

How to... become a research-engaged school

In this How To guide [Caroline Sharp](#) gives a definite guide on how schools and their staff can become research engaged.

■ Introduction

In 2003, Graham Handscomb and John MacBeath proposed that schools could become research-engaged by placing research and enquiry 'at the heart of the school, its outlook, systems and activity' (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003).

A team of researchers at the National Foundation for Educational Research worked with eight primary and seven secondary schools to find out what could be achieved (see Sharp *et al.*, 2005). Our study showed that research engagement helps staff to develop their schools and make them exciting places to work. Since then, I have been privileged to work with many more schools and have seen the positive impact that becoming research-engaged can have on staff, pupils and the wider community (see also Sharp and Handscomb, 2007).

■ What is a research-engaged school?

A research-engaged school is a dynamic institution. It's looking, questioning and trying to improve things all the time.



Primary school headteacher

A research-engaged school:

- investigates key issues in teaching and learning
- uses enquiry for staff development
- turns data and experience into knowledge
- uses evidence for decision making
- promotes learning communities.

■ Why become a research-engaged school?

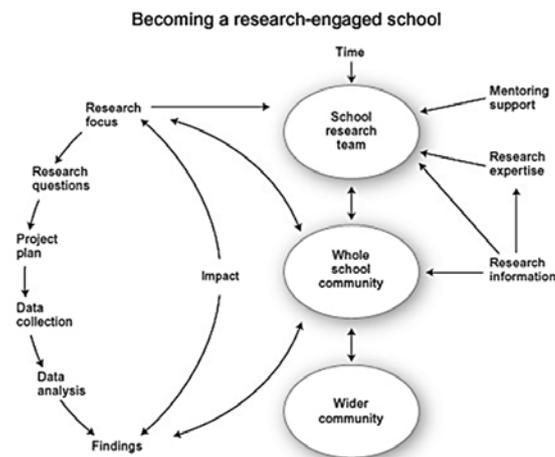
Research puts the "wow moments" back into teaching. We'll do the things we're interested in and we know it will have a payoff for our school

Primary school teacher

Becoming a research-engaged school has the potential to contribute to a school's core business and address new developments in educational policy, helping to:

- raise standards through improving the quality of teaching and support
- contribute to school self-evaluation – it will give you something to discuss with your school improvement partner and report in your self-evaluation form
- link staff development to school improvement and enhance staff motivation
- address personalised learning by understanding and addressing pupils' individual learning needs
- work on the citizenship and Every Child Matters agendas by consulting young people about their education and involving them in research
- contribute to workforce reform by involving all staff, regardless of their role and status
- develop the capacity to solve your own problems and identify 'what works', using an evidence-based approach.

Eight action points for research engagement



■ ■ Getting started

Smaller schools have the ability to take on whole-school developments relatively quickly, but a larger secondary school might want to start with a departmental approach. A third alternative is to encourage individuals to apply (e.g. by offering bursaries or time for research), but this requires coordination to make sure it contributes to the development of the school as a whole. In any case, you need a core group of interested staff and some basic resources to get started.

Case Study: A whole-school approach to becoming a research-engaged school

Staff at Colmore Infant and Nursery School in Birmingham had no previous experience of research engagement, but Headteacher Viv Randall found the idea appealing. As she explained: “I was keen to see how becoming ‘researchers’ could influence school improvement without creating a huge amount of extra work.” Viv introduced the initiative at a staff training day, and they decided to research and develop new approaches to improve children’s reading.

Staff gathered many useful insights through their research, and children’s reading scores rose by 10 per cent. A year later, both teaching and support staff had gained the confidence to take on a variety of different research projects.

1. What resources are needed?

Becoming a research-engaged school means making a commitment to using evidence and research throughout the school.

The NFER team identified key features of successful practice. These have the following action implications for schools.

- Be prepared to commit resources – especially staff time.
- Identify an appropriate topic and focus for research.
- Form a research team and enable them to work collaboratively.
- Provide support, including mentoring and research expertise.
- Create a supportive learning culture throughout the school.
- Make a commitment to embed research engagement in your school.

