

# Supporting research-engaged schools: a researcher's role

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## Introduction

In 1996, Professor David Hargreaves called for teaching to become an evidence-based profession (Hargreaves, 1996). One means of contributing to this development is for schools to become more engaged with and in research.

According to McMeniman *et al.* (2000) there are two central elements to building research cultures in schools. The first is the existence of 'research-orientated' colleagues within the school community, and the second is the support of external researchers who can offer a guiding light.

This publication aims to add to the body of work in researcher–practitioner partnerships by providing practical guidance for researchers who are just starting out in this field or considering entering it. These people have a background in research and/or practice and may be employed in a range of roles (for example, within an institute of higher education, a local authority or as an independent consultant)<sup>1</sup>. What they have in common is a background in research and an interest in working in partnership with teachers and other educational practitioners.

The main aims of this booklet are to:

- inspire researchers wishing to become engaged in practitioner enquiry for school improvement
- provide practical guidance, drawing on examples of researcher–practitioner relationships from the research and development programme.

## What is a research-engaged school?

The stimulus for the research and development programme was a publication by Handscomb and MacBeath (2003) putting forward a vision

of a 'research-engaged' school. Such a school is characterised by a culture of research and enquiry that is at 'the heart of the school, its outlook, systems and activity' (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003, p. 4). In a research-engaged school, teachers seek answers to everyday questions, using the principles and methods of systematic enquiry. The results of the research are then 'made public' by sharing with other practitioners and members of relevant communities. By using this definition of research, the authors were drawing on a long tradition of action research, stressing a concern with social action (Lewin, 1948) and sharing research findings (Stenhouse, 1980). They were also situating action research within a wider field of school improvement, professional learning and the transfer of good practice (see also Ainsworth *et al.*, 1994; Wenger, 1998; Frost *et al.*, 2000; Sagor, 2000; Bolam *et al.*, 2005; Fielding *et al.*, 2005).

In order to investigate the potential of this idea, a team at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) embarked on a research and development programme with 15 schools and five English local authorities (Sharp *et al.*, 2005). The programme entailed 'research-orientated' educational practitioners working with 'practice-oriented' researchers for a period of about two years. The school research teams consisted of at least two members of staff, who liaised with a member of the school senior management team. The schools chose their own research topics and the NFER team provided support through visits, tools, telephone/email contact and seminars. The NFER team has drawn on its experiences and relevant literature in compiling this guide.

## Why become involved in practitioner research?

Teachers and researchers participating in the NFER programme offered many reasons for becoming involved in practitioner<sup>2</sup> research for school improvement. For practitioners, the motivation to participate included:

- improving practice and outcomes for pupils
- becoming more adept at using evidence for school improvement
- engaging in reflection and enquiry as part of professional development
- encouraging a sense of professional agency (a chance for staff to develop their own insights and devise appropriate actions, rather than ‘delivering’ an agenda set by others)
- contributing to the development of a learning culture within the school.

*We wish to move further towards a culture within the schools in which teachers see themselves as learners – regularly evaluating classroom practice, investigating issues which are identified and applying their findings within their teaching.*

### **Secondary teacher**

The researchers’ motivations included:

- the chance to be involved in putting research into practice
- working with highly motivated practitioners
- sharing research skills and techniques
- developing new skills (e.g. through becoming a ‘critical friend’)
- gaining a better understanding of practitioner research and its relationship with professional research.

Both researchers and practitioners used ‘learning journals’ to make personal reflections on the project (see Moon, 1999).

## **Do practitioners and professional researchers have different world views?**

In developing research–practice partnerships, it became evident that the NFER researchers and practitioners had different ways of thinking about research.

