Educational Leadership Masters Programmes – Research Intensive Professional Learning and Applied Social Science

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Research Led: *Engaging in and with social science research to enhance professional leadership learning and practice, helping students to bring about educational reform.*

Applied social science is a tricky business – and the senior leaders on our Educational Leadership Masters programmes arguably have it harder than most. Schools are highly complex social organisations, sitting within large and diverse school systems. Few school leaders are content to stand back and offer critique and commentary; most feel compelled to do all they can to improve their schools using the resources at their disposal. However, few will instinctively reach out to research for this.

This short account of our programmes describes why engaging *in* and *with* research is our preferred model of applied social science and powerful professional learning. A masters-level programme brings students to the forefront of research and knowledge. As a tutor team, we are actively working right across this frontier, currently researching a huge range of topics including: cognitive science approaches in the classroom; values-led leadership and leadership theory; how educators can embed arts in the school curriculum; the formation of teachers' professional identities; formative evaluation at scale in large DfE-funded school improvement programmes; new video-technologies to develop teachers' thinking and practice; and the efficiency of governance models using large secondary datasets.

All of this research activity arguably entitles us to describe our programmes as 'research intensive'. In our view, however, mastering the academic literature is only half the battle. As our experience and our own research reveals, putting research into practice is challenging: expertise and considerable school improvement work is needed to contextualise lessons from research for specific subjects and school settings. There is, in other words, a 'distance-to-practice' gap which educational leaders (which we mean in the widest sense) must cross.

So how have we designed the educational leadership programmes to achieve this?

There is a common structure to learning on our programmes: We start with a problem from practice. We ask, 'What Matters?' before asking 'What works?'. We proceed to examine the research in the area. We explore – as a professional learning community which brings together educational professionals from a wide range of settings and from across the world – the research and the problems of educational leadership across contexts. Joint exploration makes for a powerful blend of the general and theoretical, and the concrete and practical. Then – crucially – it is through research and enquiry that leaders can apply the research and their insights to their own contexts, and in so doing, develop new practices and knowledge. There is no 'how-to' manual for educational leadership, so it is often the techniques and practices of research – critical thinking, collecting and analysing evidence, reviewing and presenting ideas – as much as the research itself which effects the most powerful learning and educational change.

And through this approach and ethos, educational leaders on our masters programmes in recent years have explored everything from system leadership for maths professional development across multi-academy trusts in England to developing character and moral strength in Ukraine; from advanced learning theory and assessment approaches which capture and develop depth of learning across a school's curriculum, to examining how to develop rich classroom dialogue across the Chinese school system; and from developing school self-evaluation and improvement policy and process across a multi-campus school in Cambodia, to understanding what headteachers can and should personally do to tackle bullying in their communities.

For all of these, and at the heart of our approach to professional learning in school improvement and educational leadership, is engagement with and in research.