

Advising research-engaged schools: a role for local authorities

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Published in August 2006
by the National Foundation for
Educational Research
The Mere, Upton Park
Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ
www.nfer.ac.uk

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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). They used Lawrence Stenhouse’s (1980) definition of research as ‘systematic enquiry, made public’.

Our study showed that research engagement helps local authorities to deliver local and national policy agendas. This booklet aims to help you envisage what research-engaged schools have to offer and how local authorities can encourage their development.

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.

What advantages can whole-school research engagement bring to local authorities?

Research-engaged schools have the potential to contribute to a local authority's core objectives and address new developments in educational policy. They help develop capacity for schools to identify and solve their own problems and for local authorities to share best practice. Advantages for local authorities include:

- raising standards through improving the quality of teaching and support
- addressing the 'Every Child Matters' agenda by consulting young people about their education and involving them in research
- forging closer relationships between schools and local authority staff
- providing 'critical friend' dialogue between the local authority and schools, using evidence-based approaches
- forging closer relationships between schools and local authority staff
- identifying ways of tackling issues of particular relevance in your authority
- building an evidence base of research that can be used throughout the authority for policy development and continuing professional development (CPD).

The local authority has cultivated a strong research ethos, and a strong research base reinforces its sharply focused actions and activities.

Ofsted Inspection Report on Essex local authority, January 2005

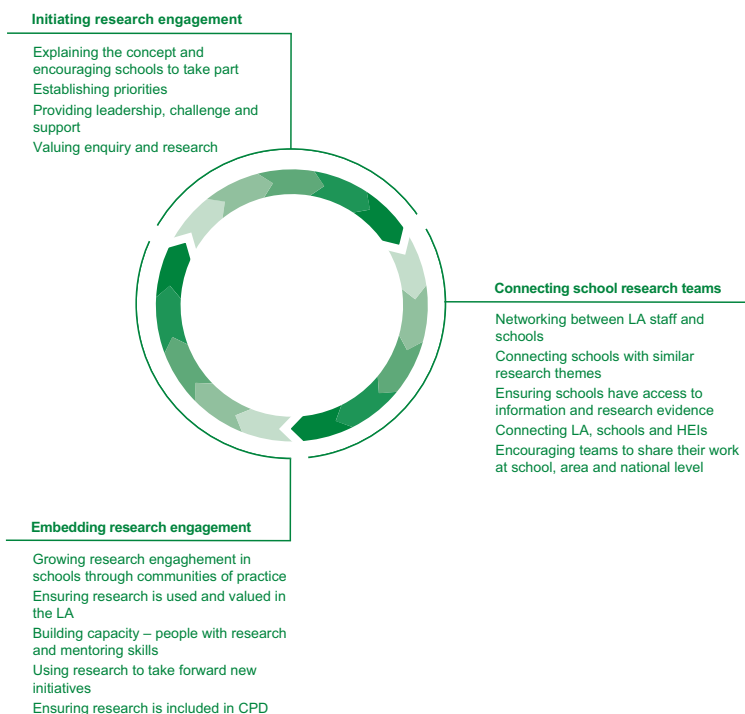
What can local authorities do to support whole-school research engagement?

The local authority involvement is quite crucial – someone as a guide, acknowledging what you’re doing and showing an interest.

Primary school headteacher

The NFER research found that local authority staff had a key role in helping to encourage, support and develop the potential of research-engaged schools. Local authority staff can help in the process of initiating, establishing, connecting and embedding research-engaged practice within schools and networks (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Local authority role in supporting research



Initiating research engagement

Local authority staff can provide leadership and encouragement for schools to become engaged in research. We found that schools with little prior experience could become research-engaged, as long as the conditions were favourable. However, whole-school involvement was easier to achieve in smaller schools.

A local authority's involvement can range from encouraging individual schools that show an interest, to setting up more formal schemes and networks. In any case, it helps to understand the key features for research engagement in schools (see Table 1 on the next page).

