School research engagement: whose agenda? Mapping the landscape for school leaders

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the connections between the emerging concept of the ‘research-engaged school’ and the continuing trend in the UK towards greater school autonomy and declining capacity at school district level. The paper argues for schools to take more conscious control of the direction, nature and purpose of their research engagement. The sources and processes of support for school research engagement are reviewed from that standpoint. The paper suggests surfacing the inevitably ‘positioned’ nature of school research agendas, of individual practitioner researchers, of some research fields, and of some of the work of agencies promoting research utilisation, so that school leaders can make more conscious choices about the ‘positions’ they support.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the connections between the emerging concept of the 'research-engaged school' and the continuing trend in the UK towards greater school autonomy and declining capacity at school district level. The paper argues for schools to take more conscious control of the direction, nature and purpose of their research engagement. The sources and processes of support for school research engagement are reviewed from that standpoint.

WHAT IS A RESEARCH-ENGAGED SCHOOL?

A research engaged school has the following three characteristics.

- It undertakes its own research through a significant incidence of good quality internal practitioner research
- It accesses research findings from external sources and takes these into account in its work, and
- It is willing to be the subject of research undertaken by others.

In addition to these three characteristics it has three further attributes: first, that these characteristics are sustained through the impetus of the school itself, rather than because the school is being 'done to' by external agencies; secondly that these characteristics have significant bearing on the professional culture of the school; and thirdly, that the school has an outward-looking professional orientation. This definition extends and builds upon the pioneering works of Handscomb and MacBeath (2003), and Sharp, Eames, Sanders and Tomlinson (2006).
RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT: WHOSE AGENDA?

In the field of school research engagement, questions of motives and purposes may be identified at all levels, including school systems, institutions, sections or departments within institutions, and at the individual level. At the level of whole systems, the interface between educational research and practice has been the subject of national developments and debates, including initiatives by government to increase the relevance of educational research and its impact on practice. That means, of course, ‘relevance’ to issues that government and its agencies have selected as important; ‘impact on practice’ means forms of impact that will endorse and implement, or at least be not repugnant to, prevailing political perspectives on school and classroom operational practices. Also at the system level are differences of viewpoint: between, for example, top-down and bottom-up interpretations of ‘evidence-based practice’, and their associated inclinations towards either ‘engineering’ or ‘enlightenment’ understandings of the relationship between research and practice.

At the institutional level, a range of motives lead some practitioners to become research engaged, and some school leaders to encourage research engagement. I have previously reported (see, for example, Wilkins 2002, 2009) case studies of headteacher-initiated school research engagement led in part at least by the motives of problem solving; promoting professional development; ‘living’ and exemplifying an educational philosophy; and supporting teacher-led reform. Additionally, where school leaders act as supporters of research engagement, a range of organisational management aims can be secondary motivators in that process. At the level of the individual deciding to become research engaged, a wide range of motives can be found, such as career development, or finding a topic intrinsically interesting. Research engagement often affects the micropolitical manoeuvrings of individuals and groups within schools as organisations.

The factors of motives and purposes can be taken further by including two additional considerations. The first concerns the positioned nature of the research process itself. Many of the fields of educational research with which school based practitioners may become engaged are themselves far from objective. These fields include lines of enquiry which have their positioned agendas and positioned genres. Individuals becoming engaged with research will generally, given free and informed choice, gravitate towards topics, lines of enquiry and literatures which resonate with their normative values, political beliefs and view of the world. The second focus is the more workaday connection between school research engagement as an activity, and perceived priorities for school development and improvement. Except for those who subscribe to very technicist and managerial views of the work of schools, those
perceptions also will not be entirely objective, but will reflect the educational philosophies of particular school leaders.

**SURFACING SOME AGENDAS**

**Agendas of school improvement**

The dynamic condition of schools leads on to a consideration of the different points that schools have reached on their journey of development, and how that might affect their approach to research engagement.

