Evidence for Excellence in Education

Report

Insights into the Role of Research and Development in Teaching Schools

National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)

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Insights into the Role of Research and Development in Teaching Schools

Matt Walker

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1 Introduction

Evidence-informed practice is now regarded as instrumental to school reform efforts both in England and elsewhere (Greany, 2015). This is especially important given the focus on school self-improvement coupled with a drive for high-quality teaching within a devolved, and increasingly autonomous, education system.

Teaching schools are outstanding schools that work with strategic partners, such as universities and private sector organisations, to provide high-quality training and development to new and to experienced school staff. Research and development or 'R&D' forms one of their six key areas of responsibility, often referred to as the 'big six'. As such, teaching schools play an important role in helping to realise the government's aim of increasing teachers' access to and use of high quality evidence and in ensuring teachers are trained in understanding and applying evidence (DfE, 2016).

This report seeks to explore the effectiveness with which teaching schools are delivering their R&D responsibilities. It provides new insights based on an analysis of a survey of teaching schools and a comparison group of outstanding schools. In doing so, our aim is to support the sector as a whole by reviewing the activities undertaken by teaching schools and their alliances in support of R&D, and the challenges they face in implementing them. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to the wider evidence base on the extent to which teaching is becoming a more evidence-informed profession.

2 At a glance

There is evidence to suggest that R&D is becoming increasingly embedded within the other areas of the big six, and particularly within school-led initial teacher training (ITT) and continuing professional development (CPD).

Despite this, many teaching school alliances (TSAs) report that R&D is treated as an 'add-on' and is considered less important compared to other concerns.

Many TSAs report engaging 'to a great extent' in producing evidence-informed outputs and yet do not appear to prioritise the development of their staff's research literacy to the same degree.

There are many challenges facing TSAs in delivering R&D including the long time it can take to show the impact of R&D and the fact there is still a need to build an expectation for teaching as an evidence-based profession.

Respondents report that research organisations like NFER can help to overcome some of the challenges identified. This includes the suggestion that research organisations can do more to make the findings from research evidence more accessible to practitioners.

There is some evidence to suggest that teaching school status does not necessarily enhance a teaching school's level of research activity, relative to other outstanding schools.

3 Background

Evidence-informed practice is instrumental to school reform

The debate about the need for an evidence-informed teaching profession has recently been reinvigorated following the government's White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DFE, 2016). The paper emphasises the importance of building a strong, evidence-informed profession to help drive up standards in schools. Indeed, it is clear that evidence-informed practice is now regarded as instrumental to school reform efforts in England and elsewhere (Greany, 2015). This is especially pertinent with so much focus on school self-improvement coupled with a drive for high-quality teaching within a devolved, and increasingly autonomous, education system.

Teaching schools have an important role to play in helping to spread evidence-informed practice

Teaching schools are outstanding schools that work with strategic partners, such as universities and private sector organisations, to provide high-quality training and development to new and to experienced school staff. They are part of the government's plan to give schools a central role in raising standards by developing a self-improving and sustainable school-led system (NCTL 2016).

Teaching school alliances (TSAs) are groups of schools, led by a teaching school, and include strategic partners who lead some aspects of training and development.

Research and development, or R&D, forms one of teaching schools' six core areas of responsibility. The others are: school-led initial teacher training; continuing professional development; supporting other schools; identifying and developing leadership potential; and recruiting and managing the placements of specialist leaders of education. Collectively, these are often referred to as 'the big six'. In order to meet their R&D responsibility, teaching schools are expected to engage in a range of activities, as detailed below.

Box 1: Activities teaching schools are expected to undertake in support of R&D

- build on existing research and contribute to alliance and wider priorities
- base new initiatives within their alliance on existing evidence and ensure they can measure them
- work with other teaching schools in their area, or nationally, where appropriate
- ensure that their staff use existing evidence
- allow their staff the time and support they need take part in R&D activities
- share learning from research and development work with the wider school system

The number of teaching schools has been growing and there are plans for more

In November 2010, the Schools White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010), set out the UK Government's plan to establish a national network of teaching schools as part of the policy aim of developing a self-improving school system. Since then, their numbers have grown considerably. To date, there have nine cohorts of teaching schools. Figures from the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) show that in July 2016 there were 765 teaching schools and 596 TSAs (NCTL, 2016). As of October 2014, at least 7,144 schools were linked with the teaching schools initiative, representing 32 per cent of all maintained schools in England (Gu *et al.* 2015). Not all alliance schools will be outstanding. Alliances can be set up in three different ways. They are: single alliance (one teaching school leading one TSA; job-share alliance (two small or special schools jointly leading one TSA); and multiple alliance (two or more teaching schools leading one alliance.

