

Implementer Portraits: Jonathan Sharples



Jonathan Sharples is a Professorial Research Associate at the University College London and works as a senior researcher for the Education Endowment Foundation, a grant-making charity in the UK that funds rigorous evaluations in the field of education.

How did you get an interest in implementation – what was the trigger?

I've always been interested in how change happens in education – especially at the individual, behavioural level. And it's been surprising to me how little the field of evidence-based practice talks about this change, and the need for good implementation.

Implementation research manages to capture a lot of tacit knowledge in the profession and brings that into shape – it makes the implicit explicit – and that appeals to me.

Unfortunately, in a desire to make itself 'academic', I feel implementation science is at risk of making itself less relevant to the people who need it most: frontline practitioners who are managing change on a daily basis. It can become complicated and abstract, and I often need to tell people, *look, stick with it for a while because once you have a hang of it, you'll find it useful*. It's an irony that we're not readily implementing what we know about implementation! That's why we want to make implementation research more accessible to educators, and try and close the gaps between science and practice.

What is one of your favourite article (or other publication) on implementation?

I recently came across a systematic review conducted by colleagues at the EPPI Centre, [The Science of Using Science](#). They focus very much on the early stages of implementation around the decision-making process, examining the behavioural requirements needed to make different intervention mechanisms work. So, to speak in Susan Michie's terms, the capabilities, motivation, and opportunities a practitioner needs to change his or her behaviour. They send this clear message that without building the capacity of individuals, implementation will not succeed. I find that very convincing.

What are you currently working on that relates to implementation?

My current work with implementation is focused on finding ways to develop an intermediary layer of change agents within the teaching profession: people who can support implementation processes and enable the uptake of evidence in schools. We have gathered pretty strong evidence on the effectiveness of teaching assistants (TA), who – when used well in a classroom – can really make a difference to outcomes. Nevertheless, helping schools to use TAs well requires a substantial multi-stranded and multi-layered change process that is best facilitated with some intermediary support. We believe that practitioners are well-placed in this respect to influence colleagues, frame the research findings in the context of practice, and bring complementary expertise on school improvement. There are limits, ultimately, to what we, as researchers, can provide. So, in two large areas of England, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, we are partnering with a range of different intermediaries to provide such support. That involves around 900 schools, so it's a pretty large-scale endeavour.

If you had the resources for it, what within implementation science or practice would you want to work with next?

I would love to develop a more systematic approach to finding, selecting, developing and supporting these intermediary partners. They are highly specialist roles, requiring a set of skills that are rare in combination, so everyone would benefit from better processes for identifying and nurturing this talent. We would also like to become more precise in selecting the right blend of implementation mechanisms in relation to our goals. There's a tendency to throw everything but the kitchen sink at your implementation target and hope for the best. Again, the behavioural science work has much to offer here I think.

If you were to have lunch with another 'implementer', whom would you pick?



It sounds a bit corny but I would pick some of the fantastic practitioner partners we've got to know over the last few years. I have a lot of admiration for people who are able roll up their sleeves and make things happen. They bring fantastic energy and commitment to the role, and as dedicated 'hybrid professionals' are always up for a challenging implementation job.