I am interested in identifying best practice and demonstrating that it has made a difference. I don't see my role as supporting schools' research work in detail, but I want to see how we can take it forward, move it to scale.

Local authority adviser

Connecting school research teams

Local authority staff can help research engagement to become established in schools by showing an interest and helping to ensure that schools have access to sources of information and advice. Some local authorities have staff with research expertise. Local universities may be able to provide appropriate support and training.

In our experience, it is important for schools to feel that they have the freedom to choose their own area of interest to research as this promotes ownership and commitment. While it may well be appropriate for a local authority to encourage research on broad themes, we would caution you against being too prescriptive. Once you know the areas of research that schools have chosen, you may be able to help them by suggesting contacts or sources of further information.

- Does your authority have statistics on the issue?
- Is there someone in the authority that knows about this?
- Where could the school find out about other research in this field?

Table 1 Key characteristics of research-engaged schools and why they are important

Characteristic	Why is this important?
School leadership is committed to using evidence for school improvement	If research engagement has little support among school leaders, it will be unlikely to receive encouragement and little action will result
The school's culture encourages challenge and learning	A school culture that discourages staff from challenging the status quo is not a healthy environment for open-ended enquiry
Commitment of resources to enable staff to spend time on research	Insufficient time for staff to plan, carry out or share research will mean that research activity is sidelined and may not be completed
Collaborative ethos among members of staff (the research team)	If research engagement is confined to a committed few, it will have limited impact and is vulnerable to staffing changes
Access to sources of research expertise to advise the planning, conduct, analysis and interpretation of research	Lack of access to research expertise means that research activity is in danger of lacking rigour and will be a poor basis for decision-making
Access to mentoring support, (e.g. from colleagues within the school)	Lack of mentoring support means that staff may be unable to solve emerging problems during the research
Commitment to share research within the school	Lack of commitment to research making a difference is likely to stifle its impact within the school
Commitment to forging research communities within and beyond the school	Research activity will become more robust if it is established within a context of collaboration and tested out with a wide range of colleagues and professionals engaged in enquiry

Helping to make strategic connections between schools is a key role for local authority staff. Research activity can easily become sidelined or delayed, but those who are part of a larger group or network are much more likely to keep up their interest and momentum.

A local authority adviser could:

- make school research staff aware of existing networks and interest groups that can provide a forum for them to share their research
- act as a broker between schools with similar interests and encourage joint working
- provide ‘critical friend’ critique and challenge
- help schools to develop their research activity into whole school research engagement over time (e.g. ensuring leadership support, planning to sustain and embed research engagement, ensuring its contribution to school improvement)
- bring school research teams together to share progress and findings.

In Oldham, the local authority ran a school improvement strategy which that invited schools to do their own school improvement projects and to share their findings with other schools at an annual conference. The research-engaged schools programme complemented this well. Three schools (two primaries and a secondary) were involved. Local authority adviser Maggie Williams visited the schools and arranged meetings to bring them together. The headteacher of the secondary school commented:

Schools are good at supporting one another, but not so good at challenging. This is what the local authority can do. They have a clear job in facilitating and brokering arrangements.

Staff at one of the primary schools added:

The local authority gathered us [the three schools] together and we have been able to ask each other questions. The knock-on effect for our school has been excellent. We will have the opportunity to share our research with about 20 others at the school improvement conference.

Essex local authority established the Forum for Learning And Research Enquiry (FLARE). The forum encourages people who work in schools across the local authority to use research to improve teaching and learning. It supports, promotes and celebrates school research through holding meetings and conferences, hosting a website, publishing occasional papers and awarding a Certificate of Enquiry and Research. It also facilitates one of the key dimensions of research-engaged schools, namely nurturing research communities within and beyond the school. Examples include taking teachers and headteachers to run symposia at international research conferences in Barcelona and Florida.

Essex recognises the connection between fostering research engagement in schools and ensuring that the local authority demonstrates this in its own practice.

