National College for Teaching & Leadership

Approaches to school-based research, including the research wheel

Case study

Autumn 2014

The Mead teaching school alliance

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Context

The Mead Teaching School alliance (TSA) works in partnership with its alliance of 21 schools in Trowbridge Wiltshire, comprising 18 primary, 2 secondary and 1 special school. The alliance has an established infrastructure for information sharing to meet its collective aims: building sustainable capacity to raise attainment and aspiration and reducing barriers to learning and narrowing the gap.

Building on the infrastructure of an extended schools model, the alliance has established a cross-phase, alliance-wide data and information sharing protocol, enabling a collective analysis of pupil performance data, Ofsted findings and consultation feedback from headteachers. Analysis of this data informs the planning and provision of school to school support and priorities for professional learning and research and development (R&D).

Background

Building on existing commitment to research and evidence-based practice, the alliance found themselves reflecting on the place of research and development within the 'Big 6' programme. They recognised the potential of research as a key driver and enabler for all aspects of the teaching school's work. For example, merging continuous professional development (CPD) with R&D was a natural step to promote rich, evidence-based professional learning.

This helped to establish a research culture, supporting leaders and teachers in understanding the principles of research-engagement and connecting research with everyday practice, rather than viewing it as an 'add on.' Importantly, time was spent considering the values and principles underpinning the work towards a research culture as reflected in figure 1.

Figure 1: Supporting a professional culture within the alliance

Approaches to school-based research: embedding practice

The introduction of systems and structures are proving critical in embedding a research culture. It has been necessary to create new roles, processes and systems to provide capacity for research activity. The allocation of time and the creation of tangible structures have been critical in securing leaders' and teachers commitment and in developing understanding of how research 'fits', and indeed underpins school improvement.

The following three developments have been pivotal in enabling capacity building and embedding research within everyday practice:

1. Establishing research hubs;

2. Developing the role of specialist leaders of education (SLEs) as research mentors to enable the leadership of enquiry and facilitation of research groups;

3. Introduction of a digital 'research wheel', enabling the integration of research with teacher appraisal and performance management systems.

1. Research Hubs

Research-based 'learning sets' within the teaching school and cross-phase 'learning communities' across the alliance provide opportunities for teachers and teaching assistants to work collaboratively on joint practice development (JPD). These research hubs provide a forum for the exploration and documentation of evidence-based approaches. Purposeful, relevant case studies ensure the transfer of practice within and beyond the alliance. A programme of regular staff meetings and inset sessions are allocated to support this activity within school. Input has focused on enquiry processes and the impact of research on teaching and learning. The shaping and refinement of the spiral[1] research methodology ensures a systematic, rigorous approach to research, providing a common language for the dissemination of practice.

The high degree of professional dialogue and deep reflection arising from the research hubs is exciting. This has created a strong sense of empowerment in which staff regard research-engagement as core to practice development and professional learning.

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[1] **Discovery** - Exploration and Definition, **Research** - Refinement and Inquiry, **Effect** - Validity and Impact, **Growth** - Cultivating Quality and Innovation www.spiralassociates.co.uk

'A change in teacher attitudes and behaviours is tangible. I sense increased teacher curiosity, risk-taking and self-questioning. There is a real buzz of activity!'

(Head of teaching school)

2. Building capacity

Research hubs are facilitated by specialist leaders of education (SLEs) who model the behaviours and attributes of teacher researchers. Staff are supported in navigating research evidence and developing knowledge, skills and understanding of research methodology. Induction and on-going coaching support for the SLEs as research mentors is critical in building capacity for research across the alliance. Findings indicate:

- SLE leadership of research is growing a critical mass of knowledge and experience across the alliance, changing teacher perceptions of what effective professional development looks like and the nature and character of school improvement. This is establishing a strong, distributed model of system leadership in relation to research engagement,

- SLEs are empowered, equipped and excited to facilitate research groups, modelling research engagement themselves and demonstrating a growing knowledge and understanding of research methodology and its application to managing school improvement priorities,

- a change in teacher attitudes and behaviour is tangible with teachers demonstrating professional curiosity, risk-taking and self-questioning. Improved confidence in the articulation and description of their own practice has also been a notable feature, alongside a sense of pride and enjoyment in sharing their research journey and findings.