When a school is failing, requiring intervention and 'turnaround', the concerns of leadership are short-term. They need to demonstrate to external stakeholders that key issues (usually concerning teaching and learning) are being addressed. Staff are likely to be de-motivated, lacking confidence in their own abilities, highly risk-averse, and fearful of interim managements that may be perceived as wanting to apportion blame. Dialogues are likely to be strictly curtailed, with an emphasis on achieving conformity to the leader’s requirements. These conditions are extremely hostile to the fostering of engagement in practitioner research of the conventional kind. The school leadership may, however, be thirsty for certain kinds of data, including quantitative analysis of attainment, reports of lesson observations, and the views of students. There may also be a desire for any suitably robust information indicating a strength of the school or progress that has been made by the new regime. Insofar as the leadership is applying evidence-based practice, the research evidence (for example on effective interventions) is likely to be accessed in indirect and highly processed forms, such as through the guidance of school improvement agencies.

When a school reaches the stage of fragile recovery, the concerns of leadership will continue to be short term but also increasingly medium term. There will be a need to sustain the trajectory of improvement following the initial acute interventions. Staff are likely to be regaining confidence, but if leaders do not evolve their style to suit the circumstances, the staff may be resentful of the prolongation of top-down managerialism. If the leadership is sympathetic to research engagement, at this stage there may be some support for practitioner research projects as part of a suite of improvement strategies. This is likely to be a controlled process, with areas of investigation focusing on school improvement priorities, and with projects being related to individuals’ performance management objectives. It is to be hoped by this stage that professional dialogues will be more two-way, relaxed and inclusive, but the leadership will be wary of staff pursuing lines of enquiry that might distract their attention from immediate priorities. A school at this stage of development is able to give more attention to published research findings in the fields most closely related to its priorities.
At the stage of stable achievement, a school’s concerns give more attention to the longer term, for example the strategic trajectory of the school’s development and where it plans to position itself in the future. The school is in a position to take a more strategic approach to staff development, perhaps supporting cohorts of staff in undertaking further study including practitioner research projects. The pattern of the school’s external relations, previously dominated by intervention agencies, will have broadened to give greater attention to lateral partnerships. The leadership style will give greater emphasis to capacity building and collegiality, and this will be reflected in the quality of professional dialogue. A school at this stage of development is ideally placed to become research engaged, both through strategic support for practitioner research, and through active engagement with published research findings.

The highest stage of development is when a school has established a strong and secure reputation for excellence, and is offering school system leadership by supporting other schools. The concerns of leadership include maintaining and increasing reputation for excellence: ‘staying at the top of the greasy pole’. The school largely ‘runs itself’, is able to attract and retain excellent staff, and with senior leaders heavily involved in external engagements, is enabling others to gain more leadership responsibility. The school has sufficient reputational capital to be able to pioneer innovations involving risk and which may not offer pay-back in the short term. According to the interests of the school’s leadership, excellence in research engagement may be one of the dimensions of system leadership. Professional dialogues will be sophisticated and extending beyond the school, for example by contributing to significant conferences. Schools at this stage have the capacity to exemplify the highest levels of research engagement, including contributing to the growth of practitioner knowledge through publications, and influencing policy.

**Agendas of social justice and equity**

Many fields of research are closely interrelated with agendas of social and political change. Some conceptual lenses through which research may be undertaken, perhaps most notably Marxist and feminist perspectives, have resulted in the generation of new meta-narratives: new overarching ways of understanding history and what is going on in the world. Research of this kind challenges people to review their basic assumptions: a previously held understanding of ‘the facts of the matter’ is exposed to be merely one chosen interpretation: an interpretation, moreover, than may serve the interests of one group and be detrimental to others. Across a wide range of fields, covering many topics and issues, research is undertaken not just with a view to putting forward new understandings, but also for the purpose of supporting actual processes of change. Generally researchers do what they do because they believe it will help to make the world a better place, whether the aim is improving the
efficiency of a technical process or advancing the interests of a particular group within society. This aim is seen particularly clearly in research in the fields of social justice and equity, but in selecting that perhaps too easy example, it is important to remember that most educational research, whether overtly or not, whether self-consciously or not, is supporting one cause or another.

Morwenna Griffiths, in *Educational research for social justice: getting off the fence* (Griffiths 1998), described a range of positions which could be held on the relationship between facts and values. At one extreme is the view that facts are value free, and that researchers can, therefore, simply research facts without needing to consider values. A middle position is that research will always be biased by value judgements, but the aim of the researcher should be to minimise this effect. At the other end of the spectrum is the view that facts and information are necessarily value-laden, but it is unhelpful to use the term ‘bias’ because this implies the possibility of a neutral view. From this position, it is preferable for the researcher to identify their perspective and to state it openly. This position also acknowledges the human aspect of education and education research, where ‘facts’ are largely interpretations, affected by human agency and self-understanding (Griffiths 1998 p 46). This third position applies widely within practitioner research: the researcher has aims and purposes to which they expect their research to contribute; on that matter they do not falsely seek or claim neutrality.

