

# Research Leads: current practice, future prospects





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## Education Development Trust

Education Development Trust, established over 40 years ago as the Centre for British Teaching and later known as CfBT Education Trust, is a large educational organisation providing education services for public benefit in the UK and internationally. We aspire to be the world's leading provider of education services, with a particular interest in school effectiveness.

Our work involves school improvement through inspection, school workforce development and curriculum design for the UK's Department for Education, local authorities and an increasing number of independent and state schools, free schools and academies. We provide services direct to learners in our schools.

Internationally we have successfully implemented education programmes for governments in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia, and work on projects funded by donors such as the Department for International Development, the European Commission, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the World Bank and the US Agency for International Development, in low- and middle-income countries.

Surpluses generated by our operations are reinvested in our educational research programme.

Please visit [www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com](http://www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com) for more information.

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## CfBT Schools Trust

CfBT Schools Trust (CST) is a family of 19 primary and secondary schools, roughly clustered in the East Midlands and Thames Valley. CfBT Schools Trust's vision is to draw out the best in every child, whatever their background or ability; developing the whole person so that each learner can embark on life beyond school as an active member of society with a lifelong love of learning.

CST was set up by the then CfBT Education Trust (now Education Development Trust) in January 2011 to channel its wealth of school improvement expertise directly into the classrooms of a group of schools under the umbrella of a multi-academy trust.

The guiding principles of CST mirror the values and moral purpose of Education Development Trust. These values shape the way we work with individual schools, as well as the way the schools work with one another, to try to provide the best possible start in life for all our learners.

CST believes that teaching and learning should be based on 'what works'. As an evidence-informed organisation we value and encourage the further study and research of our teachers, and every school in our trust has a Research Lead responsible for supporting the use of research in their school.

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## researchED

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

Visit [www.workingoutwhatworks.com](http://www.workingoutwhatworks.com) for more information.

## About the authors

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Rachel Singer is the Professional Development Manager at CfBT Schools Trust (CST). She supports CST's 19 schools with professional development opportunities for teachers and leaders as well as with their recruitment of staff. Rachel began her career teaching English and History at a secondary school in London. Since joining Education Development Trust, she has worked in Business Development (based in Education Development Trust's Middle East and North Africa office) and project-managed the development of Education Development Trust's Schools Partnership Programme before moving to work directly with schools as part of the Schools Trust team.

## The three reports

There are three reports in this series:

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



Above: The three reports in this series





## Introduction

This report was conceived as one of three publications that collectively provide a commentary on research awareness and research use within schools in England. The first in the suite, a report authored by Tony McAleavy, deals with difficult questions such as whether teaching should be seen as a form of evidence-based practice; whether there is enough good research to guide day-to-day practice in school and whether schools should be generating and using evidence of their own. The second, by Tom Bennett, is a reflective essay on the relatively new idea of a school-based Research Lead and what this role might look like in practice. Tom welcomes the diversity of possible interpretations of the role and provides a taxonomy based on some contrasting ways of doing research coordination. Tom's report has been influenced by the growing community of Research Leads who have emerged from within the researchED community that he has promoted.

This third report in the series presents findings from a small-scale, detailed study of teachers who are operating as their school's Research Lead. The small scale of the study is significant. We contacted over 2,000 members of the researchED social media community, fully aware that many of these people were not acting as whole-school research coordinators. Of the 2,000 contacts, 55 responses were received from individuals who had both completed our questionnaire and appeared to be operating in practice as a whole-school research coordinator. It seems that the number of active school-based Research Leads is still relatively few. Nevertheless, this small pioneering group is engaged in a serious enterprise. They are attempting, in different ways, to create a new form of teacher professionalism based on research engagement.

The report presents a short summary of the key findings and methods used in this study before presenting the findings in detail. Conclusions and final points are made at the end of this report.

### **Dr Anna Riggall**

Research Manager at Education Development Trust

### **Rachel Singer**

Professional Development Manager at CfBT Schools Trust



# Key findings

**The Research Lead role is at an embryonic stage of development. Most Research Leads are new and have been performing this role for less than two years. While the role is new, the work of this group of pioneering Research Leads is already paying dividends, particularly in the area of improved whole-school professional development. Our interviews with Research Leads suggested that at its best the Research Lead role can greatly enhance professional development and support an improved professional culture. There was evidence in some schools of more evidence-informed school policymaking. Approximately a third of the surveyed Research Leads indicated that they had real influence over the way decisions were being made at a school level.**

As one Research Lead said:

*'When we look to make significant curriculum change and development within school, we would look to be informed by the latest thinking, research or ideas.'*

There is a large degree of informality about the role of Research Lead. The schools represented in the survey are almost certainly untypical in that they have an unusually enthusiastic advocate for evidence in the staffroom. And yet, even in these 'early adopter' schools, the arrangements for whole-school research engagement are often fragile and key person dependent. Most Research Leads have taken on the role, not because of an organisational commitment to the use of evidence, but because of their own personal interest and enthusiasm. Research Leads are more likely to be found in secondary rather than primary schools. Over three quarters of the respondents to our survey were based in secondary schools. The smaller scale of primary schools may make it more difficult to sustain this role without some form of clustering arrangement or other school-to-school partnership.

Our cohort of pioneering Research Leads are enthusiasts and self-starters. They rarely have job titles that indicate their research responsibility. The accountabilities of the role are not typically formally recognised in a job description. In only eight cases out of 55 did our respondents indicate that their role had been created 'through a change in school policy'. The position may be relatively informal but these are often influential members of staff. Many of the Research Leads are in

Approximately a third of the surveyed Research Leads indicated that they had real influence over the way decisions were being made at a school level



senior positions within their schools and they often have other compatible responsibilities, particularly in the areas of teaching and learning and whole-school responsibility for professional development.

What do Research Leads do in practice? According to our survey the most common Research Lead activities are as follows:

- accessing research findings and sharing these with colleagues
- supporting colleagues in school to carry out their own research
- providing evidence-based advice to the headteacher or senior leadership team
- evaluating the school's provision in light of research evidence.

Different forms of partnership beyond the school are having an impact on the work of Research Leads. The context of multi-school partnership is particularly important to many of them. Some were coordinating research across a group of schools. All of the Research Leads that we interviewed were in schools where the partnership context was important. Almost all of them were positive about the value that derived from their partnership working. Partnership with universities was seen as an important but sometimes problematic aspect of the role for many Research Leads.

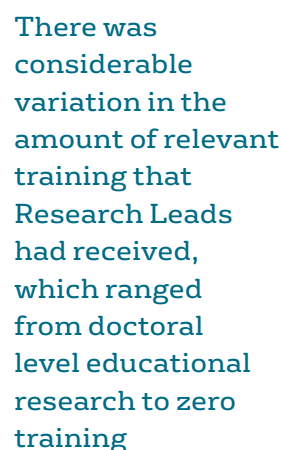
We asked the Research Leads about their concerns. The majority of participants positively agreed that they had the backing of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), were confident and had sufficient authority for the role. The area where concern was most widespread was in connection with having sufficient resources to help colleagues. In other important areas – training, sufficient time for the role and access to academic resources – a substantial minority expressed concerns.

Respondents were keen to point out the preconditions that helped them to operate effectively as school or partnership Research Lead. Critically these preconditions included having access to evidence, working with colleagues who were open to change and support from the SLT. The importance of SLT support came through particularly strongly in the interviews.

There was considerable variation in the amount of relevant training that Research Leads had received, which ranged from doctoral level educational research to zero training. The level of qualification or training required to be an effective Research Lead was a matter of contention among the Research Leads interviewed.

