## Exploring the five key roles school leaders need to adopt if research-informed teaching practice is to become a reality

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**Abstract**
This TRI issue is about the role of school leadership in nurturing research-informed and -engaged learning environments. Drawing upon evidence from literature, the authors present a 'checklist' for school leaders seeking to develop their schools to be increasingly research-informed. The article suggests practical steps for research capacity building in schools.

**Key words:** research-use; school leaders; leadership roles; distributed leadership; social networks

**Introduction**
Engaging with research evidence as part of a process of collaborative professional development seemingly has substantial benefits for teachers (e.g. see Handscomb & MacBeath, 2003; Mincu, 2014; Supovitz, 2015); possibly even for students (e.g. see Rose et al., 2017). Fostering vibrant, research-informed learning environments has proven challenging, however, and the failure of research to make a widespread impact on teachers' practices has been recognized as an international phenomenon (Bryk et al., 2011). We, like others, see school leaders as vital to these efforts. In this article we therefore set out our thoughts on the crucial role of school leaders in fostering research-informed and -engaged learning environments: i.e. environments in which there is a deliberate strategic approach to fostering practices and cultures informed by research evidence across all staff.

To foster truly research-informed learning environments, we argue school leaders must address both the 'transformational' and the 'pedagogic' aspects of change. As such, here we draw together core themes emerging from recent literature into these two aspects, providing a suggested summary 'checklist' for the role of school leaders in developing their schools as research-informed. We begin with two factors that cover the 'transformational' acts of enabling research-use to be embedded as an organizational goal. The remaining three checklist items focus on the 'pedagogic' aspects of research engagement - ensuring research evidence use can lead to improved teaching.

**Factor 1: Modeling and championing research engagement**
As authors, including Roberts (2015), argue, school leaders must actively and demonstrably buy-in to the idea research-informed teaching if it is to become part of a school's 'way of life'. As such, school leaders must not only promote the vision for and develop the culture of a research-engaged school, they must also provide the necessary resources and supporting structures so that sustained and meaningful research engagement can become a reality, and resulting changes in practice can be widely applied. For example, they need to ensure:
- there is regular time and space for teachers to come together
- that teachers have access to research,
- that teachers have the capacity (i.e. skills) to be able to engage critically with research (see Bennett, 2015).

Distribution of research leadership can also be effective, but teacher leaders' likelihood of success must be maximized. This means the vision for success must be clear and the path for reaching the vision cleared.

It is also important that research engagement is not viewed by school leaders as 'someone else's job'. Senior leaders' active involvement with research activity is vital, ensuring that it remains top of mind and that any issues in engaging with research and evidence are encountered firsthand. Moreover, involvement enables senior leaders to 'walk the talk': not only to demonstrate their commitment, but to also engage in more learning-centered leadership practices such as 'modelling', 'monitoring' and 'mentoring and coaching' (dialogue), thus ensuring wider buy-in across the school (e.g. Earley, 2013). As Earl (2015) notes, a key characteristic for senior leaders to model is having an 'enquiry habit of mind': looking for a range of perspectives, purposefully seeking relevant

information from numerous and diverse sources, and continually exploring new ways to tackle perennial problems.

**Factor 2: Achieving buy-in throughout the school**

Key to many definitions of leadership is that there must be a process of influence. As we see in Finnigan et al., (2015), leadership activity as a form of influence can be undertaken by more than just those possessing 'formal' responsibility. Jim Spillane and colleagues (2010) also posit that informal leaders, perhaps more than formal leaders, determine the fate of reform initiatives. As a consequence, the implementation of new initiatives, such as research and evidence use, must attend to the informal aspects of an organization as it is lived by its members day-to-day. In "attending to the informal organization", it is argued, "we expand our focus beyond formally designated leaders in a school's advice network to also include those individuals who are key advice givers, but who have no formal leadership designation" (Spillane et al., 2010, p. 30). Furthermore, as Stoll and Brown (2015) argue, one of the core issues in bridging the gap between evidence and practice is the need to influence teachers' values and beliefs and change their behaviors. The vision of school leaders must therefore be consensual, grounded in collaborative ideals embraced throughout the informal organization. Any vision for research engagement needs 'on the ground' champions, including middle leaders, if it is to be more than superficially embedded (ibid).

**Factor 3: The need for leaders to 'start with the end' in mind**

Much evidence indicates that professional development that makes a difference needs to start with the 'end in mind' (Earley and Porritt, 2014). In other words, one should clarify intended outcomes before commencing any professional learning activity. This approach includes two key benefits. First, it provides a point of focus – a goal or vision to strive toward. Second, starting with the end in mind provides a way to measure impact and to assess how effective efforts have been in achieving this vision. Following evaluation and sharing, practices should be collaboratively refined, radically changed, or removed as appropriate. This means research engagement

activity should not be considered one-off in nature and must be undertaken within the context of a wider iterative 'cycle' of inquiry and improvement—For example, the Connect to Learn (C2L) approach developed by Harris and Jones (2012).

**Factor 4: Approaches to research use must have teacher learning and practice at their core**

As Saunders argues (2015), effective research use doesn't mean replacing teacher knowledge with academic knowledge or with 'what works' information produced by bodies such as the What Works Clearinghouse. Effective research use actually stems from developing expertise, ensuring that teachers are able to bring together 'what is known' (i.e. formal knowledge) with what they know about their context, their students, and what they currently see as effective practice. In a similar vein, as we see in Supovitz (2015), effective data use is that which helps teachers make connections and examine the relationships between what they do (teaching activity) and its outcomes (how students fare in response). Engaging in this type of process, described by Rogers and Brown as knowledge 'creation' (2014), means that teachers gain a wider understanding of both the causes of problems relating to teaching and learning and practical understanding for how these might be addressed.