In the context of debate about feminism within educational research, Michelle Fine noted that some researchers position themselves as participatory activists, researching to ‘unearth, disrupt and transform existing ideological and/or institutional arrangements’ (Fine, 1994, p 17). She identified three stances: ‘ventriloquy’, ‘voices’ and ‘activism’. ‘Ventriloquy’ involves words and ideas that are really the author’s own appearing to come from another source; the subjects of the research tell ‘truths’ for which the researcher does not need to accept responsibility.

The stance of ‘voices’ is slightly different in that it involves the reporting of authentic voices from particular groups, but the choice of the group ensures that the material presented will support a particular ‘cause’.

Griffiths (1998) identified three categories of ‘research for social justice’. The first is research that is focused directly on the justice issue, such as studies where the central topic is, for example, provision for children with special educational needs, or the achievement of ethnic minority pupils. Her second category is research where the central topic is about something other than social justice issues, such as school organisation or teachers’ professional development, but the research is undertaken from a positioned standpoint so that the social justice issues are in fact addressed in the context of a more general study. The third category is research in which the methodologies and epistemologies used are themselves the factors that advance a positioned agenda (Griffiths, 1998, p 26).


**Agendas of globalisation**

Burbules and Torres (2000) questioned the inevitability of globalisation with respect both to its speed and to the differentiated patterns of its impact. It is helpful to distinguish between ‘globalisation’ as a top-down driver of changes, and as a bottom-up outcome of changes. In both cases its effects include mixtures of benefits and disadvantages which will differ between different groups within society. From the top-down perspective, globalisation can be understood as an unstoppable force with its own momentum, to which people at the local level adapt as best they can. From the bottom-up perspective, the trends known as ‘globalisation’ are the cumulative outcome of many decisions made by individuals, corporations and governments. Paraphrasing Popper (1966, p268), this perspective replaces the fatalism and passivity of historicism with the pro-activity of individual and collective responsibility to create the best future we can.

School leaders have to balance three sets of demands that may often be in tension with each other: the demands of governments and national expectations; the obligations of their own professional knowledge, and the needs and aspirations of the local communities they serve. These three sources of demands, and the factors underlying them, offer a key to making sense of ‘globalisation’ as it affects the operating contexts of schools. Global issues and developments are one of the factors shaping national policies and expectations, including what is seen as problematical, and what would ‘count’ as satisfactory ‘solutions’. There are also global influences on professional educational knowledge and practice. Thirdly, the needs and aspirations presented to the school by the community it serves are much affected by the impacts of elements of globalisation, including impacts on the state of the local economy and labour market; on the ethnic, religious and socio-economic profiles of the community, and on its multi-layered patterns of cultural identity and affinity.

The factor of most relevance to this conference theme is that of professional knowledge, and the ways in which globalisation is impacting on the thinking and practice of school leaders and other school practitioners. A combination of easy internet access to information on educational developments around the world; and participation in international conferences and international professional development opportunities has enabled school leaders who choose to do so to identify themselves with professional networks and patterns of thinking that, if not exactly global, are certainly international. At the same time, officially encouraged initiatives have supported international school-to-school links that broaden students’ experiences both through virtual links and actual exchange visits. There is clearly great potential for these international orientations to engender and to be enhanced by aspects of research engagement. Schools engaged in international partnerships
can also consider research findings on effective practices, for example as reported by Edge et al (2009).

PROACTIVE USE OF EXTERNAL SUPPORT

Research engagement by schools usually draws on external support. One of the attributes of the research engaged school is that its research engagement is sustained through the impetus of the school itself, rather than because the school is being ‘done to’ by external agencies. That expression conjures up intensive interventions to address school failure, or heavily prescriptive top-down initiatives, but in addition there may be more subtle influences at work, which, albeit that they generally stem from good intentions, should, nevertheless, be surfaced so that schools can take a considered view in selecting their standpoint and response.

