



BROADENING HORIZONS: the role of local authorities in encouraging research communities

The Growth of an Idea: the beginning of the investigation

It all began with an encounter at Liverpool Street station in London. Graham had contacted Caroline from the National Foundation for Educational Research about some work he had been doing in Essex Local Authority on *The Research-Engaged School*. An Essex research forum called FLARE (Forum for Learning and Research Enquiry) had drafted some thinking about what a research-engaged school might look like and what would be its distinctive features. They agreed to meet up, at Liverpool Street station, and Caroline brought along another NFER colleague.

Caroline and her colleague Wendy were very interested. The NFER had just completed some national research on the role of the local authority in supporting and promoting research. The three of us agreed that there was mileage in conducting a wider investigation into the research-engaged school. It would be interesting to learn more about the dimensions of the research-engaged school that FLARE had initially identified, and to discover what factors contribute towards a school becoming research-engaged, and what local authorities can do to support this.

Through NFER contacts were made with other organisations to secure sponsorship for an investigation. This generated excitement and the commitment of a number of sponsors: the General Teaching Council in England, the National College for School Leadership, and the Local Government Association. Then Caroline contacted a number of local authorities to invite their participation and sponsorship: Birmingham, Essex, Hertfordshire, Oldham, and West Sussex.

Graham and Caroline continued to talk and plan. Each local authority went about identifying three schools to participate in the investigation. They did this in different ways. In Essex Graham chose to send out an invitation to all 577 schools and then had the task of how to choose from among the many who replied. This was done by asking each school to say something about their interest in research, why they wanted to participate and what support they would provide.

A panel of colleagues from schools, FLARE and Graham and Caroline then reviewed the applications and eventually schools were selected. Caroline and Graham were keen that there should be a mix of primary and secondary and of those that had lots of involvement in research and those with little. One school that was selected was Marrie Webster's Hatfield Peverel Infants.



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Issues and Questions Arising from this Work

A very strong reflection we have on this investigation is the extent to which everyone responded with enthusiasm and the impact it has had on all the schools and individuals involved. The NFER researchers rarely get the chance to work in partnership with schools and local authorities. This programme provided us with great opportunities to be challenged, take on different roles and grow.

The main areas of impact on schools came from the process of research as much as the outcomes. Teachers felt empowered by the opportunity to investigate issues for themselves. Working in teams provided powerful CPD because it was collaborative, motivating and directly linked to practice. As well as gaining research skills, staff gained in confidence, questioning and problem-solving. They also understood much more about the learners' perspective, both by researching learning and by the process of learning themselves. That was something Marrie and her staff appreciated in particular.

People in Marrie's school came to value the process as they grew into it and realised that it was an opportunity to examine practice in some depth. At the beginning, everyone in the team felt quite insecure about actually getting the process underway. This was when the collaborative element became very helpful because we found ourselves drawing upon our collective ideas and really having to talk a lot to share and refine our ideas.

In effect, we realised we were feeling very much like our own pupils when they set about something new and this helped us to reflect on the ways we support them in similar situations.

Overall, the programme taught us a great deal about the difficulties of research engagement and identified the things that made it work. Focusing on the positive factors, we saw how much the school culture and leadership influenced and were influenced by research engagement. Staff told us that their schools were questioning places, where everyone was encouraged to give their views and evidence was valued as a means of achieving improvement.

We also saw the importance of having mentors and guides to help research teams through the doubts and difficulties of an open-ended enquiry. The NFER researchers were often involved in advising school teams to narrow their focus and concentrate on answering specific questions. But schools often surprised us by how much they were able to achieve, given the limited time and resources available to devote to research.

We realised how important local authority staff could be in leading and bringing coherence to the project at local level, adding status to the work, enabling schools to get together and helping share the research findings. There was some clear knowledge gained about the local authority role and a number of issues and challenges identified. These related to a range of areas including competing demands on the local authority (middle tier) function, linking of the project to other strategic developments, the championing of the project and the value of research at a senior enough level, the turnover/continuity of staff, and the modes of support provided by local authority advisers to participating schools.

