

## Speech

# Nick Gibb: the importance of education research

From: [Department for Education](#) and [Nick Gibb MP](#)  
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School Standards Minister Nick Gibb addresses the ResearchED national conference.



Thank you.

It is a pleasure to be back at ResearchED for its annual conference. As ResearchED grows year on year, so does the influence of the teaching profession in shaping the educational landscape. The relationship between research and classroom practice continues to evolve - for the better.

Speaking at ResearchED Scandanavia earlier this year, Tom Bennett highlighted how far this relationship has progressed. He reflected that only a few years ago any number of bad ideas polluted discussions of research. These pernicious ideas were

inoculated from challenge by the too-often-heard phrase ‘the research shows that’.

This phrase, as many in this room will be aware, has been used to promote ideas often lacking in both evidence and sense. At the inaugural ResearchED conference in 2013, Ben Goldacre correctly identified that people can only get away with using such a phrase in an environment where they aren’t challenged or asked for evidence. Thankfully these poor ideas are gradually being forced out of our schools.

In the same speech, Goldacre noted that research matters most when findings are put into practice. The impact of ED Hirsch is not most keenly felt through his writing, but through the curricula he developed and inspired.

Too often, however, research fails to impact on the classroom. Paul Maclellan, speaking at ResearchED Science and Maths in June, warned of the distance that still exists between research findings and their actual impact. Maclellan discussed an experiment carried out by Durham University which followed primary teachers implementing a well-evidenced intervention designed to improve the impact of feedback. The original paper provided teachers with a structured approach to giving feedback. Multiple studies estimated the enhanced feedback structure to have an effect size of around 0.6.

Despite the training given to teachers and the evidence in favour of the intervention, there was no noticeable impact on pupil outcomes.

What were the reasons for this failure?

Two were suggested. Firstly, too many research papers are written in near indecipherable language making the job of translating the research into impact far too difficult. This is not a new frustration.

In the foreword to Nick Rose and David Didau’s ‘What every teacher needs to know about psychology’, Professor Rob Coe recalls how as a student-teacher he was warned off education research by an experienced colleague, who said, and I quote:

“ Lecturers in the university have to justify their existence with all that pointless theory - they’d be worried education is not a proper subject without it. And they need something to cover that they couldn’t hack it in the classroom. But once you start working in a school you’ll soon forget that stuff, and you’ll never miss it.”

Far too many teachers have had this experience with education research.

The second reason suggested for the failure of the Durham experiment was that teachers simply didn’t have time to engage with research.

This government has made tackling the workload of teachers a priority.

In October 2014, we launched the workload challenge. More than 44,000 teachers responded to the month-long survey. The responses identified that the 3 biggest concerns of teachers were marking, planning and resources, and data management.

Three independent review groups were established to address these concerns and the [reports](#) were published in March this year. We accepted all the recommendations for government although, as the reports make clear, it is for everybody involved in education to act on the principles and recommendations in these reports. The reports are clear: if an activity is not helping to improve pupil outcomes; stop it.

As a result of the workload challenge, we committed to a lead time of at least a year for schools to prepare for significant accountability, curriculum or qualification changes.

Furthermore, Ofsted have made it clear what inspectors do and do not expect to see, to dispel myths about inspection that can result in unnecessary workload in schools.

These reforms, twinned with our funding of the Education Endowment Foundation, have provided teachers and schools with the opportunity to pursue teaching methods which will

improve pupil outcomes.

The EEF has ensured that teachers in this country have much greater access to high-quality research than ever before. Earlier this year they published recommendations for school leaders, teaching school alliances and other collaborative school networks.

As Sir Kevan Collins [CEO of the EEF] said in response to this research:

“ Teachers and school leaders now have access to a significant and growing body of academic research with enormous potential to improve pupil attainment and save schools money. But to do this, we need to make sure that research findings get into the hands of teachers in ways that are most likely to have an impact.”

I would echo these sentiments. As John Maynard Keynes famously wrote:

“ Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually slaves of some defunct economist.”

And I'm sure he meant to include 'practical women' as well.