Teaching school status is open to all schools in England regardless of type or phase. In terms of raw numbers, the majority are primary schools, followed by secondary schools and special schools.

The government's White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere,* signalled the Government's intention to expand the existing teaching school network by creating 300 more *(*DfE, 2016*).*

The evidence on the effectiveness with which teaching schools deliver their research and development responsibilities is limited

A two-year research project led by the University of Nottingham and commissioned by the NCTL provides the most robust qualitative and quantitative evidence to date on the effectiveness and impact of teaching schools (Gu *et al,* 2015*).*

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach comprising in-depth case studies and a survey of teaching schools across cohorts one to three. The evaluation also drew on statistical data to look at programme reach and association with pupil performance.

Most of the insights gathered around teaching schools' R&D work appear to be drawn from the case studies. Here, the authors found something of a mixed picture. While some alliances had been proactively promoting R&D in their schools, others (both primary-led and secondary-led) were reported to have not yet developed their R&D work.

There was evidence that most TSAs were getting support to help deliver R&D, with the majority of TSAs working with HEI partners. The evaluation also highlighted a number of challenges to TSAs' R&D work. These included:

- securing the time and involvement from other schools (including the active involvement of class teachers)
- accessing academic journals and papers

- accessing materials about what other teaching schools are doing and getting involved in national R&D activity
- senior leaders in some schools finding it difficult to engage with the R&D agenda.

The authors concluded that achieving a school-wide and alliance-wide understanding of research in a school context was still to be developed in the majority of case study alliances.

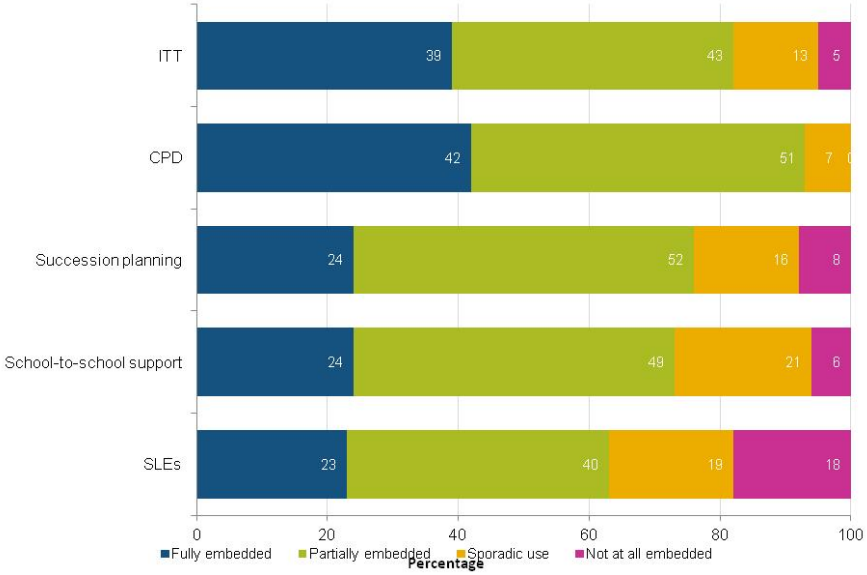
4 Findings from NFER survey of teaching schools and a comparison group of schools

The findings in this report are based on an analysis of survey responses from teachers in a sample of teaching schools and a comparison group of Ofsted-category outstanding schools. The survey was undertaken using computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) in March 2016. It was completed by the person responsible for coordinating research activity across the school or alliance, or a person who could speak on this issue. Responses were achieved from staff in a total of 83 teaching schools and 80 other outstanding schools. There are limitations to the precision of the findings due to the relatively small size of the achieved samples. Further details are provided in Section 6. Nevertheless, the achieved samples are broadly representative of the national populations of teaching schools and other schools rated as outstanding by Ofsted, and as such, the findings provide some useful insights into the effectiveness with which teaching schools are delivering their R&D responsibilities.