The experience of our research and development programme showed that becoming a research-engaged school was not just about a group of staff carrying out a research activity, but more significantly about how their schools enabled them to do this.

The evidence suggests that research-engagement involves a combination of features: dedicated resources and access to advice, collaborative teamwork, committed leadership, a supportive school culture, and a resolve to grow research communities within and beyond the school.

Other issues related to the nature of practitioner research that this work raises range from the profound (such as what is the role of reflection and evidence in professional practice) to the more specific (how can we enable schools to engage with research evidence?).

Some of the questions we are still pondering include: Is there a continuum between professional and practitioner research or are they two different things? Does practitioner research have to have a measurable impact on standards (for that read assessment results) in order to be considered worthwhile? Is there some way of building up an evidence-base of practitioner research, and if so, whose standards should apply? And if we do see merit in schools becoming research-engaged, how could this come about?

Caroline Sharp; Marrie Webster; Graham Handscomb;
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**A picture of research engagement from a
local authority perspective**

Why should teachers and schools engage in enquiry and research? Is such activity simply a laudable extra if schools can spare the time after completing the 'day job' of school improvement? Is it an indulgence that they can ill-afford? Or can a case be made for research being a core feature of reflective practice, making a clear contribution to improving the quality of learning and teaching and raising standards. And in the thick of this debate what is the role of a local authority? Is it the local authority's business to spend its limited time and resources promoting enquiry and research in schools?

Essex Local Authority in England has located itself firmly within this set of considerations and has made the promotion of enquiry and research in the Essex educational community a priority. During the 1990s it worked in partnership with a number of higher education institutions and schools to generate research based knowledge on, for instance, primary school improvement, and the flow of this knowledge has fed back into the Local Authority to stimulate further investment and commitment to enquiry and research. Over time this has led to two related developments. On the one hand the Authority has promoted school and teacher engagement in research. At the same time it has aimed to 'practice what it has preached' by endeavouring to make research an embedded feature of the way it carries out its own business in educational planning, management and development of policy and practice. So, for example, each priority within Essex's Education Development Plan (one of the Local Authority's major strategic documents) is justified on the basis of research evidence, and activities within the priorities are carried out using modes of enquiry.

This sustained commitment over a period of a decade or so is reflected in respective Government Inspection reports on the Local Education Authority.

Research is an established feature of the LEA and Essex schools. There is an appropriate emphasis on school self-review, reflecting a central aim of the school improvement functions of the LEA. More unusually there is also a strong emphasis on school-based research, reflecting a developing tradition of encouraging headteachers and teachers to gather their own data from within school to inform aspects of their practice.

Ofsted Inspection Report on Essex LEA, January 2001

The Local Authority has cultivated a strong research ethos, and a strong research base reinforces its sharply focused actions and activities.

Ofsted Inspection Report on Essex LEA, January 2005

Rather than resting on its laurels the Authority chose to invest further in this priority. In 2002 it established the Essex Forum for Learning and Research Enquiry (FLARE) which is made up of teachers and headteachers who, together with senior local authority managers, operate as a strategic group to promote enquiry and research in Essex schools and beyond.

One FLARE development has been to develop the concept of the Research-engaged School. This has since been taken up in a national investigation sponsored by the National Foundation for Educational Research, the Local Government Association, the National College for School Leadership, the General Teaching Council in England and five local authorities. The outcomes of this research have just been published (Sharp *et al.*, 2005). This work concentrated not just on teachers and others doing research in isolated pockets but rather on what there was in schools that might help to empower and sustain such activity and ensure it contributes to a culture of enquiry and development. One example that illustrates this feature is given on the attached case study from a participating Essex school.

Despite such developments the role of the local authority in actively promoting enquiry and research is a potentially problematic issue. The recent history of local government has seen a pendulum swinging movement from local authorities providing support in the mid 90s to a focus mainly on challenge and intervention in inverse proportion to success, to an acceptance again in recent times that local authorities have a support and development role, alongside the challenge they provide (although this may become unclear in the context of School Improvement Partners and the *single conversation*). If local authorities are to play a significant part in schools and their communities developing cultures of enquiry, then they must believe in the value of research themselves and provide an affirming ethos which promotes the merits of research. Authorities are in a strong position to use their strategic position to help schools connect their enquiries with other priorities and developments. They can facilitate research partnerships and networks and make links with other agencies. Above all local authorities have a valuable contribution to make in providing critique and positive challenge, asking questions like the following.

