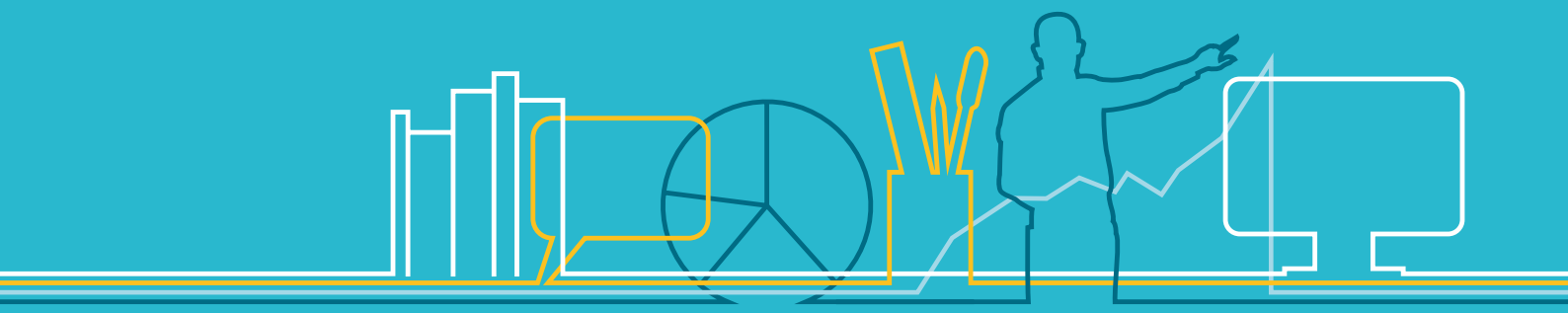
Report by Tom Bennett
With an introduction from Tony McAleavy

The school Research Lead



Education Development Trust

researchED

The school Research Lead

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researchED

researchED is a grass-roots, teacher-led organisation aimed at improving research literacy in educational communities, dismantling myths in education, getting the best research where it is needed most and providing a platform for educators, academics and all other parties to meet and discuss what does and doesn't work in the great project of raising our children.

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About the author

Tom Bennett is a teacher in East London and a columnist for the *TES*. Since 2008 he has authored or co-authored six books on teacher training and professional development. In 2013 he founded researchED, a grass-roots organisation designed to repair the relationship between practice and research in education. He is a member of an expert panel set up by the DfE to redesign the core offer in UK initial teacher training.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to Alex Quigley, Carl Hendrick, Caroline Creaby, Hannah Fahey, Helen Woolley and Jude Enright – all pioneering Research Leads who have contributed short reflections on what the role means to them.

The three reports

There are three reports in this series:

- **Teaching as a research-engaged profession: problems and possibilities**
  by Tony McAleavy (with an introduction by Tom Bennett)
- **The school Research Lead**
  by Tom Bennett (with an introduction by Tony McAleavy)
- **Research Leads: current practice, future prospects**
  by Anna Riggall and Rachel Singer

Above: The three reports in this series

Introduction

The researchED movement has generated a new debate about the role of research in schools. Of course there have always been teachers interested in undertaking research and applying the research findings of others. However, involvement in research has tended to be the personal enthusiasm of the individual teacher rather than a coordinated whole school endeavour. One of the many exciting aspects of the current debate that researchED has stimulated is the emergence of the idea of the Research Lead. Many schools now have a key individual who takes a whole school view of the use of evidence.

So how should new Research Leads see their role? This report addresses the question in two ways. Tom Bennett, the founder of researchED, has written a thought-provoking essay that sets out some of the ways in which the work of the Research Lead can be conceptualised. Tom explores a range of different approaches to research leadership. In addition to Tom's tour of the horizon, several pioneering Research Leads have provided fascinating case studies of research leadership in action in their own schools. Both Tom's analysis and the vignettes from the schools collectively make a powerful case for the new role and the potential benefits in terms of better teaching and learning. The different contributions also make it clear that there is no single blueprint that schools should follow as they explore research engagement.

Tom provides a deliberately diverse set of possible interpretations of research leadership. The unifying factor that is present in all of his approaches is a strong sense of research as a collective and collegiate endeavour. Similarly the case studies, while illustrating different styles of research leadership, are linked by a shared view of the school as a professional learning community.

This is an important and timely report. Our understanding of teacher professionalism is in flux and we have a chance to re-define teaching as a research-engaged calling. The new cadre of Research Leads can influence this and make sure that our view of evidence is securely institutional rather than individualistic.

Tony McAleavy
Research and development director, Education Development Trust

Why have a Research Lead?

In 2013 I launched researchED, a teacher-led, grass-roots movement that sought to improve research literacy in the teaching profession, create face-to-face opportunities between the research and the practitioner communities in education, and create some form of structure for the relationship between research and teaching practice. It does not seek to simply increase the traffic one way from research institutions, but rather to reduce that traffic where it originates from sources of dubious provenance and to increase it where research has shown it to have utility and integrity. Also, it seeks to make teachers change agents for their own profession by driving both the processes and the direction of research.

