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# National Research Themes R&D Project – Theme 2

**What makes great professional development that leads consistently to great pedagogy?**

## Case Study - The Mead Teaching School Alliance

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The Mead Teaching School works in partnership with its alliance of 21 schools. The alliance, Collaborative Schools Ltd (CSL ) has established a cross-phase, alliance-wide data/information sharing protocol that enables a collective analysis of pupil performance data, Ofsted findings and consultation feedback from headteachers. Analysis of this data informs the planning and provision of school to school support and priorities for professional development. This information has been critical in promoting TS alliance engagement in the Theme 2 research project, enabling participant schools to feel a tangible alignment between their school/TS alliance improvement priorities and research hub activity.

The scope of this research project was determined by the recruitment of Specialist Leaders of Education (SLE) across the alliance. Project participants included 12 SLEs, 9 from The Mead Teaching School and 3 from other TS alliance schools. As Mead TS lead teacher and TS consultant we co-led the research and feel our peer research-partnership added rigour and depth to this work.

**Our overarching research question was:**

**What is the role of the Professional Development Partner (SLE and aspirant SLE) in effecting change through research engagement?**

Initially, our research focus was established through discussion, recognising the potential pivotal role of SLES in shaping and refining the character of professional development through teacher research, towards a sustainable model of consistent great pedagogy. It was further informed by an audit of teacher perceptions of professional learning revealing that a model of one-off training days, isolated from school improvement priorities, was often felt to be ineffectual.

The experience and expertise of the executive headteacher of the Teaching School and co-leaders of the research project in understanding the concept of research engagement has steered the research focus, enabling activity to be undertaken in the context of an overarching strategy and supportive professional research culture. This highlighted a challenge from the outset, revealing a gap in knowledge and understanding of teacher research among some school leaders across the alliance. However on reflection, it was felt

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important to address this gap through building a critical mass of understanding whereby SLEs were empowered as advocates of teacher research.

The Intended Impact of the project was, on reflection, rather broad-ranging, but importantly captured the vision and underpinning principles for developing a culture of research engagement. In summary, it included:

- improved staff confidence, knowledge and understanding to facilitate JPD activity through collaborative teacher research and enquiry to establish a more systematic and rigorous strategy for a self-improving TS alliance. Essentially, to empower teachers to take risks to explore new aspects of their practice leading to improved standards of teaching and learning
- for children, improved performance in TS alliance priority areas through increased motivation and engagement as learners and researchers, towards a model of co-construction
- for participating schools, improved understanding of the leadership of enquiry through the role of SLE as research mentor alongside the development of a supportive research culture that facilitates staff learning
- for schools beyond those participating in the project, to develop models of practice to exemplify how collaborative teacher research and enquiry can provide an empowering and sustainable strategy for improvement and innovation, supporting teachers' creativity and professionalism.

Baseline evidence informing the content of teacher research enquiries included data analysis of Alliance pupil performance data, Ofsted findings and consultation feedback from alliance headteachers. Teacher perceptions of professional development were captured through staff meetings and Inset sessions where the nine claims relating to effective professional development (Stoll, Harris and Handscomb) were investigated and ranked through a diamond nine activity and group discussion. Reflective teacher learning journals, provided for all participants, provide an on-going 'live' source of evidence, capturing changing perceptions of professional development and the impact on teaching and learning. Models of professional learning were further scrutinised by the TS Executive headteacher and project leads through observation of training opportunities, informal discussions and 1-1 consultations with SLEs.

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In summary, baseline evidence indicated:

- teacher perceptions of professional development reveal a culture of dependency on national strategy frameworks and a sense of disenfranchisement and exhaustion
- a limited range of knowledge, skills and understanding of teacher research strategies among project participants. Where teachers had studied at Masters level, a greater understanding was evident but often little or no clear, meaningful links established between own study focus and impact on shaping pedagogy towards addressing school improvement priorities. This disconnect was surprising.
- although recognised as outstanding teachers and leaders, many SLEs had little or no experience of facilitating collaborative teacher research and enquiry.