It depends on your priorities: if you want research to happen, you make it happen. We have to say to our research team: “What you’re doing here is of value to the school and therefore we will provide the cover.”

Secondary school deputy headteacher

The main resource used for research is staff time. Time is needed for planning the research, collecting data, analysis, reflection and sharing results. Some release time may be

necessary, especially when staff need to work together. But there are ways of exploiting existing opportunities, such as staff development time or team teaching. There may also be some funding available for research, as part of local or national initiatives (see resources list at the end of this article).

Case Study: Finding time for research

At Mayfield Primary School in Oldham, Headteacher Christine Taylor was keen for her school to become research-engaged because she could see the potential to help staff become more reflective about their teaching. She and Deputy Head David Simpkin worked together on their research project on improving children's writing through drama. They used a team approach: one taught new material while the other observed children's responses. This was a particularly efficient way of collecting data, as David explained: "The fact that we were doing it in weekly lessons meant that we created time for teachers to be able to work together at no added expense. It became a normal part of the curriculum."

2. The research team

The main difference between being a school where some individuals are doing action research and becoming a research-engaged school is the whole school perspective. Forming a research team is a good way to ensure sharing and provide mutual support.

Case Study: A secondary school research team

The Sandon School in Essex wanted to investigate the impact of a two-year Key Stage 3 'fast track' programme. Deputy Head John Branfield said: "When we became involved we could not predict the full range of impacts that the work would have." Eight members of staff were involved in the research team, and their enthusiasm was evident in their commitment to attending meetings, collecting information, discussing what they were finding and sharing their results with others. John said: "The buzz was catching – it reinforced our commitment to using research as an essential element in developing our teaching and learning."

A research team has a number of advantages over a lone researcher. By forming a team, research becomes a collaborative professional activity, making sure that learning is promoted and shared. A pair or small group of people working together can maintain the momentum and see the work through to completion, even if individual members are unable to continue their involvement. Team working also helps to make the process of research more widely distributed, with greater potential for sharing and ownership among staff.

Research teams benefit from diverse membership, bringing enthusiasm, expertise and fresh insights to bear. It is important to have a member of the leadership team involved, either as part of the team or in a mentoring role, or both. This will provide leverage by ensuring that the team's activities are linked into whole-school decision-making and communication systems.

Depending on the focus of your research, you may wish to involve people other than staff in your research team, such as pupils, parents or governors.

Case Study: Agreeing a focus and devising research questions

Bushey Meads Secondary School in Hertfordshire established a learning working group to identify ways of motivating students to learn more effectively. The group started with eight colleagues from different departments, co-ordinated by Richard Kuhn, the school's first deputy head. A year later it had grown to 12 members, including learning support staff. After some discussion, the group agreed to focus on teachers' questioning styles.

Group members organised themselves into three subgroups, each working on one of three specific research questions: 'What do students think about teachers' questioning styles?', 'How can we get students to ask learning questions?' and 'How can teachers use questioning to motivate, engage and focus students?'.

Richard found it challenging to organise such a large group, but he was reluctant to limit its size. The decision to split into subgroups helped to make it manageable. The choice of an overarching theme brought coherence to the research studies, promoted

reflective dialogue and helped the participants to communicate their results with colleagues across the school. The research questions enabled staff to choose something of interest to them and to keep focused on what they wanted to find out.

■ ■ ■ Providing support for school research

The research found that two types of support were fundamental to the success of a school's own research projects: access to mentoring and to research expertise.

1. Mentor support

People undertake research in order to find things out. There is not a great deal of point in doing research if you already know the answer. But this very open-ended nature of research can make it unsettling for those involved, as it can be difficult to know if you are on the right track. It is important for the research team to be very clear about their research questions and systematic in their processes, but to remain open to new information and different points of view. Having people on hand to offer support, challenge and advice can help the research team decide which direction to take.

Access to a mentor is particularly valuable for those involved in leading a school research team. Staff involved in the study were grateful to school leaders who provided them with mentoring and coaching support. School leaders often found that they needed to give much more reassurance to new research team leaders at the beginning, but that they could reduce the level of support as staff became more confident in their ability to carry out and share the findings of their research.

