

Schools and educational research



# The research engaged school

**FLARE** Forum for Learning and Research Enquiry

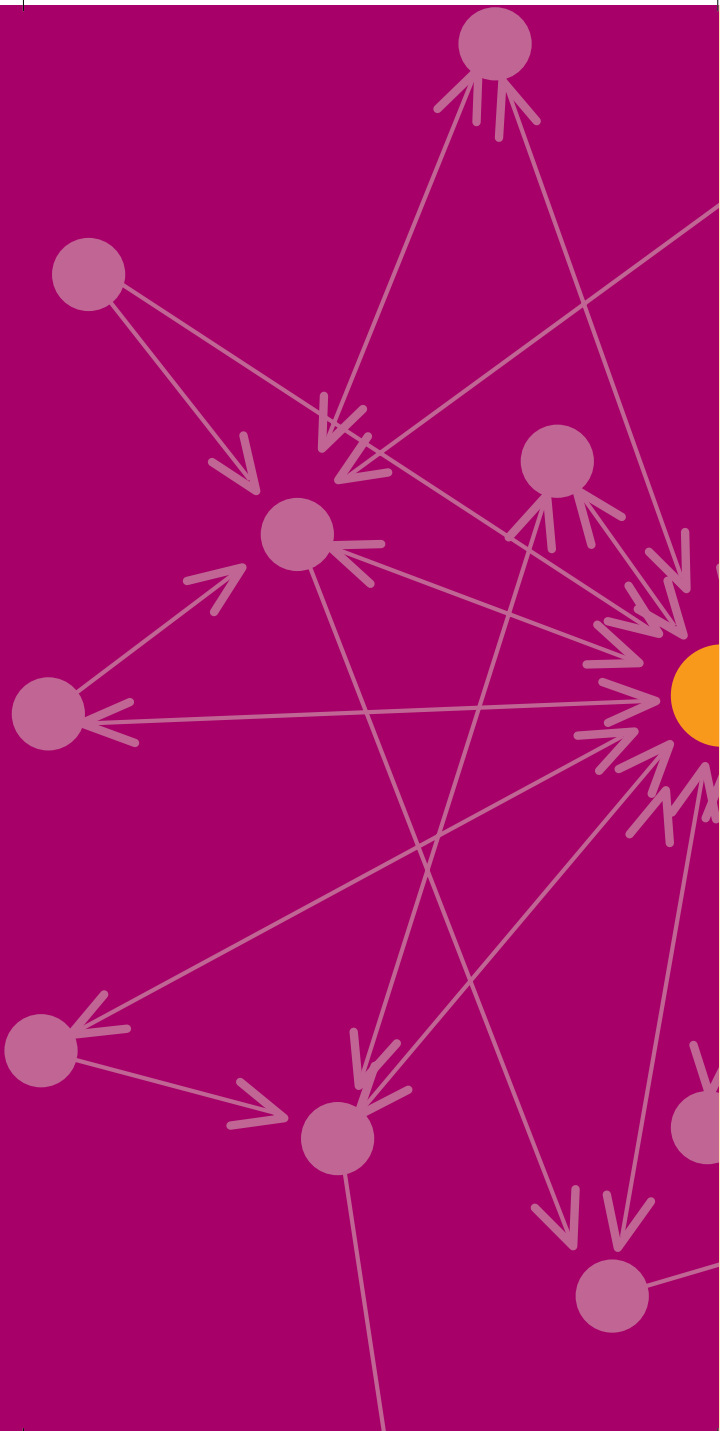


Essex County Council

This is the first in a series of occasional papers published by the Essex Forum for Learning and Research Enquiry (FLARE). This publication will sit alongside the *Mapping of research in schools* exercise being carried out by the Forum, and the Forum's pamphlet on *Educational enquiry and research in Essex*.

This paper considers what might be the features of a school that is engaged in research. It is intended to open up debate with colleagues in Essex schools and invite response. We hope that this paper will help schools recognise and acknowledge enquiry and research activity already taking place as well as challenge and identify areas for further work and development. Above all we hope that it will stimulate thought and promote research development.

**Graham Handscomb**  
**John MacBeath**  
*(on behalf of FLARE)*



## PUTTING RESEARCH TO WORK

### *Why research?*

Why should schools be interested in conducting research? In a climate in which teachers are working harder and longer hours and in which schools find themselves thinly stretched, what time and motivation is left for carrying out research? What's in it for schools?

The answer is to be found in schools and classrooms where teachers, singly or collaboratively, have engaged in some form of research and found it to be a highly satisfying and energising professional activity. For teachers who have engaged in researching their own schools and classrooms it has not only brought new insights, new levels of understanding and new challenges, but enhanced the quality of learning and teaching at the same time.

