

# Research at The Bridge London Trust

## Part One



## A commitment to Research, Professional Development and Practice Based Evidence

### Introduction

The Bridge, London is a research engaged Teaching School. Our aim is that critical, reflective thinking will become even more deeply embedded in our culture and impact across all areas of the growing multi-academy trust (MAT). Underpinning our core principles (Partnership, Positivity, Professionalism, Pride and Passion) is the ongoing development of excellence in engagement with and in research, so as to provide the highest quality of support for all our pupils, their families and our staff. We also aim to share our expertise through dissemination of practice-based evidence via publication, presentation, partnerships with other organisations and the promotion of wider debate around special education at local and national levels.

The Bridge has developed a Research Strategy (2017-19) to clearly set out the way we wish to go about achieving our aims. This Strategy is the result of a thorough evaluation of our current activity, feedback from staff<sup>1</sup>, consultation with senior leadership and a rigorous review of the existing relevant research. This latter process resulted in an in-depth rationale to further support this document (see *The Bridge London, Research Strategy Wider Rationale*). The Research Strategy is in three parts: a statement of the principles (Part 1) and a set of practical proposals (Part 2) to govern research at The Bridge over the 2017-19 period and the wider rationale (Part 3) for Parts 1 and 2.

### Principles

The Bridge's mission, to combine the highest standards of research engagement and teaching that supports not just pupils within the MAT but beyond, has developed organically as the school has grown. The Bridge now includes: The Bridge Primary, The Bridge Secondary, The Integrated Learning Space, The Bridge Satellite Provision, Hungerford School, The Bridge Outreach Service and The Bridge Training and Development Centre, which all support a large spectrum of research interests. These interests are enhanced and extended through the multi-agency working that is central to The Bridge's working practice. Inter-agency collaborations enrich the range of research opportunities available and enable The Bridge to better engage with the complex problems often faced by our staff, pupils and their families.

As the MAT grows, The Bridge will continue to offer unique and vital research opportunities. We support a highly diverse range of pupils across mainstream and specialist settings, as well as developing innovative professional practice (CPD) opportunities. Whilst specific cohorts that we support may be relatively small (Secondary school aged pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties, for example) this generates the incentive for collaboration with the wider education community through our proposed Research Schools Network and university based professionals. This in turn encourages and sustains new thinking and allows larger-scale research to take place.

By implementing the Research Strategy (2017-19) we aim to build upon The Bridge's existing strengths and to raise our engagement with and in research to the level of our other areas of practice recognised as outstanding by OFSTED.

### Research empowers and develops staff

We believe that research and teaching are inextricably linked. Engaging with and in research helps teachers develop new knowledge directly related to their classrooms, supports and develops reflective teaching and thinking, puts teachers in charge of their profession and encourages an openness toward learning new things. Taking part in research can foster feelings of pride and excitement about teaching and a revitalised sense of oneself as a practitioner.

Emotional awareness, empathy and intuitive understanding are highly-valued skills among teaching staff, particularly those working with pupils with complex needs. However, the focus on such attributes can mean the academic skills of staff can be overlooked. By promoting a research culture, we will ensure that teachers' intellectual capability is always recognised and highlight the importance of that capability to their professional lives.

The education system as a whole is vulnerable to adopting an imposed performativity culture, and it would be naïve to suggest that The Bridge is immune. However, developing research literacy and engaging in research to support practice can restore in teaching

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'staff' throughout this document refers to all individuals at The Bridge who work both directly and/or indirectly with our pupils

practitioners a sense of professionalism, autonomy and power in terms of having a clear voice in decision making at local and national levels.

### Everyone contributes

The Bridge's commitment to encouraging and supporting all staff to engage in and with research is led from the top, with our senior leadership team engaged with research. We offer opportunities for staff to pursue their specific areas of interest and, where possible, connect them with others who share similar interests across the MAT, including the multi-disciplinary agencies that work within it, our Research Schools Network and university-based professionals. All research achievements are valued and recognised for the major contribution they make to enhancing and developing practice: from reflective practice sessions and journal club presentations to small pilot projects and large scale studies across multiple sites.

### Research matters

At The Bridge we caution against the narrowly defined 'impact agenda' that has arisen through the performativity culture that exists within education as a whole, as this can limit the long term vision of schools. In developing a sustainable research culture we aim to make a positive, long term difference to the staff, pupils and families we work with, as well as the wider community to which we belong. So, whilst we develop our support structures to allow staff to engage in the production of practice-based evidence output (such as published research) and facilitate the ways in which this can be shared as widely as possible, we will also embed a research based ethos of critical, reflective consideration of everything we do, from strategic decisions in senior leadership to day to day teaching practices. We recognise that this may not result in tangible, evidence-based documents, but it is nevertheless of central importance to our research strategy.

### Research must be sustainable

The move towards greater research literacy is slowly becoming a national priority, with a focus on these skills in initial teacher education (ITE). However, staff do not yet universally receive effective training in research methods as part of their ITE. As such, while The Bridge's embedded research culture is still in its infancy, we will support staff engaging with and in research, as well building capacity in this area. Staff will be supported to engage in research and existing methods will be adapted or developed to suit the specific needs of our setting.

Developing staff skills will ensure that, over time, staff will be more cognisant of the ways in which they can adapt methods to suit their specific setting whilst maintaining high levels of internal validity.

This support also seeks to address the current disconnect between research and practice in education as a whole.

