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School Leadership

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Leading a Research-engaged School

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Leading 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

1. Introduction

Investigating the Research Engaged School was a two-year research and development programme that involved researchers from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) working with eight primary schools and seven secondary schools in five English local authorities.

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, p.4). They used Lawrence Stenhouse's (1980) definition of research as 'systematic enquiry, made public'.

Our study showed that research engagement helps school leaders to develop their schools and make them exciting places to work. This booklet aims to help you to understand more about research engagement and to envisage how it could work in your school.

What is a research-engaged school?

A research-engaged school is one that:

- 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

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."

2. Why become a research-engaged school?

A range of indicators suggests that we are progressing very well. In order to improve further, we must become more focused about how and why we do things. Research engagement offers the prospect of reinvigorating our collective professional identity and self-esteem.

Primary school headteacher

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

- raising standards through improving the quality of teaching and support
- contributing to school self-evaluation – it will give you something to discuss with your school improvement partner and report in Ofsted's self-evaluation form
- moving forward personalised learning by understanding and addressing pupils' individual learning needs
- addressing the citizenship and Every Child Matters agendas by consulting young people about their education and involving them in research
- contributing to school workforce reform by involving all staff, regardless of role and status
- developing the capacity to solve your own problems

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 whole-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.

When they needed to appoint a new teacher, the job advertisement highlighted the fact that Colmore was a research-engaged school. Instead of the usual handful of applications, they received over 50, many of which said they were attracted by the opportunity to be involved in research. Viv summed up the impact of this initiative by saying: "Our school has become a really exciting and innovative place to be."

3. How do we become a research-engaged school?

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 school leaders.

- Be prepared to commit resources to research – 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 your school.
- Make a commitment to embed research engagement in your school.

What resources are needed?

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 required for research activity 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 also ways of exploiting existing opportunities, such as staff development days or team teaching. There may also be some funding available for research, as part of local or national initiatives.

Mayfield Primary School is based in Oldham. Headteacher Christine Taylor was keen for her school to become research-engaged because she could see the potential to help staff reflect on their practice and move forward. She and Deputy Head David Simpkin decided to work together on their research project on improving children’s writing through drama. They used a team teaching approach: one teacher 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.”

An inspection by HMI recognised the value of the approach, commenting: ‘Mayfield is an entrepreneurial school, effective at identifying needs, thinking of ideas, finding resources and support and implementing unique solutions to particular issues.’

How do you choose a research topic?

When we started we went for this massive topic, but there was no way we could actually do it, so we've had to narrow it down to something feasible.

Secondary school head of department

Working in a school throws up constant issues and questions. Choosing which of these to research can be a challenge. It is important to find a topic that will be of interest to individuals in the research team and has the potential to benefit the whole school.

The school improvement plan can be a good starting point to help identify a research topic. You could also identify issues for research through consulting pupils. In any case, you will probably start out with a number of ideas and then need to decide which is most suitable and important to pursue. It may be appropriate for larger schools to work on more than one project at the same time, as long as the resources and support are available. You could involve a larger group of staff in deciding on a research topic, before handing over to a core research team.

The research question is central to the success of the research project. This will identify what the research project is and what it is not about, guide the methodology and keep the research team focused. Time spent developing a good research question will ensure that it is answerable, practical and specific. An expert research adviser can be particularly helpful in this process.

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.

Who should contribute to the research team?

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 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. For example, a team can involve a newly qualified teacher working with more established members of staff. Support staff can contribute alongside teaching staff, and some will have specific skills to offer, such as information-gathering, administration and data-processing. It can be helpful to include people with a particular responsibility for continuing professional development and sharing best practice, particularly advanced skills teachers.

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.

Staff at Horton Mill Primary School in Oldham wanted to identify what was preventing parents from becoming more involved in the school. They also wanted to find out what children thought of their parents coming into school. When planning their research, the team became concerned that parents and children might not be comfortable talking to staff about these issues, particularly if what they had to say could be perceived as critical of the school. Mark Barton, a member of the research team, explained: "The pupils said that some people were shy and that it was much safer for the pupils themselves to do the interviews."

Staff decided to invite a number of pupils and parents to join the research team. Staff began drafting the questions, but parents and children soon added to their ideas. Parents interviewed parents and children interviewed children. Staff, parents and children were all involved in making presentations about their findings.