The term 'research' can have unfortunate connotations - of white coated boffins in laboratories, of ivory tower academics, dusty tomes, unread impenetrable articles in esoteric journals. The experience of teachers working in research engaged schools is in sharp contrast to this stereotype. In fact, research covers a wide gamut of activities and includes what teachers routinely expect of their primary and secondary pupils.

Teachers encourage their pupils to engage in inquiry, systematically, and with a concern for evidence. These same principles apply to teachers themselves. It is about turning intuitive and spontaneous judgements into more systematic investigations. The starting point is with the everyday but critical questions which teachers ask themselves; why do children behave the way they do? why do some children seem unable to learn? why is my teaching sometimes effective and at other times not? what would make for a happier, more productive classroom?

Seeking answers to these questions has always concerned teachers but never before has it become so critical to a school's survival, growth and success. The Third Millennium school is required to be self-evaluating, open to scrutiny, evidence-based, data rich. But, as many commentators have suggested schools are, at the same time, often 'information poor'. This is, in part, because teachers feel no ownership of the data they are expected to use, nor is it necessarily data that they value. It is, nonetheless, high stakes, so teachers find themselves busy in 'implementation' rather than in inquiry, lacking in self-confidence to convert what they know or believe into a form that provides robust counter evidence, that speaks with conviction from teachers' own context and experiences.

### *A school engaged in research*

The research engaged school is one in which teachers believe it is in their interest, and in the interest of their pupils, to be critical of received wisdom, to be sceptical of easy answers, to have a desire for evidence and to foster 'aggressive curiosity'. It recognises that at every level there is a research of some kind already ongoing, and finds ways of supporting that endeavour and making it more rigorous, transparent and of value not only to the school itself but to a wider constituency. In the research engaged school, teachers have confidence in the process and enjoy mutual support in exploring their thinking, scrutinising their practice and taking good ideas further. Self-evaluation is then not an extra or an imposition, not undertaken to satisfy some external demand but integral to the day-to-day practice of school and classroom.

Building on what we know about teachers as researchers and professional enquirers the Forum is exploring the features that might be typically found in a school that is 'research engaged'. Our thinking is that in such a school, research and enquiry is integral to its approach to teaching and learning. It is built into the school's culture which fosters groups within and beyond the schools collaborating on research and enquiry activity. Above all we feel that what distinguishes a research engaged school is that research and enquiry is at the heart of

the school, its outlook, systems, and activity.

So, in giving some thought to this aim, we hope this paper will help schools recognise research and enquiry that is currently taking place and to provide a platform for further development. The intention is to provide a means by which schools can acknowledge work already being done, to instil teacher confidence in enquiry and to provide a creative support framework for further research and enquiry.

### **FEATURES OF A RESEARCH ENGAGED SCHOOL**

What then are the characteristics of the research engaged school? To answer this question the Forum has taken evidence from teachers who are currently engaged in research activity. Drawing on these accounts, together with evidence from national initiatives, a range of features of the research engaged school have been identified. These features have been grouped under the following broad headings.

1. The research engaged school has a 'research rich' pedagogy.
2. The research engaged school has a research orientation.
3. The research engaged school promotes research communities.
4. The research engaged school puts research at the heart of school policy and practice.

## 1. The research engaged school has a 'research rich' pedagogy

This means that teaching and learning is research-based. Practice is informed not only by common sense but good sense, and by the surprise that research can offer to challenge established ways of doing things. So:

- there is a focus on learning throughout the school;
- research is driven by teaching and learning needs;
- pupils use and apply research;
- staff, together with their pupils understand and apply research;
- risk taking is welcomed and encouraged;
- there is an impact on pupil learning;
- unexpected and unwelcome outcomes are allowed and valued.

**This is underpinned by a rationale for investigating issues** and a recognition of its diverse sources and procedures. Issues to be investigated may be identified by different individuals or groups within the school and through a range of different avenues. Turning these into systematic inquiry is realised by having tools of enquiry at the disposal of teachers, pupils, management and others who wish to pursue the issues.

## Implications for my school

You may want to think about these three issues in relation to your own school:

### What part in the process do the following play?

- Children
- Individual teachers
- Managers
- Support staff
- Others in the community
- Departments/teams
- Governors
- Parents
- Others in the Community

### How are the issues identified?

Issues may be identified in a number of ways, such as:

- routine review processes;
- surveys of customer satisfaction e.g. students, parent governors;
- research findings and methodologies;
- examples and case studies from other schools;
- web sites;
- individual study and accreditation e.g. Certificate of Further Professional Study, MA.