*I think there are two kinds of research. There is the research that seems to go on what you read about and you think, 'well someone's had a lot of fun doing that, but what use is it?' And there's the research where they come up with suggested strategies for dealing with certain situations – and that's where it's useful.*

### **Secondary teacher**

*Part of what I am realising is that I haven't thought about what research is – I haven't really needed to. The teachers' perception is that research = reflective practice for practical improvement. It made me think about my own 'research' – my PhD research simply wouldn't count because it hasn't had any practical outcome.*

### **Extract from a researcher's learning journal**

Some fundamental differences in researchers' and practitioners' modes of thinking have been recognised in the work of Gibbons *et al.* (1994) and Labaree (2003).

If we accept the ideal typical model set out in Table 1, it can be implied that practitioner–researcher partnerships involve some movement along these dimensions for both parties. This was the experience of the NFER programme. For example, practitioners became more inclined to be analytical, to value intellectual learning and to consider generalisations, whereas researchers were called upon to focus on solving problems, to demonstrate their commitment to improving practice and to recognise the importance of context.

### **Questions for consideration when partnering practitioners in research**

- What is your motivation for becoming involved in practitioner research?
- How can you use the characterisation of world views shown in Table 1 to inform your interactions with practitioners?

**Table 1 Differences in world views held by researchers and practitioners**

Researcher	Practitioner
<i>Analytical</i> focused on understanding the nature of educational practice	<i>Normative</i> focused on dealing with immediate problems
<i>Intellectual</i> valuing objectivity, scholarship and ideas	<i>Personal</i> motivated by caring about young people and valuing the quality of interpersonal relationships
<i>Universal</i> while acknowledging the importance of context, seeking to develop general principles and theoretical understanding across individual cases	<i>Particular</i> believing that individual classrooms and schools are unique

Based on Labaree, 2003

## What helps a school to engage with research?

The NFER study identified a number of key factors that were conducive to research-engaged schools:

- a school culture that values openness, reflection and professional debate
- a commitment to using evidence for school improvement
- a commitment of resources (especially staff time)
- a desire for staff to work collaboratively, regardless of role and status
- a willingness to embed the research activity into existing school systems
- access to sources of expertise and advice.

Support for research and enquiry among school leaders was particularly important in providing these favourable conditions. One of the learning points from the NFER study was the importance of clarifying the commitments required both by researchers and schools from the

start and gaining 'buy in' from school leaders (in our case, in the form of a written '[contract](#)').

The NFER programme encouraged schools to form a 'research team'. These varied in their membership and size, but proved to be a highly successful means of encouraging collaborative continuing professional development (CPD). They also provided a mechanism for mediating between individual interests and whole-school perspectives.

### Questions for consideration about your partnership

- What kinds of conditions are present in your partner school?  
How do school leaders wish to use research?<sup>3</sup>
- How can you clarify the 'contract' with your partner school?

## What expectations do practitioners have of researchers?

The practitioners involved in the NFER study were somewhat wary of their research partners at first, because they thought they might be 'boffins' concerned with esoteric ideas far removed from practice. However, practitioners looked forward to working with professional researchers, anticipating that researchers would be able to help them by:

- adding status to practitioner research
- advising on how to plan and conduct a research enquiry
- ensuring the quality of the research
- helping practitioners to develop new research skills, techniques and systems
- providing a role model of how a professional researcher thinks and acts.

The NFER researchers approached their first meetings with schools with some nervousness, but found practitioners welcoming and strongly motivated by the opportunity to do research. Some extracts from a researcher's learning journal are shown in Box 1.

## **Box 1 A researcher's thoughts on her first visit to a school**

### **Before the first school visit**

*I am a bit concerned that we are being too floaty and not giving schools enough that is practical. We really don't know how to give appropriate support to schools.*

### **After the first school visit**

*It was excellent. Good discussions on 'what is research?'. They realised themselves that they needed to narrow down their focus. We talked about what data they needed and how to collect it. Thoroughly enjoyable – I am optimistic about this project.*

## **Questions for consideration about practitioner and researcher expectations**

- What expectations will practitioners have of you as a researcher?
- What are your expectations of practitioner-researchers?