Headteacher Sue Crowson felt that involving parents and children as researchers had been a positive move: "Research has taught us a lot. As time has gone on our team has grown and partnerships have been strengthened. We will move forward together."

What support is needed?

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.

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Providing 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. 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.

Our head was our critical friend. We were a little unsure about what we were doing initially but our head really supported us. She helped us organise things – she has been fantastic.

Primary school teacher

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.

Lucy Payne had been working as a nursery teacher at Field Place First School in West Sussex for about five years when she was invited to become involved in her school's research. The project focused on the impact of its early intervention programmes. This involved Lucy working with Andrew Simpson, the Key Stage 2 Co-ordinator, with support from Headteacher Frances Dunkin.

Lucy was unsure about her ability to do research at first, but her interest in children's early learning sustained her. She said: "As my understanding grew, I definitely became more confident and I felt I was really contributing something to the team. It was amazing that I could actually make a presentation about the research and I *understood* what I was talking about. I think it must have developed leadership skills – I'd be able to share the experience from this project with others now, which is a leadership skill, isn't it?"

Providing access to research expertise

Doing research with professionals who can help you is the ideal – it's the best form of professional development you can get.

Primary school teacher

Access to research expertise is a key consideration for school research teams. 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, or both. 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 national evaluation of Best Practice Research Scholarships concluded that support from professional researchers was 'vital to the success of projects'. (Furlong et al, 2003 p 4)

4. What is 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 put a high value on 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

One of the things we discovered was that research activity helped to promote learning among staff, encouraged staff to empathise with learners, and helped young people to recognise that their teachers were learners too.

Professor Mary James (2005) points out that teacher learning is a necessary condition for pupil learning. Identifying the implications of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme for school leaders, she explains that: 'The development of supportive professional cultures within which teachers can learn is vitally important'. (p.136)

School leaders are fundamental in promoting a learning culture in schools. Here are some suggested strategies for school leaders.

- When someone makes an assertion, ask them *why* they think so – what evidence do they have to support their thinking?
- Make space for professional dialogue, for example in staff meetings.
- Encourage staff to share and reflect on their practice, for example through observation and mentoring.
- Demonstrate that you value research yourself: refer to research findings and show that you are using evidence in your own decision-making.
- Make a commitment to listen to and act on the results of research, even if they challenge existing views and practices.

5. 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

Who wants to be a researcher?

Research has an image problem. People tend to picture educational 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. Research is an academic profession, but there is also a great tradition of other 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 findings.

- 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 have been involved in research as part of postgraduate study: make use of their knowledge and skills to support others embarking on research for the first time.

Who wants to read about research?

Finding out about existing research is an important part of research engagement, but staff can find long academic articles off-putting. The good news is that several publications and websites are now available that feature research digests and articles written for practitioners. Some websites are suggested at the end of this booklet.

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

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What about ethics?

Research can cause problems if it fails to respect ethical principles. School leaders 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.

- Think about research as a way of finding out more about an issue, rather than as a way of pursuing a particular agenda or confirming existing practice.
- Consider what you will do if the research comes up with controversial or unexpected findings.
- Ensure that the research team considers ethical issues before any data is collected.

How can you ensure research is shared?

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. School leaders need to keep the focus on whole-school engagement with research. This does not necessarily mean that all staff have to be actively involved, but it does mean raising awareness and making the research accessible to all.

- 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.

6. 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 school leaders take action to embed research into the school’s outlook, systems and activity.

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Some of the next steps might include:

- ensuring that research evidence is part of school development planning and that new resources or practices are evaluated before they are adopted on a larger scale
- applying for funding for research and evaluation, possibly in partnership with professional researchers
- suggesting research activity to staff during their performance reviews; staff could be encouraged to develop research skills by studying at a teacher learning academy, college or university – look out for universities offering practice-based MA courses
- encouraging staff to form a professional learning group and involving pupils as researchers

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. You could consider starting with a cross-departmental research activity. An alternative approach is to focus research in one department with a view to spreading the model to other departments once it has been shown to work.

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 and humanities staff may be keen on aspects of social research, such as interviewing people or interpreting documents.

7. 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 within 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.

