

ESRC Education Research Programme (ERP)

Knowledge Exchange in Education. Briefing Note #3

International Knowledge Exchange: What can schools learn from each other?

Introduction: Collaborative Peer Enquiry in context

This briefing note explores whether an international knowledge exchange process, based on principles of Collaborative Peer Enquiry (CPE) and involving educational practitioners in England and the Netherlands, can offer new horizons for collaboration and research application in school improvement.

CPE beyond borders

Collaborative Peer Enquiry (CPE) involves reciprocal school review visits, agreed by a group of school leaders who work together around an agreed improvement focus. CPE fits into a more commonly used umbrella term 'school peer review'.

Peer review can provide "feedback, critical friendship, validation of the school's self-evaluation or support fellow schools' improvement efforts" (Godfrey, 2020, p.374). It is also a particularly effective strategy in systems with high school autonomy, as it helps prevent schools from forming an introspective and defensive culture (OECD, 2013).

As a form of peer review, CPE builds on ideas about research-informed practice (RIP), in which educational practitioners enquire into practice, combining tacit knowledge of practice with explicit academic knowledge to better understand what they are doing and why. CPE is built on trust-based partnerships between schools. For these to be successful, a set of common conditions is required, such as shared leadership, shared goals, development of social and intellectual skills required for collaboration, and provision of sufficient time (Godfrey and Handscomb, 2019). Uniquely,

this project involved an international form of CPE, where the partnership extended beyond the local and national boundaries we normally see with peer review. Furthermore, this programme included non-school based professionals and academics, involved in developing RIP and partnership working in their respective countries.

The knowledge exchanges reported here were part of a larger project that involved schools in England, Spain and the Netherlands using CPE.ⁱ The process aims to transform practice by collecting school-based evidence that draws on both practitioner and academic knowledge (see Godfrey, 2020).

This paper focuses on the knowledge exchange experiences of the Dutch and English delegations. Visits between schools were designed to further understanding of:

- Peer-to-peer school collaboration in different policy settings, with a special emphasis on the integration of academic research into this process
- What optimal implementation of collaborative learning in schools looks in the Netherlands and England

Overall, twenty-three people including two headteachers from each country, interacted through school visits and online sessions from January to June 2024 to deepen their understanding of school collaboration, peer learning and engaging in and with research.

Different starting points, common dilemmas

The participants in this case were a mix of school leaders and other organisations: from England, the Schools Partnership Programme (SPP), a programme run by Education Development Trust (EDT); and from the Netherlands the Ontwikkelkracht and leerKRACHT programmes, with coordination from academics at Vu University and at UCL. Each provided an example of school-based collaborative improvement initiatives combining peer learning between schools with research-engagement.

In England, The Schools Partnership Programme (SPP) adopts a bottom-up approach to school improvement through self-evaluation, peer reviews and school to school support. Schools voluntarily come together in 'partnerships' aimed at improving self-directed areas of practice. "Improvement Champions" selected from each school receive special training and facilitate "improvement workshops" in other schools. The team from the Netherlands visited a school in which two Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) had been working together using the SPP methodology. The visitors were briefed on the SPP model and observed an improvement workshop.

In the Netherlands, The Ontwikkelkracht ("development power") programme is a 10-year national project running from 2022 to 2032 to promote evidence-informed practice. It aims to provide schools with the opportunity, time and expertise to take the lead in their own educational development. The project has four pillars: providing expertise and coaching to build a school improvement culture; providing accessible research-based knowledge (guidelines, summaries, toolkits, etc.); a pilot research programme in collaboration with researchers; and school development supported by "Expert Schools".

leerKRACHT (Teacher Power) has developed a method for teachers to regularly participate in internal collaboration to improve their practice, and is being used in more than 1,000 schools in the Netherlands. The method is centred around four devices: weekly stand-up teacher meetings; joint lesson design; lesson visits and feedback; and the student's voice. It describes an implementation process from introduction to establishment in schools. To find out more about the Ontwikkelkracht project and the leerKRACHT foundation's method for teacher collaboration, the team visited two Expert Schools, one certified by the Ontwikkelkracht project and another using the leerKRACHT method.

What did participants learn from the Knowledge Exchange?

In feedback collected after each visit, participants identified a number of common features to collaborative school improvement, including the importance of leadership and an infrastructure, culture and strategic vision to hold this together; and the importance of having high quality, credible facilitators. Participants also noted that successful research engagement required the adoption of rigorous processes, that could be helped by expert teacher teams. Common challenges identified were that while schools engaging in research-informed practices made reference to a range of research outputs, the depth of their engagement was sometimes limited.

However, the real value in these exchange visits was seen from shadowing and participating in school-based practices and engaging in professional dialogue. There was a sense of 'solidarity'; several participants revealed that they realized how international counterparts were working on the same issues, sometimes with a high level of expertise, which deepened their confidence in the education community as a whole and in themselves as members of that community.