One of the first things that became obvious, as the researchED conference series grew, was that it was extraordinarily hard for teachers and school leaders to become research literate by themselves; the time commitment alone put it out of the grasp of all but the most lightly timetabled of practitioners. Individual educators cannot be expected to keep abreast of both the legacy of educational research and the daily debate and emergent discoveries of contemporary research.

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At the first national researchED conference, we proposed that schools should appoint 'Research Champions' or 'Research Leads' as an efficient mechanism that would act as an interface between the two domains of school and research.

This would remove the need to train or retrain every member of staff in the minutiae of research, or expect them to undertake it themselves. It also showed that the school had decided to make a commitment to evidence-augmented professional and pedagogical development. There exists a good deal of poor, misleading or simply deceptive research in the ecosystem of school debate; the Research Lead could develop on the school's behalf a process that would confer at least partial immunity to such ideas. More, they could act as conduits between research and schools with benefit to the school's needs, and the providers of such research.

It would be pointless – and dangerous – to expect teaching to ever become an evidence-*based* profession when so much of what practitioners do in a classroom or school is craft, or experiential. To demand that every decision be underscored

by credible research would be to expect too much from research. That said, it is not too much – indeed, it is vital – that the profession be *assisted*, wherever possible, by research, where it exists. Where research contradicts the prevailing experiential wisdom of the practitioner, that needs to be accounted for, to the detriment of neither but for the ultimate benefit of the student or educator.

Put simply, the Research Lead can connect the school to the greater world of educational research, while simultaneously acting as a filter. The Lead can convert the school from an island to an archipelago, to a peninsula. And they can be a powerful agent of change.

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My overarching observation is that there is a need for Research Leads; there are benefits attached to the creation of the role that go beyond immediate need; that, with caveats (and important ones) the Research Lead can act as a powerful change agent in the often calcified environment of institutional education. I hope this document addresses these caveats appropriately, as there are risks associated with this role as well as prizes. Fortunately the prizes are very valuable indeed.

What the role entails, and how it demonstrates efficacy, is the focus of this paper. I will investigate what the role looks like, in all of its permutations, and discuss what research looks like, and what varieties of research exist for schools to access (along with their concomitant limitations and powers). Then, I examine the challenges and experience of being a Research Lead, along with any unique perspectives that existing Leads have experienced. Throughout this piece attention will be paid to potential benefits of this role, and I will look at reasons why schools should consider engaging with this as part of their whole school strategy.

What does the Research Lead do?

The Research Lead role has been interpreted in an enormous variety of ways by different institutions. This is entirely appropriate, and it is a strength of the role that it can be viewed so fluidly. Through researchED and the Research Lead Network, it is clear to me that the sudden emergence of the role was accompanied by an equally rapid realisation that there was a need to define the role, at least sufficiently to create utility. It was one thing to realise that raising research literacy had intrinsic and instrumental value for any institution that wanted to access the burgeoning body of data that existed. It was quite another to reify that realisation into a strategy, let alone a job role.

To this end, in September 2014, a remarkable gathering took place at the researchED 2014 National Conference at Raine's Foundation School, East London. Judith Enright, a deputy headteacher at Greenford High School, Ealing, along with Alex Quigley, Assistant Headteacher at Huntingdon School, York, asked if they might have a space in the middle of researchED for them to meet with other Research Leads to discuss the very ontology of their role: what was a Research Lead? What could it be? What should it be?

I provided a space, and advertised it as the 'Lunchtime of Champions' (as a way of reducing overlap with existing sessions at the conference, and enabling access for as many as possible). The mini-event was invite-only, with opportunity for others to apply. We quickly filled our list of thirty; then we facilitated the meeting with suitable expertise from useful fields: Paul Black, Dylan Wiliam, Sam Freedman, Daisy Christodoulou, Professor Rob Coe all gamely contributed to the discussion. One of the chief takeaways from this brief meeting of minds was that the role was clearly a chameleon one. Following are some of the ways in which practitioners have interpreted the specification (bearing in mind that few of these interpretations are exclusive to one another, and most were frequently inhabited in several ways).

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Gatekeeper

The lead should be a conduit for research in general, including methodology, current affairs and issues, and staying abreast of latest developments in educational research. This was one of the most common ways that the role was interpreted.

The most common reason given for this was that research literacy in many school teachers and educators is generally fairly low, with most being unaware of anything other than the broadest of debates taking place in educational research. Accompanying this was the usual, perverse and pernicious problem of time: time to achieve fluency in these issues; time to stay abreast of contemporary debates; time to reflect; time to analyse; time to implement. It is no wonder that most teachers intersect with the world of research by accident,or when directed to do so. A Research Lead can be a point of contact for staff queries, a reference base, an expert and an adviser. They might be asked to present at staff meetings or training sessions, or to explore projects specific to the whole school community.