In addition to a range of specialised agencies, the main sources of external support in the UK include local authorities and higher education institutions: bodies with generic functions which devote a small proportion of their energies to supporting research engagement by schools. In the same category has been the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) which, through its research department advocated research engagement (see for example the booklet Using research in your school and your teaching, GTC 2006), and which offered also the more specific support of its Teacher Learning Academy (TLA) initiative. Other sources of external support include organisations with remits for specific aspects of research engagement, such as the EPPI Centre at the Institute of Education, and the National Teachers Research Panel. Many of the forms of support are either locality-specific, or thinly distributed, or depend upon the school either being referred to or stumbling across a website. A national picture of a vibrant ‘industry’ promoting and supporting research engagement by schools does not necessarily translate into an equivalent richness of opportunities at the local level.

This paper’s argument is that the research engaged school should, as far as possible, be in the driving seat of its engagement with research. While there is no particular reason to doubt that the external sources of support have a primary motivation to benefit schools by meeting their needs in this area, it cannot be denied that also in their priorities there are bound to be some secondary considerations: universities need to award degrees, conduct research and generate publications; local authorities need to support school improvement and lead school systems; specialised organisations need to be seen to be engaging with a good number of users of their services. So while it is important to know what support is provided, it is just as important to know what schools want and need.

But what do schools need? This exploration can be approached from first principles by looking at the factors that have to be in place for individuals (in any context) to
engage successfully in a protracted process of significant change. These factors are
generic, but in this context they apply mainly to senior and middle leaders in schools
who want to increase the extent to which their school is research engaged. In short,
people engaged in change need seven ‘senses’:

- A sense of desirable destination
- A sense of motivation to progress towards that destination
- A sense of navigable steps and milestones
- A sense of ability and confidence to do what is required
- A sense of permission to work differently
- A sense of support from the organisation and the wider system
- A sense that success will be marked by recognition in desirable ways.

For people not at the most senior levels of school leadership, the forms of support
which generate these ‘senses’ come partly from within the organisation. One of the
effects of external support ought to be to help school senior leadership teams to
create these conditions, whilst also generating these ‘senses’ for the senior leaders.
It is important to note, however, that most forms of external support for school
research engagement impact on the practitioners who are engaged regardless of
their organisational level. For example, the most active interaction with external
sources of support might be made by a group of relatively junior staff, or by the
senior team, or by a cross-section, and these variations will tend to reflect the pattern
of activity in the school rather than differences in the forms of external support
available. In the following comments, the first six of the seven ‘senses’ have been
grouped into pairs because the patterns of external support currently available tend
not to be calibrated finely enough to enable a worthwhile distinction to be drawn
between the impacts of the support on each need within the pairs.

**Desirable destination, and motivation**

Anyone setting out on a journey of major change needs a clear vision of the intended
direction of travel. If the journey involves going into unknown territory, any definition
of ultimate destination must be provisional. That notwithstanding, a professional
team contemplating a journey, such as one towards higher levels of research
engagement, need to know not only where they are going, but what it is that will be
attractive about the destination. What benefits will accrue? In what ways, and to
what extent, is that place really a better place than where they are now?

The second and separate need is for a sufficiently strong sense of motivation to
commit to undertaking the journey. This involves both pull and push factors. The
advantages of the desired destination need to be more than just beneficial in a
general way: they need to generate in the individual a strong desire to participate in
those benefits personally. On the ‘push’ side of the equation, motivation to move to
somewhere different requires a sense of dissatisfaction with current location. For
example, that dissatisfaction might be a growing awareness of, and frustration with,
the paucity or poor quality of evidence about many aspects of school life to which the
school leadership team claims to attach importance. These pull and push factors
need to be linked, so that the individual identifies how moving to the desired
destination will deal with the unsatisfactory elements of their current situation.

The comments above assume that the desired destination of higher levels of
research engagement, and motivation to move towards that destination, represent a
conscious and collective decision: the headteacher and senior leaders seeing a
distant land of promise and resolving to lead the school on a journey towards it.
Sometimes, however, the process of research engagement builds up through the
cumulative effect of individual choices and actions, and even those individuals may
not at the time know quite where their journey will take them. A school may reach a
point of momentum and critical mass when it finds itself ‘research-engaged’.