It has been very democratic, the discussions have been quite open, but all democracies need a system and John (the Deputy Head) is our system. He does the agendas and minutes. He has been very supportive of me, talking things through. If he had not been here, it might not have happened at all.

Secondary school learning support team leader

Research engagement provides an opportunity for school leaders to share leadership and for staff to develop their leadership skills.

2. Research expertise

We've been used to seeing CPD as sending one person on a course and getting them to filter down... But doing research with support from professional researchers – that's the best form of professional development you can get.

Primary school headteacher

Access to research expertise is a key consideration. This is an opportunity to build on research expertise within the school or to involve someone from outside, such as a lecturer from a local university or someone working for your local authority. Research experts can help your team by:

- adding status to the research
- advising on how to plan and conduct a research enquiry
- ensuring the quality of the research
- keeping up the team's enthusiasm and moving things on
- helping staff to develop new research skills, techniques and systems
- linking your school's interests with local or national research evidence
- providing a role model of how a professional researcher thinks and acts.

■ ■ ■ The role of school leaders

The staff in our project schools told us that becoming a research-engaged school fitted in with their school's culture. They had leaders who valued research, encouraged questioning and reflection and prioritised staff development. Staff knew that any effort they put into doing research would be recognised and supported, and that the results would be taken seriously.

We see the staff as learners. We want to open minds and find ways to improve. Research fits in with the ethos and vision of the school.

Secondary school deputy headteacher

What are the challenges? What could go wrong?

I think you quickly become aware of the pitfalls – taking on too much or asking the wrong kinds of questions. You need to make sure you choose something you know you want to find out. Start small, have clear goals, have a timeline and write a plan.

Secondary school head of department

1. Who wants to be a researcher?

Research has an image problem. People tend to picture researchers as ‘ivory tower’ boffins who are far removed from the practicalities of life in the classroom. Professional researchers are trained to develop their research skills, so becoming a researcher may seem daunting to school staff. But as well as being an academic profession, there is a great tradition of people taking on their own research projects. This is often referred to as ‘practitioner’ or ‘action’ research. Action research is so-called because the people doing it are interested in social action – what people think and how they behave – and are committed to taking action as a result of their research.

- If you think your staff would find the label ‘research’ off-putting, you could consider calling it ‘enquiry’ or ‘reflective practice’, at least at first.
- Reassure staff that much of what they do in their everyday practice, such as observing, using data and problem-solving, can be turned into research skills.
- Some members of staff may be involved in postgraduate study: make use of their knowledge and skills to support others embarking on research for the first time.

2. Do we have to write a report?

People often struggle to pull together the results of their research into a report. In some cases, a formal report is required, but there are other ways of recording research findings.

- Make sure the results of research are recorded so that others can share your findings.
- A slide presentation or video could provide an alternative to a written report.
- If you are writing a report, use some of the examples listed in the resources section to form a template for your school’s reports.
- You could ask someone with good writing skills to help the research team write up their findings.

3. Who wants to read about research?

Using published research is an important part of research engagement, because it raises awareness of the latest findings, avoids duplication and helps you relate your

research to previous work on the subject. But long academic articles can be off-putting. The good news is that several publications and websites are available featuring research digests and articles written for practitioners.

- Ask information professionals, such as school library staff, to help locate relevant research.
- Subscribe to a research digest and circulate items to colleagues.
- Display research findings in the staffroom.
- Start a professional reading group.

4. What about ethics?

Research can cause problems if it fails to respect ethical principles. School staff need to think carefully about why and how they want to use research. Conducting research raises issues such as confidentiality and anonymity, informed consent, the right to withdraw, who collects and owns the research, and what will happen as a result.

- Use research to find out more about an issue, not to confirm existing practice, support one person’s viewpoint or pursue a particular agenda.
- Consider what you will do if the research comes up with controversial or unexpected findings.
- Think about how to establish trust and deal fairly with all research participants (especially pupils and parents).
- Consider whether your research is likely to raise issues of disclosure/child protection or data protection.
- Decide whether you intend to identify participants. Let people know from the outset what will happen to their information.
- Make sure you consider ethical issues before collecting any data.