### How are they investigated?

Investigation may be pursued through procedures such as:

- peer observation;
- pupil or teacher logs;
- surveys and questionnaires;
- observation and shadowing;
- interviews;
- experimentation and action research.

## 2. The research engaged school has a research orientation

The research engaged school is distinguished by a culture which **values and promotes research**. In such a school:

- there is a shared recognition of the value of research;
- research activity is 'owned' and not imposed;
- the benefits of research are widely understood and frequently modelled;
- there is an improvement focus;
- the culture is one of 'learning how to learn';
- classroom practice is characterised by continuous evaluation;
- teaching and learning is evidence-based;
- staff are both ready and confident to engage in and with research;
- research engagement is built into school processes and planning;
- research infuses continuing professional development.

### 6 The research engaged school

Within this **culture of reflection and enquiry** certain things take place.

- Through systematic review there is clarity in identification of issues. Data is gathered, evidence scrutinised, alternative views sought, summaries made, action taken and reviewed again in a second (or double) loop. This is often described as a school improvement cycle and is seen as a continuous process rather than an event.
- The process may be informed by published research studies which help to give a further critical focus on the issues.
- The nature of review may be small scale, or at whole school level. Or through wider networks and consortia - at LEA level or beyond. At whatever level it reflects and models some common principles of enquiry.
- The review process pulls together elements of research practice, makes connections, and gives direction and momentum.

Finally a school which has a research orientation typically has a culture which promotes enquiry, challenge and enthusiasm.

### *Implications for my school*

#### **To what extent does your school have a culture which values and promotes research?**

1. Using the features listed in the first set of bullet points above give examples of evidence that would indicate this.
2. What steps would your school need to take to develop even further a culture that values and promotes research?

#### **To what extent does your school foster a culture of reflection and enquiry?**

1. What evidence is there from:
  - the way in which children engage in learning?
  - the way in which teachers reflect upon and critique their practice?
  - the professional learning of school staff?
  - the development and review activity of the school?
2. What steps would your school need to take to develop even further a culture that promotes reflection and enquiry?

### **3. The research engaged school promotes research communities**

The research engaged school may be seen as a community of enquiry; that is, one in which there is a shared purpose, a commonality of approach and a recognition of the 'treasure within' - the knowledge, expertise and values that staff and pupils bring with them.

- Research engagement runs throughout the whole school.
- There is a belief in the potential of all staff to make a valid contribution.
- Ways are found of exploiting and enriching professional expertise.
- People in different roles and with different backgrounds all play a part.
- The widespread nature of activity produces a critical mass of research activity.
- There is a full commitment to the engagement of pupils with research.
- There is a planned and focused use of higher education.



### *Fostering research partnerships*

An important feature of this community of enquiry is the fostering of research partnerships. Research partnerships may be represented as a series of inter-relating layers in a pyramid of relationships. Each layer is inter-connected with the next. Each follows a set of principles which are reflected at the next level. At the apex is the classroom.



It has both an inward and an outward looking dimension. Looking inward may address questions such as the following:

- what conditions are most likely to promote or inhibit learning?
- what is common and unique to learners?
- what can teachers do to maximise learning for everyone?

In addressing these questions partnerships may involve:

- teachers in the same or different secondary department;
- other teachers in the same school;
- teachers and members of senior management;
- teachers in other schools;
- local authority personnel;
- pupils and teachers.

All are potential partners in exploring classroom learning. All are required to be self-evaluating and need tools to help achieve this. This is one crucial entry point for research.

The outward looking dimension is to the community of which it is a part. The classroom considers how it can learn from others and how others can learn from it. So at the second layer is the school, an amalgam of classrooms but also more than that, a community of learners, all pursuing learning in different ways. Pupils, teachers, and administrators provide a rich mix of people living and working together, with some common and some discrete goals but all standing to benefit from opportunities for a variety of research partnerships.

Partnerships within the school may cross all boundaries of age and status.

The third, or local layer, consists of partnerships between schools within an LEA, area or locality. Partnerships between teacher to teacher, leader to leader, pupils to pupils, help extend the boundaries of the school and enrich self-evaluation and research.

At the fourth layer partnerships go beyond authority and community boundaries, developing partnerships at national level, both virtually and face to face. Possibilities for collaborative research are made possible by ever more sophisticated e-links. These may also be pupil to pupil, class to class, teachers to teachers or collaborative leadership investigations at school and/or authority level.