3. Developing a digital research wheel

The integration of teacher research with appraisal and performance management both recognises and values the growing competency of teachers as researchers. The introduction of an innovative digital research wheel capturing this growing competency is providing exemplars of practice and enhancing understanding of the leadership of enquiry and teacher research.
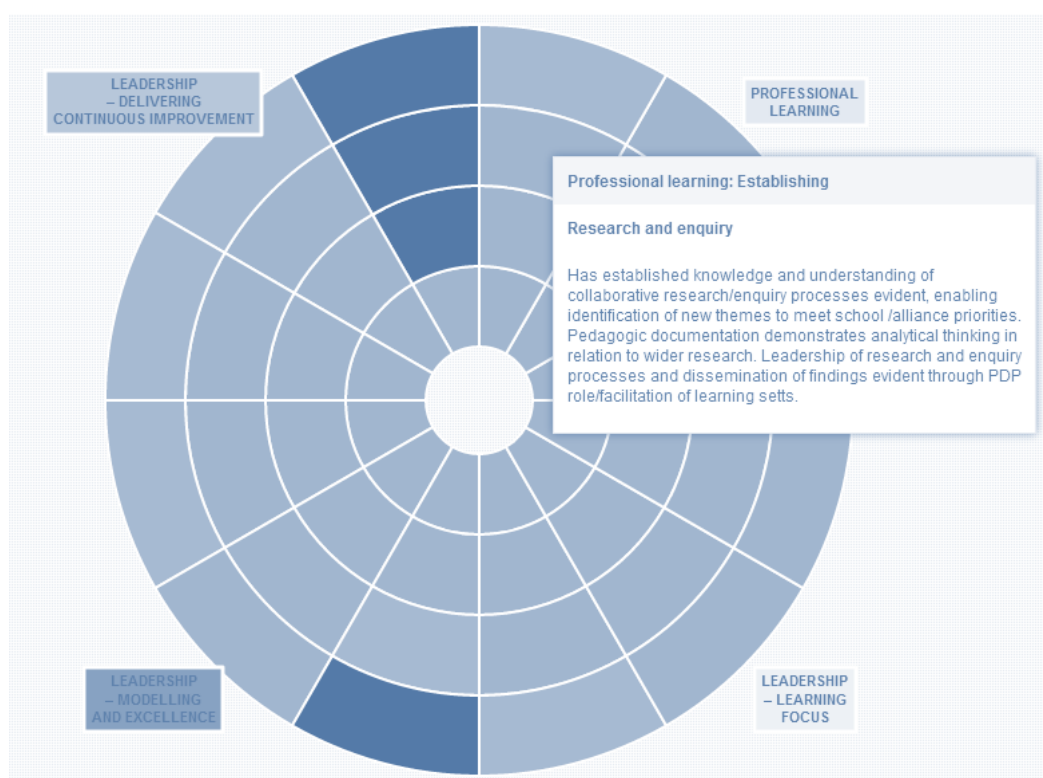
What is the research wheel?

The research wheel is a digital self-assessment tool designed to support leaders, teachers and teaching assistants in navigating their own research journey towards maturity. Competences, including knowledge, skills and behaviours, recognise the key

steps on this journey. These competences are presented on a continuum from emerging - developing - establishing - leading, as illustrated by the concentric circles of the Wheel.

As shown below, research competences are captured under a segment of the broader 'leadership and learning wheel', under the heading of 'professional learning'. This strongly supports teachers in recognising research and development as a key vehicle for their own learning and school improvement. The example highlighted in figure 2 provides a description of what an 'establishing' competency may look like in practice, referencing expected knowledge and skills in relation to collaborative research, pedagogic documentation and leadership / facilitation of research activity.

Figure 2: Digital research wheel

How is the research wheel used?

The research wheel is owned by teachers and supports them in considering and articulating how their practice demonstrates research competences. Critically, the digital nature of the tool enables teachers to upload evidence of their work to demonstrate impact on children's learning. Examples include case studies, film footage of interviews and pupil focus group discussions, photographic evidence and graphical representation of impact.

The research wheel is shared with line managers during teacher appraisal meetings. Research evidence is viewed and line managers support teachers in moderating judgements related to their research activity and in identifying training needs. The maturity model basis of the wheel supports target setting, providing teachers with clear next steps for improvement. A further function of the digital tool allows line managers to

upload relevant documents, think pieces and resources to scaffold this next stage of development. The whole process recognises research as a valued and integral part of performance management and provides a powerful mechanism for line managers to communicate the pivotal role of research in developing professionalism and leadership capacity.

Capacity-building

The wheel is supporting capacity-building, enabling teachers to define where they currently are, and aspire to be, on their research journey. The developing skills, confidence and enjoyment of research is tangible across the school and wider alliance.

Recently the research wheel has been introduced to teaching assistants and trainee teachers as part of their assessment and appraisal. This is further developing the alliance's capacity for research activity.

Dissemination and next steps

Supported through a structured programme of induction and coaching, SLEs are expected to demonstrate the 'leading' competences for research and this sets an important standard across the school and alliance.

Uploaded exemplars of research activity can be easily disseminated to demonstrate what good practice looks like at each stage of the maturity model. This has the potential to highlight the impact of research and to facilitate knowledge transfer. As they further co-construct and refine the content and application of the research wheel with their school leaders and teachers, dissemination remains a key focus of their work.

The Mead TSA are developing the research wheel further as part of their R&D national themes project:

- What is the role of the Professional Development Partner (SLE and aspirant SLE) in effecting change through research engagement?

The findings from this project will be published early in 2015.

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