St George's primary school in Birmingham wanted to find out how to help 'newly arrived' children settle into school. They shared the results of their research with three other schools in a local network, who then decided to investigate the issue in their own contexts. The research involved school leaders, teaching and support staff in all four schools. It resulted in a welcome pack that has been piloted throughout the authority and has attracted interest from other authorities facing similar issues.

Notley High School and The Rickstones School in Essex chose to work together on a joint research project. Although they are neighbouring schools, they are not in direct competition for students. In both cases, some students performed less well in mathematics at GCSE than their performance at Key Stage 3 indicated they should, and their teachers wanted to find out why. Staff communicated by email and the occasional meeting. They were very positive about their experience of working together. Barbara Clark, Head of Mathematics at The Rickstones School, said: "I'm not just sharing ideas with people in my department, but with someone who has worked on a similar problem in a different school." Mike Seymour, Deputy Head of Mathematics at Notley High School, said: "The opportunity to work with another school is tremendous, and it's something that is not often offered to schools."

Several of the schools involved in our research and development programme have received recognition in their local authorities for their work. They have been asked to share their expertise and experience, offering mentoring and advice to other schools wishing to become research-engaged.

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8. Reflecting on the sum of the parts

The experience of our project 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 booklet has presented the main features that contributed to the process. The evidence suggests that, rather than any one ingredient, 'research engagement involves a combination of features – dedicated resources, collaborative teamwork, committed leadership, a supportive school culture and a resolve to grow research communities within and beyond the school' (Handscomb and Sharp, 2006, forthcoming).

9. Where can I find more resources on research engagement?

There are several sources of information on research engagement. A selection of useful websites follows.

NCSL has a variety of resources for research engagement, including a review of literature on why and how school leaders engage with educational research. Its work on networked learning communities has several useful guides on using and carrying out research at www.ncsl.org.uk/researchengagedschool.

The General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) produces *Research of the Month*, featuring summaries of research on a series of topics, chosen for their interest to teachers, at www.gtce.org.uk/PolicyAndResearch/research/ROMtopics.

The Economic and Skills Research Council (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Programme aims to use research to improve outcomes for learners of all ages. It publishes regular newsletters and research briefings at www.tlrp.org.

The National Educational Research Forum (NERF) produces a bulletin of research information called *Evidence for Teaching and Learning*. It addresses issues across the education spectrum and can be found at www.nerf-uk.org.

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) website has a section that takes articles from research journals and summarises them with the needs of practitioners in mind: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research.

A list of organisations that fund teacher research is provided by Teachernet at www.teachernet.gov.uk/research/opportunities/sabbaticalfellowshipsopportunities/fundingorganisations.

The National Teacher Research Panel (NTRP) is an independent group of practising teachers and heads that encourages staff to get involved in and with research. It offers research guidelines for continuing professional development co-ordinators, advice on how staff can contribute to national research projects and conferences aimed at sharing practitioner research: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp.

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) website has a special area dedicated to research-engaged schools: 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.

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.

10. How was this booklet developed?

This booklet was prepared by Caroline Sharp, Anna Eames, Dawn Sanders and Kathryn Tomlinson. They worked with Programme Administrator Anne McNeil on NFER's two-year research and development programme which began in September 2003. The programme involved schools from five local authorities (Birmingham, Essex, Hertfordshire, Oldham and West Sussex). It was sponsored by NFER, NCSL, GTCE, the Local Government Association, the five partner local authorities and the schools themselves. The draft version was extensively commented on by a wide range of school leaders.

In addition to this publication and the main report *Postcards from Research-engaged Schools*, a series of practical guides aimed at different audiences will be published soon.

- *Research-informed Professional Practice*
(for teachers)
- *Advising Research-engaged Schools*
(for local authority advisers)
- *Supporting Research-engaged Schools*
(for researchers)

These and other resources are available from the NFER website:
www.nfer.ac.uk/research-areas/research-engaged-schools/becoming-a-research-engaged-school.cfm.

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11. Research-engaged school health check

The Forum for Learning and Research Enquiry (FLARE) has kindly allowed us to reproduce the following diagnostic drawn from a paper written by Graham Handscomb and John MacBeath (2003).

Is research at the heart of your school's business? This quick 'health check' can help the school make an initial judgement about the relationship of research and the key business of the school. Following this exercise the school can then set about developing strategies for increasing and maintaining research engagement.