The fifth layer is the international layer. With ICT as a resource it becomes increasingly possible for individuals, groups, schools and authorities to build research partnerships. With encouragement from Government funding, bodies like the British Council, other forms of sponsorship and lower airfares, exchanges, conferences and workshops across national boundaries also become a reality.

### *Implications for my school*

With the five-layer 'Egyptian Pyramid' in mind you might like to consider what partnerships or groups are currently active in research and inquiry at:

- classroom level?
- school level?
- local level?
- national level?
- international level?

What links are there to connect these different levels? What would you like to do to enhance or extend partnerships?

In what way might FLARE help you to achieve that goal?



#### 4. The research engaged school has research at the heart of policy and practice

**Research is task orientated.** It has an end in mind and is built into development planning and improvement at every level. Therefore:

- research engagement is built into School Improvement Planning;
- activities are clearly planned, timed and implemented;
- there is a clarity of tasks and roles;
- there is a diversity of projects, well-tracked and well managed;
- people are equipped with a 'research tool-bag';
- advice is given for shaping tasks and projects;
- attention is given to robust research approaches and methods.

**Research is outcome focused.** It begins with an end in mind and a commitment to scrutiny and fitness for purpose. This would involve:

- findings which are regularly fed back in a variety of forms;
- 'small steps for real gains';
- research engagement linked to specific school improvement gains;
- specific strategies in place to monitor and measure outcomes;

- investigation and evaluation undertakings being fit for purpose;
- criteria and descriptors enabling research to be evaluated.

**Research practice is communicated and disseminated** with a recognition that knowledge and understanding do not simply transplant from one context to another but require a fertile ground and appropriate nurture. This would entail:

- recognition being given to the issues involved in knowledge transfer and application;
- the three elements of knowledge production, knowledge dissemination, and knowledge use being systematically addressed (NERF, 2001);
- the research methodology, as well as the outcomes being open to public scrutiny;
- recognition that research is 'built in, not bolt on';
- classroom level research models ways in which outcomes are reported;
- research moves from teacher to teacher rather than blanket and token communication;
- practitioners are involved wherever possible in the commissioning, planning and communication of research;
- communication takes place on a variety of fronts and at different levels.

### Implications for my school

Is research at the heart of your school's business?

Rate your school on the following. Which statement most represents your school?

This quick 'health check' can help the school make an initial judgement about the relationship of research and the key business of the school. Following this exercise the school can then set about developing strategies for increasing and maintaining research engagement.

#### Are significant decisions informed by research, i.e. systematic enquiry made public?

100%

**Yes, this is built into our organisational approach and systems.**

75%

**Specific key decisions are founded on research.**

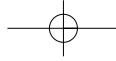
50%

**Occasional projects and developments are informed by research.**

25%

**Decisions are seldom informed by research.**

*Tick relevant box*



**Do people have access to tools that help them to challenge their practice?**

100%

**Yes, the development of research and enquiry skills is built into the school's professional development planning and practice.**

75%

**Major projects are supported by the development of research and enquiry skills.**

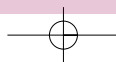
50%

**Some individuals have taken an interest in using research and enquiry to challenge and improve their practice.**

25%

**There is little evidence of people having access to opportunities to develop research and enquiry skills apart from isolated cases.**

*Tick relevant box*



Are the outcomes of our research effectively communicated both within the school and beyond?

100%

**Yes, systematic arrangements have been made to ensure transmission and application of research outcomes in classroom settings within the school, and teacher to teacher dissemination beyond the school.**

75%

**Presentations of research outcomes are regularly given at e.g. staff meetings with some opportunity for demonstrations and application within classrooms; use is made of any opportunities to present findings to others, such as consortium partner schools.**

50%

**Presentations of research findings are occasionally given at e.g. staff meetings when business allows; occasional research newlines and reports are shared with other schools.**

25%

**Presentations of research outcomes are infrequently communicated within the school and are dependent on the enthusiasm and influence of individuals; outcomes are shared with other schools only where there are specific personal contacts.**

*Tick relevant box*

**Do others have access to ways in which we conducted research in order to make their own judgements?**

100%

**Yes, all communication of research activity and development includes full details of the context of the research and the way in which it was conducted so that others can make fully informed judgements about reliability, validity and relevance to their own situation.**

75%

**Research accounts give some details about context and how the research was carried out to help others make reasonably informed judgements about reliability, validity and relevance to their own situation, or to formulate further questions which might be asked.**

50%

**Generally sketched details are given of context and how the research was carried out which give a partial picture but which restrict others' ability to make judgements about reliability, validity and relevance to their own situation.**