There is evidence to suggest that R&D is becoming increasingly embedded within the other areas of the Big Six, and particularly within ITT and CPD

One of the unique things about R&D, relative to TSAs' other priorities, is that it can underpin the other areas of the Big Six. The findings shown in Figure A suggest that R&D is most heavily embedded within school-led initial teacher training (ITT) and continuing professional development (CPD).

Figure A: R&D is most heavily embedded within ITT and CPD



Question: 'I'm going to read out the other five core areas of responsibility which, in addition to R&D, make up the 'Big Six'. Please say whether R&D is fully embedded, partially embedded, used sporadically, or not embedded at all in each area of responsibility'.
Source: NFER survey of teaching schools, 2016 (n=83)

More than 80 per cent of respondents reported R&D was 'fully' or 'partially embedded' within CPD and school-led ITT. R&D was reported to be less well embedded within each of the other core areas, with about two in ten teaching schools reporting it was 'not at all embedded' within the area of 'specialist leaders of education'.

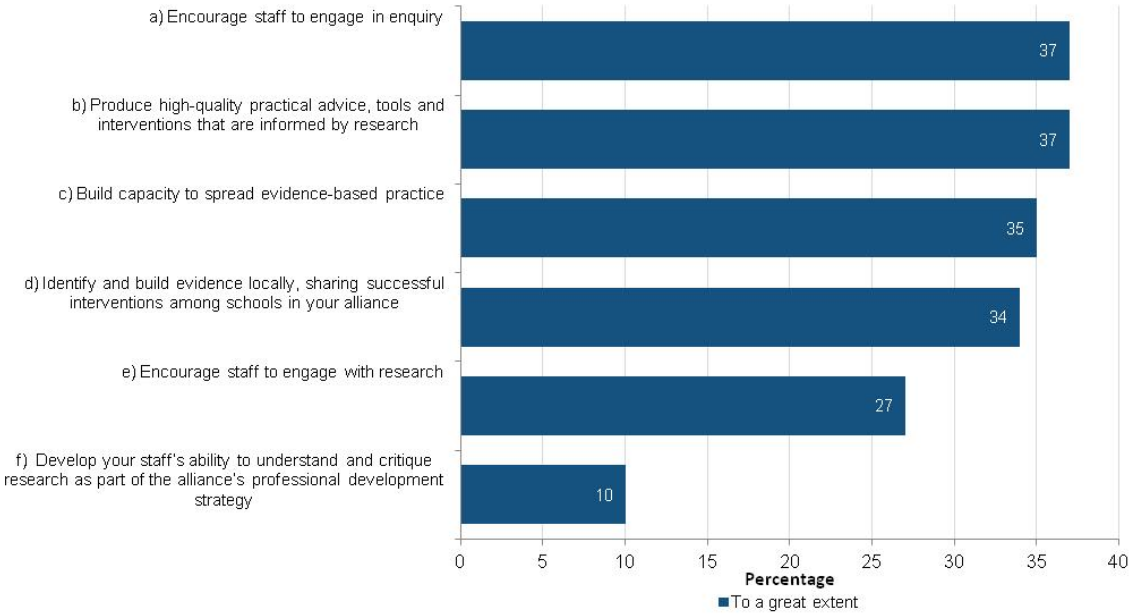
Previous research commissioned by the National College and undertaken by a group of TSAs in February 2015 asked a similar question of staff working in TSAs and achieved 178 responses (Bamfield, 2015). Compared with the National College findings, the NFER findings show a greater proportion of respondents reporting that R&D is 'fully' or 'partially embedded'. Thus, there is some evidence to suggest that R&D has become increasingly embedded within the other areas of the Big Six over the intervening 12 months.

Many TSAs report engaging 'to a great extent' in producing evidence-informed outputs and yet do not appear to prioritise the development of their staff's research literacy to the same degree

As outlined in the White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere,* the government seeks to build a high quality teaching profession which embraces evidence-based practice to drive up standards in schools DfE, 2016. Yet in order for this to happen, teachers need the research skills to evaluate and challenge research findings, in addition to knowing where and how to access relevant research, and how this can be applied to classroom practice. Our findings raise questions about the extent to which teaching schools are developing their staff's research skills and about the resulting quality and impact of this work.

We asked respondents in both teaching schools and our comparison group of outstanding schools a closed question about the extent to which they engaged in a range of different activities in support of their R&D work. Selected findings for teaching schools are presented in Figure B. The findings for comparison schools are discussed in Section 5.