In Essex, promotion of enquiry and research is a core strategic priority. This is shown both in the development of research-engaged schools and also in the commitment to develop as a research-engaged authority, i.e. making sure we exemplify an enquiring approach in the way we operate and relate to schools and the wider community.

Graham Handscomb, Principal Adviser Best Practice and Research

Embedding research engagement within a local authority

Local authorities can build up systems and ways of working that encourage schools to become research-engaged. It makes sense to raise awareness of schools' research findings and to help other schools to build on their insights and findings.

- Build a critical mass of teacher-researchers in your local authority.

- Help schools to link research with policy initiatives, (e.g. self evaluation, student voice, performance development, mentoring).
- Facilitate research programmes, accreditation schemes and staff development opportunities involving research.
- Work with an institute of higher education to design an MA programme of particular relevance to school improvement in your local authority.
- Help schools to access information about relevant research and ensure that CPD providers refer to research.
- Look for opportunities to use action research as a means to drive forward new initiatives. For example, government initiatives often have an element of evaluation – could this provide an opportunity for guided action research?

Hertfordshire local authority has established the HertsCam Network in partnership with the University of Cambridge. At the core of this is the MEd in Teaching and Learning programme, which has spawned a number of satellite, school-based groups for teacher-led development work. Members of the network are all pursuing projects aimed at improving teaching and learning in their schools and contributing to the stock of professional knowledge in the educational community in Hertfordshire. Accounts of the teachers' projects appear in the new journal *Teacher Leadership* and on the Hertfordshire Grid for Learning. Through network events, participants build collaborative links in order to synthesise knowledge and act in concert to share it more widely within Hertfordshire and beyond. Links with the advisory service are promoted through joint conferences and key link advisers (many of whom have also studied for the MEd alongside Hertfordshire teachers and leaders).

Birmingham local authority used its experience of the research-engaged schools programme to design a programme of action research within a network of primary schools. Adviser Chris Olley explained that the authority had a good development programme in place for newly qualified teachers and was looking to provide CPD opportunities for other staff. Instead of putting funding into courses, the authority decided to use action research to work on implementing some aspects of the primary strategy. Advisers were given funding to work with a group of schools on research and development projects.

Chris explained the reasons for using action research:

It was another way of looking at the school improvement process. It enabled us to work with a broad range of schools and it created a problem-solving ethos in schools. We plan to use an action-research model to encourage schools to address the Every Child Matters Agenda through talking to different stakeholders.

If they are serious about research engagement, the local authority needs to put time and effort into it. They should bring schools together and provide individual prompting and support to those involved. It's an opportunity for the local authority to form stronger relationships with schools.

Secondary head of department

Towards a research-engaged local authority?

Being involved in the research-engaged schools programme was an effective way of working that impacted not just on our relationship with schools but also on our own development. As a local authority team, we are now engaging in a process of learning, including

enquiry. We have formed partnerships with local HEIs to accredit professional practice.'

Local authority adviser

During a meeting with an NFER researcher, the CPD Adviser for West Sussex, Carolyn Gibbs, began to think about how research engagement could be used to develop adult learning throughout the advisory team. She produced a concept map (see Figure 2) to show how research engagement could provide a means of the local authority and schools connecting policy imperatives and system changes, such as workforce reform, performance management, the new relationship with schools, school improvement and school self evaluation. This interconnection, she thought, could be achieved through collaborative CPD involving reflection, learning, investigation and skill development, forming the basis of communities of enquiry that are recognised, supported and built upon to make a fundamental contribution to achieving insight and development.

