundell's teaching staff and students.

4 Conclusions

The notion of being an evidence-informed school is certainly appealing when one considers the research. The Brown and Zhang (2017) definition of ‘evidence-informed schools’ as those engaged in academic research and their own interventions, is something the PDR has looked to do by having staff conduct small-scale research projects as a way of developing reflective teaching practice, integrated within the appraisal. The work of Dewey (1933) and Schön (2017), have instrumentally contributed to the understanding of reflective practice and its benefits in a variety of contexts and as Hatton and Smith (1995) point out, reflective practice has provided the framework for many teacher training programmes.

Blundell's School is fortunate to have a thoughtful and reflective staff body, who want the best for the pupils that they work with. The PDR has created an opportunity for this to be preserved

in a tangible way through the Blundell's Research Journal and allows for a community of teacher researchers to grow.

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