Figure B: TSAs most frequently encourage staff to engage in enquiry and produce research-based materials



Question: 'I'm going to read out six things that your TSA may or may not do. For each one, please say whether your TSA does it to a great extent, to some extent, very little, not at all, or you don't know'
Source: NFER survey of teaching schools, 2016 (n=83)

While 37 per cent of respondents reported that they 'produce advice, tools and interventions that are informed by research' 'to a great extent' (option b), only ten percent reported that their TSA was engaged to the same degree in developing their staff's 'ability to understand and critique research as part of their alliance's professional development strategy' (option f). Previous research has found that collaborative R&D across alliances requires a range of practitioner research skills and that a lack of research capacity and skills are significant barriers to sustainability (Stoll, 2015).

However, this is not to say that TSAs are not developing their staff. Indeed, when combining the responses from those that reported 'to a great extent' with 'to some extent', 75 per cent of respondents reported that they developed their staff's ability to understand and critique research, compared to 91 per cent that reported producing outputs that are informed by research. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that if the quality of their research-informed outputs is to be maintained, some TSAs might consider placing a greater emphasis on developing their staff's research skills.

Many TSAs report treating R&D as an 'add-on' and consider it less important compared to other concerns

The survey findings revealed multiple indicators of this, for example:

- **About half of TSAs reported R&D was viewed as an 'add on'.** 54 per cent of respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statement: 'R&D is viewed by many colleagues as an add-on, rather than as a key part of the alliance's efforts to raise standards'.
- **Half of TSAs have not yet fully prioritised their R&D work.** 52 per cent of respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statement: 'We have not yet fully prioritised our R&D work and need to develop it further'.
- **For many, R&D is a low priority relative to other concerns.** Of those answering an open question, 30 per cent of respondents reported the main challenge facing their TSA in delivering R&D was that it was a low priority relative to other concerns.
- **Not all alliance schools have staff with designated responsibility for R&D.** Most TSAs (59 per cent) reported only having designated R&D leads in 'some' of their alliance schools, while more than a quarter (28 per cent) have no designated R&D leads in any of their alliance schools.

The findings raise questions about the extent to which some teaching schools are effectively spreading and promoting the use of research evidence across their alliance and the wider education system. The findings broadly support those of the two-year NCTL study. They suggest that many TSAs approach their R&D responsibilities in different ways, and often give it a low priority relative to other concerns.

Most TSAs appear to focus on 'engaging in' research as distinct from 'engaging with' research

Two main forms of research engagement are distinguished in studies of the subject: responding to public research ('engagement with') and doing one's own research ('engagement in'). For the purposes of the survey, we described the first activity (engaging 'with research') as 'how you access, understand and apply academic or professionally produced research across your school/TSA'. The second activity was described as 'enquiry', and defined as 'practitioner-led research or action research'.

Figure B shows that while 37 per cent of respondents reported encouraging their staff to engage in enquiry 'to a great extent', only 27 per cent reported encouraging their staff to engage 'with research' to the same degree. In practice, NFER has found that many research-engaged schools undertake both activities, and that both can have an appropriate place in supporting evidence-informed practice (Judkins *et al,* 2014). However, the findings could suggest that TSAs view enquiry-based activities as being particularly important, and/or that they need support to build the capacity of teachers to meaningfully engage with academic or professionally produced research evidence.

There are a range of challenges facing TSAs in delivering R&D

We explored the challenges facing TSAs in delivering R&D through two questions: the first an open question; the second a series of single response items.

In response to the open question, 'Other than funding and a lack of time, what would you say is the main challenge facing your alliance in delivering R&D?', three in ten respondents (30 percent) reported the main challenge facing their TSA in delivering R&D was that it was a low priority relative to other concerns. This was followed by difficulties in accessing research evidence (11 per cent), and the lack of confidence that some teachers felt in making use of research evidence (10 per cent).