## What does it mean to become a critical friend?

Saunders (2004) suggests that translators, envoys and mediators are needed to traverse the perceived gap between research, practice and policy (Saunders, 2004, p. 20). She proposes that these people might ‘speak to both cultures in their own language’ in order to create a community where there is time and space for a ‘co-construction of knowledge’ (p. 21).

The NFER team conceived of their role as that of a ‘critical friend’. This relationship shares some of the characteristics of mentoring or coaching (see Box 2), but the team were drawn to the term ‘critical friendship’ as a more specific, yet flexible description of their role.

### Box 2 Valuing research partners

The national evaluation of the Best Practice Research Scholarships (Furlong *et al.*, 2003) noted that scholars were required to appoint a mentor, 80 per cent of whom were from Institutes of Higher Education. Mentoring was found to be ‘vitaly important to the success of projects’ (Furlong *et al.*, 2003, p. 4).

*We need people who can challenge us and take us on from where we are.*

#### Primary teacher

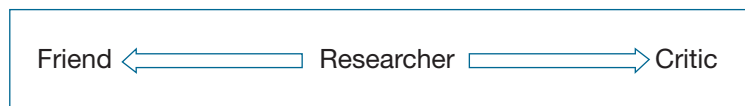
Much has been written about the nature of critical friendship in general and as applied to researcher–practitioner relationships (see for example Arnot *et al.*, 2004; Black-Hawkins, 2003; Costa and Kallick, 1993; Elliott, 1991; MacBeath 1998; Brighouse and Woods 1999; Swaffield, 2002).

According to Costa and Kallick (1993) a critical friend may be defined as ‘A trusted person who asks provocative questions... takes time to

fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working towards, an advocate for the success of the project' (1993, p. 50).

There is a seeming contradiction evoked by joining together the words 'critical' and 'friend'. Rather than conceive of this relationship as a linear continuum framed by two extremes (as in Figure 1), critical friendships may be seen as occupying a certain niche at a given time in the ecology of the relationship. The researcher may need to be more of a supportive friend in the beginning; later becoming more critical, as the relationship develops (MacBeath, 1998).

**Figure 1 The critical friend continuum**



In our experience, the following qualities and actions led to productive research partnerships with practitioners:

- building trust (e.g. through confidentiality, empathy, suspending judgment)
- deciding when to listen and when to intervene
- asking provocative questions
- recognising progress and celebrating success
- linking and networking (to sources of information, guidance and expertise)
- developing practitioners' research skills (through modelling analytical thinking, recognising skill development and advising on research methods)
- reassuring practitioners that it is natural to encounter doubt and uncertainty when taking on an open-ended enquiry
- moving the journey forward (both in relation to the research activity and to whole-school engagement in research).

One of the approaches to building trust between researchers and their practitioner partners can be to explore research ideas in a supportive environment before testing them out with a larger group, as demonstrated in the example shown in Box 3.

### Box 3 Building trust and confidence

The research team in a primary school consisted of a teacher and a teaching assistant. During the first visit of the NFER researcher they began to explore the meaning of 'research'. After exploring their ideas in this way, both members of the school research team felt they would like to take the debate into the wider staff group.

They invited all staff to attend an evening session to discuss how research could contribute to their school. This discussion provided a platform to introduce their research project and fed into a process of professional reflection. They later commented that their partner researcher really helped them to clarify their thoughts in a trusting and supportive climate, leaving them confident to share ideas with the rest of the staff.

It is important for researchers to feel supported in their role as critical friend. In the NFER programme, the researchers had three main sources of support: they used their learning journals to record their thoughts, provided a sounding board for one another and were guided by members of the programme's advisory group.