It is incumbent upon government, the EEF and the people in this room to help ensure that young teachers are entering a research-informed and research-enthusiastic profession - unlike the one that Professor Rob Coe encountered all those years ago.

Education research has come a long way since the Tooley Report in 1998 - the frank assessment of the dearth of quality and relevance of education research.

Tooley described an academic atmosphere rife with partisan, methodologically unsound and next-to-irrelevant research. One only needs to look down the list of speakers at this year's conference to see that no such partisanship is on offer today.

Frank Furedi - founder of the now disbanded Revolutionary Communist Party - will speak today as he did at the inaugural ResearchED.

Regular contributors to both the Labour Teachers blogsite and its Conservative counterpart – the Conservative Education Society - are here today including the always thought-provoking Heather Fearn, Jon Brunskill and Andrew Old.

The globally respected Professor Paul Kirschner - whose work with Sweller and Clark must surely have motivated Michaela Community School - will speak on the same platforms as teachers from that wonderful school.

Classroom teachers, directors of policy, journalists, union leaders, authors, leaders of charities, researchers and politicians have gathered this weekend to debate with and listen to one another. The phrase ‘the research shows that’ will not go unchallenged today.

Research has informed the direction of reforms undertaken by this government. In 2010, Tim Oates - who is also speaking later today - laid down the gauntlet in ‘Could do better’ his scathing assessment of the English national curriculum. He correctly identified the strengths of a successful curriculum, not least entitlement - the right of all children to a knowledge rich curriculum.

Knowledge can emancipate a child from the geographical, historical and personal parochialism of everyday life. Academic education should not be the preserve of the elite. Every child has the right to an education in the best that has been thought and said. Ensuring all pupils are endowed with this right is the key to creating a socially just society and a socially mobile society.

‘Could do better’ identified problems which were holding back the achievement of children in this country, including:

- an overloaded curriculum resulting in a necessarily shallow coverage of topics
- and an overbearing assessment structure which undermined

teaching and failed to provide reliable information on standards

The issues with the 2007 national curriculum were best summed up by the statutory requirement of secondary chemistry pupils to understand “that there are patterns in the reactions between substances”.

In the words of Tim Oates: “This statement essentially describes all of chemistry. So what should teachers actually teach? What are the key concepts which children should know and apply?”

This government acted rapidly to overhaul a curriculum which was not fit for purpose.

In maths, we placed a greater emphasis on ensuring the fundamentals were mastered:

- children are now required to be fluent in times tables by the end of year 4
- a structured sequence of efficient written methods is prescribed in primary schools
- and maths hubs are introducing Asian-style maths mastery into our schools

In English, we have increased the level of demand for all ages:

- inspired by international evidence from the likes of the National Reading Panel in the US and the Clackmannanshire study in the UK, our unwavering commitment to systematic synthetic phonics has seen 120,000 6-year-olds read more effectively than they otherwise would have done
- the emphasis placed on spelling and grammar at key stage 2 will see pupils better prepared for the challenges of secondary English than ever before
- and at key stage 4, all pupils will have the opportunity to study a range of high-quality, intellectually challenging, and substantial whole books in detail. No longer will children’s experience of literature be limited to ‘Of Mice and Men’ and ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’.

Through the expansion of the academies program, the

government has given teachers and headteachers greater control over the curriculum. The fruits of autonomy were in evidence in this year's GCSE results.

The West London Free School recently announced that 76% of its pupils achieved 5 A\* to C including English and maths and 37% of all grades were A\*s and As. This school, inspired by the work of Dan Willingham and ED Hirsch, is one of many free schools demonstrating that a classical liberal education is for all.

Another free school, the Tauheedul Islam Boys' High School in Blackburn, reported achieving the remarkable feat of 95% of pupils achieving 5 A\* to C including English and maths. Over 4 in 5 boys at the school do not have English as a first language. This did not prevent 72% of this school's inaugural cohort achieving the EBacc qualification.

As the academy and free school policy matures it is increasingly possible to recognise what is succeeding and what is failing. The successful approaches of these pioneer schools will be adopted and a new consensus about 'what works' for teaching children will emerge.

