

Research into action

Lindsay Palmer and Nicola Theobald describe their collaboration to promote professional learning through school-based research and innovation

The Mead Community Primary School, designated a National Teaching School in July 2011, works in partnership with Collaborative School Ltd, its cross-phase alliance of 21 schools in Trowbridge, Wiltshire. The Mead is a National Lead School for Research and Development (R&D).

R&D is identified by the national Teaching School agenda as one of the “Big 6”, alongside initial teacher education, CPD and leadership development, succession planning and talent management, Specialist Leaders of Education (SLEs), and school-to-school support.

The inclusion of R&D builds on the concept of the “teaching hospital”, where there is a professional responsibility for practitioners to be research-engaged to shape the direction of practice and contribute to the knowledge-base for their profession.

Building on our existing commitment to research and evidence-based practice, we naturally found ourselves reflecting on the place of R&D within the Big 6 agenda, recognising the potential of research as a key driver and enabler for all aspects of the Teaching School’s work.

For example, merging CPD with R&D was a natural step for us to promote rich, evidence-based professional learning. This approach has supported leaders and teachers in understanding the principles of research-engagement and connecting research with everyday practice, rather than viewing it as an add-on.

In order to embed a culture of research, it was necessary to create new roles, processes and systems to provide capacity for research activity. The allocation of time and the creation of tangible structures have been critical in securing leaders’ commitment and understanding of how this approach “fits with”, and indeed underpins, school improvement.

Research Hubs

Research-based “Learning Sets” within The Mead and cross-phase “Learning Communities” across the Mead Teaching School Alliance provide opportunities for teachers and teaching assistants to work collaboratively on joint practice development. These research hubs provide a forum for the exploration and documentation of evidence-based approaches. Purposeful, relevant case studies ensure the transfer of practice within and beyond the alliance.

A programme of regular staff meetings and INSET sessions are allocated to support this activity within school. Input has focused on enquiry processes and the impact of research on teaching and learning. The shaping and refinement of our research methodology ensures a systematic, rigorous approach to research, providing a common language for the dissemination of practice. At alliance level, an agreed protocol for information sharing provides a collective analysis of pupil performance data, Ofsted findings and consultation feedback from headteachers. This informs research priorities and has been fundamental in securing engagement from leaders and teachers, enabling a clear alignment between individual school priorities and research hubs.

SLEs as Research Ambassadors

Research Hubs are facilitated by SLEs who model the behaviours and attributes of teacher researchers. Staff are supported in navigating research evidence and developing knowledge, skills and understanding of research methodology. In many ways this is a new role, historically held by external higher education partners.

Induction and ongoing coaching support for the SLEs as research mentors is critical in building capacity for research across the alliance. Although recognised as outstanding teachers/leaders and naturally researchful in their practice, many SLEs did not feel equipped to lead school-based enquiry. As a consequence, it is important to support them in leading research activity with materials and guidance.

Buzz of activity

The high degree of professional dialogue and deep reflection arising



Collaboration: (from top) SLEs facilitate discussion during the Research Café; market place stalls illustrate the learning journey and impact of teachers’ research

from our Research Hubs is exciting. This has created a strong sense of empowerment in which staff regard research-engagement as core to practice development and professional learning.

A change in teacher attitudes and behaviours is tangible with increased teacher curiosity, risk-taking and self-questioning.

Our recent Learning through Research Conference provided a forum for the dissemination and exchange of learning. A keynote, led by Professor Graham Handscomb, launched the day and staff visited “market place” displays that illustrated the impact of their work on children’s learning (see photographs).

During the afternoon, teachers, teaching assistants and trainees participated in a “Research Café” discussion, exploring the following questions:

- How can we ensure that our research brings about improvements in teaching and learning?
- How can we share the fruits of enquiry meaningfully and systematically with our partners?

One way to gain recognition for the quality of research across the school is through the NFER Research Mark. The mark recognises engagement with and in research. For those Teaching Schools starting out on their R&D journey, the criteria involved in the Mark give a comprehensive structure to a research programme.

It is a welcome development having R&D as one of the Big 6 for Teaching Schools and The Mead has set up a structure where R&D is positioned as a key driver for school improvement. 

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Further information

For more information about the NFER Research Mark, visit www.nfer.ac.uk/mh4