What benefits from external support would help a school to meet the needs identified
in this section? A school not yet in the vanguard but interested in moving forward
and wanting to put some detail on its vision would find it useful to access
descriptions of practices at schools further along the journey. To meet motivational
needs those descriptions must contain very robust evidence of the benefits of those
practices, and those benefits need to be seen as relevant to the school’s own
circumstances.

School self-evaluation has a part to play in identifying benefits that might flow from a
higher level of research engagement. Graham Handscomb has explored how
reflective practice can contribute to the quality and effectiveness of school self-
evaluation (Handscomb 2008). The process of self-evaluation might include a focus
on the range and quality of the evidence the school is able to draw upon in arriving at
its judgements: both internal evidence and evidence of practice at other schools, and
how research engagement might be used to increase the extent and utility of that
evidence. The process of school self-evaluation may also identify areas for school
improvement where research engagement would be one of a suite of effective
measures for bringing about the improvement.

What sources and forms of external support would provide those benefits?
Accessible and trustworthy accounts of developments at schools further along the
journey of research engagement would clearly be helpful, as might inspirational
presentations by champions of research engagement who can draw upon knowledge
of leading edge developments. Technical support with school self-evaluation would
be helpful if it could be provided from the specific standpoint of looking at improving
the quality of evidence. Critical friendship, again if provided by someone with the necessary interests and skills, could hold up a mirror to the school so as, in the nicest possible way, to stimulate dissatisfactions to which research engagement would provide the remedies.

A source of support that schools may find informative and inspiring in relation to their visioning, as indeed to other needs in the following sections, is the National Teacher Research Panel (http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp). This offers a range of informative papers and opportunities for interaction including through conferences and publications in which school-based researchers are able to share their experience. It also offers links to the resources of other relevant organisations, as do other bodies such as the GTC and NCSCSL, so there comes a point in browsing when one realises that the total sum of information and advice ‘out there’ is very much less than the sum of the individual websites. NTRP is, through its constitution, at least in formal terms owned by the ‘movement’ of school-based research. It is, however, sponsored by Government, the General Teaching Council, the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services and the Learning and Skills Improvement Service, so perhaps NTRP is best understood as a meeting point of top-down and bottom-up perspectives.

An issue for school leadership teams at this stage of the research engagement journey is how to make meaningful judgements about the information and advice that may be encountered. The more professional reading they are able to undertake, the more time they are able to devote to peer discussion of that reading, and the more they are able to take account of a range of viewpoints, then the better placed they will be to engage critically and constructively with new knowledge and suggestions. The services of NTRP emphasise interaction and are supportive of those aims.

Navigable stages, and ability

As with any other significant change, the development of a higher level of research engagement represents a daunting prospect for practitioners who have not been used to working in that way. Some practitioners may perceive this new and different way of working as too hard a step to take. Others may take a deep breath and ‘plunge in’ and then become frustrated with what they are able to achieve. Of course, as with other new practices, serious research engagement has to be worked towards through logical steps and stages, involving the cumulative development of skills and understanding, opportunities to practice before moving towards more complex applications, and points at which small early successes can be celebrated.

Those who lead the process need to be able to present and explain these stages and milestones at the outset, in a way that conveys realistic expectations of the inputs and timescales that are likely to be required. This will not only lead to better
understanding of what research engagement will ‘look like’ and its worth, but more importantly will enable people to make choices about which steps and stages are achievable for them personally. If the aim is to generate a large enough group of staff actively involved to be effective as a supportive peer group and as an agency for change, then it is likely that the ‘steps and stages’ will need to be differentiated to offer a range of options to suit different career stages, academic aspirations and levels of time commitment.

If this can be achieved it will create the confidence that people need to feel when they are embarking on change, but unless that confidence is matched by a parallel process of skills development, it may turn out to be false confidence. People may busy themselves with activity to which they attach the vocabulary of research, and which they believe, quite mistakenly, has merit and significance. Or they may have a good appreciation of what it required, but give up in frustration, finding it too hard, because they have underestimated the need to develop their skills. So those leading the change require a thorough and authoritative understanding of the skills needs associated with each step of the journey, and the means to provide the development which will generate those skills effectively.

