



**Using research in your  
school and your teaching**  
Research-engaged  
professional practice

**TPLF06**

# What is research-engaged professional practice?

The great educationalist Lawrence Stenhouse defined research as 'systematic enquiry, made public', arguing that research enquiry aims to solve problems by achieving deeper understanding (Stenhouse 1980, p1).

Recently this concept has been developed by Graham Handscomb of Essex County Council and John MacBeath, professor at Cambridge University. They propose that schools can become research-engaged by placing research activity' at the heart of the school, its outlook, systems and activity' (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003). They suggest that a research-engaged school has four main features:

- It has a research orientation
- It has a research-rich pedagogy
- It promotes research communities
- It puts research at the heart of school policy and practice.

## How does this help the school, the teacher and the learner?

A school that is research-engaged uses that engagement to sharpen its focus on school improvement and improve teaching and learning. The school becomes involved in both large- and small-scale projects.

Supported by school leaders and governors, research engagement is shared among all staff, and gives opportunities for professional development.

It becomes embedded in school culture and so is used for decision-making. It helps forge a link between schools and education policy.

Research engagement provides a platform for the development of learning communities, both within and outside the school, and enables and sustains learning conversations (see *The Learning Conversation* in this series). It helps people in school reflect together about pedagogy, assessment, curriculum and leadership.

**“Research puts the ‘wow moments’ back into teaching. We’ll do the things that we’re interested in and we know that it will have a pay off for our school.”**

Primary school teacher

**“We’ve had years of implementation, but now it’s time to get into enquiry.”**

Primary school teacher

## **Who this leaflet is for**

This leaflet is written for all teachers, and provides useful information for all who work in schools and for the research community.

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# What research-engaged practice brings you and your school

## What it brings you

By engaging with research you can take a lead, question and reflect on your practice. You can try new things in your classroom and learn more about teaching and learning. The more your work is informed by research, the better you can contribute to whole-school improvement for your own benefit and that of your pupils.

Research projects can be the starting point for you to investigate and interpret how you teach, in a focused and systematic way. You can use research to ask – and answer – “What works and why?” and explore and understand the needs of your pupils more deeply.

You can rediscover what it is like to be a learner, for example by learning how to undertake research in your classroom, improving how you relate to pupils as a result.

Research engagement can boost your motivation and with it your personal, professional and career development. It can lead to a better understanding of major policy developments, such as school self-evaluation and specialist status for secondary schools.

## What it brings your school

The whole school will benefit from the renewed dialogue between school leaders, teachers, support staff, pupils, parents and governors. Each group will better understand the others' needs and concerns; research engagement helps to create a learning community.

And it can provide sound professional knowledge for decision-making. It can help to explain cause and effect, and show how to evaluate new initiatives, technology and teaching methods. In so doing, it can encourage more staff members to become interested in and take ownership of developing excellent practice.

Research engagement can help your school's staff to get together and reflect on pedagogy, assessment, curriculum and school leadership. Becoming engaged in research can inspire curiosity, interest and professional discussion among the staff, making it a great place to work.

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

Primary school head teacher

### **Colmore infant and nursery school, Birmingham**

#### **Whole-school impact on teaching reading**

Colmore Infant and Nursery School is a three-form entry school on the outskirts of Birmingham, with about 270 children.

Although staff had little previous experience of research, they all became involved in an action research project to improve the way they taught reading. Staff talked to colleagues in other schools about good practice, introduced different reading activities and recruited parents to help support children who were struggling with reading.

The school's research showed that its new approach to reading was having a positive effect on children, staff and parents. The research identified communication as an issue and so the staff invented a new 'book mark' scheme to improve communication with parents and helpers.

The experience of being research-engaged was so positive that it has become part of the school's identity. Several members of staff have gone on to use research as part of studies for professional qualifications, and the school is supporting a local research network among primary schools.

**"If you can become aware of what you're doing in a lesson, you start to actively think 'Could I do this differently?', because you are consciously looking for cause and effect. Encouraging teachers to become researchers is going to have tremendous benefits for the teaching profession."**

Secondary school teacher

## **The links between research engagement and continuing professional development**

Engaging in research is a professional development activity. It involves reflecting on your own practice, gaining new insights and making changes as a result.

Engaging in research gives you a chance to consolidate your existing skills and develop new ones. It provides opportunities to plan a research activity, refine questions, gather data, analyse results and share your findings with others.

Your career development can benefit, especially when your enquiry activities are recognised in your continuing professional development (CPD) portfolio. Ways this can happen include practice-based study through the GTC Teacher Learning Academy or postgraduate study at a university. Experience of research can help those seeking promotion to roles such as CPD co-ordinator, advanced skills teacher or head teacher.