The evaluation of the impact of research engagement was at a very early stage of development in many schools. There was considerable variation in the extent to which the Research Leads had a clear plan for the future development of research engagement in their schools. Those Research Leads who were operating in a more strategic way identified such priorities as:

- the need to formalise the role
- strengthening the links between research and professional development
- engaging staff more systematically with academic research
- strengthening the relationship between research activity and SLT decision-making.



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# Research design

**This small-scale investigation of how the Research Lead role is being interpreted by pioneering practitioners in schools adopted a simple mixed-methods approach.**

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## Aims

The overarching aims were to generate insights about:

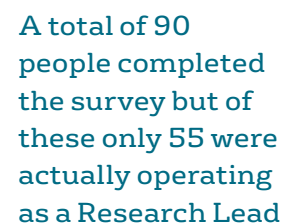
- how the role of the Research Lead in school is developing in practice
  - the variety of ways in which practitioners in schools are interpreting the role.
- 

## Survey

An electronic questionnaire was sent to all those people who had attended or registered interest in any of the researchED events. This total number was slightly in excess of 2,000. Of this number we knew that many were not actually Research Leads. In fact it was estimated that there were a maximum of 300 Research Leads within the researchED community. This estimate was based on the number of attendees at specialist researchED Research Lead events.

The email text invited only those individuals who were currently acting as a Research Lead in their school to respond. Two follow-up emails were sent reminding people to complete the survey if they met the criteria and if they had not already done so. The survey was also available to complete at the Brighton researchED Research Lead event held in May 2015 and a link was posted on the researchED website.

A total of 90 people completed the survey but of these only 55 were actually operating as a Research Lead (even if this was not the formal title of their role). The remainder were enthusiastic and interested, without actually being currently engaged in the role. The final analysis and subsequent selection of interviewees were based on the sub-group of the 55 respondents. Of these, most said they were senior leaders (23) or middle leaders (15). Nine said they had no leadership responsibility, of whom one was a teaching assistant and three were non-teaching



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members of staff. The Research Leads were mainly working in secondary schools (43), with only a minority in the primary phase.

The survey asked a mixture of open and closed questions designed to explore the:

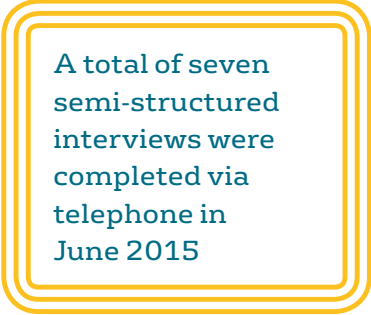
- types of school, partnership arrangements and the impact of these on the Research Lead role
  - length of time individuals had been the Research Lead and level of formality of the role
  - recruitment mechanisms operated and position Research Leads held in schools
  - how the role was being interpreted
  - knowledge and confidence of those acting as Research Lead
  - successes, impact and support that Research Leads felt they experienced
  - challenges that Research Leads experienced and the ways in which they were responding
  - future plans and aspirations for the Research Lead role in schools.
- 

## Semi-structured interviews

Following the close of the survey, we selected a shortlist of 10 interviewees who had indicated they would be happy to be invited to take part in follow-up interviews. The list was created to represent a range of primary and secondary practitioners (but skewed toward secondary where the role was more prevalent), a range of time in post as the Research Lead and a mix of those operating in schools where local partnerships were important, as well as those in schools operating in relative 'research isolation'.

A total of seven semi-structured interviews were completed via telephone in June 2015. The final group consisted of five secondary teachers and two primary teachers. All told us they were part of the senior leadership team (SLT) in some capacity – one was the SENCo (primary), four were assistant headteachers, one was a deputy headteacher, and one did not specify their role on the SLT. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed by the research team.

The telephone interviews followed up on the survey responses, asking for more detail about such matters as the impact of partnerships with other schools, the interpretation of the role and the sorts of things that were either helping or hindering the priorities they had been addressing.



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# Research Leads and the perception of the role in schools

This section presents findings from the research relating to the nature of the Research Lead role in schools, including recruitment and organisational structure.

The picture that emerges from the data is that most Research Leads are relatively new in post and many have taken on the role not because of an organisational commitment to the use of evidence, but because of their own interest and enthusiasm. In nearly half the schools represented in the study, the recruitment methods leading to the creation of the post were not driven by a strategic decision that such a post was required. Few of the Research Leads have job titles that indicate research responsibility and the accountabilities of the role are rarely formally recognised in a job description. At the same time there are several instances where a more strategic approach is evident and where the role has a formal status in school. There are also interesting patterns evident in the ways that individuals interpret the role. Many of the Research Leads are in senior positions within their schools and they often have other responsibilities perceived as similar or compatible, particularly in the area of whole-school responsibility for teaching and learning and for professional development. Some schools are attempting to use the Research Lead as a part of an approach to the core business of whole-school improvement.

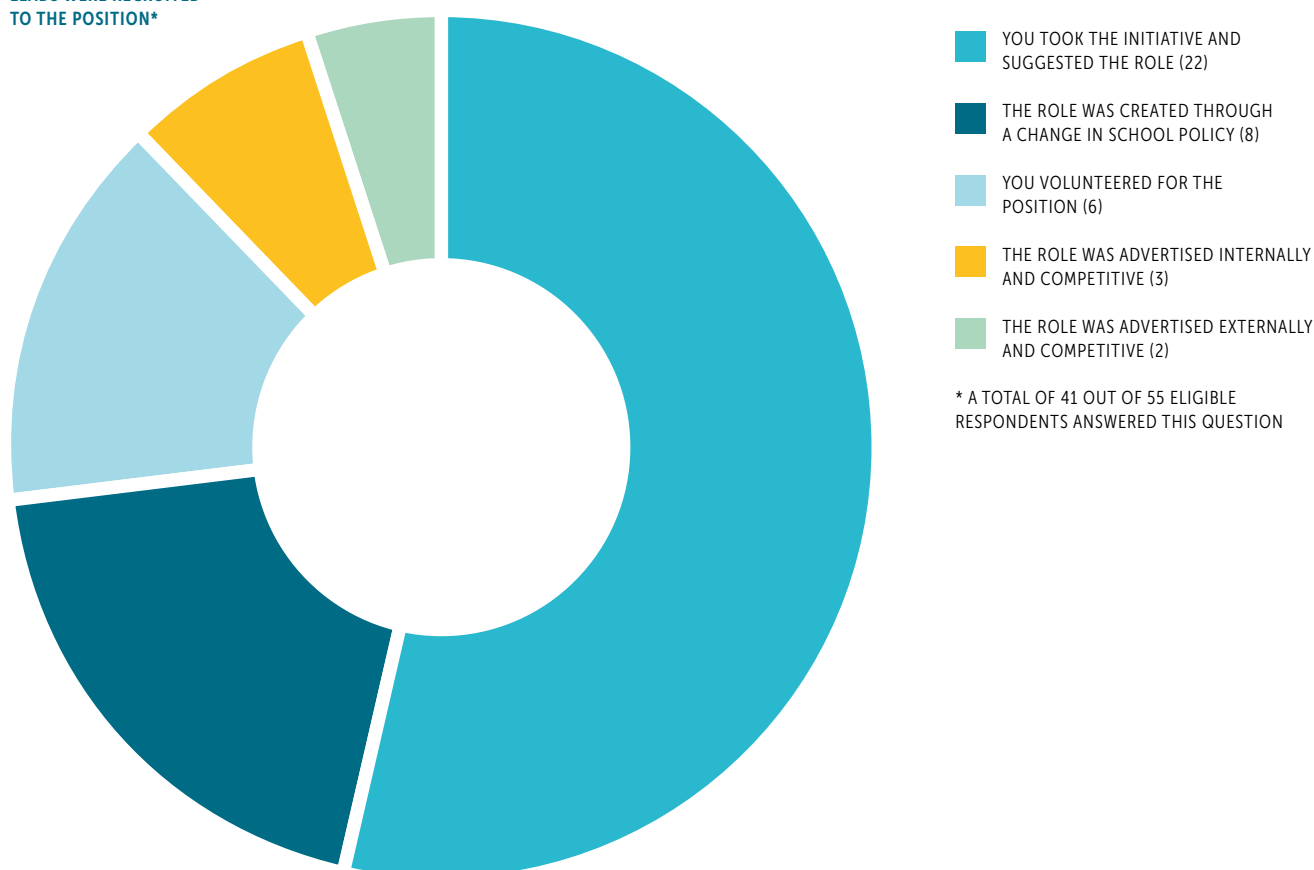
The picture that emerges from the data is that most Research Leads are relatively new in post and many have taken on the role not because of an organisational commitment to the use of evidence, but because of their own interest and enthusiasm