What benefits from external support would help a school to meet the needs identified in this section? External sources of support are required for advice and guidance on the nature of activities that might usefully be undertaken; the steps, stages and timescales involved; the skills needed at each stage; and the development activities which will produce those skills. External support is also needed for ongoing expert technical support and quality assurance of the research engagement activity, especially for practitioner research projects. These functions include guidance on the ethical aspects of school-based research. Another benefit from external support is access to the stories and experience of other practitioners who are further along the journey.

What sources and forms of external support would provide those benefits? Usually, the most obvious source of the relevant technical expertise for general guidance and for skills development is university-based personnel. The form of the support may often be an accredited programme, which, if it is not entirely school based, will also give participants the benefit of a wider peer group and network, enabling them to see and evaluate their own activities within a broader field. Another source of support which would normally be additional to rather than alternative to the first is the collaborative ‘networks’, ‘learning communities’ and so on operated by groups of schools either at their own initiative or with the support of the local authority. These may be particularly helpful in providing an extended peer group who are familiar with the local context.

An issue for school leadership teams is that while support offered through networks of the kind illustrated above offer choice as to how, and how far, to be involved, other
kinds of external support can take forms that might be perceived as ‘package deals’, or almost as ‘branded products’. Where the support takes the form of a university accredited programme it will come with set requirements; there are numerous different options: sometimes several are available from the same institution. Inevitably the individual who is the point of contact tends to be most enthusiastic about the programme they work on or know best. Schools need to shop around and also keep focused on the needs and interests which they identified, rather than being too readily distracted by the attractions of what they are being offered, which may actually focus on a somewhat different set of aims. Some compromise may be necessary, however, and often the school's own thinking will develop as a result of the dialogue.

If the point of this external support includes accessing quality assurance, then it may be worth checking how the source of support positions itself in relation to the debates on that subject. For example, will participants be expected to shoehorn their activity into the understandings of validity and reliability applied within conventional academic research? Or will they be encouraged and assisted in applying the ‘new validities’ of Anderson and Herr (1999) which are more appropriate to school-based practitioner enquiry?

A separate issue is whether, to what extent and by what means the form of external support will build the capacity of the school leadership team in the field of research engagement. Over-generous use of terms such as ‘partnership’ and ‘collaboration’ can cloud this issue. Schools need to check out whether the form of external support foregrounds specific processes for capacity-building, or whether the reality is that the school will be signing up to be ‘done to’ for the next few years in ways that maintain a dependency relationship.

**Permission and support**

Undertaking a process of significant and protracted change within an organisation also requires a sense of ‘permission’ to work in new and different ways, and a sense of support. This support is not just in terms of receiving the practical help and cooperation required, but rather the sense of assurance on the part of the person doing things differently that at some future point, perhaps when problems arise, the organisation (or the wider system) will not turn on them and criticise them for their actions.

A school wanting to move to higher levels of research engagement can convey the sense of ‘permission’ to its staff by the strong, ongoing and visible patronage of this method of working by the senior leadership team, and by its inclusion in school development plans and in the objectives negotiated with individuals as part of their performance management. The sense of support can be conveyed by enabling a
critical mass of staff to be actively participating in research engagement; by constructing the timetable so as to allow sufficient opportunities for relevant activity and discussions; by giving space and respect to research related matters in official meetings; by ensuring that the governing body is aware of and fully supportive of what staff are doing in this area; by providing a staff reference library; by prioritising research-related continuing professional development and providing reasonable levels of financial support for this; and by operating a risk-accepting, no-blame professional culture.

What benefits from external support would help a school to meet the needs identified in this section? While a school, from its own resources and through its own choices, can go a long way to creating the senses of permission and support for research engagement among its own personnel, at institutional level, the school as an organisation can only meet these needs through external support. Under current conditions, the attitude of the local authority is important as a potential source of permission and support, especially in those local authorities which have taken a serious interest in school research engagement. Under the emerging policy environment this factor may become less relevant to an increasing proportion of schools as they distance themselves from local democracy. Making formalised linkages between research engagement at school level and national schemes (such as the Teacher Learning Academy), national agencies (such as the Training and Development Agency (TDA) or Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT)) or individual universities can provide a sense of legitimacy and hence permission. External funding streams provide their own very distinct form of permission and support. Finally, for headteachers, a like-minded peer group can go some way to meeting these needs.