Research also provides ideal opportunities for collaborative CPD. Everyone can contribute, regardless of their role and status. Through working with others, questions become refined and new insights gained.

**“The power of working with another teacher has been so good for me. Where I might be tempted to cut a corner, the other person has a good idea.”**

Primary school teacher



# What it means to work in a research-engaged school

## Not sure which of your ideas to research?

Research can be a great way of tackling a problem or addressing a question directly relevant to your classroom.

In a research-engaged school, the research should be relevant to the school, as well as the individuals directly involved. The school improvement plan can be a good starting point to help identify a topic for research.

It is quite common for the research team to start out with a number of possible research ideas and then to decide which one is most suitable and important to pursue – a process of setting the research question.

The research question is central to the success of the project. It will identify what the research project is and is not about, guide the methodology and keep the research team focused. A good research question has to be answerable in principle, and as practical and specific as possible; you will need to refine and clarify it to fulfil these criteria. Seek support from researchers, colleagues and local authority advisors to do so.

### **St George's Church of England school, Birmingham**

#### **A whole-school approach to setting research questions**

The research team at St George's Church of England school arranged an after-school session for all teachers and teaching assistants to work on their research priorities. They decided that an area of concern to the school was supporting newly arrived pupils who had little or no English.

Through a process of discussion, they decided on the following research questions:

- What are teachers and teaching assistants doing at present to assist newly arrived pupils?
- What do teachers and teaching assistants feel is needed to help newly arrived pupils on entry to school?
- What resources/support would benefit teachers, teaching assistants and pupils?

## Who can be involved in research

Anyone can become research-engaged, including support staff and newly-qualified teachers (NQTs) as well as more experienced and senior members of staff. It can be particularly relevant for teachers who wish to become or already are advanced skills teachers and for the CPD co-ordinator.

You don't have to have research experience, but it is very helpful to have someone with relevant expertise to support you – both from within the school and from outside. These could be a member of the senior management team, a professional researcher and/or local authority adviser, for example. Access to a mentor is particularly valuable for those leading a school research team.

Pupils, parents and governors – indeed anyone in the school community – can be involved in the research team. The model adopted depends on the scale of the research and the size of the school.

### **The Sandon school, Chelmsford, Essex**

#### **A research team in a large secondary school**

The Sandon school chose to investigate the impact of its Key Stage 3 Accelerated Learning programme on student motivation.

An important feature of the research project was the size and make-up of their research team. With eight members in total they formed a large, multi-skilled group from different subject areas.

The team comprised:

- a curriculum leader for science
- the learning support team leader
- a Key Stage director
- a newly-qualified teacher
- a head of year
- a technology teacher
- an RE teacher
- the deputy head.

The team was supported by a university tutor who had been a head teacher and had worked with the school on previous occasions.

## How to get started

There are many research methods to draw on, including reviewing literature, looking at existing data, observing, taking photographs, surveying and interviewing people.

Keep the project on schedule by a timetable with key milestones that include:

- planning – and allow some flexibility in your timetable
- refining your questions
- design of ‘research instruments’ (such as questionnaires or interview schedules)
- data collection and analysis
- reflection
- identifying and reporting on your findings.

Share the project, to help resolve difficult issues, focus thinking and ultimately improve the quality and relevance of the research. Don’t just share at the end, but at times such as staff meetings, when discussing research questions, or piloting interview questions.

You can share your findings through whole-day staff meetings, presentations, notice boards and even – perhaps with the support of an external researcher – through an academic journal.

Keep in mind the ethical issues involved in research. These are often about power relations, and issues such as confidentiality and anonymity of participants, informed consent and the right to withdraw, who owns the research and how the findings will be acted upon. Discuss and agree these before any data is collected.

### **Field Place first school, Worthing, West Sussex**

Using a mixture of methods to evaluate the impact of early years interventions

Field Place school caters for over 300 pupils from the ages of three to eight. Many children come from less advantaged backgrounds. The school’s research evaluated three strategies for early years intervention – attending their own nursery, the Early Literacy strategy, and a family learning scheme.

The school’s research team used a mixture of methods to evaluate the impact of these interventions, including a literature review, an analysis of children’s progress and interviews with parents. In this way they gained a good understanding of the initiatives and compiled a report combining both qualitative and quantitative data.

# Becoming a research-engaged teacher – the challenges

Can you become a researcher? Yes you can. Educational researchers are not boffins in white coats, and much of what you do in your school every day is closely linked to research.