5. Ensuring research is shared

We find out things all the time and share them in conversation. I have used several ideas from other schools’ research.

Primary school teacher

It is all too easy for research to become a private activity, taken on by a few members of staff and of little interest to others. Schools need to keep the focus on whole-school engagement with research. This does not mean that all

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staff have to be actively involved, but it does mean keeping everyone informed.

- Raise awareness of the research and share the activity as widely as possible, through newsletters, your website, staff meetings and training events.
- Members of staff who are not directly involved in data collection might be interested in providing reflection and critique.
- Make sure that you keep research engagement high on the agenda for staff, parents, pupils, governors and others, such as the local authority.

■ ■ What next – embedding research in your school

Having done things from a research angle, our perceptions of how to do things have changed. Rather than saying: “We’re going to look at target-setting”, we can ask: “Does setting targets with children enable them to improve their performance?”

Primary school deputy headteacher

Research engagement has the potential to empower schools and staff to incorporate a virtuous cycle of enquiry, critique and improvement into well planned and targeted development. But this will only happen if schools take action to embed research into the school’s outlook, systems and activity.

Some of the next steps might include:

- ensuring that data and research evidence is part of school development planning
- applying for funding for research and evaluation, possibly in partnership with professional researchers
- evaluating new resources or practices before they are adopted on a larger scale
- suggesting research activity to staff during their performance reviews
- encouraging staff to form a professional learning group
- involving pupils and parents as researchers.

1. Growing research communities in your school and beyond.

Small schools can involve the whole staff in research activity, but this is not practical in larger schools. Secondary

schools need to have a strategy for spreading research engagement throughout the school.

Case Study: spreading research engagement in a larger secondary school

Blue Coat Church of England Secondary School in Oldham has approximately 1,300 students on roll. Staff in the geography department decided to investigate e-learning as part of an initiative in three local schools. Headteacher Julie Hollis explained her vision for spreading research engagement throughout the school: “The short term goal is to get something productive, exciting and known to be useful, with a bit of newsworthiness about it. Then I would like to see the involvement of more staff, so that it becomes self-sustaining. In the longer term, I would like to see research engagement become not just part of our culture, but part of our identity.”

Staff with different specialisms may find different aspects of research appealing. For example, science staff may be drawn to scientific research designs, mathematics staff may be interested in analysing quantitative data, arts staff can think of creative ways of gathering and presenting information and humanities staff may be keen on aspects of social research, such as interviewing people or interpreting documents.

2. Sharing with other schools

This research that we’re doing, it’s not something that I want to keep to myself. I can take it to other schools. I want to ask: “What evidence are you collecting?”

Primary school headteacher

If your school is becoming engaged in research, there is every reason to celebrate and share your findings and experience with others. The schools involved in our research found that there were many opportunities for sharing through local networks and interest groups. Staff have contributed to local, national and international conferences. In some cases, research also led to partnership working with other schools.



Case study: collaborative research

King Edward VI Grammar School in Essex devotes the equivalent of one teacher's salary to enabling ten teachers a year to get involved in research. Over a five-year period, research engagement reached a 'tipping point' when with the majority of teachers had completed a research project. As well as sharing results during staff development days, each piece of research is reported in a short written account, circulated to staff, parents and governors and made available on the school's website. The school spends a third of its Leading Edge budget on working with other schools, including joint research investigations. These included research with a junior schools into the impact of parents continuing to read to their children as they grow older and a collaboration with an infants school to investigate children's developing concepts of science. The school has recently arranged meetings with other research-engaged schools to share the findings of their research.