The gatekeeper acts as a mechanism of efficiency, dedicating a discrete portion of their time to actively pursuing these matters on behalf of their colleagues and leadership team. Another way to see this role interpretation is to understand it as a form of labour division and specialisation. The gatekeeper is an organ that interfaces with research-related issues in order that other colleagues do not have to in such detail. This version of the role requires high levels of dedication from the Lead; it also requires concomitant levels of professionalism and integrity, in order to avoid acting as an agent of cognitive bias, and therefore immobility of change or professional development (see Making the role work, page 29).

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Consigliere

The Research Lead is seen as a special adviser to the headteacher, or senior staff, or governing body, rather than as a specifically whole school resource. While they may still be used as a reference by the larger staff body, their primary role is to assist with change leadership in the school. Their relationship with the leadership varies: for some of them, they were 'aimed' at specific projects by leadership groups in order to explore the existing evidence base for proposed interventions. In other cases they were used – possibly abused – by being directed to find evidence to retrospectively justify existing policies and strategies, although this was rare, and usually any school robust enough to appoint a Research Lead was robust enough to weather both welcome and unwelcome conclusions furnished by the Lead's investigations. Some variants of this role were very powerful, with some Research Leads expressing that they had, at times, had a pronounced and significant impact on school strategy by bringing in research that was previously alien to the school's systems.

Devil's advocate

Also known as the critical friend, this Research Lead takes a muscular, almost aggressive approach to their responsibilities, and assumes an investigative and inspectorate type role. The Lead in this scenario is responsible for challenging

staff at all levels (although frequently this was restricted to leadership and management levels) to discuss their strategies with reference to existing research that was relevant to their field of activity. The aim behind this was not to simply dispute or disagree with the strategy, but to create a dialogue of challenge where the staff member was forced to revisit their own motivations and evidence base – experiential, practical or theoretical – and respond to the challenges of the Research Lead. Done properly, this was a powerful intervention for reinforcing the original intentions behind policy, or even redirecting those policies. Care has to be taken not to alienate or simply attack the staff member. In a few notable examples, this role was specifically used by the headteacher, who could use the Research Lead as a whetstone for their leadership. Understandably, this was not a common approach.

Auditor

Some Research Leads were tasked with evaluating the whole school's relationship with current research, and then using that baseline evaluation to generate targets and a vision for where the school needed to be. This could mean re-evaluating whole school teaching and learning policies in the light of, for example, latest developments in cognitive psychology and the understanding of how memory works, or it could be to dispute and dispense with an existing, out-of-date practice such as Brain Gym or Learning Styles. It could be to suggest that teachers become involved with their own research projects (although see Making the role work, page 29), to suggest developing links with other institutions, to become part of larger research projects, to develop staff training towards research-based goals, or to simply inform the school's continuing professional development (CPD) policy.

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Project manager

The Research Lead is given a specific mission to achieve, usually centred around a specific research-based intervention, either in the exploratory phase of its adoption, or in the investigative phase of policy forming. They might be required to perform a literature review, or visit schools that have previously adopted the strategy in question. Usually the focus of the project will be generated by some perceived need intrinsic to the school, either identified by an external third party such as Ofsted, or by the leadership team. This form of the role tended to be the most transient, with funding and role associated with fixed terms and timescales, as well as success criteria that were usually either time or project based. In some few cases, the role was tied to a schedule that included a revisiting clause, where the Research Lead would, after a period of time, perform an evaluation of the project's subsequent adoption, although this was a vanishingly rare variant to the role.

Seniority of position

As already mentioned, these roles were not exclusive to one another. Further variegation was generated by introducing another plane into the post: seniority of position. This results in the following variants of role:

- **The Research Lead as senior leader.** Schools where Research Leads had made the biggest impact were frequently (and perhaps somewhat obviously) schools where the role was part of the brief of a senior member of the leadership team. The immediate and structural nature of their sphere of influence meant that research was easily implemented (at least in a management context) into the school system: budgets were obtained more easily, and reach was further than in other circumstances. This top-down approach leads to faster implementation, but frequently runs into the difficulties that any change agency encounters in institutions composed of semi-autonomous members.
- **The Research Lead as middle leader.** This was most common, although the senior leadership role was still a popular variant. Typically a member of staff was selected by leadership, although often the role was self-nominated by enthusiastic and ambitious members of staff who were passionate advocates of the research strategy, and had generated sufficient traction in the leadership team to acquire formal status. Interestingly, this version of the role has been seen in as many institutions providing no budget or remuneration to the post holder, as those that do. This might be a sign of fiscal frugality, managerial opportunism and exploitation, hesitancy to commit budgets to such an embryonic role, or even altruism on the part of the post holder. This type of post holder was often very driven – zealous almost – in their commitment to the role, and its opportunities. While managerial reach and impact was often more limited than their more senior counterparts, they frequently made a great deal out of their role.
- **The Research Lead as non-teaching staff member.** This was the least common version of the role. In a few cases, the role had been assigned to administrative or pastoral staff. In every circumstance encountered, this was due to their personal commitment and affinity with the themes represented by the role, and their post had often been self-generated, in that they had either persuaded management to create the role, to allow them to do it without dispute of contract, or to investigate the possibility of project-based research tasks. Usually these roles were unpaid, although in some circumstances they were rewarded with remuneration, often on a temporary or finite basis.