At the **Innovation Phase**, our research activity focussed on defining the role of outstanding teacher/SLE as facilitators of collaborative research and enquiry. This required:

- the design and delivery of an induction programme for SLEs, including a focus on extended moral purpose for system leadership, coaching and mentoring strategies and the role of research mentor in facilitating change.
- development of the ‘Spiral Learning Journey’, providing a common process to support teachers in undertaking school-based research, ensuring rigour and an ethical approach regular 1-1 /group coaching.
- Inset training for wider staff team, providing an introduction to research and the creation of ‘Learning Sets’ to address school improvement priorities.
- the introduction of systems and structures to embed research strategy, to ensure that our work would have a sustainable impact. This included the development of Mead TS Learning Setts, TS alliance JPD Research Hubs and Learning Communities.
- consideration of a maturity model for teacher research and enquiry to recognise growing SLE competency and need to integrate this competency framework into teacher appraisal/PM school systems. This has included the design and implementation of a PM digital wheel recognising growing experience/competency in leading R&D.

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## Impact Phase

From the data collected, we are able to make the following claims:

(Evidence sources underpinning these findings include comments from individual teacher researcher reflective journals, project leader field notes, SLE interviews, SLE focus group discussions, 1-1 coaching sessions, observations of research group activity, headteacher feedback through Alliance 'Leading Learning' strategic group, SLE role specifications)

- In the context of a self-improving school system, the role of SLE is pivotal in promoting, leading and facilitating collaborative teacher research and innovation. This empowers teachers to lead their own learning and impacts positively on the quality of children's learning experiences, leading to improved outcomes.
- Establishing the role of SLE as Research Mentor/ Coach strongly enhances the capacity and expertise of Teaching School Alliances to lead and engage in high quality research and development.
- It cannot be assumed that 'outstanding' teachers have the knowledge and skill-base to lead research and enquiry across Teaching School Alliances. Induction and on-going professional development/ coaching empowers SLEs to lead rigorous, systematic, ethical approaches to school-led research and enquiry.
- Establishing the role of SLE as Research Mentor/ Coach is most effective when supported by a professional culture where learning through research is valued and recognised as a core strategy for school improvement.
- Recognising the facilitation of collaborative teacher research as a core leadership competency, embedded in school's performance management systems, is supporting engagement. Appraisal against a continuum of teacher research competences, from emerging to leading (as outlined in R&D maturity model) is fostering the ambition of middle leaders, raising the profile and strengthening the profile of teacher research evidence.

Relating to the above claims, the impact of this research has been measured directly in relation to the quality of children's experiences of teaching and learning and pupil outcomes. This has been documented and collated by SLEs leading specific research hubs,

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guided by additional individualised research questions. Detailed case studies relating to each research focus can be accessed via The Mead Teaching School website. *Example:*

### **Early Years Learning Set**

*'How does child initiated learning impact on planning, provision and attainment?'*

In summary, findings showed:

- improved percentage of children achieving / exceeding Early Learning Goals at the end of YR against lower baseline attainment than previous years
- Improved child confidence, ownership of learning and peer cooperation (as evidenced against Leuven scales)
- adoption of new child-initiated model of learning by Y1 colleagues, supporting effective transitions
- strong parental engagement / recognition of impact
- deeper staff understanding of principles and pedagogy underpinning early years practice

**Evidence was validated by HMI who requested film footage to inform training for Ofsted inspectors.**

**As we move forwards, our learning will be shared and sustained through:**

- securing headteacher commitment to school-based research across the alliance to ensure that teacher enquiry is supported and recognised as a core strategy for school improvement and innovation
- further strengthening partnership with our HEI partner towards a more co-constructed model of teacher research in which access to (and affordability of) support and accreditation is addressed
- securing funding and capacity to embed current activity and undertake new research; ensuring regular dissemination of our work across and beyond the alliance through conference events, *learning@themead* days and our website.

[www.themeadteachingschool.org.uk](http://www.themeadteachingschool.org.uk)

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