## Length of time as Research Lead and recruitment strategies

There has clearly been a recent increase in the phenomenon of the Research Lead. Data from the survey showed that most Research Leads had only been performing this role for between six months and two years. A minority had been undertaking the role for much longer, with three saying they had been acting in the position of Research Lead for between seven and ten years.

We asked the survey respondents how they were recruited to the role. Most stated that they had taken the initiative personally and asked the school management that they be allowed to act as Research Lead in school. This was not the case in all schools – in eight cases respondents described how the role had been created ‘through a change in school policy’, and in five cases the role was advertised either internally or externally. One Research Lead stated that: ‘A secondment was advertised internally

FIGURE 1: HOW RESEARCH LEADS WERE RECRUITED TO THE POSITION\*



to SLT. I applied and suggested the role as part of my vision. The idea of teacher research had been set out in the whole school priorities.’ The responses are shown proportionally in Figure 1.

We have, therefore, two types of Research Lead: the individual enthusiast who has taken the initiative and the post-holder who has been appointed as part of a whole-school commitment to more systematic use of evidence. The first type of Research Lead constitutes the great majority. Bennett has rightly pointed out that there is no single blueprint or script for Research Leads, but an obvious question is how far well-intentioned volunteers can drive whole-school research engagement or how far there is a need for an element of ‘top down’ strategy.

### Formal recognition of the Research Lead role

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the frequently self-initiated nature of the role, there was a high degree of informality about the status of many of the Research Leads. For the great majority of Research Leads who participated in our survey, the role was not formally reflected in job descriptions (38 out of 55). This reinforces the picture of a high degree of informality about the research leadership function in all except a minority of schools.

Only eleven participants said that the role was described formally in their job descriptions. In free comment boxes and in the in-depth interviews, Research Leads explained how they thought they were perceived by others in school. All except one of the interviewed Research Leads described how the term 'Research Lead' was not part of their job title. One primary school Research Lead explained that such a label would not be recognised within her school:

*'If you phoned my head and said "Who's your Research Lead?" he wouldn't say "Oh, it's Annie." He wouldn't know. He would say, "Nobody".'*

Another interviewee explained that in the school there was not 'technically [...] a Research Lead because we don't have that title.'

There must be questions about the potential efficacy of a Research Lead whose role is not entirely visible at school level. The combination of restricted profile and the frequent absence of strategic commitment must surely reduce the ability of the Research Lead to be an integral component of an evidence-informed school and a self-improving system.

### **The Research Lead role is often combined with other (often SLT) roles**

The questionnaire gave participants an opportunity to comment about the way the role had come into being and this topic was also explored in the in-depth interviews. Comments identified a tendency to link the role to other responsibilities deemed compatible with research and evidence engagement. Connections were made between responsibilities for teaching and learning, professional development and SLT membership.

Most of our in-depth interviewees said that the research role 'sat naturally' within their pre-existing role and many of the free comments in response to the questionnaire reflected that the role had 'evolved' based on pre-existing responsibilities.

Several of the in-depth interviewees were the leadership member responsible either for teaching and learning or for curriculum and assessment.

A deputy headteacher explained that the role sat naturally with a responsibility to 'develop a professional learning curriculum [which is] evidence based and research led'.

An assistant headteacher responsible for teaching and learning said that 'one of [the school's] key threads is about reflective enquiry' so the Research Lead role was best positioned with a senior member of staff.

All those interviewed felt that the Research Lead role complemented their other SLT responsibilities. One of the in-depth interviewees was the school SENCo, who felt particularly strongly that the two roles were highly compatible and mutually reinforcing, saying that the SENCo is someone within the school with 'a foot in every puddle', someone who 'meet[s] outside agencies who've got different skills and knowledge' and someone who is constantly 'looking for information and problem solving'. This Research Lead felt that the skills and attributes required to be a successful SENCo were very well aligned to those needed to be a Research Lead.

The connection between research and SLT responsibilities such as oversight of teaching and learning is interesting and potentially important. By linking the

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Research Lead role to school management it is perhaps possible to put research at the heart of school improvement. The 'downside' is that research leadership may become subsumed into a managerialist agenda based on external accountability pressures and a restricting and restricted list of whole-school development priorities rather than a more inclusive, more democratic agenda.

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## Interpretation of the Research Lead role in schools

Research Leads who participated in the survey were able to describe in detail the work in which they had been engaged. We asked them to enlarge upon the potential role categories identified by Tom Bennett in the second report in the series. The work they described was complex and often involved working across their own school as well as with other schools and institutions. Universities offered valued support but presented some specific challenges around ways of working.

The data we gathered raises some interesting questions:

- Do Research Leads have the skills required, given the complexity of the role?
  - Is it enough to have a single Research Lead? What can be done to extend the responsibility for research engagement and evidence-led practices more widely among staff?
  - Is it better to conceptualise the Research Lead role as a school-based or a cluster-based position?
  - Are there significant differences between the way in which research leadership should be organised at the primary phase compared to the secondary phase?
- 

