

# Promoting teacher autonomy

Educators want evidence and tools, not strict instructions

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*Professional teachers play an essential role in improving the evidence base around teaching and learning. However, this does not mean that all teachers must engage with scientists, nor does it mean scientists should tell teachers what to do. It is important that teachers maintain their autonomy.*

The [interdisciplinary learning sciences](#) seek to advance our scientific understanding of teaching and learning processes and hope to ultimately change teaching and learning practices for the better. Teachers are a crucial component in this endeavour, and collaborations between teachers and scientists ensure that the research is relevant to education. Within the field of [educational neuroscience](#), there are ever increasing efforts to connect educators with researchers, and these efforts are to be applauded. Similarly, neuroscience is starting to work its way into [teacher training](#) and ongoing professional development.

These initiatives are a fantastic way of ensuring teachers have their say in the production of new research, and access to the science that may help them in their day jobs. It is important that moves to strengthen the ties between scientists and teachers are not interpreted as eroding teachers' independence. While many educational neuroscientists argue that teacher engagement is vital in ensuring the applicability of research to the classroom, not all teachers need to engage. Relationships should be forged between researchers and only those teachers who want to be involved in educational neuroscience.

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The scientific evidence that is enhancing our knowledge about how we learn is partly neuroscientific. But this doesn't mean that teachers need to understand everything about how the brain works, and it absolutely doesn't mean that scientists will be telling educators how to teach. An ideal integration of science to the classroom might involve teachers learning the basics of the science of learning, along with a number of evidence-based tools for practise. Teachers would use their expertise to decide which tool is likely to work best in a given classroom scenario with a certain group of students.

## **Supporting, but not compelling, teachers to engage**

Given the huge workloads that teachers are faced with, the onus should not be on teachers to take

on further work if they have no desire to do so. Ideally, research funds would be used to enable keen teachers to dedicate time to be meaningfully engaged in research. These funds might pay for a supply teacher to teach classes while the usual teacher works with scientists, or cover the costs of resources for teachers who want to run their own research projects.

Educational neuroscientists want to listen to teachers, but only those who want to talk. They want to talk to teachers, but only those who want to listen. If we are to take a holistic approach to education, which goes beyond grades to consider wider factors including the importance of teacher wellbeing, it is clear that imposing research on teachers would not be beneficial.

## **"Finding out more about teaching and learning mechanisms, and how to enhance them should encourage teacher autonomy and enable well-informed, independent decision-making."**

Similarly, not all neuroscientists, psychologists, or geneticists are interested in education, and that's fine too. Educational neuroscience may draw on all of these disciplines, but it does not call on each scientist to engage. Finding out more about teaching and learning mechanisms, and how to enhance them should *encourage* teacher autonomy and enable well-informed, independent decision-making.

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