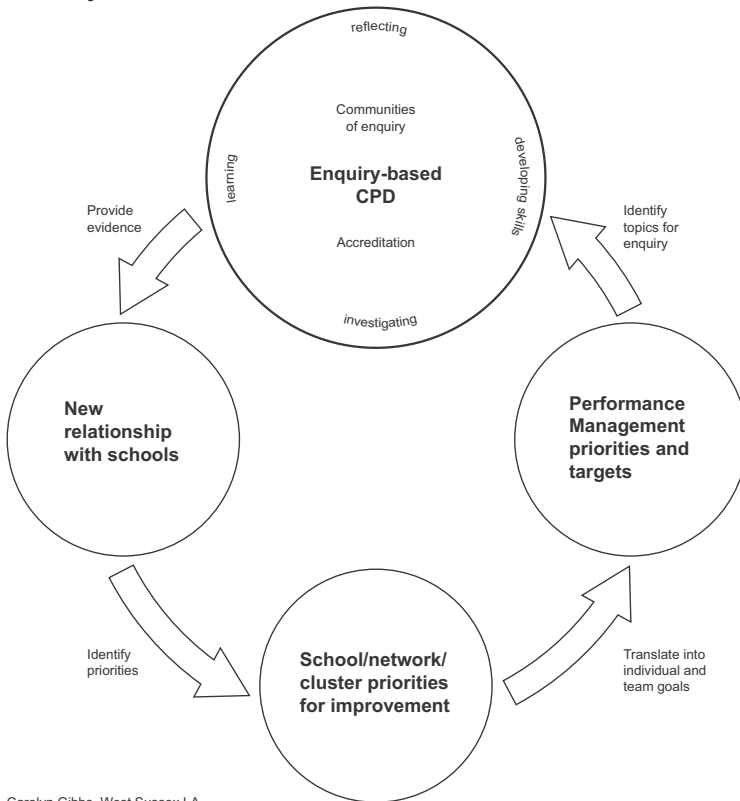
The local authority's commitment

This booklet exemplifies the great deal that local authorities have to contribute to the development of research-engaged schools. The local authority can play a potentially crucial role, but this depends upon their outlook and commitment. During the last decade the purpose and contribution of local authorities have undergone renewed scrutiny and change. After an era of providing support to schools, local authorities were required to emphasise monitoring and challenge. In more recent times their role in working with schools in a developmental and creative fashion has again been recognised, providing scope for promoting research-engaged schools.

A recent emphasis in the role of local authorities has cast them as commissioners of services, providing only a limited range of activities themselves. In this climate it will be important for local authorities to be resolute and committed to fostering research in the educational

community as one of its key priorities. In order to do so, local authorities need to believe in the importance of enquiry and research, to value and promote the merits of research and to use their strategic position to connect with other priorities and developments. In a context of ever-increasing pressure on time and resources it is important that local authorities make research engagement in schools, and within their own staff, a key priority if this exciting development is to realise its potential.

Figure 2 Concept map for research engagement within a local authority



Carolyn Gibbs, West Sussex LA

Where can I find more resources on research engagement?

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

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) website has a special area dedicated to research-engaged schools where you can find four downloadable booklets addressing teachers, school leaders, researchers and local authority staff involved in developing research-engaged schools.

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

The NFER also produces *practical research for education*, a journal of research articles written for teachers. This includes a ‘tool-kit’ series, aiming to help practitioners plan and carry out their own research.

<http://www.preonline.co.uk><http://www.pre-online.co.uk/>

The GTC produces *Research of the Month*, featuring summaries of research on a series of topics, chosen for their interest to teachers.

<http://www.gtce.org.uk/policyandresearch/research/ROMtopics/>

The ESRC Teaching and Learning Programme aims to use research to improve outcomes for learners of all ages. They publish regular newsletters and research briefings.

<http://www.tlrp.org>

The National Educational Research Forum produces a bulletin of research information called *Evidence for Teaching and Learning*. It addresses issues across the education spectrum.