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## What Research Leads do

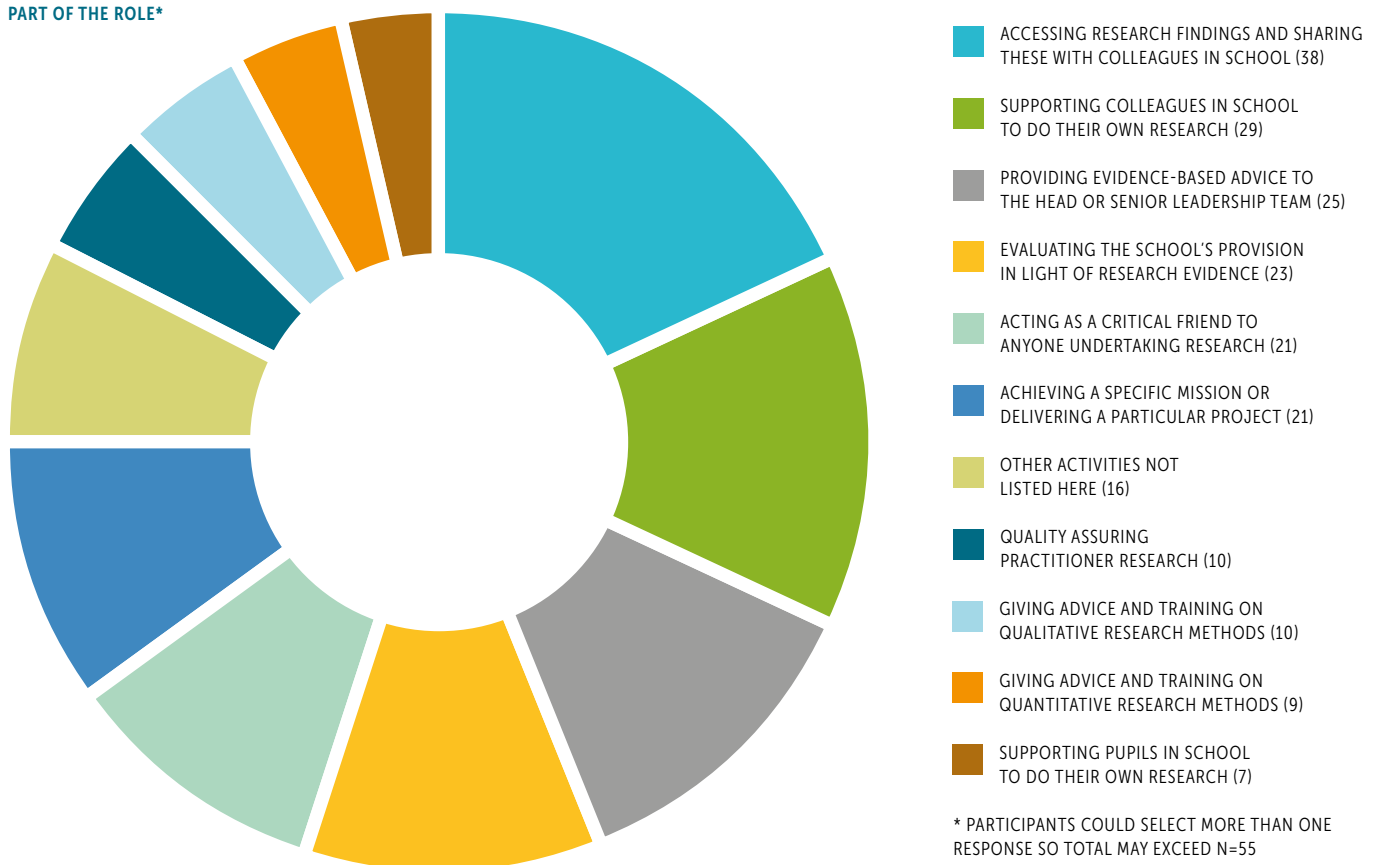
There is considerable scope to interpret the Research Lead role in different ways. In the second report in this series, Tom Bennett outlined five possible but contrasting interpretations of the role, acknowledging that these were not necessarily mutually exclusive. He distinguished between Research Lead as gatekeeper, 'consigliere' or special adviser, critical friend, auditor and project manager. Tom's categorisation was based on his own views and the debate within the researchED community.

The survey data from this small sample of schools appeared to confirm provisionally the empirical validity of Tom Bennett's categorisation. Participants were asked to describe what they did against suggested categories of action that were an expanded version of Tom's taxonomy. Figure 2 shows the response from the survey data which included several examples relating to each role.

Most Research Leads told us that they:

- accessed research findings and shared these with colleagues (38)
  - supported colleagues in school to do their own research (29)
  - provided evidence-based advice to the headteacher or SLT (25)
-

FIGURE 2: WHAT RESEARCH LEADS DO AS PART OF THE ROLE\*



- evaluated the school's provision in light of research evidence (23)
- acted as a critical friend to anyone undertaking research (21)
- were engaged in a specific mission or delivering a particular project (21)
- provided quality assurance related to colleagues' research work (10).

Smaller numbers were engaged in giving advice and training on qualitative research methods (10) and providing advice and training on quantitative research methods (9). Relatively few were engaged in supporting pupils in school to do their own research (7).

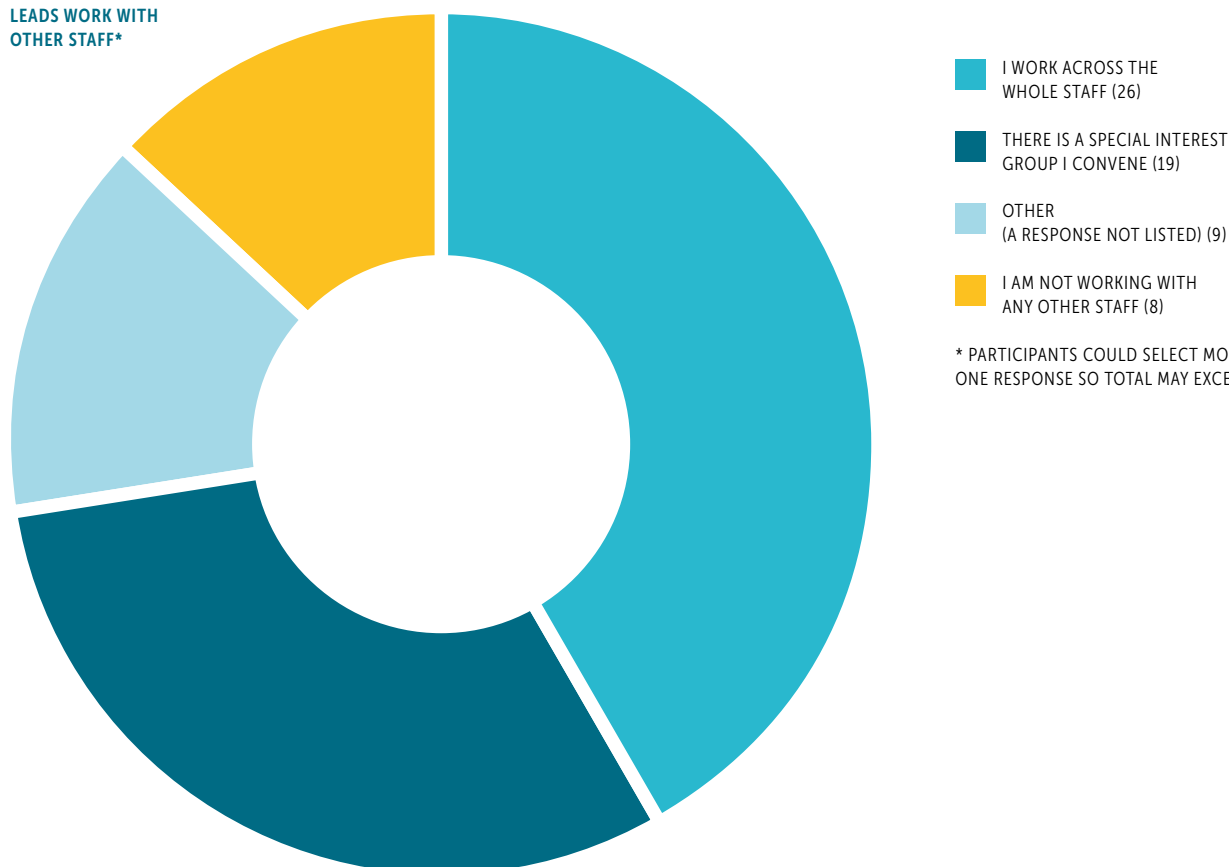
In response to open-ended questionnaire items, sixteen participants said they also engaged in other activities as part of the Research Lead role, for example:

*'Designing research projects from small scale to larger scale. Establishing networks to share effective practice and encourage ongoing innovation to build capacity. Designing a process-based CPD programme across schools.'*

*'Facilitating university faculty to conduct their own research within our school.'*

*'Ensuring all teachers and TAs are engaged in Action Research each year, and present at internal sessions at the end of the academic year.'*

FIGURE 3:  
HOW RESEARCH  
LEADS WORK WITH  
OTHER STAFF\*



\* PARTICIPANTS COULD SELECT MORE THAN ONE RESPONSE SO TOTAL MAY EXCEED N=55

This large range of activities, and the depth of research-specific knowledge that would be required to conduct these tasks, raises questions about the level of skill that Research Leads possess and how confident they feel in their ability to deliver. This will be revisited in the next section.