- What difference is teacher engagement making to the school as a whole?
- Is the research just the activity of a coterie of enthusiasts or is it more widespread and universal?
- Has the research 'stickability' (that is, will it have some persisting presence and influence) or is it dependant on the lone 'hero-researcher'?
- Is it at the core of school improvement...and how would one know?

All of this essentially rests on the premise that local authorities commit and pin their colours to the mast of enquiry and research. In a time when authorities are needing to question what they are doing, adopting a research orientation can provide a rigorous evidence base to determine what are the core elements of their work and what makes a difference. Such a commitment can also help to provide a secure flow-of-knowledge platform to address major and often thinly researched developments like *Building Schools for the Future* (DfES 2003) and *Every Child Matters* (Ofsted 2005a and b). Above all it can help to inculcate within local authority communities a questioning and enquiry outlook which can only benefit the children that we are there to serve.

This paper is developed from:

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Graham Handscomb
January 2006



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Research-engagement from a school's viewpoint

Why are we interested in doing research?

My school is acknowledged as a successful school and wants to build upon that foundation to become an 'excellent' school. We decided, therefore, that engagement in action-based research or enquiry offered a means to reflect on our work, and a context that would bring fresh disciplines and practices to challenge us as individuals.

We felt that, by entering into different areas of activity as adults, we could explore new perspectives that would enrich our work and overall performance as a school. Within the culture of rapid change in the education sector in England, we had also a strong, evolving desire to take control of our own identity as a school and to shape our own future. We felt that this would help us to clarify our priorities and, by extending our own thinking and learning, to become more effective in our support of pupils and their specific needs.

The Research-engaged Schools Project offered an invigorating opportunity for staff to experience professional interaction both within and away from the school. It seemed to offer a way of stimulating teachers' appetite for ideas and curiosity about factors underpinning learning and teaching. In short, it offered a means of moving forward, and we submitted a bid to our local education authority to become involved.

In choosing a focus for our school's research, my teaching colleagues and I decided to explore the impact of rhyme and rhythm on children's developing speaking and listening skills. This is an area of general interest in English schools and of significant relevance across all areas of the curriculum. In my school, we have been aware for some time that children start school knowing far fewer traditional rhymes than they used to, and we wanted to look at the implications of this in more detail.

How did we get started?

In setting up our enquiry, we found it invaluable to be linked with a mentor from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) who was able to guide us towards a focused research question. We did find it hard to choose one clear focus at first because it was tempting to want to follow up several aspects of the same subject.

In addition, we had the support of a Principal Advisor in our Education Authority, who facilitated local meetings with other colleagues in nearby schools and provided contexts in which we could consider a range of research skills and practices and so gradually refine our thinking.

I found it very helpful to be part of this early process in my role as headteacher because I was able to understand and identify with the needs of the teachers who were to conduct the core activities of the research work. I could sense when and in what ways support was needed, whether it was a matter of entering fully into discussions about how to get started, or of the need to appreciate the level of practical support that would be necessary.

Observations about the process

Our experience has been very valuable. One teacher spoke of the 'feel good' factor that she experienced throughout the research. Essentially, the project provided the opportunity to talk in depth about issues very pertinent to our work and this was very helpful indeed. I was often surprised by the fervour and enthusiasm shown by members of staff during professional debates. The project released new energies and perspectives on areas of common interest, even though all concerned had other substantial interests and responsibilities at the time. Discussion with peers was extremely important throughout and often transported people away from the day-to-day minutiae and practicalities of their routine work.

From the start, the provision of time was the most important factor. Teachers needed frequent sessions of a reasonable length to think and work together because, as well as moving on with the stages of the project, they benefited a great deal from time to recapitulate and to debate issues as they occurred. Flexibility in curriculum arrangements and timetabling was also essential so that they could carry out research investigations and specific programmes with particular groups of pupils.