*Contact [with you] reminded me of what research skills are. You exemplify models of thinking, in the way you speak.*

#### Secondary teacher

*When the partnerships are working well within a balanced ecosystem of friend and critic, I feel that the 'eyes of my eyes are opened' (Cummings, 1960) to the possibilities of teacher-researcher partnerships.*

#### NFER researcher

## Questions for consideration on critical friendship

- How useful do you find the concept of ‘critical friendship’ in working with practitioner-researchers?
- Which of the qualities and actions on page 11 can you bring to this relationship?
- What support do you have for taking on this role?

## How can researchers provide support to practitioner-researchers?

The NFER researchers provided support to school research teams during the following processes in particular:

- helping to refine research questions
- advising on ethical practice
- planning the research (e.g. considering issues of manageability/scope, stages, timelines and resources)
- selecting appropriate design and methodology (especially advising on the appropriate use of qualitative and quantitative methods)
- encouraging practitioners to apply their existing skills and techniques in a research context
- advising on analysis and helping practitioners to make sense of their findings (including challenging practitioners to consider the evidence as objectively as possible)
- helping with writing and encouraging schools to identify opportunities for dissemination
- encouraging staff to build research and dissemination into their existing practice, systems and priorities.

The NFER researchers helped school research teams to refine their research questions. Practitioners acknowledged the importance of this process in the success of their projects. Box 4 shows a conversation between a researcher and two secondary school staff about refining a research question.

### Box 4 Helping to refine research questions

**Researcher:** What is your research question?

**Teacher 1:** How can e-learning in geography enhance the quality of teaching and learning?

**Researcher:** This is assuming it can enhance...

**Teacher 2:** So should it be 'does...'?

**Researcher:** It could be, but if you state your assumptions to start with...

**Teacher 1:** So 'what are the most effective ways...'?

After further discussion, they decided on the following wording to make their question more specific: 'What are the most effective ways of using ICT to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in geography at key stage 3?'

*I can see why the research question is absolutely key, because if you're starting from a question that people say isn't a legitimate question to start with, then they are not going to read the rest of what you've done – or it trivialises it.*

#### Secondary headteacher

On the whole, the partnerships worked well, with all school teams successfully completing their research projects. The researchers' visits and seminars were particularly influential in helping to keep the momentum going. On reflection, if the NFER team were to do this

again, we would probably devote more time and energy to helping practitioners with analysis and writing their research reports, as this was a particularly challenging part of the process.

### Questions for consideration when supporting school research teams

- How can you best support school research teams in each of the areas identified here? When are practitioners most likely to need your help?
- Which resources can you identify that may be helpful for practitioner-researchers to draw on at each stage?

## What are the common challenges in partnership work?

The following areas of partnership can present particular challenges for practitioners and their research partners:

- finding a shared language
- issues concerning the appropriateness of research as a means of school improvement
- encouraging practitioners to refer to research literature
- making time for research and developing cultures of support.

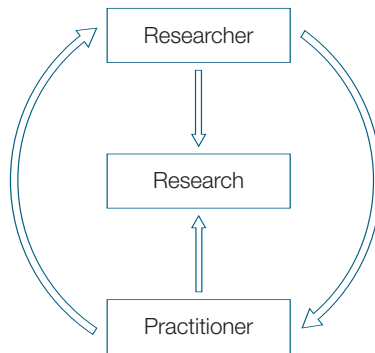
An issue facing partnerships between practitioners and researchers is the challenge of finding a common language: one that is neither too grounded in informal staffroom conversation, nor too reminiscent of academic debates. The NFER team decided to use plain language to express research concepts, but found that some practitioner-researchers wanted to adopt research terminology (such as ‘data’ and ‘hypothesis’).

One of the difficulties encountered was concerned with the appropriateness of research as a method for addressing sensitive issues (for

example, attempting to solve a deep-seated problem on which staff had already taken up positions) or as a means of arriving at predetermined answers (such as proving that existing practice was successful). It is important for research partners to gain an understanding of the organisational context and to discuss the purposes for which research might (legitimately) be used. One technique the NFER researchers used to address this was to ask practitioners about their expectations for research outcomes and how they and their colleagues would respond if the research produced unexpected results.

