



## RESEARCH REVIEW

# Elizabeth Foster

## How to apply professional learning research to your work

The first research column of 2019, at the beginning of this magazine's 40th year, is a good time to pause and take stock of the state of research on professional learning.

Research has always been important to our field, but we have a new opportunity to elevate its importance, thanks to recent policies and priorities — including the evidence provisions for professional learning initiatives in the Every Student Succeeds Act (see article on p. 12), which increases demand among state and district policymakers for evidence-based strategies and practices.

In addition, we are seeing growing interest among philanthropy and practitioners in how to best use and support a range of research strategies, such as complementing extant studies with evidence from action research and improvement science approaches (see article on p. 48).

Research remains a top priority for Learning Forward, as it is critical to our advocacy efforts, will inform the

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### LET US HEAR FROM YOU

Do you have thoughts about this study or have recommendations of other research you'd like to see us cover? Email me at [elizabeth.foster@learningforward.org](mailto:elizabeth.foster@learningforward.org).

upcoming revision to the Standards for Professional Learning, and is a high-interest topic among our members, according to a recent member survey.

Given the range of ways in which Learning Forward members and others engage in and use research, this column will depart from its usual format of zeroing in on one research study to highlight themes and ideas we are seeing and provide an overview of guiding resources.

### Understand which research best suits your specific purpose.

While demand is high for the best available evidence, the definition of “the best” depends on the type of questions you seek to answer. Different types of evidence are appropriate for different uses.

For instance, randomized control trials are considered the gold standard for demonstrating which professional learning approaches are the most effective in specific conditions. Because assignment to treatment groups is random and the conditions of the study are highly controlled, researchers can have a high degree of confidence

that any changes are the result of the intervention and not other extraneous factors.

These types of studies have been the most effective way to determine what interventions are worthy of continued investment and replication. The scale and precision of such research provides a strong foundation for decisions about which strategies are likely to produce positive results for teachers and students.

While gold standard studies are invaluable, they require great investments of time and resources and can take years to produce findings.

Therefore, complementing foundational studies with other research findings is critical to understanding what works well under what conditions, given the complexities of professional learning — changing site conditions, strategies working in tight combinations, challenges in causal linkages, and other factors.

Qualitative research, such as case studies based on interviews and focus groups, provides valuable contextualized insights about participants' experiences and can elevate and highlight practitioner voices in ways that other types of research do not.

Improvement science research, which features rapid-cycle testing of small change ideas and sharing of test findings, can add to an overall understanding because of the way the results of the cycles provide ongoing feedback. Part of the philosophy of improvement science is that the



learnings are quickly shared and applied, allowing small investments of time and resources to result in usable information for practitioners.

There is also a lot of discussion in the field about the relationships between traditional research and what we learn from program evaluations. Staying away from the debate for a moment, we believe that quasi-experimental evaluations — which compare change over time with pre-

and post-tests or compare two groups who participated in an initiative — are particularly helpful when randomizing participants is unethical or impossible or when an initiative is new and needs small-scale testing before a resource-intensive trial is conducted.

It is important to be intentional about matching research design and evidence with your intended purpose. For instance, a research study about teacher misconceptions that may

## RESOURCES

### EXISTING RESEARCH

- All Things PLC: [www.allthingsplc.info/articles-research](http://www.allthingsplc.info/articles-research)
- Digital Promise: [researchmap.digitalpromise.org](http://researchmap.digitalpromise.org)
- Oxford Bibliographies: [learningforward.org/publications/oxford-bibliographies](http://learningforward.org/publications/oxford-bibliographies)

### PARTNERSHIPS

- National Network for Education Research Practice Partnerships: [nnerpp.rice.edu](http://nnerpp.rice.edu)

### STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

- Learning Forward: [learningforward.org/standards-for-professional-learning](http://learningforward.org/standards-for-professional-learning)
- Standards Assessment Inventory: [consulting.learningforward.org/consulting-services/standards-assessment-inventory](http://consulting.learningforward.org/consulting-services/standards-assessment-inventory)

### THE EVIDENCE BASE

- State Supports for Title II Implementation (webinar): [learningforward.org/learning-opportunities/webinars/webinar-archive](http://learningforward.org/learning-opportunities/webinars/webinar-archive)
- Title II Impact Story Survey: <https://bit.ly/2Fplrj>

be critical to a discussion about developing a PLC protocol will not be as compelling in a discussion about the impact of PLCs overall.

### Understand and build on existing research.

Whether you are a producer or consumer of research or some combination of both, an understanding of what exists already in the research is

an essential starting place. Fortunately, there are resources that address research and include the details of a specific strategy or aspect of professional learning (see box on p. 17).