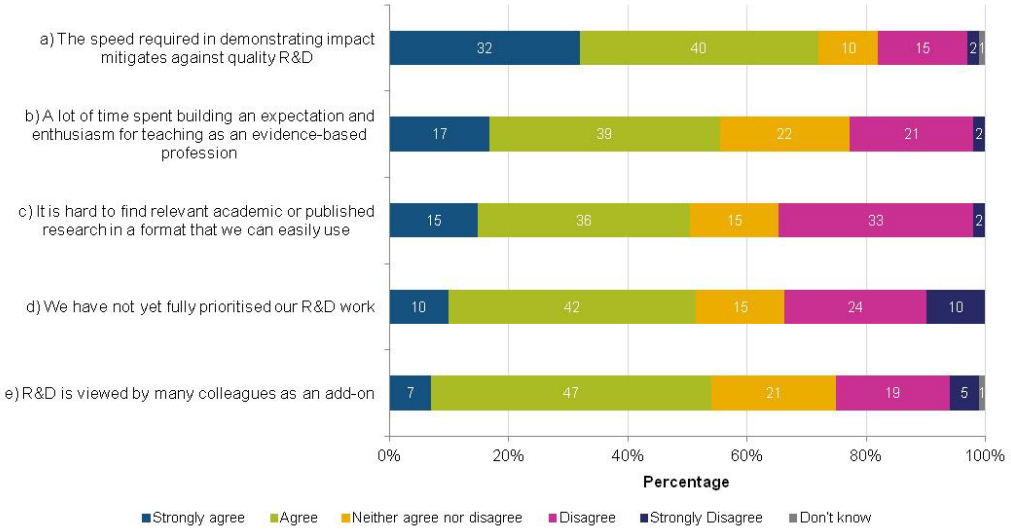
While there is nothing particularly new about these findings, they do support arguments that NFER (Durbin and Nelson, 2014) and others have been making for a number of years about the factors preventing schools from accessing or using research evidence. Namely, that there is still work to be done in:

- creating a demand for evidence in schools (particularly for using academic or professionally produced research evidence)
- improving the supply and accessibility of research evidence
- building the capacity of teachers to meaningfully engage with research evidence.

In addition to the open question, respondents' answers to a series of single response questions revealed a number of additional challenges to delivering their R&D work (see Figure C).

Chief amongst these was the speed required when carrying out R&D in order to demonstrate its impact, with almost three quarters (72 per cent) reporting they 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that this mitigated against quality R&D which can take time to undertake and embed. This was also identified as a major challenge in the two-year National College evaluation of teaching schools (Gu *et al,* 2015). Our findings appear to confirm those reported in the National College study, while also suggesting that this continues to be a challenge.

Figure C: TSAs reported they face a number of challenges in delivering R&D



Question: I'm going to read out five things that may or may not represent challenges to your R&D work. For each one, please say whether you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree or strongly disagree that it represents a challenge to your R&D work. If you don't know the answer, please feel free to say so.'
Source: NFER survey of teaching schools, 2016 (n=83)
Figures may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Just over half (56 per cent) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that they were having to spend a lot of time building an expectation and enthusiasm for teaching as an evidence-based profession. As reported earlier, a similar proportion (54 per cent) reported that R&D was viewed by many staff as an add-on, rather than as a key part of the alliance's efforts to raise standards.

While for some, these challenges may have stemmed from respondents' views that their TSAs have not yet fully prioritised R&D and needed to develop it further (52 per cent: see Figure C, option D), a notable minority rejected this view (34 per cent 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed').

We also asked a similar question of respondents from our sample of Ofsted-category outstanding schools. They appeared to broadly recognise the same challenges to delivering R&D as their counterparts in teaching schools, albeit to a more limited degree. A notable difference was that a smaller proportion of respondents in our comparison sample (compared to those in teaching schools) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that:

- they were having to spend a lot of time building an expectation and enthusiasm for teaching as an evidence-based profession (42 per cent compared to 56 per cent)
- R&D was viewed by many staff as an add-on (46 per cent compared to 54 per cent).

It is unclear whether these responses reflect the fact that comparison schools have been more successful than teaching schools, and/or their alliances, in overcoming these challenges.

Teachers identified a number of actions that research organisations can take to help support them to deliver R&D

In response to an open question, respondents identified a number of activities that research organisations, like NFER, could undertake to best support TSAs, and other schools, in a self-improving school system.

Chief amongst these was the need for research evidence to be made more accessible to practitioners (as reported by 38 per cent of respondents from our teaching school sample and 48 per cent of respondents from our comparison school sample). This was followed by support to help interpret and use research evidence (as reported by 26 per cent of respondents from our teaching school sample and 10 per cent of respondents from our comparison school sample). Several of the comments from respondents in the comparison school sample suggested this could be best delivered by researchers working alongside schools.

The findings suggest that there is more that the research community can do to help address some of the structural challenges, reported earlier, that are facing schools in delivering R&D.

