Research Leads pilot 2020-21

High-level summary, August 2021

A.   **Introduction and background**

B.   **Recommendations**

C.   **Guiding questions and implementation**

D.   **Findings**

E.   **Learnings and reflections**

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What we were seeking to do and why

Purpose

The Research Leads pilot provided the opportunity for a cohort of **19 schools to have a dedicated research role (i.e. Research Lead – RL) for 18 months**, to lead and implement strategies, processes and initiatives that aim to strengthen research engagement and evidence use, to ultimately improve school and student outcomes.

Background

Engaging in research projects, and using high-quality research to inform planning and practice, can help schools improve (Godfrey, 2016). One way of supporting a school's engagement in and with research is to have a dedicated **'Research Lead': someone who coordinates their school's internal and external research activities, and supports the use of research evidence in planning, professional learning, decision-making, and teaching and learning.**

Having a research leadership role is emerging as a strategy to help schools prioritise research engagement and mobilise research evidence into practice.

The *Research Lead* role is more common in countries like the UK (Bennett, 2016), but there is also growing interest in Australia due to increased expectations for schools to be more evidence-informed.

A survey conducted in 2019 by the Melbourne Archdiocese of Catholic Schools (MACS), revealed some Melbourne Catholic schools already had a role with dedicated research responsibility, albeit with different titles to suit each school's context. Other schools expressed a keen interest in the idea of a Research Lead, but principals reported having limited resources (including time), as well as not being sure about what the role would involve.

In response to the survey findings, MACS decided to implement a pilot, providing small grants to schools to have a dedicated Research Lead from February 2020 to June 2021.

This report summarises what was involved in the Research Leads pilot and what we learned from working with 19 schools and their Research Leads. Source data was collected and analysed from each school's final report, as well as interviews with Research Leads at the mid-point and end of the pilot.

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MACS Recommendations

All schools reported having a Research Lead (RL) helped them to strengthen research *awareness*, *engagement* and *use*. Therefore…

1. Continue to invest in and grow the role of RLs beyond the pilot, including formalising the title of *Research Lead* to give the role some profile and help with school buy-in and long term commitment.

While the grant was valued by schools, what mattered more was professional learning, learning from other RLs/schools and personalised support from MACS. Therefore...

2. Establish a professional network of RLs, and provide network meetings, professional learning days and online webinars to continue to build capacity.

3. Investigate two promising RL examples (one primary and one secondary) to better understand the successful practices and strategies they implemented, and the key enabling factors at both individual and school levels. Share them as case studies.

4. Consider how personalised support might continue to be provided to schools that are actively trying to strengthen research engagement and evidence use as part of the school improvement process. Invest in building the capacity of regional staff so they are the first port of call for research advice and support.

Research engagement and evidence use is a journey of continuous improvement. Schools are at different stages, with some not knowing where and how to start. Therefore…

5. Develop a continuum of research engagement including descriptors, practice examples and tools to support schools at each stage. Pay particular attention to the starting phase because seemingly simple structures and processes in the beginning can lay the foundations for long term research engagement.

It is not the RL *role* itself that makes a difference, it is what the RL is enabled to *do* (supported by school and system factors) that creates the real opportunity for evidence-informed improvement. Therefore…

6. Develop a system-wide school research engagement strategy, whereby the role of RLs becomes a stream of work within that, supported by a range of strategies and professional learning initiatives designed to strengthen research engagement and evidence use.

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What we were seeking to learn

This Research Leads pilot initiative was the first of its kind in Australia, and an exciting opportunity for MACS and schools to learn alongside each other about ways that schools can strengthen research engagement and evidence use. While we had high hopes for the initiative, we were reasonable in our expectations of what could be achieved in 18 months, with a small grant, and in the middle of a pandemic! Nonetheless, we expected positive steps forward to be taken, and significant insights and learnings to be gained at both school and system levels.

Overarching evaluation question:

Is having a Research Lead a helpful strategy for supporting research engagement and evidence use in schools?

And specifically, we wanted to know…

1. **Does having a Research Lead help to:**
   a. raise **awareness** and build understandings of research engagement and evidence use?
   b. increase **engagement** with research evidence (e.g. sharing, reading, discussing research)?
   c. improve the **use** of research evidence (e.g. in decision making, professional learning, teaching)?

2. What **strategies, processes and initiatives** were believed to be the most helpful for strengthening research engagement and evidence use in schools?

3. What **individual, school and program factors** helped the Research Lead in their role?

4. What could be done to **strengthen the Research Leads initiative** if it continued beyond 2021?

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What the pilot involved

Overview

All MACS schools were invited to submit a $5,000 grant application to support having a Research Lead in 2020. 19 schools were chosen to be part of the initiative, including 10 primary, 8 secondary and one special P-12 school. Schools were also spread across the regions, with 8 northern, 4 eastern, 4 southern and 3 western.

Unfortunately due to the impacts of Covid19 and extended school closures, 9 schools chose to put the RL initiative/grant on hold for Terms 2, 3 and 4, while 10 schools still continued in 2020. The pilot initiative was extended until mid 2021 to allow a longer period to trial having Research Leads, and the 10 schools who continued in 2020 were given a top-up grant of $2,500.

Key components of the pilot included:

1. $5,000 OR $7,500 grant per school (i.e. approx. 12 days/year, or 2 hours/week for the Research Lead).
2. Four professional learning days/sessions for RLs.
3. Access to resources, information and research.
4. Individual coaching sessions with MACS Project Leader.
5. Access to other RLs (emerging community of practice).