There are also research reports that give us the opportunity to engage with researchers and encourage discussions that lead to a better understanding about professional learning implications. For example, we recently developed a webinar featuring a RAND Corporation review on implementation of social and emotional learning under ESSA, which was supported by The Wallace Foundation. Although the report did not focus solely on professional learning, the webinar focused on and drew out that connection to help participants use the important content it contained.

As another example, Digital Promise has developed a compendium of research studies related to education that also link to videos, literature review summaries, vignettes, and additional supports. The free, web-based resource offers a searchable database of research studies related to education, searchable by key word, author, topic, and number of citations.

This is a great resource if you are looking for research on a particular professional learning strategy. The mapping capability also points you to related studies and topics as suggestions to explore — one way to further broaden knowledge about professional learning.

**Foster collaboration among researchers and implementers.**

Partnerships among researchers

and those who apply their findings in practice have a unique opportunity to generate relevant, contextualized evidence about education change ideas, including professional learning.

Such partnerships are growing, spearheaded by universities, foundations, and organizations such as the National Network for Education Research Practice Partnerships, which offers information and resources about the design of such partnerships and acts as a broker to match interested parties to create intentional, formalized joint efforts that will inform and influence decisions in education based on research.

Such partnerships also exist among the Learning Forward community, with its varied membership made up of classroom educators, school leaders, regional providers, district and

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state policymakers, and researchers. We encourage you to expand these partnerships and to share your valuable lessons for the field by submitting ideas for our conferences, institutes, and publications.

### **Let the Standards for Professional Learning be your guide.**

Given the wide range of topics, designs, and publications in education research, it is important to keep an eye on what it means for professional learning to be effective — not just interesting or innovative.

The Standards for Professional Learning can play a critical role by acting as a framework for discerning what research is relevant and meaningful. The standards and related tools can also help inform where knowledge is lacking with regard to effective overall systems of professional learning — for instance, assessing whether your school or district understands the best evidence related to the learning designs or learning communities.

The standards are the foundation for all of Learning Forward's work and therefore are the lens through which we view research in the field as well as our own role in the professional learning research community.

We are interested in better understanding relevant research that has emerged in the field since the last standards revision — especially with regard to equity, technology, and social and emotional learning — and considering what might be incorporated in the next iteration of the standards. This could highlight areas where the current standards could be strengthened.

Finally, we are eager to highlight research about evidence of outcomes or impact related to the standards and identify additional research that is needed and might be good future

projects for Learning Forward.

We have data collected over years of standards implementation via our Standards Assessment Inventory that could contribute to new research, and we are eager to better understand and document the impact and influence of standards adoption on policy and decisions across a system.

### **Help build the evidence base for the professional learning field.**

As Janice Poda explains on p. 12, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has put forth both a priority about and detailed requirements for evidence-based practices as related to the choices and continued support of professional learning.

Learning Forward is making a concentrated effort to support educators in their quest to understand the evidence requirements in ESSA while also leveraging this requirement to collect and document more evidence related to effective professional learning.

States are often leading this effort and guiding districts to look to the research in making decisions as to what strategies to undertake or continue. For instance, our recent webinar about using evidence highlighted how Tennessee and Washington are building the capacity of educators to use research in identifying priorities and initiatives.

We can strengthen this foundation by evaluating professional learning in schools, districts, and states, documenting the impact of professional learning on educators and students, and sharing findings and data to the extent possible with policymakers. This strong foundation in turn informs and guides policy and resource decisions, shifting the field toward more evidence-informed choices for professional learning.

Advocacy efforts that depend on an evidence base also help inform and build that evidence base. As individuals

become more educated about the need for research that informs strategy and resource decisions, the focus on data collection and evidence gathering increases.

Learning Forward is advancing this relationship through its wide range of advocacy efforts, including a briefing on Capitol Hill that highlighted key findings from large-scale research about effective professional learning as well as the importance of stories about the impact of professional learning.

### **Lean on Learning Forward as a resource for professional learning research.**

Learning Forward continues to conduct original research about specific programs, interventions, and aspects of professional learning as well as the conditions that impact the effectiveness of professional learning.

Currently the organization is engaged in several long-term studies with research partners that will inform the field about topics such as the impact of collaborative professional learning teams and the effect of coaching on secondary teachers' content knowledge.

We also translate data into knowledge, apply evidence for program improvement and policy development, and share knowledge with our members and the field at large through a range of venues, including the Annual Conference and Summer Institutes, the Learning Forward Academy, network communities, our affiliates, publications, and outreach communications.

Our commitment is to highlight the importance of evidence on program and strategy improvement as well as contribute to and generate new knowledge and support policy and advocacy positions.

We welcome your feedback, including ideas for future studies to highlight, actions or partnerships to explore, and other suggestions. ■