Get inspired, and set your own research in context, by finding out about existing research. Long academic articles can be off-putting, but several publications and websites feature research digests and articles written for teachers. The GTC's own Research of the Month is a good place to start:

[www.gtce.org.uk/ResearchOfTheMonth](http://www.gtce.org.uk/ResearchOfTheMonth)

People undertake research in order to find things out. There isn't 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 – how do you know you're getting it right?

The answer lies not in trying to make research predictable, but in approaching it as if you are setting out on a journey of discovery. Be very clear about your research questions and systematic in your processes, but remain open to new information and different points of view.

Have people on hand to offer support and advice and help you decide which direction to take. They can also help you think of ways to test your findings, as this can add validity to the research.

Finding the time is perhaps the biggest challenge. You will need time for everything in the timetable on the opposite page. Not only that, if you want to reap the benefits of collaborative working, your school needs to find a way of facilitating at least two members of staff to work together.

Most school leaders can find a way to make time available – if the issue is sufficiently high on their agenda, which in a research-engaged school it should be. Time for teachers to work together can be found, for example, through team teaching, peer observation and/or planning and preparation time, not only by having to pay for supply cover.

If money does have to be found, ask around: there may be other sources of support (such as bursary schemes) available to staff who want to undertake research.

# How this leaflet was developed

Staff at the GTC worked closely with Anna Eames, Caroline Sharp, Dawn Sanders and Kathryn Tomlinson at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), who prepared the information in this leaflet, supported by the programme administrator Anne McNeil. They worked on the NFER's two-year research and development project which began in September 2003.

The programme involved eight primary schools and seven secondary schools from five local authorities: Birmingham, Essex, Hertfordshire, Oldham and West Sussex. It was sponsored by the NFER, GTC, Local Government Association, National College for School Leadership (NCSL), the five partner local authorities and the schools themselves.

We are very grateful to the teachers and other experts who extensively commented on the draft version of this leaflet.

## References

Handscomb, G. and MacBeath, J. (2003). *The Research-engaged School*. Chelmsford: Essex County Council

Stenhouse, L. (1980). 'The study of samples and the study of cases', *British Educational Research Journal*, 6, 1, 1-6.

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# Tell us your ideas and experiences

All the evidence suggests that research engagement is a source of energy and excitement for teachers.

We would love to hear from you with your ideas and experiences.  
E-mail us on: [research@gtce.org.uk](mailto:research@gtce.org.uk)

# Resources

## From the GTC

There is a much expanded web-based version of this leaflet on the GTC website [www.gtce.org.uk](http://www.gtce.org.uk), with links to resources that support research-informed practice.

Also on the GTC website, **Research of the Month** is an innovative venture that helps teachers access and benefit directly from research. Go directly to: [www.gtce.org.uk/ResearchOfTheMonth](http://www.gtce.org.uk/ResearchOfTheMonth)

The **GTC Teacher Learning Academy** offers public and professional recognition for teachers' learning, development and improvement work, with the opportunity for academic accreditation through higher education institutions. The learning which occurs in the daily professional lives of teachers is recognised and celebrated through a national, portable system. For more information see [www.gtce.org.uk/tla](http://www.gtce.org.uk/tla)

We co-host the **National Teacher Research Panel** with the Department for Education and Skills and the NCSL. To find out more, visit [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp)

## From the NFER

The NFER team has produced a book of the research and development project called *Postcards from Research-engaged Schools*. It is also developing a series of practical guides designed for different audiences:

- Leading a Research-engaged School (for school leaders)
- Advising Research-engaged Schools (for local authority advisers)
- Supporting Research-engaged Schools (for researchers and research consultants).

These and other resources are available from the NFER website [www.nfer.ac.uk/research-areas](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research-areas) – click on the link to 'Research-engaged school'.

# **The Teachers' Professional Learning Framework series**

Useful leaflets from the General Teaching Council for England

## **Commitment: The Teachers' Professional Learning Framework**

Opportunities for CPD take many forms. Find out more from the TPLF.

## **A Guide to Peer Observation**

How to conduct peer observation, and what it can do for CPD in your school.

## **The Learning Conversation: Talking together for professional development**

Insights into how school learning conversations work, how to structure them, and the skills you need.

## **Learning Together: Leading professional development**

Insights into the importance of CPD, and what is involved in being a CPD leader. Specially written for staff who lead CPD in their school.

For copies please write to or telephone the GTC's Birmingham office, details on the back cover.

The leaflets are also available on the GTC website at [www.gtce.org.uk/tplf](http://www.gtce.org.uk/tplf)





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### Research-engaged professional practice

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