Information and resources

Our research showed that becoming a research-engaged school was not just about a group of staff carrying out a

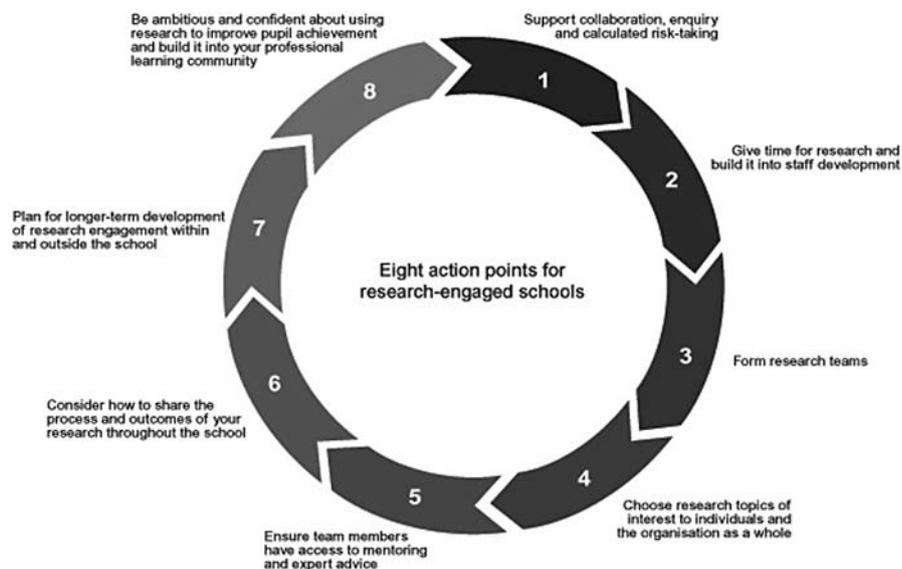
research activity, but more significantly about how their schools enabled them to do this. This article has presented the main features that contributed to the process. Rather than any one ingredient, research engagement involves a combination of features – a supportive school culture, dedicated resources, collaborative teamwork, committed leadership and a resolve to grow research communities within and beyond the school. (Sharp and Handscomb, 2006).

Information and resources

There are several sources of information on research engagement. Here is a selection of useful websites.

- Teachernet provides a list of organisations that fund teacher research.
<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/research/opportunities/sabbaticalfellowshipsopportunities/fundingorganisations>
- The DCSF produces a newsletter to keep people up to date with recently-published research, forthcoming events and news about research for practice. You can sign up for a monthly email update on the latest research.
<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research>

(Adapted from Sharp C and Handscomb G (2007) Making Research Make a Difference: teacher research - a small scale study to look at impact)



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- The GTCE produces *Research for Teachers*, featuring summaries of research on a series of topics, chosen for their interest to teachers.
<http://www.gtce.org.uk/teachers/rft>
- The British Educational Research Association has published a series of research guidelines, including booklets on ethics and report writing.
<http://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/category/publications>
- The Teacher Learning Academy (TLA) helps teachers to enhance their practice and gain professional recognition, using school-based enquiry. Teachers can apply to be accredited at different levels and schools can apply to

become a TLA school. There is a sliding scale of fees for participation.

<http://www.teacherlearningacademy.org.uk>

- The National Teacher Research Panel offers research guidelines for continuing professional development coordinators, advice on how staff can contribute to national research projects and conferences aimed at sharing practitioner research:

<http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/ntrp>

- The National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (formerly the NCSL) has a variety of resources for research engagement, including a review of literature on why and how school leaders engage with educational research. You could consider applying to become a research associate.

http://www.ncsl.org.uk/research-index/research_activities-index/randd-activities-engaged.htm

- The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) website has a special area dedicated to research-engaged schools, including guidance for schools, teachers, researchers and local authority staff.

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research-areas/research-engaged-schools>

- NFER also produces *Practical Research for Education*, a journal of research articles written for teachers. The Journal includes a toolkit series, aiming to help practitioners plan and carry out their own research.
www.pre-online.co.uk

- Essex Local Authority promotes enquiry, research and the development of research engaged schools through its Forum for Learning and Research/Enquiry website:
www.essexflare.org

- If you are looking for research evidence on a particular area, you might find it useful to use a specialist search engine, such as www.scholar.google.com.

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