Providing sufficient time for teachers to work collaboratively was an important feature of financial planning and preparation. The research involvement had to feature prominently in school development planning quite some time *before* the actual project began in order that resources could be made available.

As headteacher, I felt that it was important that I showed interest in the research work and accorded it high status on the agendas of staff meetings, in reports to the governing body of the school and in newsletters to the school community in general. This raised the profile of the staff as researchers and provided ways in which we could keep everyone in touch with what was happening. It also helped to demonstrate to the community beyond the school that we feel it is important to question and challenge our own thinking in the interests of pupils.

I was anxious too that, in a relatively small teaching staff, the two teachers leading the work were not perceived as being set apart from the others. For similar reasons, we asked for help or advice from other colleagues with various aspects of the ongoing activities and worked hard to retain the *relevance* of the overall programme to the job in which we are *all* engaged daily.

At the outset, the two main researchers doubted their capabilities to some extent. They were confident practitioners in the classroom but hesitant about how to return to this type of investigative activity where they could exercise a high degree of autonomy in deciding what to do. They needed reassurance from the sources outside the school and moral support from their colleagues and me in order to get started. Very quickly, however, their mindset shifted to one of being in control of what they wanted to do and not one where they took comfort in a degree of suggestion and direction.

This increase in the confidence and the self esteem of the teachers concerned was probably the most satisfying outcome from my perspective because I firmly believe that this will lead to benefits for pupils.

Staff said that the experience of being a learner again had reminded them of what it felt like to be uncertain. This strengthened their empathy with pupils in the same position and caused them to evaluate and reflect upon how well they supported them in classroom work. So it seems that engagement beyond the daily commitments of teaching certainly refreshes people's awareness and insight into what they are doing.

Providing time, space and the opportunity to engage in this type of enquiry proved very stimulating to those concerned and they are keen to repeat the experience with a new area of research activity. Nevertheless, it took a while at the start of the project for teachers to accept that being away from their classes for the research activities was a *valid* use of their time. This feeling gradually dissipated with the realization that time spent delving deeply into aspects of children's learning really informed their ongoing work and was valued by others.

Where do we go from here?

Our experience has led to an increased and deeper awareness of pupils' needs with regard to the development of speaking and listening skills. We have also tried new activities and learning tools in conjunction with our on-site Junior School.

Certainly, we want to continue to include a questioning and investigative approach that informs our practice and maintains the momentum of professional engagement and interaction that has resulted from this experience.

There are several aspects of entering into research activities that we will approach slightly differently in a new context purely because of the benefit of hindsight. Some of these concern the technical or logistical elements of organizing ourselves to match the nature of the investigation in hand. In short, we are learning from direct experience as our pupils do.

We are more aware than we were that much of the ongoing process of teaching incorporates elements of enquiry and investigation that might justifiably be interpreted as 'research'. However, we know now that there is much to be gained from sharing this kind of work more widely with colleagues in and beyond the school.

For the future, we intend to encourage short investigations and surveys as a more frequent, easily achievable and ongoing feature of monitoring and evaluation work in leadership roles in the school. Also, we'd like to develop the facility for longer term engagement with research and enquiry activities and build this into the profile of teaching posts.

Our experiences have allowed us to feel the satisfaction that results from being *in control of our own progress and the chance to link our research to the particular characteristics and context of our school.*

We feel strongly that schools are invigorated by a sense of ownership of the strategies and approaches they adopt in order to improve the quality of learning and teaching they offer.

Action-based research definitely can broaden horizons for the school community in a powerful way, as has proved to be the case in our school. It has definitely been a significant and very worthwhile element of our drive to enter a new arena of school effectiveness.

Marrie Webster
Headteacher/Hatfield Peverel Infant School, Essex, England.
December 2005

In each school we wanted to get some research underway, but also more importantly we wanted to discover what features of the school were significant in supporting teachers to conduct the research activity. So there was a twofold approach which involved reflecting on the research being undertaken on the one hand, whilst also looking at how this sat within the school, and what helped and hindered, on the other. It's been a fascinating journey which has brought some clear illumination in some areas and has raised tantalising questions and scope for further investigation in others.

*Graham Handscomb; Caroline Sharp; Marrie Webster
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