Figure 3 above summarises responses from the questionnaire relating to the way in which Research Leads work with other school staff. Almost half report that they work across the whole staff. By contrast, eight of the Research Leads reported that they were not currently working with any other staff. Of the nine that said they worked in other ways, four went on to describe working across partnerships and networks beyond their schools.

### Is one Research Lead enough?

Several of the Research Leads interviewed promoted the idea of a distributed responsibility for research engagement based on the need to share responsibility for research across the school. One went further, questioning the idea of the individual Research Lead, and suggesting that responsibility for research should be taken on by every single member of staff, with certain key projects led by certain individuals.

Several of the Research Leads interviewed promoted the idea of a distributed responsibility for research engagement based on the need to share responsibility for research across the school



### **A whole school approach: sharing the responsibility for research**

One Research Lead spoke about the need to share responsibility for research engagement across staff in the school:

*'I don't know whether the Research Lead should be one person. I think what you want ultimately is lots of people who are engaged in research. I quite like the idea that everyone who's doing a Masters here will be actively engaged and they will be sharing what they're doing. You know, they will bring something back from the Masters every time they went to classes. What you want ultimately is lots of staff to be in a position where they can [support other staff in developing research] rather than just one Research Lead.'*

Another Research Lead agreed, calling for leadership of research engagement at every level:

*'We need to make more independent leaders of research so that the research doesn't come through just say one or two people, like myself and Mrs Smith, but it's seen to be a really healthy part of everybody's role. I think it's about creating leaders at all levels in research. We need to have key leaders who will drive different projects of research forward.'*

**Collaborative research: a mechanism for driving sector-led self-improvement**

One Research Lead discussed the collaborative research undertaken with two of their feeder primary schools over the last two years:

*'For two years we have run a cross-phase primary piece of reflected enquiry. One secondary person worked with two primary colleagues. [They did not use a] full lesson study model in the first year but elements of it: they observed each other teaching and looked at the feedback. That was written up and formed part of our reflective enquiry booklet at the end of the year. The second year we did it again as a pure lesson study which focused on differentiation. We did two rounds of lesson study – one round took place in the secondary and one round took place in the primary.'*

This interviewee saw a huge benefit in this cross-phase work. When asked whether partnership work was beneficial, the Research Lead responded:

*'Yes, one hundred percent. I think one of the biggest difficulties in schools is around the transition [from primary to secondary]; when we really look into our transition work properly, what you've got is a lot of students who repeat things that they've already done. One of the key things we've found from the first two years of doing reflected enquiry with the primaries is that they are very good at skilling up the children to be independent and we found that when they come in to secondary we de-skill them rather than developing the skills they've already got.'*

## School partnerships and the impact on the Research Lead role

For many of the participants in the survey, the focus of their role was not just the individual school but some sort of school partnership context. Nearly a third of participants (16) indicated that larger, formal groupings were also important to the way they worked. Different partnership relationships, such as teaching school alliances, multi-academy trusts, federations or subject networks, were mentioned:

*'[I am] working with the maths hub and drip-feeding into our own school.'*

*'I work across clusters of schools and in partner schools.'*

The survey indicated that partnership arrangements were growing in importance. Most of the participating Research Leads were from schools in some form of formal partnership (37). Of those in partnership the majority thought that this had impacted on the Research Lead role (24/37). Twenty said they were part of a teaching school alliance (TSA), seven were part of a multi-academy trust and four were part of a federation.

The impacts of partnerships on the Research Lead role took a variety of forms, including:

- shared research activity across schools:

*'Partnership has just been developed; however, as part of this we are looking at the sharing of lesson study and development of action research across different contexts. The other main collaboration is on the professional learning of staff and developing research groups with shared interests (e.g. assessment).'*

- support visits and shared resources:

*'Visiting schools and teachers regularly, exposure to settings, access to policy and research team and networking.'*

- linking research to a partnership approach to Initial Teacher Education (ITE):

*'My role is leading on ITE across a federation and exploring research opportunities for trainees, as well as more general ITE research.'*

Partnership work also brought challenges. The partnership context for research on occasion constricted the specific school research activity, limiting what could be focused on at school level. At times it seemed that the needs of the partnership were placed above those of the school where the Research Lead was based.

All of the Research Leads who participated in the in-depth interviews were in schools where the partnership context was important. Almost all of them were positive about the value that derived from their partnership working.

The partnership context was professionally enriching and they discussed the privilege of being able to visit other schools and learn from others' work. Several described cross-phase working – looking at the transition from primary to secondary education.

An example of this cross-phase work and the impact it had is presented on the facing page.

The survey indicated that partnership arrangements were growing in importance

The challenges of partnership working were also identified in the in-depth interviews. Several discussed the competing and sometimes conflicting needs of different schools within any partnership: 'It's very complicated because every school has got a different priority.' Others explored the difficulties of engaging with multiple partnerships and networks. One said that working with multiple networks 'makes life quite confusing' because 'there is so much information' that 'it can be very hard to pick and mix or find the appropriate information for our context.' Others also felt that 'time is the real barrier' to effective partnership working.

The importance of partnerships and the effect of these on the Research Lead role is important. Potentially, it opens a world of possibilities in terms of placing the Research Lead at the very heart of a self-improving *system* rather than an individual institution. It also creates organisational complexity. Should there be an overall Research Lead for a partnership as well as the single Research Lead based in one school? How is it possible to reconcile an inevitable degree of competition or tension between the school and partnership levels of research engagement in terms of research priorities? Schools and partnerships need to think carefully about how to structure the responsibilities of an individual charged with research responsibility, what to ask them to focus on and what resources to make available to them.

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## Working with universities

Every Research Lead interviewed described some kind of partnership with universities, although these varied hugely in terms of the depth of, and commitment to the partnership. The interviewees described the benefits and the costs of partnership with universities. For some the relationship with universities could be mutually beneficial. Several Research Leads interviewed explained that universities were brought in to run training for staff and some schools were able to reciprocate and were 'used for university research'. Personal relationships counted for a lot. The deepest partnerships were usually found when there was a personal connection with a specific university, for example when the Research Lead was currently, or had been, involved in a Masters programme. This tended to give Research Leads access to resources, contacts and opportunities for them and their schools.

Some Research Leads expressed concerns about partnership working with universities, particularly in the area of finance. The question of finance often loomed large in discussions about university relationships. One Research Lead considered partnership with universities challenging and expensive. The relationship with the local university was described as 'fragile'; 'the reason why we stepped out of that direct relationship was first and foremost cost – it was very expensive'. One Research Lead had been exploring the possibility of a university 'accrediting [the school's] CPD or professional learning so that the people who attend it can get Masters credits for it.' However, this Research Lead expressed some frustration with the length of time the negotiations had taken and the arrangement had not yet been confirmed: 'We've found this year that the university, as great as they are, don't work at the same sort of intensity of pace as we do in a school.'



Every Research Lead interviewed described some kind of partnership with universities, although these varied hugely in terms of the depth of, and commitment to the partnership

### Strong relationships with universities

One Research Lead was in the process of completing a Masters specifically designed to train teachers in how to take up the role of Research Lead across their school. This interviewee described a strong, deep and apparently enduring partnership between the school and the university.