Jude Enright, Deputy Headteacher – Learning and Teaching and Ealing TSA Research Lead at Greenford High School, says:

I am a self-appointed Research Lead – this arose as part of time spent with the Institute of Education in developing their Research Schools Network and an interest in researchED. The role has been developed as part of my job leading on staff development and through taking a lead on Research and Development across the Ealing Teaching School Alliance.

My aim is to connect the work of leadership and teachers so all are better informed about what works in school and why. Day to day I lead the learning and teaching and staff development team. We have planned and implemented a whole school staff development programme focused on research. Teachers have chosen from reflective blogging, triad coaching, action research, learning from research or practitioner research. We plan to publish a journal of articles in September 2015 and have a whole school showcase of our research findings. Evidence of impact will come from our redesigned lesson observations – types of development point and to what extent these are met, academic results, and a range of impact measures used by those teachers involved in more formal research.

Many colleagues have always taken an academic approach to teaching: studying for Masters degrees or getting involved with research projects. I'd like to see more school-based research embedded in our school development planning, and see research shared widely – I have collated sites where useful articles are published for free. A Research Lead needs to point colleagues in the direction of interesting research to read.

My school has benefited already – leadership meetings put more emphasis on an evidence base, for example the decision to remove grades from lesson observations, though facilitated by Ofsted changing their practice, was ultimately made based on published research evidence showing that grading varies between observers.

In the short term, I want staff in my school and across Ealing to make better-informed decisions, and to develop their skills in getting evidence of what works and why. Longer term, I want a network of Research Leads who have the evidence and knowledge to transform Ofsted, education policy, teacher training, staff recruitment and retention and outcomes for young people in Britain.

Helen Woolley, Teacher at Oxford Spires Academy, says:

I was appointed to the Research Lead role in June 2014 having previously been part of a research group at the school that worked with an external researcher, Alan Howe, to produce a report called Talking Schools in collaboration with another Education Development Trust school, St Mark's Academy. In recent years I also completed an MSc in Educational Research Methodology at Oxford University and have been awarded an Oxford City Learning Research Fellowship for this academic year which provides me with the opportunity to work with other Research Leads across the county. I also sit on the Education Deanery at the University of Oxford and am working on several research projects at the university.

Being Research Lead at Oxford Spires enables me to work with staff to address pedagogical issues and improve the experience and achievement of our students. I lead a staff Research Group through which I facilitate others to conduct their own research. I also produce my own research and coordinate activity with external organisations such as Oxford University and Oxford City Learning. In addition to this, I collaborate with educational researchers, academics and other relevant institutions to ensure that our research is relevant and up to date.

I see my function within the school as multi-faceted. First and foremost research must benefit all – it needs to mean something tangible and real for the staff and pupils. A large undertaking this year has been to conduct a study on the importance of feedback. We began to research the importance of this salient topic at the end of the summer term and have published findings internally so that all staff may use this research to inform practice in time for it to benefit our current Year 11 cohort. We surveyed over 500 students in the production of this research to ensure that they were at the very heart of something so important to them and have ownership of it. Our next project involves the Research Group receiving training in research methodology which will enable staff, with my support, to produce research which is of importance in their subject area.

In the short term, we have used research to inform our practice across the school and particularly with our current Year 11 cohort, and we have begun to inject an ethos of research-led practice into the way we work. In the longer term, I would like to ensure that research is at the heart of pedagogy, and research is used as a solution to problems, a method of CPD for staff and a basis for problem solving.

What research is available for schools to use?

Schools need to be aware of the diversity of research sources available to them. They also need to be aware that the term 'research' is itself loaded with variable connotations and denotations. As a word, it is often as contested as 'evidence'. Of course, what constitutes evidence will vary from person to person; consider the evidence that leads one person to a faith in God, and the evidence that convinces a mechanic of the need to strip an engine. It is necessary – vitally so – to discuss different ways that Research Leads can approach this important aspect of the role.

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The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines research as:

> *'... creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications.'* (OECD, 2002)

It is used to establish or confirm facts, reaffirm the results of previous work, solve new or existing problems, support theorems, or develop new theories. A research project may also be an expansion on past work in the field. Research in the physical or natural sciences (for example, chemistry, physics etc) is the closest to the description given above. The social sciences (loosely, the related study of humankind, such as sociology, economics and psychology) also attempt this systematic work; educational research sits within the auspices of the latter.

The nature of the subject of study – human behaviour in group and individual contexts – means that harvesting data is rarely as straightforward as in the physical sciences (which themselves are subject to their own difficulties). As a result it is common to rely on qualitative data, as well as quantitative data.