The autonomy granted to schools has been twinned with intelligent accountability. From this year Progress 8 will replace 5 A\* to C including English and maths in the school performance tables. This new measure has reduced the perverse incentives associated with the 5 A\* to C measure. Reducing the focus on the C/D borderline means both high and low attaining pupils will benefit from greater attention.

We have committed to working with Ofsted to introduce 'improvement periods', allowing teachers and headteachers 30 months to turn around underperforming schools. This follows our changes to the Ofsted framework which increased the rigour of school inspections, demanding ever higher standards. Despite this higher bar, school improvement has been such that there are now over 1.4 million more children attending good or outstanding schools than in 2010.

The EBacc is being taken by ever greater numbers, giving pupils

from all backgrounds access to a core academic education.

Analysis by Dr Rebecca Allen and Dave Thomson for the Sutton Trust showed that pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds benefitted most from a school's decision to switch the focus of its curriculum to these core subjects. This research looked at the impact in 300 schools that had enthusiastically adopted the EBacc curriculum, typically increasing the proportion of pupils taking the EBacc from 8% to 48%.

At the 300 so called 'curriculum change' secondary schools, the pupil premium gap - the difference in achievement between the least well off pupils and their peers - had reduced relative to schools with similar intakes.

Criticism of EBacc policy too often centres on the assumption that an academic curriculum is not for certain pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with low prior attainment. I do not agree.

In the narrative accompanying the analysis of 'curriculum change' schools, Dr Becky Allen addressed some of the other concerns raised by critics of the EBacc. On the claims that less academically-orientated pupils would be forced into subject choices which would undermine their attainment and distract their focus from English and maths, she concluded that there was "no evidence".

Pupils in 'curriculum change' schools were - I quote - "more likely to achieve good GCSEs in English and maths, achieved higher average grades across the board, were 1.7 percentage points more likely to be taking an A level or other level 3 qualification after the age of 16 and 1.8 percentage points less likely to have dropped out of education entirely."

One might even say that 'the research shows that' a demanding, knowledge-rich curriculum benefits pupils, particularly those from the most challenging backgrounds!

Opposition to the EBacc has often centred on the impact this reform is having on other areas of the curriculum - the arts, in



particular. We are clear that in following the recommendations of Tim Oates, difficult choices needed to be made as to which subjects to include in the EBacc.

The decision to restrict the number of subjects included was a deliberate one. The EBacc leaves pupils with a choice of at least 2 subjects, often more. These free option slots allow pupils to pursue another language, further humanity subjects, a technical qualification or a number of art and design options.

The government will continue to emphasise the importance of a broad and balanced curriculum. This message will be twinned with new, more demanding and more rigorous qualifications.

It is the duty of schools to produce pupils who can think critically and creatively, but the irreplaceable first step for a pupil to do so is learning a coherent body of knowledge. For a socially just and socially mobile society, pupils must have access to this knowledge.

The EBacc debate is being won, but there still exists a troubling gap in entry rates. Too few pupils with low prior attainment and from disadvantaged backgrounds are being taught this core academic curriculum at key stage 4. The arguments in favour of this curriculum entitlement must continue to be made.

As so often nowadays, it is online rather than in academic journals where these important debates are being had. Rob Coe - again in the foreword to David Didau and Nick Rose's book - summarised the importance of social media:

“ Social media, led by teacher bloggers and tweeters, have helped create communities of teachers who want to engage with research and discuss the ideas and their implications. There is an appetite for research evidence and an increasingly critical and sophisticated research stance.”

These growing teacher-led communities offer the greatest hope for ensuring that research reaches teachers and impacts upon their practice.

Of course, there is more to do. This vibrant community of ideas is

still dominated by pioneers, many of whom are in this room today. There are, however, many reasons for optimism.

As the number of edu-bloggers swells to over 3,000 in this country; as this conference expands its reach ever further afield - having already taken in the sites of New York and Sydney, Washington DC and Amsterdam are next in Tom Bennett's travel plans - and as more teachers appreciate the value of research-informed practice, this profession-led movement will improve the education and life chances of innumerable children.

It is for this reason that it is always a pleasure to speak at ResearchED.

Thank you very much.

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