*'I have a very involved relationship with [our local university]. This is partly because I am going through the Masters programme, through the [University] Research Network Programme. Also, one of the directors of the [University] Centre for Teaching and Learning Research is actually part of my strategic group across the alliance.'*

*This year we had an 'Introduction to research and development' training session which was organised by myself and a colleague from [the] University ... it was essentially an introduction to what evidence-based teaching and research would be.*

*Also, because I'm a student at [the] University I have access to all the research that [they] have through their library so I collate that and can give it to teachers who are conducting research.'*

Another Research Lead who had completed a Masters in Education and Neuroscience described the important role that Research Leads can play in bridging the gap between schools and universities:

*'[It is important for school researchers to be active otherwise] research is just going to remain locked up in the universities. It's not their fault but we do have a bit of a problem with the dialogue between class teachers and researchers. The neuroscientists speak one language and the educators speak another language. When I went to do my Masters, it was to learn to be able to be the translator between the two. I think the job of the Research Lead is to be the translator between the school community and the HEIs. I think it's important that Research Leads are embedded in schools properly and that they're class teachers so that they can keep themselves fluent in the language that they're trying to translate in and out of.'*





# Knowledge, confidence and support

This section is about the knowledge, confidence levels and support that Research Leads perceive they have. Most participants in the research view these matters positively. A majority of Research Leads feel confident in the role. Importantly, they think they have the backing of the SLT. Not everyone in the role agrees and some are concerned that they lack the necessary skills. The less positive minority feel that they do not have enough time, resources or access to research to do the job. If Research Leads are to be successful then support in the form of training, SLT backing and encouragement, and the kinds of qualification and training programmes that can support them need to be made more clear and more readily available.

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## Are Research Leads adequately equipped to do what is required of them?

Participants of the survey were asked to respond to a series of statements which questioned the extent to which they:

- were confident in their ability to do the role
- believed they had the backing of the SLT
- thought they had sufficient time to do the role
- believed they had sufficient authority to do the role
- had received sufficient training
- had sufficient resources
- had effective access to academic research
- believed that professional development in their schools was strongly influenced by research.

The outcome is presented in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4: RESEARCH LEADS' KNOWLEDGE AND CONFIDENCE IN KEY AREAS\*

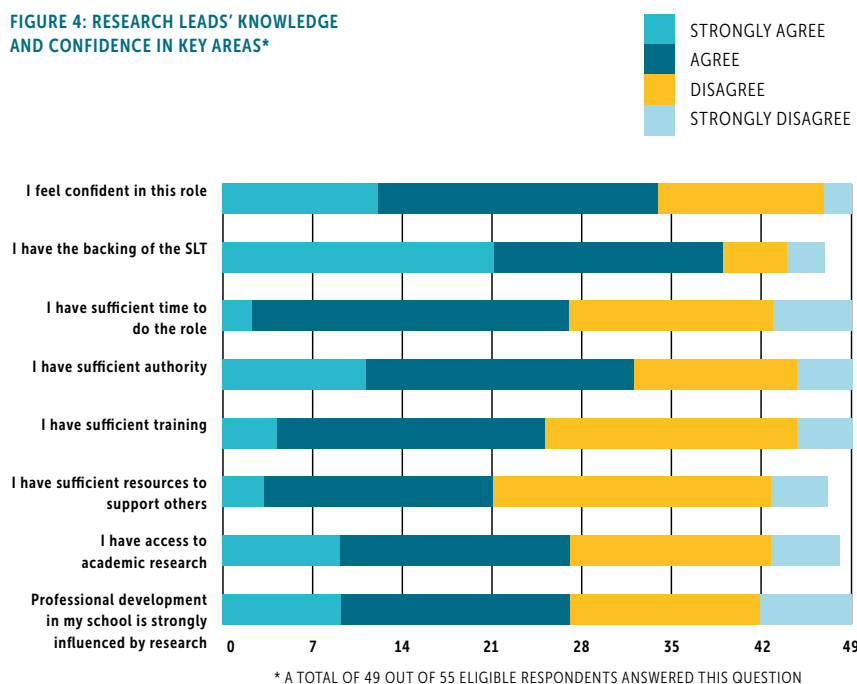


Figure 4 shows that positive responses outweighed negative responses across most statements. The single most positive response related to the extent to which Research Leads felt they had the support of the SLT. The majority of respondents also reported they were confident in the role and had sufficient authority, although a significant minority disagreed and said that they lacked confidence or authority. For the other questions there was a higher proportion of negative responses. The area where concern was most widespread was in connection with having sufficient resources to help colleagues. In other important areas – training, sufficient time for the role and access to academic resources – a substantial minority expressed concerns.

The single most positive response related to the extent to which Research Leads felt they had the support of the SLT

The question about research engagement and continuing professional development (CPD) represented an important measure of the extent to which research had become an integral part of the operations in the participating schools. There is clearly a strong potential connection between whole-school research engagement and professional learning, so this question teased out the level of research engagement maturity in the schools. In just under half the schools the relationship between the work of the Research Leads and CPD was seen as a weakness rather than a strength.

## Having the backing of the SLT

The majority of participants positively agreed that they had the backing of the SLT, were confident and had sufficient authority for the role. This message was largely reinforced through the in-depth interviews. The interviewees felt strongly that SLT



buy-in and support for research engagement were crucial to the legitimacy, and ultimately the success, of the Research Lead role. Many felt that it was essential for the Research Lead to be on the SLT: 'I wouldn't like to try and do my role if I wasn't part of the leadership team.' One said: 'My concern is that when the Research Lead is not a member of SLT, they won't have the same amount of influence.' This point was justified with reference to questions about influence and authority: 'I think that is the only way to ensure that research is given enough of a voice and has enough influence on the school as a whole.' Another Research Lead interviewee made a similar point, stating: 'Being on the leadership team you have the status for making decisions and you are included in conversations.' This interviewee stressed the importance of authority and 'credibility': 'how other staff might perceive you ... you're someone they should listen to ... what you're saying might have more credibility and more weight.' Another interviewee also talked about 'credibility' but emphasised that this derived not from questions of hierarchy but from an understanding of classroom practice: 'because I'm actually a class teacher as well, it gives [me] massive credibility. I have my responsibilities as well and this means that colleagues take you seriously.'

The interviewees felt strongly that the SLT needed to display a real commitment to research, placing it at the heart of school practice. One outlined this clearly, saying, 'It's no good just creating a post of Research Lead or advocate. If you haven't accepted [research] as an organisational value then you're not going to value the role of the Research Lead; if you [have accepted it], then you'll value that work and integrate it into your thinking and direction.'

## Qualifications and training

In addition to asking Research Leads whether they felt they had received sufficient training to conduct the role, we also asked them about the qualifications, formal or informal, that they thought were relevant and important. The responses indicate a widespread lack of training.

Fewer than half said they had had no formal research training; only a small proportion said they had had substantial research training.

For those who say they have had formal training, this came in very different forms, including: Doctoral-level study (3), Masters-level study (24), non-accredited training (5), Initial Teacher Training (8).

The level of qualification or training required to be an effective Research Lead was a matter of contention among the Research Leads interviewed. Four of those interviewed had had no formal training; the other three had undertaken or were beginning Masters-level study. Two had specifically chosen to undertake a Masters in recent years in order to support their work as a Research Lead. Those involved in Masters-level study felt strongly that further training and qualifications were integral to their ability to perform the Research Lead role, whereas several of the others felt formal training was unnecessary and that they drew their professional knowledge from elsewhere.