What sources and forms of external support would provide those benefits? In addition to the range of agencies mentioned, sources of these kinds of support can include collaborative networks, including some run by universities specifically to encourage practitioner research; School Improvement Partners (SIPs) in the cases where they understand and support school research engagement; and charitable foundations that can be sources of funding.

An issue for school leadership teams is that while these sources of support may be helpful in other more general ways, they do not amount to very much in relation to the specific senses of ‘permission and support’ as outlined above. Organisations and agencies which provide advice and ‘frameworks’ (or, according to viewpoint, promote themselves and their ideas) do not generally take on much responsibility towards the schools that use their products or buy into their logo. In this matter, as with so many others, school leadership teams are heavily accountable in the event of anything going wrong. The main thing likely to ‘go wrong’ in relation to school research engagement is if individuals, groups or the whole organisation allow their interest in research to distract their attention from their primary responsibility for the
achievement and well-being of their students. So the words ‘permission and support’ are really shorthand for reassurance and confirmation that the research activities that people are undertaking are relevant and justifiable in the context of their current professional priorities.

External project funding from a reputable body, while offering a powerful sense of ‘permission’, can be a mixed blessing. It reinforces the belief that research engagement is an extra that requires extra funding, which does not help those who argue the cause of evidence-informed professional practice. There is then always the issue of how much of the good work can be embedded and sustained after the funding finishes.

**Recognition**

Finally, people undertaking significant long term change need a sense that success will be marked by recognition in desirable ways. This factor can be considered at the individual level and at the institutional level. Very often these are aligned, in that the research engaged school will take a certain amount of credit for the recognitions achieved by individuals that the school has supported. For individuals, the recognitions that act as motivators to research engagement include the achievement of academic and professional qualifications; career advancement; opportunities to present work to internal and external meetings, including presenting papers at conferences; and opportunities to contribute to publications. For many teachers, seeing the ideas generated through their research being put into practice with good outcomes for students, with some public acknowledgement, is the most rewarding form of recognition.

For the school as an institution, the rewards and recognitions for research engagement are much tied up with its correlation with the school’s overall success, as measured by students’ attainment, Ofsted inspection ratings, and the school’s ability to attract and retain able staff. From the point of view of a school senior leadership team, those outcomes are their own reward; they are also a necessary condition if the school is to continue to enjoy a sense of ‘permission’ to be pursuing an interest in research engagement. A valued accolade is when external quality assurance agencies such as Ofsted and Investors in People appear to acknowledge a connection between activities of research engagement and the achievement of high ratings.

What benefits from external support would help a school to meet the needs identified in this section? The benefit of external recognition is that it validates the school’s view that what it is doing is worthwhile: corroborating those opinions and judgements, and converting what would otherwise be collective self-praise into ‘facts’ that become matters of public record.
What sources and forms of external support would provide those benefits? Clearly accreditations of individuals’ work provide a tangible form of recognition. These may be primarily academic qualifications, as awarded by universities, or primarily professional qualifications for example those awarded by the College of Teachers (http://www.cot.ac.uk). Other ladders of accreditation include the GTC’s Teacher Learning Academy scheme (http://www.teacherlearningacademy.org.uk). These are individual recognitions: at the whole school level, building upon the national Research Engaged Schools Project, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has developed a research engaged school/college award scheme, that judges submissions against 22 assessment criteria (http://www.nfer.ac.uk/what-we-offer/schools/research-engaged-award/). Other forms of recognition include the acceptance of papers at conferences and articles in publications such as professional journals. Learned societies, professional associations, conference organising bodies, universities and publishers have the potential to be sources of external support with this. Schools often find the easiest way to present their work at significant conferences is as part of a symposium session organised by a university or interest group. Another form of recognition is the involvement of school staff in externally organised professional development in the field of research engagement, as a speaker at INSET events or as an associate tutor on a university programme. All of these examples provide external endorsement of quality.

An issue for school leadership teams is that most forms of external recognition for research engagement require the school to adopt an outward-facing orientation, which is why that should be one of the attributes in the definition of a research engaged school. Another issue is the balances that need to be struck between achieving recognitions and doing what the school really wants to do. The ‘tail’ of accreditation can wag the ‘dog’ of enquiry based professional practice: often there is much to be said for getting the latter established first. Usually external recognitions involve adopting systems and methods which are often helpful but can also be binding.