25%

**Outcome findings are reported with little detail of context or the way research was conducted, giving others very little understanding of how valid, reliable and relevant the research might be to their own situation, and giving little help as to what further questions might be asked.**

*Tick relevant box*

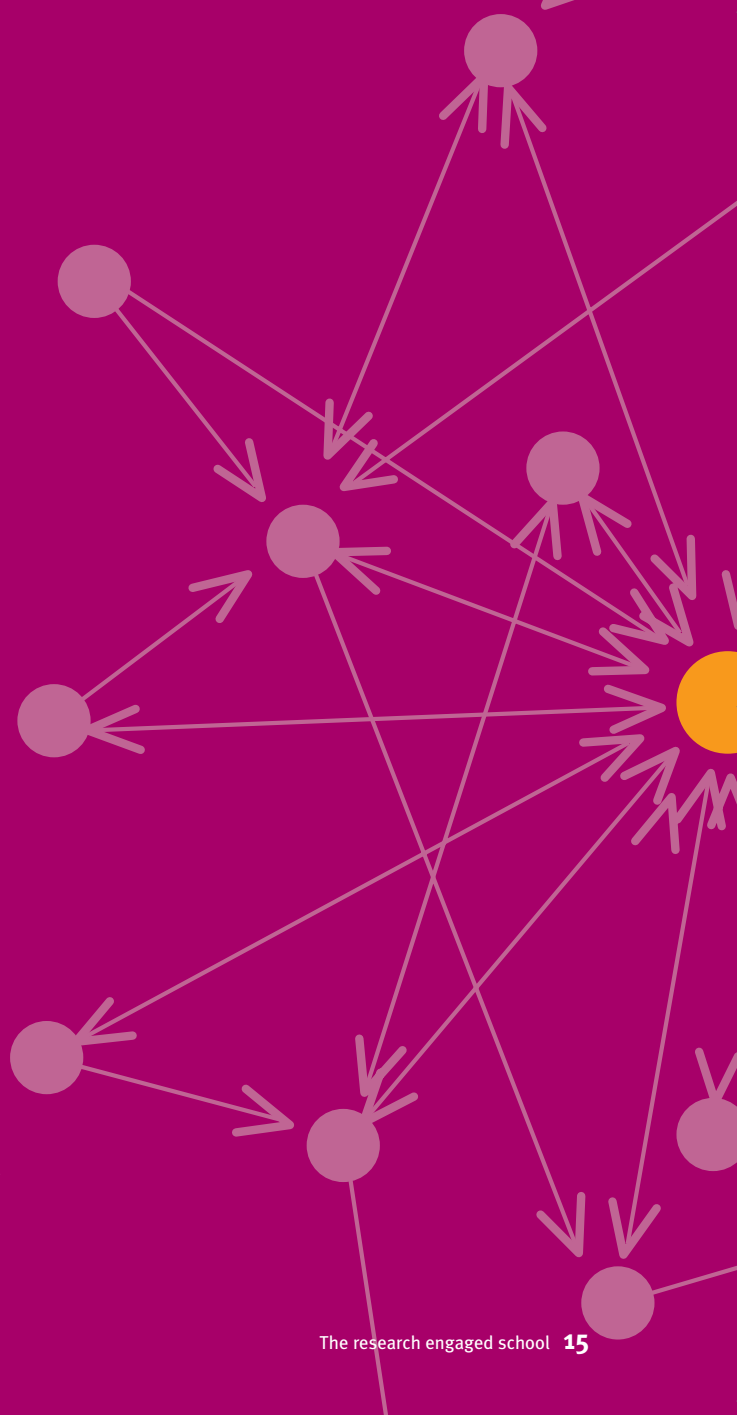
## THE DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT

In exploring these ingredients of a research engaged school we hope this paper will help schools pose questions about the place of research within their organisation and teaching and learning culture. We are conscious that there will be degrees of school involvement in research and enquiry, and that this is a developmental process. In taking evidence from school and higher education 'witnesses' FLARE is aware that there is a possible continuum of school engagement with, and in, research which may be characterised as "emergent, established, and established-embedded" (Ebbutt, 2002) or "emerging, established, and advanced" (Macbeath, 2003 forthcoming). FLARE is keen to hear from Essex schools that are engaged in research in order to help further model the stages in this developmental journey.

### References:

Ebbutt, D. (2002) 'The Development of a Research Culture in Secondary Schools' *Educational Action Research* Vol.10, No.1

National Educational Research Forum (2002) *The Impact of Educational Research in Policy and Practice*. NERF sub group report. Chairman: David Hargreaves.



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