Quantitative and qualitative evidence

The strength of the natural sciences has been their ability to lend themselves to quantitative analysis: the objects of examination are amenable to being counted, measured, and weighed. Anything with a numerical quotient is easily comparable. If you want to know which metal will make the best fireguard, simply heat up two

samples and take the temperature at which either fails, for example. That result can then be repeated (or not), shared with others, and tested. The data captured can be applied equally from Bearsden to Bangladesh. It is far easier for people to agree on the outcomes of experimentation when it can be comparatively assessed using the unarguable yard stick of numbers. It is hard to challenge the claim that the Empire State building is taller than the Hoover Dam, when every measuring tape supports it, unless you want to argue the paradox that two is less than one.

The problem for the social sciences (and educational research) is that so often what we want to investigate cannot be reduced to numbers. When Jeremy Bentham produced his Hedonic Calculus, a method by which pleasures could be measured and compared with one another, even his attempts at reduction failed. The duration of a pleasure could probably be measured. But its intensity? Its propinquity? Such matters are abstract concepts that exist as secondary properties in the mind of the one experiencing them. Temperature is absolute, but hot and cold are not. The frequency of the notes in a Beethoven movement can be described numerically, but the sound cannot. The experienced human realm seems to be constructed on unquantifiable intangibles that we understand but cannot describe numerically, because they are not intuitively quantifiable. Instead they are qualitative experiences. (It might even be argued that the majority of what we experience consciously is comprised of these types of experience. Typically we certainly only experience number in a very intuitive manner in our everyday business.)

Evidence is frequently divided into two realms: quantitative – that which can be numbered, and qualitative – that which can be expressed only in qualities. Both are important forms of evidence; both are necessary to understand as closely as possible the phenomena you wish to investigate. If you wanted to research, for example, the impact of serving in the armed forces, you could capture data that expressed numbers of soldiers who received counselling, suicide rates, crime rates etc. We could then centrifuge these data points and seek patterns of interest between seemingly random events. Or, you could interview the participants, and ask them to describe their experiences, making case studies of their responses which could then fuel a more qualitative analysis, where the researcher's skill in evaluation would be paramount.

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Both approaches have value; both have strengths, and both have perils. The quantitative approach enjoys robust comparative powers; is far more easily reproduced (or not) in repetition; and approaches indisputability in at least the bare facts of it itself (that is, it is far more amenable to being shown to be the case, or not the case). The limitation is that such data fails to capture the lived experience of the object of investigation. In the case of the veterans above, a quantitative analysis only of their experiences would obviously be enormously incomplete to any serious student of, for example, post-traumatic stress disorders.

So too in education, where so much of what we seek to understand is comprised of the lived experience of its participants. So many of the questions we ask in this arena are related to unquantifiables; what constitutes literacy? How valuable is this essay compared to another? It is clear that the realm of subjectivity is an important part of understanding education.

The dangers of educational research

This, however, does not lead us inevitably towards the conclusion that all qualitative data is equally valuable, just as we must avoid the mistake that quantifiable data is the only important prize to obtain. The field of education has been subject throughout the whole of its existence to dubious practices and assuredly bad science. To be fair, no field of science is immune to these syndromes, and many sins are committed in the name of commercial or reputational gain that result in tortured science, prejudiced analysis, ridiculously enthusiastic conclusions, and at times plain deceit and invention.

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But at least in the natural sciences, such devices can be, to some extent, verified or disproved. In the social sciences, and in education, it is possible to find research that makes claims of efficacy that are unsupported in any way that can be proven or not. For example, it is frequently claimed by many practitioners, that role play is a powerful tool for improving the learning experience of students; or if not role play, substitute discovery learning, or using thinking hats, or multiple intelligence theory. The difficulty arises when we attempt to establish if the interventions had the effects claimed. And we find that qualitative data proves to be a mercurial subject. In my own investigation to find a solid evidence base to support many of the claims of the IT-adoption communities, for example, I found a good deal of testimonials and enthusiastic case studies from participants based on, for example, satisfaction surveys and feedback forms, but very little hard evidence of impact.

Of course, the feelings of the participants are not insignificant indicators of impact. And as far as evidence goes, it is incontestable that a great deal of developing what I regard as expertise in teaching is generated by reflective experience – the craft and art of teaching, one might say – which is problematic in two ways. First of all, it is vulnerable to the prejudices and assumptions of the teacher, who may be willing their interventions to have the impact they desire, and secondly it provides very little impetus for the intervention to be adopted by anyone else. If I want to convince a friend to buy a car, and I know he likes fast cars, I can refer to the power of the engine and the ceiling on the speedometer. But if I recommend a restaurant because 'I had the best time there' then *caveat emptor*.