An important role for the NFER researchers was that of guiding practitioners towards appropriate methodologies and helping them to develop their research skills, particularly in qualitative research methods, as many practitioners are more used to working with quantitative data (see Berger *et al.*, 2005). Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between people and their roles in relation to research.

**Figure 2 The relationship between practitioner/research/researcher**



## Developing research skills

Although some practitioners were interested to read about research, encouraging practitioners to relate their own action research projects to wider research literature was challenging, even though researchers provided practitioners with links to accessible research summaries. While some practitioners were willing to engage with research literature from the start, many objected on the grounds that they disliked

reading, found research writing off-putting and could not relate research conducted elsewhere to their own context.

Box 5 shows the reflections of a primary teacher about the guidance provided by their partner researcher.

### **Box 5 Reflections of a primary teacher**

**Researcher:** Do you feel that you or your colleagues have gained research skills through undertaking this project?

**Teacher:** We bought both of the books you suggested on quantitative and qualitative data. I read the one about developing interviews (Gillham, 2000). That's definitely a skill that I've been able to develop by planning an interview, writing an interview schedule and then doing the interview – looking at types of interview questions to ask and ways to follow up... I found my understanding grew as the project developed, and I was very interested in finding out the parents' view and actually talking to the real people rather than having all the facts and figures on paper.

Having carried out their own research, however, some practitioners became more interested in reading wider research literature (see also Rickinson, 2005). Encouraging professional reading groups can provide practitioners with an access point into reading research literature. Practitioners sometimes dismiss the findings from research as 'not relevant in my school' (see Box 6). One way to encourage practitioners to engage with research findings is to ask them what their experiences have been in their schools, and if they have found these to be similar or different to those described in the research articles they have read.

## Box 6 Being able to relate to research evidence

Teachers were excited about doing their own action research project, but were concerned about the amount of time needed for reading. One said: 'When we were first presented with the details of the project, I thought "Oh no, that means reading".'

As the project progressed, and with encouragement from their research partner, the team agreed to do some reading in their area of interest. They discovered that it helped to share the reading between them and discuss what they had found.

The same teacher later reflected that he had found reading about research and discussing theory more interesting than he had imagined: 'I've enjoyed reading to figure out where I am – I like the dialogue and the questioning.'

Probably the most challenging aspect of the NFER programme was the limited time teachers could devote to research activities. It was important to be realistic about the pressures on teachers and to use the available time effectively.

Researchers may need to consider advising practitioners to scale down their proposals to make them more manageable. There may also be opportunities to use existing data sources for research purposes. For example, several of the NFER partner schools used assessment data and pupil records to contribute to their research. One of the schools found a novel way of building time for data collection into the school day. They used a team-teaching approach to enable one member of staff to teach while the other observed pupils' responses.

Some teachers struggled to maintain their research projects in the face of changing priorities and roles. For example, individual members of research teams left the school and others took on additional responsi-

bilities, leaving little time and energy to complete the research. These were times when the researchers had to focus on providing practical support and a 'listening ear'. The NFER researchers had limited face-to-face contact with their practitioner partners, but they were able to communicate by telephone and email. Having access to an in-school 'mentor' was another means of ensuring that practitioners undertaking research had support to get them through difficult times.

### Questions for consideration about the challenges of partnering schools

- What are the main challenges you are likely to encounter in researcher–practitioner partnerships?
- Which strategies could you adopt to address these challenges?

## How can you help practitioners achieve impact, sustainability and development?

The NFER programme deliberately set out to help schools to become 'research engaged'. This involved working on different levels, both within and across schools. In order to encourage sustainability, the NFER team was aware of the need to develop schools' own research capacity.

As the relationships developed, both practitioners and researchers became keenly aware of the relationship between research as a process and as a product.