<http://www.nerf-uk.org>

The DfES website has a section that takes articles from research journals and summarises them with the needs of practitioners in mind. The DfES also circulates a regular newsletter of research for practice, which includes summaries and digests of research for practitioners,

activities and studies on practitioner engagement with research.
<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research>

The National Teacher Research Panel (NTRP) is an independent group of practising teachers and headteachers who encourage staff to get involved in and with research. They offer research guidelines for CPD coordinators, advice on how staff can contribute to national research projects and conferences aimed at sharing practitioner research.
<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp>

The National Council for School Leadership (NCSL) has a variety of resources for research engagement, including a review of literature on why and how school leaders engage with educational research. Their work on networked learning communities has several useful guides on using and carrying out research.
<http://www.ncsl.org.uk>

The Local Government Association (LGA) has recently produced two publications about research and evidence-informed practice: *Creating Effective Research in Local Government* (by Percy-Smith and Darlow) and *Leading Evidence-informed Practice* (by Hodson and Cooke).
<http://www.lga.gov.uk>

Essex Local Authority has developed a website for its Forum for Learning and Research Enquiry (FLARE). This is accessible to all, not just Essex schools.
<http://www.essexflare.org>

Further accounts of the approach used in HertsCam can be found in Frost, D. and Durrant, J. (2003) *Teacher-led Development Work: guidance and support*, London: David Fulton Publishers. The HertsCam Network produces its own journal details of which can be found on the website: <http://www.teacherleadership.org.uk>.

The Hertfordshire Grid for Learning has a Research and Good Practice website is on <http://www.thegrid.org.uk>.

How was this booklet developed?

The information in this booklet was prepared by Caroline Sharp, Anna Eames, Dawn Sanders and Kathryn Tomlinson of the NFER and Graham Handscomb of Essex local authority. The researchers worked with Programme Administrator Anne McNeil on the 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 the NFER, LGA, NCSL, GTCE, the five partner LEAs and the schools themselves. The draft version was extensively commented on by local authority staff.

In addition to the main report, *Postcards from research-engaged schools* (Sharp *et al.*, 2005), the programme team has developed a series of practical guides aimed at different audiences:

- Research-informed professional practice (for teachers)
- Leading a research-engaged school (for local authority advisers)
- Supporting research-engaged schools (for researchers).

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

Postcards from research-engaged schools, by Caroline Sharp, Anna Eames, Dawn Sanders and Kathryn Tomlinson, is available from the NFER at www.nfer.ac.uk/bookshop.

References cited in the text

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These sponsors worked with the NFER on this research and development programme



General Teaching Council for England
www.gtce.org.uk

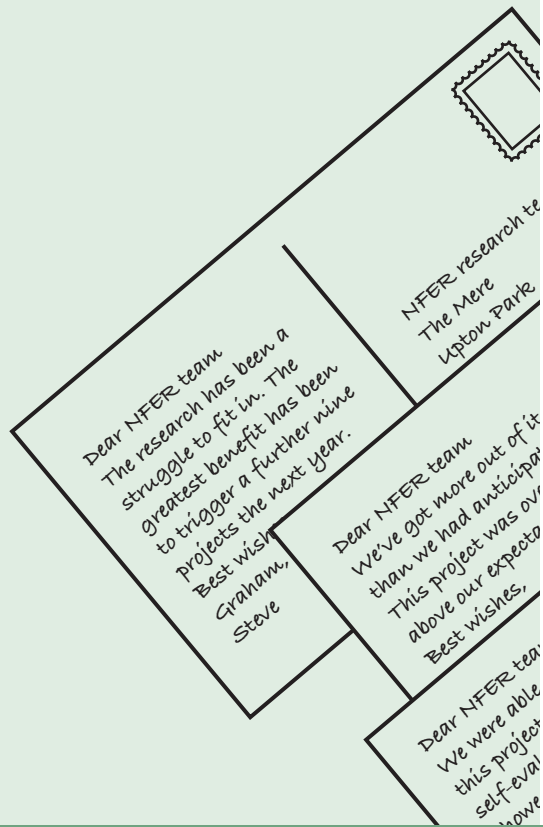


Local Government Association
www.lga.gov.uk



National College for School Leadership
www.ncsl.org.uk

With thanks to the partner local authorities: Birmingham, Essex, Hertfordshire, Oldham and West Sussex and the 15 participating schools.



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The research and development programme was sponsored by the NFER, LGA, GTCE and NCSL. For more information on this or any other NFER research programmes, visit our website at www.nfer.ac.uk.

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