This is especially important in the field of education because of two things:

- **Financial cost:** Everything that happens in a school costs money. Some interventions, for example iPad adoption, can be enormously expensive. But the evidence base for their efficacy simply doesn't exist yet. Which isn't to say they aren't a tremendous boon to learning (perhaps they are) but the data we have does not support this conclusion yet. And as interventions go, they aren't inexpensive.
- **Opportunity cost:** Everything done in a school is done within the context of finite time, attention and administration. Therefore everything done in a school that has no effect detracts from interventions that could have an impact. When it comes to a commodity as precious as minutes of a child's life that cannot be regained, especially a poor child's life, for whom education might be the last vehicle of social mobility available, this is a grave responsibility.

We can see that no form of evidence is intrinsically bad or good – it merely carries within itself intrinsic strengths and weaknesses, and as long as these are borne in mind, by itself no data – if it is honestly harvested – can be dangerous. Quantitative data is powerfully comparable, and lends itself to statistical analysis. However, it is wise to remember that statistical analysis is no layman's field, and requires training in its language to avoid making non-intuitive errors. Similarly, qualitative analysis (again, gathered with integrity) can possess reservoirs of meaning and value, but must always be understood as contextual, subjective and often profoundly relativistic. Sometimes one form of evidence is powerful in understanding a given subject; sometimes another. A healthy awareness of these limitations and powers is essential to appreciating the limits and utility of any evidence we encounter. Randomised controlled trials (RCTs), for example, have become a popular way of assessing the overall efficacy of many interventions. The strength of such a method is that it provides an often useful, global and holistic view of what direction enormous amounts of data might be pointing in. The weakness is that it frequently steamrollers over the more subtle,granular aspects of the data.

We can see that no form of evidence is intrinsically bad or good – it merely carries within itself intrinsic strengths and weaknesses, and as long as these are borne in mind, by itself no data – if it is honestly harvested – can be dangerous

It is important for Research Leads to be aware of both aspects of what constitutes evidence and research. There is, in my experience, a great deal of very poor research available for consumption. There is also a good deal of research that is simply thinly-veiled advocacy or indeed straightforward propaganda. There is even research which in no way resembles an attempt at the sober exploration of what actually happens, or works, in a classroom, but simply expounds what the writer thinks would be the ideal case, or would like to be the case. I recommend to all such Research Leads that they avoid all such research, or engage with it only to discern its fallacious properties, for the better future recognition and avoidance of such errors.

Alex Quigley, Director of Learning and Research at Huntington School in York, says:

I am Research Lead at my school but I am also Project Leader of RISE (Research-leads Improving Students' Education) – an Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) funded Randomised Controlled Trial to ascertain if having a Research Lead in a school can make a discernible difference to student outcomes.

My role combines being a Deputy Headteacher and a Director of Learning and Research. It is crucial that our judgements, as a senior leadership, are evidence-informed wherever possible. I help filter high quality research evidence into our CPD model. This encompasses fortnightly training, INSET days and regular updates to our school Huntington Learning Hub website. My chief function is to be informed about a breadth of research evidence about pedagogy and school interventions but I also support the process of evaluating the impact of our decision making. As Research Lead I also help establish links between higher education institutions, such as York University, and our school so that we can have high quality expertise supporting our CPD processes.

As Project Lead of RISE, I train Research Leads in 20 secondary schools from around the country, in conjunction with Durham University. This involves: supporting other Research Leads to ask effective questions for school improvement; finding and appraising good evidence; and embedding evidence-informed practice into their schools. A significant part of the RISE project is about learning how research evidence can be filtered into the eco-system of a school and how usable knowledge and resources that teachers can engage with and apply to their practice can be created. I am modelling and trialling these ideas in my own school.

The role of Research Lead is a nascent one, but already we are forging an informal network across the country and with our teaching school alliance.

Being a Research Lead has helped me to connect to a network of expertise that has challenged my thinking and has considerably deepened my knowledge base. I think being research-informed could actually see teachers and school leaders exercise an autonomy that is fundamental to a self-improving school system.

Hannah Fahey, Vice Principal (Sixth Form) at St Mark's Church of England Academy in Mitcham, says:

The Research Lead role is an additional duty on top of my day job and one that I do because of my passion for research. It's a role that has grown within the school over the last four years. At that time – a very challenging time for our school as it happens – research engagement was a really positive way to drive school improvement and give teachers a new professional development opportunity. The school since then has improved significantly and although we can't directly link the ongoing research activity here to the improvements, there seems to be a connection and the two have certainly happened in parallel.

I've been involved since the start and over the years I have taken an increasingly central role in leading research work in the school. Each year staff and pupils are encouraged to undertake a small research project linked to an area of school need. We run this as an annual rolling programme that starts with a launch and concludes with a celebration. I provide the daily support for those doing projects and broker support from the Education Development Trust Research Team as we are a Education Development Trust academy. I hold an initial launch where staff hear about the powerful learning journeys their colleagues have been on through research, share information about appropriate methods of data collection and think about research questions. The focus of our projects is always students and their learning.