Rate your school on the following.

Which statement most represents your school?

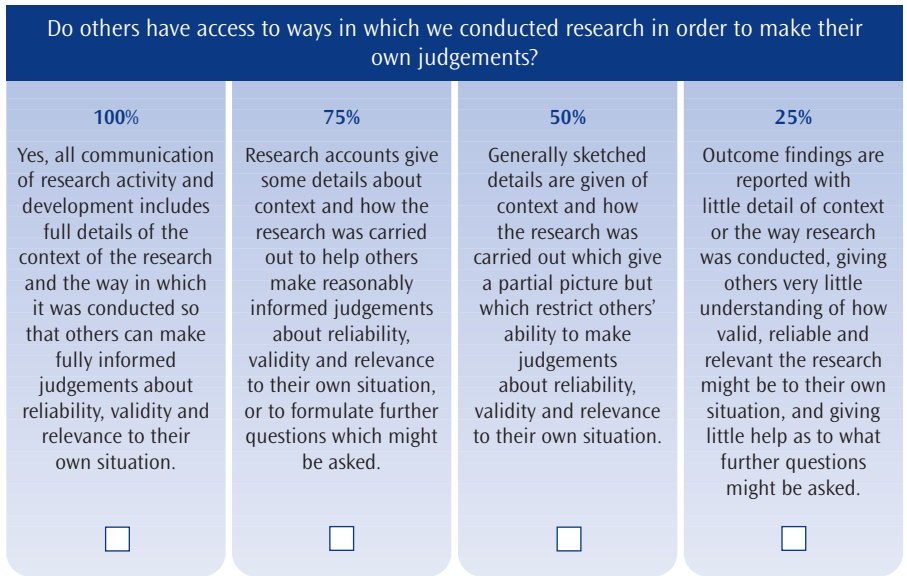
Tick relevant box

Are significant decisions informed by research, ie systematic enquiry made public?			
100%	75%	50%	25%
Yes, this is built into our organisational approach and systems.	Specific key decisions are founded on research.	Occasional projects and developments are informed by research.	Decisions are seldom informed by research.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

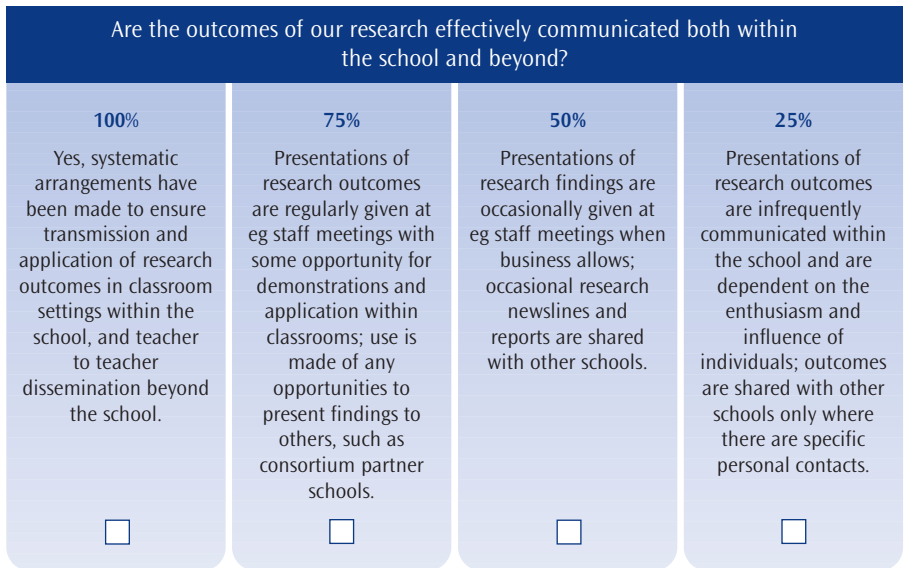
Tick relevant box

Do people have access to tools that help them to challenge their practice?			
100%	75%	50%	25%
Yes, the development of research and enquiry skills is built into the school's professional development planning and practice.	Major projects are supported by the development of research and enquiry skills.	Some individuals have taken an interest in using research and enquiry to challenge and improve their practice.	There is little evidence of people having access to opportunities to develop research and enquiry skills apart from isolated cases.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Tick relevant box



Tick relevant box



12. References

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