**Factor 5: Ensuring that the right people are in the room**

As noted above, the vision of school leaders needs 'on the ground' champions to become deeply embedded. Similarly, aspects of learning-centered leadership also need support from teachers who agree that specific approaches to improving teaching and learning are required, and who are happy to endorse them to peers. In other work, Stoll and Brown (2015) detail how they strategically selected teacher leaders for this role - they sought those keen to tackle and promote research-informed change. The most effective 'catalysts', they soon discovered, were influential within and beyond their schools. Crucially, their peers were willing to learn from and engage with them.

Social network analysis (SNA) and methods (Daly, 2010) provide another way of identifying who has influence in the school. A good example is the England's Research Learning Communities project led by this commentary's first author (Brown, 2015). Here SNA was been used to identify the teachers to whom others turn for support in terms of pedagogic expertise, research informed advice on teaching and learning, and

in terms of collaborative activities (e.g., joint lesson planning and the exchange of teaching materials). These central and influential people, along with formal leaders in their schools, were then chosen as the project's research champions. Between 2014-2016, research champions were brought together into learning communities, with activities designed to help them increase the awareness and use of evidence throughout their schools and to measure the impact of doing so.

Another way of thinking about 'who is in the room' is to consider what expertise and resources are required to make research engagement happen, and if necessary, to seek this from external sources. Louise Stoll and Chris Brown previously partnered with Challenge Partners (a group of 300+ schools across England who work collaboratively to improve teacher and pupil outcomes), giving the schools involved access to 'formal' research, skilled facilitators, a network of teacher leaders that could form an instant learning community covering many sites, and a central coordinating function that could negotiate release and cover across 15 schools, pay cover costs and help ensure schools were all broadly moving in the same direction simultaneously. Louise Stoll also makes the point that teachers and leaders need critical friends who will ask challenging questions (e.g. see 2012). As Greany suggests, academics are often well placed to ask these challenging questions (Greany, 2015). Indeed, in the U.S., research-practice partnerships are increasingly being forged as a collaborative means of investigating problems of practice and generating solutions (Coburn, et al., 2013). A slightly different approach also occurring with frequency in the U.S. and closely related to Stoll and Brown's project, involves the formation of 'networked improvement communities' (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2011). In all cases, the success of these partnerships will require school leaders who can foster the support required, but who can also ensure adequate time and space is created for practitioners and researchers to come together.

**Moving forward**

Our checklist above sets out the five key behaviors school leaders need to adopt if research-informed practice is to become a reality. At the same time, we suggest that it is only when these behaviours are utilized holistically that a truly impactful and interlinked triad of action emerges. This is because, when undertaken together, such actions ensure that: 1) school leaders are formalising their school's and teachers' engagement with research, meaning research-use remains a key focus and that its importance is recognized; 2) that school leaders are prioritising research engagement, ensuring adequate capacity and resource exists to enable such engagement to take place; and 3) that new research knowledge and research-informed practices are mobilised effectively, allowing them to be engaged with, adopted and employed. It is this trinity of formalising, prioritising and mobilising, that we believe maximises the impact research-use has, both within and across schools. At the same time, vital is how we support and build the capacity of school leaders to engage in these activities. Correspondingly we also believe these five roles provide food for thought in terms of what we might view as integral to the future curricula of school leader training and professional development. We ourselves have already begun to integrate these five requirements into key facets of our work with schools, and we would welcome the opportunity to continue this conversation with others.

**About the authors**

Professor Chris Brown has a long-standing interest in how research evidence can and should, but often doesn't, aid the development of education policy and practice.

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On Tuesday 26th February, Prof. Stephen Gorard attended a roundtable discussion at Newcastle University as part of the Social Mobility Commission's two day visit to North East England. Attendees discussed current developments on social mobility and school performance in the region, as well as a long-term strategy to tackle social mobility.

**New publications by DECE members**

Demie, F. (2019). *Educational Inequality: Closing the Gap.* London: UCL IoE Press

El Soufi, N. and See, B.H. (2019). Does explicit teaching of critical thinking improve critical thinking skills of English language learners in higher education? A critical review of causal evidence. *Studies in Educational Evaluation.* 60: 140-162

Gorard, S., Griffin, N., See, BH and Siddiqui, N. (2019) *How can we get educators to use research evidence?* Raleigh NC: Lulu Press

Gorard, S. and Siddiqui, N. (2019) How trajectories of disadvantage help explain school attainment, SAGE Open, doi:/10.1177/2158244018825171

Gray, H., Lyth, A., McKenna, C., Stothard, S., Tymms, P., and Copping, L. (2019). Sex differences in variability across nations in reading, mathematics and science: a meta-analytic extension of Baye and Monseur (2016). *Large-scale Assessments in Education*, 7(1): 2

Siddiqui, N. Gorard, S., and See, B.H. (2019). Can learning beyond the classroom impact on social responsibility and academic attainment? An evaluation of the Children's University youth social action programme. *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 61: 74-82.

Torgerson, C., Brooks, G., Gascoine, L. and Higgins, S. (2019). Phonics: Reading policy and the evidence of effectiveness from a systematic 'tertiary' review. Research Papers in Education, 34, 2, 208-238

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