5 Discussion

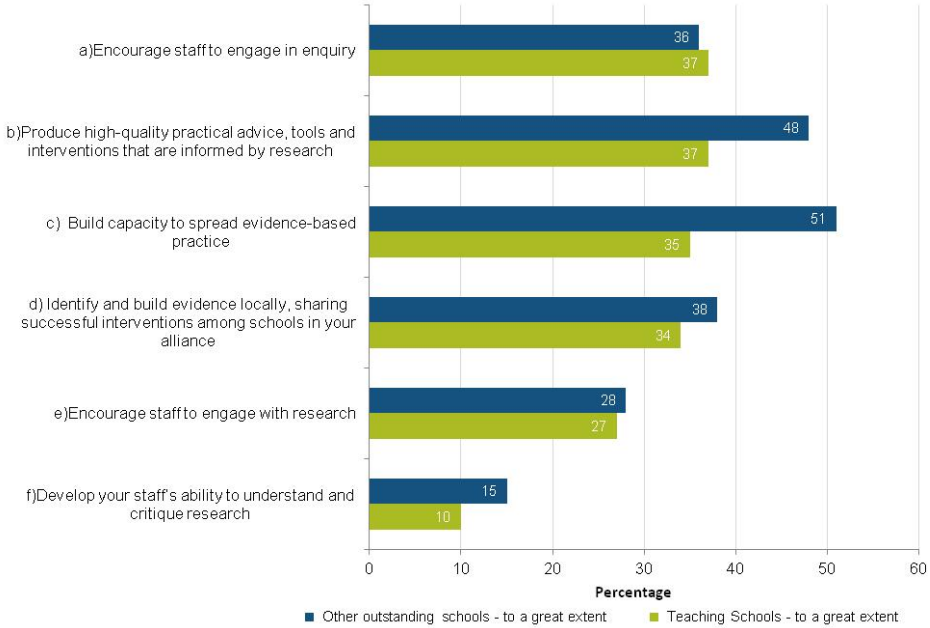
There is evidence to suggest that teaching school status does not necessarily enhance an individual teaching school's level of research activity, as measured by selected R&D indicators, relative to other Ofsted-category outstanding schools.

We asked respondents both from teaching schools and from our comparison sample of outstanding schools to what extent they were engaged in a range of activities in support of R&D. For all but one activity, a greater proportion of staff in outstanding schools reported they were doing these things 'to a great extent' than those in teaching schools, as shown in Figure D. While not statistically significant, there are particularly notable differences between the two samples in the proportion reporting that their TSA (or school in the case of respondents in the comparison sample) does the following 'to a great extent':

- 'build capacity to spread evidence-based practice' (51 per cent in comparison schools compared to 35 per cent in teaching schools)
- 'produce high-quality practical advice, tools and interventions that are informed by research' (48 per cent in comparison schools compared to 37 per cent in teaching schools).

It should be pointed out that when we combine the proportion reporting 'to a great extent' with 'to some extent', the difference between the two samples narrows. It is also the case that staff from our comparison sample of outstanding schools were generally more likely to report doing 'very little' or nothing ('not at all') for these activities, than those in the teaching school sample. The relatively small sample sizes, particularly for the comparison group of schools, should also be taken into consideration when considering these findings.

Figure D: TSAs most frequently encourage staff to engage in enquiry and produce research-based materials



Question: ' I'm going to read out six things that your TSA [wording used for teaching schools sample]/school [wording used for comparison schools sample] may or may not do. For each one, please say whether your TSA/school does it to a great extent, to some extent, very little, not at all, or you don't know'.
Source: NFER survey of teaching schools (n=83) and Ofsted-category outstanding schools (n=80), 2016

Nevertheless, the findings do cause pause for thought. On the face of it, it might seem counterintuitive that staff in teaching schools, which have a specific responsibility for delivering R&D, would report being engaged in these activities on behalf of their alliance less intensively than staff in other outstanding schools. One possible explanation is that R&D activity is being squeezed because teaching schools are occupied with their other responsibilities and particularly with delivering school-led ITT and CPD. By contrast, other outstanding schools are free to focus on other things, including R&D. Extending this thinking further, one might speculate that six areas of responsibility is too many, and that teaching schools would be better able to dispense their responsibilities if the number of their priorities was reduced.

But the findings also give rise to cautious optimism, as they suggest that other outstanding schools are engaged in activities that support R&D, and that they are choosing to do this, even without any explicit requirement for them to do so.