Throughout the year, I support staff and students who are doing research by helping them access relevant literature and by holding regular drop-in sessions through which they are able to complete their research effectively. Research has allowed our staff to become masters of their own professional development.


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Making the role work: what does the Lead need, to flourish?

There are several factors that stand out when it comes to making the role of Research Lead as effective as possible. In conversations with many of the Research Leads already established, patterns repeat that suggest ways in which the role can be supported effectively. Some of these are common to any effective role; some have a more boutique relationship with the Research Lead role.

Authentic buy-in from senior leadership

This is unquestionably a necessary condition. The Research Lead need not occupy a position of senior responsibility, but the role must borrow the authority of someone in that position. This is necessary because without the support of decision makers, the Research Lead is relegated from change agent to archivist and commentator, at best. Of course, where the Research Lead is simultaneously in a leadership role, this conflict evaporates.

Protected time

It is undoubtedly true that ambitious and energetic professionals either make time for projects that matter, or find it. And staff who are prepared, as Research Leads often are, to go an extra mile, working around the clock or when others are at rest, often find that commitment and diligence pay dividends. However, this is no way to plan for success. Committing and ring-fencing time for the Research Lead's project is a far more effective way to guarantee efficacy. Time, of course, is somewhat of a precious commodity in institutional education. Those who commission Research Leads (and more broadly any role) must consider how committed they themselves are to the success of the role and the project. Creating a position and then allowing no discrete time for its execution, suggests that the role has been created to satisfy a cosmetic need rather than a substantial one.

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Status and profile

Buy-in from leaders is one thing; commitment from staff is another. Given that leading in research requires the willing (or at least the encouraged) participation of autonomous professionals, it is hard to emphasise enough how much the Lead must act as an advocate, sponsor and promoter of the concept. The school must support this aspect by allowing it a 'place at the table' of everyday school processes and activities; as an item on department agendas; as a portion of staff training strategies; as an object of timetabled discussion at senior staff meetings. In addition, the Lead must be prepared to convince and argue the case for engaging with research. Many staff members will hardly see the point of the project; or fail to see anything in it for them. Hearts and minds must be won, not stolen.

The right choice of Lead

This is not a role for the unenthusiastic, or those seeking to gain promotional capital within the organisation. The Lead must be enthusiastic about the potential of the project; must be well-informed about contemporary debates in educational research; must have a sober appreciation of the limits and dangers as well as the opportunities that research affords; must be prepared to discuss, debate and convince, and where necessary, give ground to the needs and concerns of participants. They must be aware, or prepared to become so, of basic theory in scientific methods, research methods, debates about what constitutes evidence, and case studies of successful and unsuccessful initiatives. They must be critical of their own ambitions and biases, as much as advocates and cheerleaders for good practice. They must appreciate that 'what works' may be influenced as much by context as by the agents involved, and that one strategy may not demonstrate or map efficacy from one environment to another. This is not a role for the half-hearted or the opportunistic. This is a professional role that requires professional capacities and commitments. Schools may want to consider offering assistance to Research Leads to achieve the training and CPD targets that will enable them to perform efficiently. Some schools observed had entered their Research Leads for Masters courses in research methodology, for example. Many of them had committed their leads to attendance at researchED events or courses, as a vehicle to accessing further engagement with the broader Research Lead community.

This is a professional role that requires professional capacities and commitments

Caroline Creaby, Assistant Headteacher at Sandringham School, says:

My role as 'Research Lead' in my school is self-appointed and has developed from my focus on developing teacher learning opportunities in school as well as leading on Research and Development for my school's teaching school alliance.

Over the last two years, I have been engaged in three main activities in school to support a more research-informed approach:

The first activity has centred on trying to incorporate evidence into existing structures in school, particularly CPD. For example, all our in-house CPD opportunities now have associated literature that teachers or CPD leaders can use to support their learning. Whole school teaching and learning priorities such as feedback are informed by research evidence.

The second activity has focused on creating additional opportunities for staff to connect with the wider education community and develop expertise themselves. This has included the development of our own in-house think tank in which we hear from a range of experts and practitioners from other schools and universities. We also support teachers to develop their practice through specific funded opportunities including in-house projects, certificated programmes, Masters and Doctorate qualifications.

Finally, an activity underpinning both these areas is a commitment to supporting teacher reflection. This has included whole staff activities in which teachers are supported to reflect upon the impact of new approaches and weigh up the impact on their own planning and preparation time. Teachers are also supported to write about their practice, be it in a tweet, a blog post or an article for our school journal.

I think that Research Leads have two main purposes: to support a more informed approach to decision making in schools to enhance the learning opportunities available for students; and to develop rich professional learning opportunities for teachers and staff who work in schools.

Networks have been really important to me as a Research Lead. It has been valuable to become involved in the researchED community and through an established network of schools through HertsCam, an education charity which seeks to support teachers to lead change in schools.