Another issue concerns the sensitive subject of organisational micro-politics, and a need to challenge the assumption that all forms of external endorsement are always helpful to the organisation, and that everything in the research-engaged garden is fragrant. Some people pursue their own agendas in ways that oppose or undermine their organisation’s senior management. As noted earlier, uncertainty can arise regarding whether the interpretations of reality conveyed in accounts of practitioner research would be shared by other key stakeholders. More widely, when university assessors are awarding masters degrees, there is usually no place in the process for checking out whether the project and its conclusions were seen as welcome and helpful by the candidate’s headteacher. The same applies to the way that conference papers are accepted. So it is not particularly difficult for a disruptive element in the organisation to use external endorsement of its research activities to
wrong-foot the leadership and to gain support and momentum for their standpoint, knowing that the leadership would look bad if it expressed a negative view of these ‘achievements’. It is easier to design out such hazards where the leadership team is actively driving both the organisation’s professional culture, and the agenda of research engagement.

External support from local authorities

One of the publications to come out of the national research-engaged schools project Investigating the research-engaged school (Sharp et al 2005) was a booklet summarising the project’s findings regarding the role of local authorities (Sharp et al 2006). The booklet maps the ways in which local authorities can support whole-school research engagement.

The forms of support identified by Sharp et al, and illustrated in the booklet by examples, were of course all taken from the project, which involved five local authorities: Birmingham, Essex, Hertfordshire, Oldham and West Sussex. These were involved in the project because of their interest and leading edge practices in this field. While it is good to celebrate this work and to show what some local authorities are doing, findings like these leave a major open question in their implications: to what extent could, and should, local authorities generally adopt similar methods of working? This is an important question for schools in the other 170 local authorities with education powers in England and Wales, for whom it might translate as ‘If we decide to become a more research-engaged school, is it reasonable for us to expect our local authority to develop the kinds of support that were reported in this study?’

Earlier, the Local Government Association had commissioned a previous relevant study from NFER. This was Using research for school improvement: the LEA’s role by Rebekah Wilson, Jane Hemsley-Brown, Clair Easton and Caroline Sharp (Wilson et al 2003). Reconsidering both of these reports in the autumn of 2010 identifies two major limitations. One is simply the reduced scope and capacity of local government. Over the last five years or so, local authority advisory services have been greatly reduced and have had to focus more sharply on specific central government priorities. More recently, the combination of the ending of central government’s National Strategies, cuts in public spending, and the new government’s commitment to removing as many schools as possible from local democracy have sent that trend almost into freefall.

The second limitation concerns the implicit assumption (not on the part of the authors of either of these research reports) that there can be ‘lateral transfer of good practice’ in a matter such as this, along the lines of ‘these five authorities have worked in this way, therefore any number of the other 170 could do so’. As with practitioner research undertaken by teachers, where the ‘practice’ cannot be separated from the practitioner, so it is with the research engagement strategies
developed by certain local authorities. These were the work of specific individuals who were interested in and motivated to develop these ways of working, often over a period of many years, and in a context that was favourable but is bound to become increasingly difficult.

Putting these two factors together: in those local authorities which passed through the last two decades without being noticeably enthused about stimulating and supporting school research engagement, the chance that they will, in the foreseeable future, develop the interest to do so, combined with the means to do so effectively, is virtually zero. So for schools located away from the relatively small proportion of local authorities that currently have strong practice in this field, it is unlikely to be realistic to expect very much support from their local authority for their journey towards higher levels of research engagement.

External support through networks

Another source of (mainly mutual) support is through networks of schools that have research as one of their aims. McLaughlin, Black-Hawkins, McIntyre and Townsend (2008) have researched what is currently known (which they conclude to be ‘very little indeed’ p.81) about the relationship between school networks and school research engagement, especially the ways in which networks can support action research projects undertaken by teachers. They critique the ‘taken for granted’ good of school networks:

There is, it seems, little reporting of ‘bad’ or ‘weak’ school networks, or evidence regarding whether networking is necessarily the ‘best’ means by which to accomplish a particular set of ends. (Black-Hawkins 2008a p 65)

The future path for the development of school research engagement is likely to depend quite heavily on the kinds of partnerships that will be formed between groups of schools and universities. What agendas, whose agendas, will guide that path?

References