A new addition to the schools landscape is the Research Schools Project, which is a partnership between the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Institute for Effective Education (IEE) at the University of York. Together, they are funding a network of schools that will support the use of evidence to improve teaching practice. The intention is that Research Schools will become a focal-point for evidence-based practice in their region, building affiliations with large numbers of schools and supporting the use of evidence at scale. It is expected that Research Schools will engage with local schools in a variety of ways and with varying degrees of intensity.

Following a competitive application process, the first five Research Schools have been appointed, with a further five to join in 2017. Each of the ten schools will receive £200,000 over three years to enable them to fulfil their roles[1]. Of the first five schools, four are also teaching schools. Given the findings and discussion presented above, it will be interesting to see how their focus on evidence-based practice will be managed alongside their other responsibilities.

This report has looked at the extent of activity undertaken by teaching schools and their alliances in support of R&D, and the challenges they face in implementing them. While there are now a range of evidence-based resources and tools available to help improve teaching practice and raise the attainment of pupils, getting research into schools in ways that really make a difference in the classroom remains a challenge for many. In a self-improving school-led system, teaching schools continue to play an important role in leading and supporting evidence-informed practice. Their efforts should be supported, by research organisations, policy-makers and the wider education community, as without effective school-led support there is a danger that evidence-informed practice in schools could be, and in some places will continue to be, dispersed and piecemeal.

[1] By comparison, cohort ten teaching schools will receive 'core funding' totalling £190k over four years to deliver their six areas of responsibility.

6 Methodology

Data

The findings in this report are based on an analysis of survey responses from teachers in a sample of teaching schools and a comparison group of Ofsted-category outstanding schools. The survey was undertaken using computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) in March 2016. CATI offers a number of advantages over paper and/or online surveys, including:

- high quality of collected data: the telephone interviewer can ensure that questions are fully understood and are not misinterpreted by the interviewee
- more complete data: the telephone interviewer can ensure that all questions are answered
- time reduction: the whole process is speeded up because data is entered as it is obtained (compared with paper surveys).

The survey was completed by the person responsible for coordinating research activity across the school or alliance, or a person who could speak on this issue. Responses were achieved from staff in a total of 83 teaching schools and 80 outstanding schools.

Response rates

	Number of schools contacted	Number of schools achieved	Response rate
Teaching schools	464	83	18 %
Comparison schools	688	80	12 %

Definitions

Key terms used within the survey were described to interviewees as follows:

- R&D = “activities that support research engagement, such as how you access, understand and apply academic research or practitioner-led research”.
- Engaging ‘with research’ = “how you access, understand and apply academic or professionally produced research across your TSA/or school”.
- Engaging ‘in enquiry’ = “practitioner-led research or action research”.

Characteristics of achieved samples

The achieved teaching school and Ofsted-category outstanding school samples were analysed in terms of their representativeness (at individual school-level) by geographic distribution (using government office regions), proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM), and school phase.

Our findings revealed that the achieved samples were broadly representative of the national population of teaching schools and Ofsted-category outstanding schools, with the notable exception that:

- Nursery schools were greatly over represented in the achieved Ofsted-category outstanding schools sample while primary and secondary schools were greatly underrepresented, relative to the national population.

We did not have access to a dataset of alliance schools, and so no checks could be made as to the representativeness of the achieved teaching schools sample in terms of the number and composition of their alliance schools.

Respondents from both samples may not necessarily be representative in the sense that it is reasonable to assume that they may be more engaged in R&D on average than schools which did not respond to our survey.

Margins of error

To understand the precision of the findings from the achieved samples we calculated the margin of error[2] (expressed in terms of -/+ percentage points) for each sample as follows:

- teaching schools (N = 83/715) = -/+ 10.1%
- outstanding schools (N = 80/3538) = -/+ 10.8%

This means that a reported figure of 50 per cent within the teaching schools sample could fall within the range of 60.1 per cent or 39.9 per cent when extrapolated to the national population of teaching schools.

Similarly, a reported figure of 50 per cent within the comparison schools sample could fall within the range of 60.8 per cent or 39.2 per cent when extrapolated to the national population of Ofsted-category outstanding schools.

The margin of error for comparisons between the teaching schools and comparison schools sample is -/+ 14.8 per cent. These figures should be borne in mind when considering findings both within and between the school samples.

[2] Margin of error = the 95% confidence interval in terms of -/+ percentage points, where the mean response is 50%.

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