The work that we have been doing has led to two interesting opportunities: one funded by the DfE to evaluate the impact of supporting teachers to become more evidence-informed and another project with the EEF, CEBE and the University of York to connect schools and education academics.

Carl Hendrick, Head of Learning and Research at Wellington College, says:

The role is a paid position and was advertised internally. I was appointed to the role in June 2014.

The main job is to manage several projects including everything from a whole school project in partnership with Harvard to collaborative projects with partner schools. This takes up most of the time but increasingly I am finding that reading actual research is vital.

The function/purpose is firstly to act as a gatekeeper, as a buffer against the kind of bad research that has plagued schools for so long. Secondly, to mobilise and disseminate good research that is relevant to particular whole school focuses and identified areas of improvement. Thirdly, it is to open up a particular kind of space where teachers can be not only deeply reflective about their practice but more importantly, deeply informed.

I manage a team of internally appointed research fellows who meet once a fortnight to discuss key literature and co-design surveys. I also attend strategic meetings to offer an evidence-based perspective and meet with staff individually to help facilitate research. I also set up a student research council who meet every two weeks and who read the same literature that staff read and help co-design research tools. These two teams are not only advisory in nature but also ambassadorial.

I work with several schools in our teaching school alliance on common problems we want to explore and have successfully bid on funding from different bodies to do so.

The main benefit has been to inform whole school policy. When the school approached me with the issue of 'independent learning', I was able to link that to particular areas of established research such as metacognition and Growth Mindsets and begin a collaborative project of school improvement that is rooted in methodologically robust inquiry as opposed to the traditional top-down, superficial PD approach that has had such little effect.

In the short term I want to train a core group of people in research methodology and critical, informed approaches to school improvement. In the long term I would like to engender an approach to teaching and learning that is informed, elegant and has measurable impact of student outcomes.

Conclusions

The role of Research Lead is an exciting and timely development in the evolution of school leadership and the teaching profession more generally. With care, effort and considerable persistence, it has the potential to bear fruits at all levels of the school process: as an agent of challenge for leadership; as an agent of professional development for all members of staff, returning to them the capacity to discover for themselves what works in the classroom; and ultimately for the children themselves, who should benefit from the best of what has been learned already about education and the human mind.

Here are some final points of advice to any school leader (or other interested party) considering embarking on the appointment of a Research Lead, or who has already done so. These points are based on interviews with over 50 existent Research Leads, and the verbal advice from many more:

- Commit time and resources to the project.
- Appoint the right member of staff; often the candidate will be the obvious choice, despite position or seniority. Appointees should possess the character and skill set necessary for the role; everything else can be taught.
- Decide what impact you need them to have.
- Decide what level of autonomy they will need.
- Work out a job specification; if necessary, involve the Research Lead in the process of designing a tailor-made role for the school.
- Reach out with vigour to other institutions that are engaged in research.
- Encourage partnerships with research-based institutions such as universities and teacher training colleges.
- Avoid action research by itself as a sole strategy in-school, in order to avoid the perils of cognitive bias and a reductionist approach to what rigorous research entails; instead, invest in relationships with established research institutions, using action research as a reflective tool driving professional development.

With care, effort and considerable persistence, it [the role of Research Lead] has the potential to bear fruits at all levels of the school process

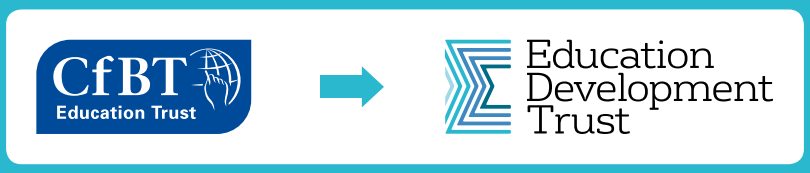
- Encourage dialogue between the Research Lead and other in-school agents.
- Decide in advance what will be done, if anything, with the findings of the Research Lead, as a way of establishing what impact will be seen in the school.
- Design checkpoints to assess the direction of the Research Lead project, and any milestones or markers of impact. Note that impact may not be observed in easily measured packets, but instead can be evaluated, like much educational research, qualitatively.

Of course, the common response to those who want to establish a Research Lead is: 'Can we afford this?' This is no easily dismissed question: school budgets have long been under pressure and look set to remain that way for some years to come. But looking at it from the terms of opportunity cost (and considering that the effective use of research to augment school decisions, interventions and strategies should result in savings for the prudent school) the question becomes: can any school afford not to?

Education Development Trust... we've changed from CfBT

We changed our name from CfBT Education Trust in January 2016. Our aim is to transform lives by improving education around the world and to help achieve this, we work in different ways in many locations.

CfBT was established nearly 50 years ago; since then our work has naturally diversified and intensified and so today, the name CfBT (which used to stand for Centre for British Teachers) is not representative of who we are or what we do. We believe that our new company name, Education Development Trust – while it is a signature, not an autobiography – better represents both what we do and, as a not for profit organisation strongly guided by our core values, the outcomes we want for young people around the world.



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