*Where does planning and researching something start, and where does actually demonstrating that it has a clear outcome... and you can understand, postulate why it had that outcome? Where's the dividing line?*

**Secondary headteacher**

For many of our partner practitioners, the immediate benefits of the research journey came from engaging in the research process. In this sense, the early stages focused on 'capacity building and providing value for people' (see Furlong and Oancea, 2005).

Later, the outcomes of the research were valued for their ability to inform the development of practice. The research projects achieved a high level of recognition within the schools, local authorities and also at national level (via publications and presentations). School staff were able to identify multiple impacts of the research on practice and policy. These included:

- taking decisions about adopting new resources and teaching approaches
- developing new guidelines, materials and resource packs
- providing evidence for school inspections (especially Ofsted's Self-Evaluation Form)
- refining systems for data collection so they could be used to inform planning
- identifying new issues for investigation
- building research activity into staff development
- finding new ways to work with key partners, including staff, pupils, other schools, local authority advisors, parents and governors.

*Having done things from a research angle, our perceptions of how to do things have changed. Rather than saying, 'We're going to look at target setting', we can ask: 'Does setting targets with children enable them to improve their performance?'*

### **Primary deputy headteacher**

All of the 15 schools involved in the NFER programme continued with research activity when the programme came to an end. Schools recognised the importance of involving professional researcher partners and, while many decided to focus on building up their own research skills, several have continued to find it helpful to work in partnership with professional researchers.

As practitioners became more experienced in using research, they began to widen their interests in some of the following ways:

- broadening their repertoire of research skills
- consulting parents and pupils
- enabling pupils (and parents) to become researchers
- engaging with research literature
- seeking accreditation for academic study
- involving more colleagues in research and reflective dialogue
- providing guidance and advice to other schools.

The practitioners participating in the NFER project commented on how the partnership with researchers had changed their perceptions of research and had made them feel enabled to engage with research themselves. This empowering aspect of the relationship was important both for practitioners and their partner researchers, as each group witnessed change. Many of the practitioners acknowledged the ways in which the conversations with their researcher helped ideas coalesce into actions and in some cases new whole-school approaches. They also appreciated the space to reflect on their practice with their partner researcher supporting them to do so. The researcher partners recognised a new aspect of their professional identity as facilitators of reflective practice rather than as outside observers of policy and pedagogy.

In our experience teachers and researchers can play a key role in the production and circulation of new knowledge about practice. Professional renewal can occur for both school and research partners as a result.

*At the beginning of this programme, we asked our partners for a metaphor to describe their feelings about research engagement. The most common metaphor was that of a journey. At the end, one primary teacher said: 'It has been an amazing journey for the team.' As one of the research partners, I would heartily endorse that message – it has been an amazing journey, for all of us.*

**NFER researcher**

## About the NFER programme

The NFER research and development programme involved 15 primary and secondary schools from five English local authorities (Birmingham, Essex, Hertfordshire, Oldham and West Sussex). The programme received funding from the NFER, the Local Government Association, the General Teaching Council, the National College for School Leadership and the participating local authorities.

Participating schools were asked to involve at least two members of staff in the research activity and to nominate a representative of the senior management team to act as a link to whole-school policy. Each school undertook a research activity, linked to their current school improvement priorities. The NFER programme situated the work specifically in the area of school improvement because it has a high profile in both the life of a school and current policy frameworks. It was felt that engaging with research questions in this context would encourage school leaders to see research engagement as an important element of school and staff development, and enable individual teachers to contextualise their research activities in wider whole-school agendas rather than focusing exclusively on individual classroom concerns.

The NFER team consisted of three researchers and an administrator. The team provided the following support to schools:

- at least two face-to-face visits over a period of about a year
- ongoing contact by email and telephone
- a subscription to *Topic* (now called *practical research for education*, NFER's research-based publication for teachers)
- a dedicated website providing information and links
- guidance materials, including a contract form, learning journal, research planning form and writing guide
- two seminars bringing together representatives from participating schools and local authorities facilitated by members of the NFER team

- a final conference in which the schools, researchers and local authority advisors shared their work with a wider audience.