Some insights gained by each national team highlighted the differences in what others were doing. From the English delegation, one headteacher of a Junior School in the South of England, was impressed by the collaborative and steady improvement process in the Netherlands, the research connections with universities and the focus on teacher ownership.

The ambition and length of commitment in place in the Netherlands was impressive. The practice observed in the schools of Leerkracht and Ontwikkelkracht demonstrated a more embedded and collaborative cycle of improvement – little and often. This was also promoted and underpinned by regional/national objectives. Also the research link between schools and universities appeared stronger than in the UK or Spain. Teacher agency here was stronger and deliberately encouraged.

He is now working on setting clear goals for research-based practice and improving the peer review process in his own school.

A CEO of one of the MATs said they were able to reflect on and critically view their own daily practice.

This trip made us really reflect on what we can stop doing in our organizations. Seeing how aspects of the schools differed gave us clarity

on aspects of our schools that is important and other aspects that are just habitual. (CEO)

Others saw the experience as developmental in terms of their own leadership and their intentions for their school:

This process has built my confidence in both myself as a leader and in the systems we use and why they work. It has made me more critical of how we work and I am now striving for clarity and purpose around our school improvement model. I am also more passionate about being research informed. (Headteacher)

From the Netherlands, an Associate Professor at VU University was impressed by the commitment of teachers and trainers to processes of peer review used in the SPP program. She is currently working with SPP to pilot a peer review project in the Netherlands. One headteacher of an 'Expert School' in the Ontwikkelkracht project, also saw its potential, and is looking to implement peer review with schools in their foundation.

For me personally I saw the possibilities of peer-review within my trust and convinced my director and other head teachers within the trust to look more into peer-review, and so now we are discussing and looking for possibilities to get schooling on peer-review [sic].

The value of international collaborative peer enquiry.

The ways in which such collaborations were achieved was structurally different in the examples of England and the Netherlands. In the case of SPP in England, this is a locally-based initiative funded by the Education Endowment Foundation. "Improvement Champions" are trained as critical friends to facilitate improvement in disadvantaged schools through a coaching methodology. Schools sign up using a subscription model with this fee shared among joining clusters. An evaluation of the SPP suggests that the programme can build trust and skills, supports disadvantaged schools, and cultivates ownership of improvement aims (Godfrey et al., 2023). Promoting such peer review requires long-term, enthusiastic commitment from all those involved, including school and system leaders who can allocate resources such as time and opportunity. The SPP provides a framework, structure and ongoing training on the roles required within the partnerships that means it is sustainable.

The Ontwikkelkracht project in the Netherlands was set up to promote research-informed practice (RIP) and research engaged schools (RES) at the national system level. What is unique about this project is that rather than the state prescribing important research and evidence, the four pillars of the programme facilitate access to and participation in research based on the needs of individual schools. Funding is for a long-term, 10-year project taking into account the time needed to build a culture change. While learning from England's Education Endowment funded research schools' network, the Dutch team have taken a patient approach using smaller clusters of schools initially and are trialling what works with these before scaling up.

This project showed how both sides could learn important lessons from the methodologies employed, as well as ways in which approaches to CPE could be scaled up.

Conclusion

This Dutch- English collaboration showed the great potential for international learning for the school leaders, academics and other organisations involved. In the case of the Leerkracht/SPP collaboration, we have seen a concrete example of the transfer of practice with the introduction of a pilot programme of peer review in several Dutch school boards. Where the SPP programme was strong on leadership and between-school practice, LeerKRACHT was excellent in creating processes and structures to encourage in-school leadership and teaching practices to implement RIP. Both sides were able to recognise the relative strengths and shortcomings of these approaches and are seeking to address them.

This KE project also illustrated how cross-border experiences can have an impact on teachers' cultural, pedagogical, and leadership competencies, while the development of a multicultural nature in teachers' thinking enhances their own sense of personal critical awareness (Casinader, 2018). The Erasmus+ teacher mobility scheme is a good example of such an international knowledge exchange. This program is based on the needs of schools and teachers (in contrast to domestic CPD, which is often based on policy requirements or standardisation), and it has been suggested that exposure to other countries' education systems and collaboration with teachers in other countries has led to deep reflection, critical attitudes, and confidence in one's own educational practice (Martins et al., 2024; Özdoğru, 2022). This influence can also be seen in the comments of

participants from England and the Netherlands in this UCL knowledge exchange project.

Clearly there are language and geographical constraints in international knowledge exchange. However, given the use of technology and online implementation, this should not be an insurmountable barrier. Given the powerful learning and transfer of practices seen from these visits, more could be done to look at the sustainability of international knowledge exchange networks.

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