The level of qualification or training required to be an effective Research Lead was a matter of contention among the Research Leads interviewed

**SLT buy-in**

One Research Lead, also the deputy headteacher, explained the importance of SLT, and specifically headteacher buy-in to research engagement:

*'I think that you've got to have your leadership very much engaged with research as a sort of principle if you're going to have any sort of impact on your school. The values and the direction of the school are always going to be shaped by the head, so if you're looking to get your school as a more research-driven or evidence-based place then you've got to get your head to buy into it. So I suppose ultimately within any organisation the ultimate person who needs to be engaged in research has got to be your headteacher and to a certain extent they should be the overarching Research Lead in terms of the modelling of behaviours. For example, at my school the head is going to do a Masters. She hasn't done one yet and she's wants to do one to support the way she'll think about leadership and her own practice. She's always been very interested in seeing what other people do in terms of how they lead schools, so she sees the value of sharing findings between schools. She reads research, goes to events and finds online forums. Because of her commitment, research becomes not just something that we do as an add-on, it becomes something that she sees as being very bound up within the school's identity.'*

Another Research Lead expanded on the importance of SLT leading by example when it comes to research engagement:

*'All the senior leadership team are members of the research groups so they very much walk the walk, so that people see actually this is important to all of us. I think that's probably the biggest support they could give. They practise what we say we value [and] model what [we] want people to emulate.'*

One interviewee who was about to start a Masters course said, 'I think for me I've got to do a Masters for credibility, to be completely honest.' Having seen the impact that teachers with further academic qualifications could have on their colleagues and on the school, this particular Research Lead felt that further training in conducting academic research was essential: 'The people who are best equipped within my school to actively lead on how you should do research tend to be the newly recruited teachers who've come through a Masters.'

Two interviewees had specifically chosen to undertake a Masters in the last couple of years to help enhance their role. One had completed a new Masters course designed specifically for Research Leads and the other had undertaken a Masters degree in Neuroscience and Education. They both felt strongly that their Masters-level study had helped them in their role. One said: 'I don't think I could have done [the role] without [the Masters] ... When I started in September I really wouldn't know what I was doing. Now I feel confident enough that I could go out and guide people in how to do research.' The other interviewee expressed a very similar view, stating that:

*'By taking a sabbatical and being involved in research, what I've done is, I've actually become a better educated professional, able to support colleagues to perform in the academic work at a higher level.'*

Three of those interviewed who had had no formal training in educational research considered that they drew their research expertise from their subject specialism. 'As a social sciences teacher .. I'm aware of all the different research methods.' Another Research Lead, a maths teacher, stated:

*'There is a mathematical element to [research] and a sort of statistical base. You need to understand reliability, validity etc and need an understanding of the scientific methodology behind [investigating a hypothesis].'*

One interviewee who was also a SENCo drew legitimacy from the training and experience gained as a result of the SENCo role.

The interviewees with Masters-level involvement saw this, or something similar, as essential. One interviewee advised Research Leads to 'get some decent training'. Another recommended that new Research Leads, 'if they haven't done a Masters, if they are not really hot on research, then they either need to sign up to do one or think again.' Another reinforced the same point, advising that Research Leads should 'actually go and get some training in research methods, don't try to make it up because [you'll] just lose credibility with [your] colleagues.'

The 'non-Masters' interviewees saw things differently. They did not advise new Research Leads to pursue further training. Their advice instead focused on suggesting that Research Leads should not 'try to present [themselves] as the expert if [they're] not' and advised Research Leads to 'start small' and not to 'try to do too much too quickly. Focus on one thing and really stress test that one thing first so that you can evidence that your role has an impact.'

The interviewees with Masters-level involvement saw this, or something similar, as essential





# Successes and challenges associated with the Research Lead role

This section considers the successes, opportunities and challenges that Research Leads identified through the survey and in-depth interviews. It also reviews issues relating to the measurement of impact.

In the survey and the interviews we asked participating Research Leads to reflect upon those successes that they thought were a result of having a designated Research Lead in the school or partnership of schools. We also asked them about how they were measuring impact, and how they knew that achievements were objectively 'successes'. In addition, we were curious about the kinds of things that were barriers to success, the challenges that they perceived hampered their ability to do the role.

## Successes

These successes are derived from the survey analysis and were further explored in the interviews. Using this approach it has been possible to identify a number of successes as perceived by Research Leads, including:

- **The possibility of changing the CPD culture**

Roughly half of the participants in the survey thought that professional development in their schools was strongly influenced by their work. The interviews supported this further suggesting that, at its best, the Research Lead role can greatly enhance professional development. Several interviewees had set up and coordinated new CPD programmes which were closely intertwined with research and research methods. They had experimented with new forms of professional learning as the school's main form of CPD, such as lesson study and the use of learning triads. These interventions were in some cases set up as a compulsory part of teaching staff's directed time.

Several of those interviewed emphasised the importance of ensuring that research activity was closely linked with staff CPD. When discussing how they would improve their school's research engagement, one Research Lead said: 'We're better than we were 18 months ago and we'll be better next year when we've used it as a fundamental process to do our CPD.'

Roughly half of the participants in the survey thought that professional development in their schools was strongly influenced by their work

### • Implementing evidence-based change

Approximately a third of the surveyed Research Leads indicated that they had real influence over the way decisions were being made at a school level:

*'When we look to make significant curriculum change and development within school, we would look to be informed by the latest thinking research or ideas.'*

One interviewee described how the whole-school lesson observation policy was informed by the latest research. The school leadership started reading research around grading lesson observations:

*'We agreed with what we were reading. Therefore long before Ofsted decided, we'd already made our decision that we would no longer grade lesson observations.'*

Another interviewee echoed this point – research and making evidence-based decisions can empower school leaders, giving them the confidence they need to make significant changes to their practice without relying on external advice or inputs:

*'We need that otherwise it just turns into a bit of a political football.'*

One participant in the in-depth interviews considered that evidence-informed decision making was integral to ensuring that students get the best from interventions:

*'My original motivation for going to do my Masters was that I was fed up with schools spending money on things that don't have any impact. I'm trying to make sure we are getting value for money and value for time. We didn't want our staff wasting time on interventions that are useless.'*

### • Teachers becoming learners

Again, approximately a third of those surveyed thought that research engagement was encouraging teachers to re-engage as learners. This view was echoed in the interviews. Almost all of the interviewees said that the most rewarding part of their job was supporting others to learn and to try new things. One described a shift in staff mindset. When discussing one particular member of staff the Research Lead said: 'I was thinking "something [has] definitely shifted here, because she's gone from wanting to be told what to do to wanting to solve the problem".'

Another Research Lead felt that the role was all about supporting teachers as learners: 'It's just enabling [staff] to put a mirror up to their processes in the classroom and what they do.' The interviewees suggested that an increased engagement with research was helping teachers to engage in professional conversations more confidently:

*'Seeing people in a much more confident way be able to articulate why they teach the way they do and talk about professional learning as if it's a common part of their everyday language.'*

In some cases the Research Leads considered that they were able to act as a catalyst, creating a new energy for professional learning. For one Research Lead the most rewarding part of the role was: 'seeing other people enthused with something; colleagues who can often be really tired and hardworking just to be

Research and making evidence-based decisions can empower school leaders, giving them the confidence they need to make significant changes to their practice without relying on external advice or inputs

enthused about something new and trying new things.' In other cases Research Leads valued the development of new links with other organisations and renewed links with their school community.