Schools received no financial support from the programme, other than reimbursement of travel and supply cover costs to enable two members of staff to attend the seminars and the final conference. They funded their own research activities, with some support from their local authorities.

## Further information: web-based resources

There are several sources of information on practitioner engagement with research. Here is a selection of useful websites:

The British Educational Research Association has published a series of research guidelines, including guidance on ethics and report writing.

<http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guides>

The ESRC Teaching and Learning Programme aims to use research to improve outcomes for learners of all ages. They publish regular newsletters and research briefings.

<http://www.tlrp.org>

The National Educational Research Forum produces a bulletin of research information called Evidence for Teaching and Learning. It addresses issues across the education spectrum.

<http://www.nerf-uk.org>

The DfES website has a section that takes articles from research journals and summarises them with the needs of practitioners in mind.

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research>

The National Teacher Research Panel is an independent group of practising teachers and headteachers who encourage staff to get involved in and with research. They offer research guidelines for CPD coordinators, advice on how staff can contribute to national research projects and conferences aimed at sharing practitioner research.

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp>

The NCSL has a variety of resources for research engagement, including a review of literature on why and how school leaders engage with educational research. Their work on networked learning communities has several useful guides on using and carrying out research.

<http://www.ncsl.org.uk>

The GTC produces *Research of the Month*, featuring summaries of research on a series of topics, chosen for their interest to teachers.

<http://www.gtce.org.uk/PolicyAndResearch/research/ROMtopics>

The NFER website has a special area dedicated to research-engaged schools. It contains information, resources and links. In addition to the main report (Sharp *et al.*, 2005), the programme team is developing a series of practical guides aimed at different audiences:

- Research-informed professional practice (for teachers)
- Leading a research-engaged school (for school leaders)
- Supporting research-engaged schools (for researchers)
- Advising research-engaged schools (for local authority advisors).

These and other resources are available for download from:

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research-areas/research-engaged-schools>

The NFER also produces *practical research for education* (formerly known as *Topic*), a journal of research articles written for teachers. This journal includes a 'Tool-kit' series, aiming to help practitioners plan and carry out their own research.

<http://www.pre-online.co.uk>

If you are looking for research evidence on a particular area, you might find it useful to use a specialist search engine, such as:

[www.scholar.google.com](http://www.scholar.google.com)

## How was this leaflet developed?

The information in this publication was prepared by researchers Dawn Sanders, Caroline Sharp, Kathryn Tomlinson and Anna Eames. They

worked with Anne McNeil (programme administrator) on the NFER's two-year research and development programme which began in September 2003.

The programme involved eight primary schools and seven secondary schools from five local authorities (Birmingham, Essex, Hertfordshire, Oldham and West Sussex). It was sponsored by the NFER, the Local Government Association, the General Teaching Council for England, The National College for School Leadership, the five partner local authorities and the schools themselves.

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## Notes

1. The NFER team has produced a separate guide for local authority staff.
2. Although the majority of the school staff involved in the NFER programme were teachers, some of the research teams also included school leaders and support staff. For this reason, we have chosen to refer to participants as 'practitioners' rather than 'teachers'.

3. When preparing to discuss research with school leaders, readers may find it helpful to consider how research activity relates to current policy agendas. You can find information about this in the booklet *Leading a Research-engaged School* (Sharp *et al.*, 2006).

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Dear NFER team  
The research has been a  
struggle to fit in. The  
greatest benefit has been  
to trigger a further nine  
projects the next year.  
Best wishes,  
Graham,  
Steve

NFER research to  
The Mere  
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Dear NFER team  
We've got more out of it  
than we had anticipated  
This project was over  
above our expectations  
Best wishes,

Dear NFER team  
We were able  
this project  
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