A heavy emphasis on the technical aspects of research, internal validity, and experimental trials in the production of evidence-based practices contributes to disappointing implementation of these practices by disaffecting many education professionals—the very people depended on to implement it. We recognise that many education professionals perceive evidence-based practice as a “top-down” approach derived from the results of studies that, though internally valid, do not reflect the complex and unique contexts in which they work and teach, this being particularly true of the diverse population we support at The Bridge London Trust.

Our focus will be on developing practice-based evidence. In contrast with notions of efficacy, rigor, and internal validity associated with evidence-based practice, practice-based evidence emphasises real-world effectiveness, relevance, and external (social) validity. As the phrase implies, practice-based evidence is derived from real-world settings and practitioners (e.g., SNPs, teachers and classrooms), with all their inherent complexities and challenges. It provides evidence that we know staff will view as more relevant as it is connected in a meaningful way to their specific situation. This greater connection between research and practice will help to encourage further engagement with and in research.

It is important to recognise that we do not see practice-based evidence as simply a less rigorous version of efficacy research. Rather, efficacy research and practice-based evidence serve two different purposes. Whereas efficacy research establishes whether a practice can work for a population (under ideal conditions), practice-based evidence is concerned with examining whether and how a practice works in specific, authentic settings. As such, practice-based evidence is situationally bounded, examining what is credible for our pupils, in our classrooms, in our schools, in this city at this moment in time. At The Bridge we note, therefore, that practice-based evidence and evidence-based practice form a compelling partnership—both incomplete on their own, but the strength of one compensating for the weakness of the other.

By providing a larger focus on practice based-evidence The Bridge will look to address the shortcomings of a lot of evidence-based practice. This form of evidence dominates the academic literature but without being paired with practice-based evidence the results from these tightly controlled experimental studies often exist solely in the academic realm—generated and consumed primarily by researchers with little to no meaningful impact in the real world. Our work will seek to change this.

### Good research is socially valid, ethical research

Ethical research not only protects all those involved in a project (pupils, parents, carers and staff), it also ensures that those who may not be involved in a project are not impacted, for example, by having to participate in a control group where access to support is delayed.

The Bridge is guided by The British Psychological Society and British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines. Furthermore, The Bridge Research Ethics Committee (REC) has been established to provide ethical approval (or reject an application) for all proposed research projects. In terms of broader ethical principles The Bridge London Trust is committed to carrying out socially valid research i.e. the importance, value and acceptability of a project is defined by those for whom it is intended to benefit (pupils, parents and carers and staff).

The Bridge already has a core set of research priorities (expressive language, self-care skills, diet and sleep) that have been established through consultation with our parents and carers. As our MAT grows we will seek input and feedback from our new parents, carers, pupils and their advocates regarding research priorities as well as ongoing consultation with our existing community. Further to this, wherever possible, we will ensure that our pupils are co-researchers, engaged equally in the research process of a project.

### Research needs resources

The Bridge's commitment to research is supported in deeds as well as words. We recognise that a set of principles without the necessary resources to support them is meaningless and will not, therefore, become a positive force for change. The greatest, most valuable resource we provide for our staff is time. Time dedicated to engaging with and in research, developing research literacy and working in partnerships is vital to ensuring our aims are reached. Dedicated time outside of class to engage in research allows our staff to step back from the day to day treadmill and critically examine their practice, re-evaluate current teaching strategies and examine novel interventions or techniques. It allows our staff to examine contrasting points of view through discussion with others or engagement with research findings. At The Bridge we recognise that learning and development is enhanced through social interaction with others who have different training, experience, knowledge and opinions. This constructive interaction then leads to a realisation that 'a different point of view than one's own is possible'. This in turn enables staff to reconsider their own opinions and to integrate the ideas of others (including the research literature) and develop a deeper understanding of their practice and values, and the values of The Bridge London Trust.

The Bridge also recognises that embedding a research culture, and the development of high quality research, demands a sustained commitment over time that may not fit easily with a performativity culture of instant results. As such the Research Strategy is set over a two year period with the benefits of the principles becoming more and more measurable as the Strategy reaches the end of the two year cycle.

### Leadership matters

By far the greatest influence on the development of research culture is leadership. Not simply through the provision of resources for staff to engage in and with research but also in terms of a top-down driven culture. Our senior leadership engage with research when examining whole school strategic changes. Senior leaders and heads of site 'talk the talk *and* walk the walk', engaging in research-based leadership practices such as 'modelling', 'monitoring' and 'mentoring and coaching'.

The key characteristic that our senior leaders model is an 'enquiry habit of mind': senior leaders actively look for a range of perspectives, purposefully seek relevant information from numerous and diverse sources and continually explore new ways to tackle perennial problems. This demonstration of research engagement and openness to enquiry is what helps to foster a greater sense of trust within the Trust. Staff relations are underpinned by trust and high levels of trust mitigate some of the key barriers to self- and school-improvement. In our atmosphere of high trust staff are encouraged to, and feel comfortable with, taking risks. Rather than

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respond to any barriers by playing safe and sticking to a narrow range of “tried and tested” methods, staff are more likely to innovate, in their efforts to develop or trial effective practice in this trusting learning environment.

### **Working in partnerships**

Developing a solid research culture within The Bridge is a key priority. However, we also appreciate the wider role The Bridge London Trust can play in spreading good, professional practice that is deeply rooted in engagement with and in research. We will continue to build partnerships and links not just across the MAT and with the NHS professionals who work alongside us but also with a wider network of schools and universities, particularly through the development of our Research Schools Network. This will enable us to widen our impact and share good practice, it will also help to address the research to practice and practice to research gaps that exist within education.