## Preconditions for effective operation

Respondents were keen to point out the preconditions that helped them to operate effectively as school or partnership Research Lead. Critically these preconditions included having access to evidence, working with colleagues who were open to change and the support of the SLT. The importance of SLT support came through particularly strongly in the interviews. Perhaps not surprisingly, the SLT approach that was most supportive was based on the concept that leadership itself should be informed by evidence and research:

*'Ultimately, within any organisation the person who needs to be engaged in research has got to be your headteacher and to a certain extent they should be the overarching Research Lead in terms of modelling the behaviours.'*

*'She sees it as being very bound up with the school's identity.'*

*'All the senior leadership team are members of the research group so they very much walk the walk, so that people see actually this is important to all of us. I think that's probably the biggest support they could give.'*

*'You model what you want people to emulate.'*

SLT also importantly provided support in the form of time and money:

*'They are paying for the Masters programme ... and give me release time off timetable to complete it ... so it has cost them an awful lot of money.'*

There was a consensus among the interviewees about the desirability of the Research Lead being on the SLT:

*'Being on the leadership team you have the status for making decisions and you are included in conversations.'*

## Challenges

In both the survey and the interviews we asked respondents to comment on the challenges and the barriers that constrained their work as Research Leads. The most frequently mentioned issue was time. Two thirds of those who participated in the survey and every Research Lead interviewed mentioned that lack of time was a major barrier. Not only was there not enough time to undertake the Research Lead role, sometimes there was not enough time for collaborative reflection: 'When you're driven to get results and everything else, they don't want teachers out of the classroom – which I can't argue with, really'.

A smaller number talked about the importance of access to research resources, including academic publications, as one said: 'It's not easy to get hold of that evidence, which is a real barrier.' For a small minority, taking on the role of Research Lead had clearly been challenging in terms of the skills required for the

Two thirds of those who participated in the survey and every Research Lead interviewed mentioned that lack of time was a major barrier

role. Just as support from the SLT was mentioned by some as a major enabling factor, the absence of it was also highlighted as a barrier:

*'It's no good just creating a post of Research Lead or advocate if you haven't accepted that as an organisational value – then you're not going to value the role of the Research Lead; if you do, then you'll value that work and integrate it into your thinking and direction.'*

*'Although the head has a Masters, she's not really interested in that kind of thing so she's leaving that to me.'*

While much useful data arose from specific questions about challenges, the question of constraints also featured in other survey and question items. One important area that emerged as a challenge was the difficulty of measuring impact.

The survey asked a direct question about the impact that having a Research Lead had on pupils or on their learning. Approximately one third responded by suggesting that the role had the potential to impact positively on learning outcomes. One respondent wrote: 'I think my role again is always to try to keep it grounded in thinking about the outcomes for the students. I don't just mean in terms of data or league tables, I mean in terms of student experiences.' While there was a widespread awareness of the importance of changed learning outcomes, respondents did not appear to demonstrate a great awareness of how to measure or capture the impact that the role was having on pupils. Several of those interviewed explained that measuring the impact of research on students was not something they were currently able to demonstrate: 'Measuring the true impact of what we're doing is something we've got to get better at.' They felt a need to improve their understanding and skills in order to start to do this in any fashion.

Research Leads, for the most part, did not describe the involvement of students in research activity. Only two of the 55 survey respondents described any involvement of students in research-related activities or projects. However, two of the interviewees described interesting practice involving students as researchers. One Research Lead trained Year 6 students as researchers. When a university professor was invited to school, shown round and introduced to some of the student researchers he said: 'I never thought I'd hear a ten-year-old use the word *methodology*.' Another Research Lead explained that their school is using sixth-formers as research assistants who will be supporting those teachers who are completing Masters degrees with the collection of data.

One constraint that emerged from the survey and the interviews was a widespread lack of clarity, skill or confidence about research methods. Many Research Leads seemed unsure about the extent to which teachers could conduct rigorous research.

*'You know, we're not researchers as such.'*

*'We do give a methodology but it wasn't detailed ... a lot of [our staff] are not research experts and we didn't want that to limit their enthusiasm for it. So some of the projects are quite scientifically based and backed up with very robust data. Others are more questionnaires, students' opinions, that type of thing.'*

Only two of the 55 survey respondents described any involvement of students in research-related activities or projects



*'I'm trying to skill them up as well but I know that it's hard.'*

For some the conception of teacher 'research' was effectively a form of personal reflection on practice rather than the application of techniques of social science.

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## Future plans and aspirations

The survey asked Research Leads to comment on the future plans at their school for the role. The responses divided into two broad categories – responses that conveyed a sense of strategy and those that were much more provisional and tentative.

More 'strategic' responses included:

- the need to formalise the role
- plans to strengthen the links between research and professional development
- plans to engage staff more systematically with academic research by enabling more staff to read research relevant to their subject, interest or areas of school need
- strengthening the relationship between research activity and SLT decision-making.

The more tentative responses suggested that some Research Leads would 'wait and see' how the role might develop in the context of other school or partnership developments. In some cases the Research Leads did not appear to have a plan for the future of research engagement. Some were hopeful for the future but there was a sense that they felt relatively powerless to influence the position of research within the school.



# Conclusions

## **This report shows both the potential and the fragility of the Research Lead role. Does this matter?**

Government policy on school improvement has been shifting control away from 'top-down' guidance to schools from central and local government towards the notion of a self-improving school system. Such a system was described by Greaney (2014) as one in which:

- teachers and schools are responsible for their own improvement
- teachers and schools learn from one another and from research so that effective practice spreads
- the best schools and leaders extend their reach across other schools so that all schools improve
- Government support and intervention is minimised.

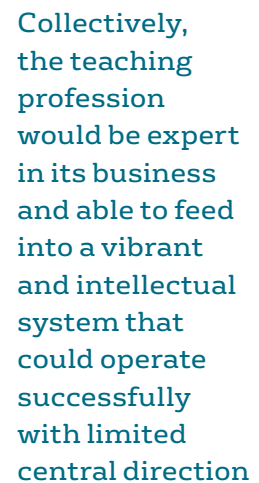
Greaney is one of the few commentators who have attempted to theorise about how the self-improving school system might work. The idea of the self-improving system is on face value attractive, but it is based largely on political aspirations rather than an evidence-based theory of change. An effective self-improving school system surely depends upon schools possessing a level of technical capacity and a commitment to help one another. Arguably an important aspect of the required technical capacity lies in the field of research. If schools within the self-improving system are to avoid 're-inventing the wheel' or worse, promoting changes that are not likely to improve learning outcomes, then they need access to the best available evidence. The self-improving school system will also need to generate new evidence about the impact of possible improvement interventions. The Research Lead has the potential to ensure that schools can access the research of others and generate new impact findings in a rigorous way.

If schools themselves are to lead their own improvement they surely need staff literate in the use of evidence: able to differentiate good evidence from bad, able to engage in small-scale systemic appraisal of the interventions they implement, and able to reach outside their own walls to access the thinking of other experts;

The idea of the self-improving system is on face value attractive, but it is based largely on political aspirations rather than an evidence-based theory of change

they are likely to make intelligent and thoughtful decisions about how to run their schools and teach their pupils. It would also seem sensible to imagine that such schools and practitioners would be in a strong position to support the work of other local and partner schools.

Collectively, the teaching profession would be expert in its business and able to feed into a vibrant and intellectual system that could operate successfully with limited central direction. A basic building block of such a system could be the school-based Research Lead – the person right at the heart of a network of vibrant and critically-thinking organisations. This publication asks questions about the extent to which this ambitious view of the potential of the Research Lead might be taking shape in reality and the extent to which Research Leads in schools now are able to contribute to what Tony McAleavy has described<sup>1</sup> as 'the evidence-informed school'. While the responses to our survey and interviews suggest there is a very long way to go before the true potential of Research Leads is realised, the pioneering community of Research Leads that we engaged with in this study suggest that the potential is great.



Collectively,  
the teaching  
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central direction

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<sup>1</sup> See the first report in this series, *Teaching as a research-engaged profession: problems and possibilities*

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

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

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



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