Timeline and key milestones (Feb 2020 – June 2021)

T1 2020 – first PL day with all 19 RLs (face-to-face)

T2 2020 – lockdown/remote learning, 14 schools put RL initiative 'on hold', 5 continued as planned

T3 2020 – lockdown/remote learning continued, decision to extend pilot to mid 2021, 10 schools continued with RL initiative in 2020, 9 put RL initiative 'on hold' until 2021

T3 2020 – group check-in meetings (online) with 10 schools

T4 2020 – individual coaching sessions (online) with 10 RLs

T4 2020 – second PL session (online) for 10 schools

T1 2021 – all 19 schools recommenced, including 6 new RLs

T1 2021 – third PL day with all 19 RLs (online)

T2 2021 – individual coaching sessions with 16 RLs (online)

T2 2021 – fourth/final PL session with all 19 RLs (online)

T2 2021 – final reports due from each school (25 June 2021)

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What we learned about… *what the RL did*

In their final reports, schools were asked to report on how they used the grant money, how much time was allocated to the RL role per week, and what the RL mostly did during their allocated time to strengthen research engagement.

All free text (qualitative) responses in the 19 school reports were analysed and coded for themes, then quantified to provide indicative values against each theme.
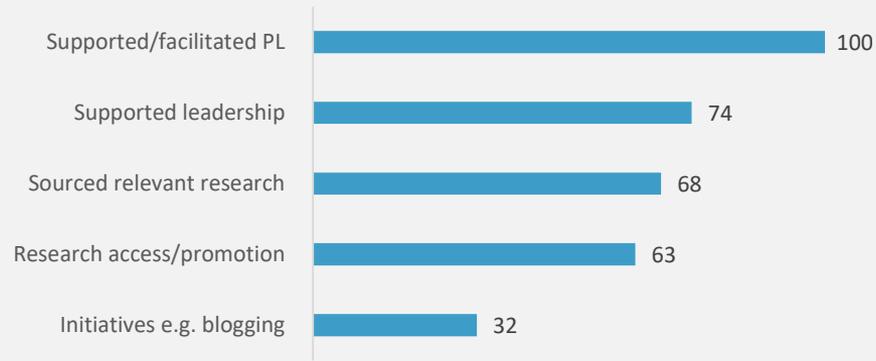
How the grant was spent

- **RL time release = 12 (63%)**
- Staff time release = 4 (21%)
- Research resources = 4 (21%)

Time allocated to the RL role per week (on average)

- Least = 25mins/week
- Most = 2 days/week
- **Average = 150 mins (2-3 hrs/wk)**

What RLs did most (%)

Supported/facilitated PL	100
Supported leadership	74
Sourced relevant research	68
Research access/promotion	63
Initiatives e.g. blogging	32

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# What we learned about... *what the RL focused on*

RLs were asked to develop a goal to focus on during the pilot, which was used as a touch-point in PL and coaching sessions.

Key themes related to RL/school goal

Strengthen research use in general*	53%
Find and analyse research on a specific priority to inform goals, planning, leadership decisions, teaching**	32%
Strengthen use of research in decision making	21%
Increase access to research via research hub	16%

Progress towards goal

Significant progress	21%
Moderate progress	63%
Some progress	16%
No progress	0
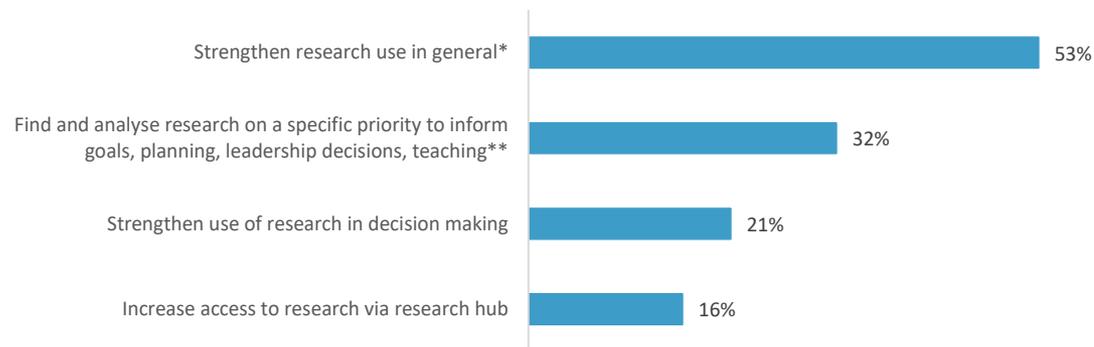
* Mainly related to teaching and learning, and professional learning structures & processes
** E.g. Gifted & Talented education, maths & EAL students, learning diversity interventions & assessments, PL approaches & flipped classrooms, numeracy, balanced vs structured literacy
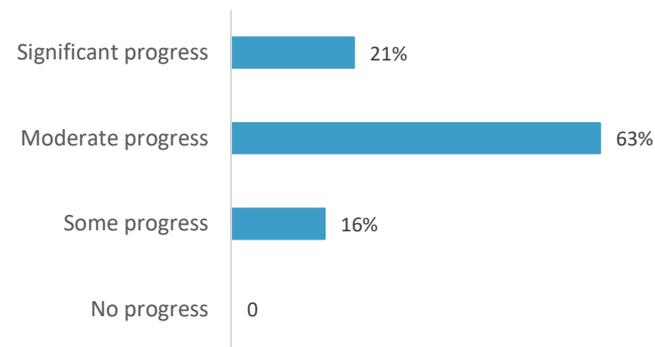
84% made moderate or significant progress towards their goal (despite COVID disruptions)

"Teachers have progressively become more open to exploring research together and use it to shift their practice. What's been really affirming has been the tangible changes we have seen in how staff members do things, and that research has helped them to feel more empowered about trying new things, without the fear of failure". (Primary RL)

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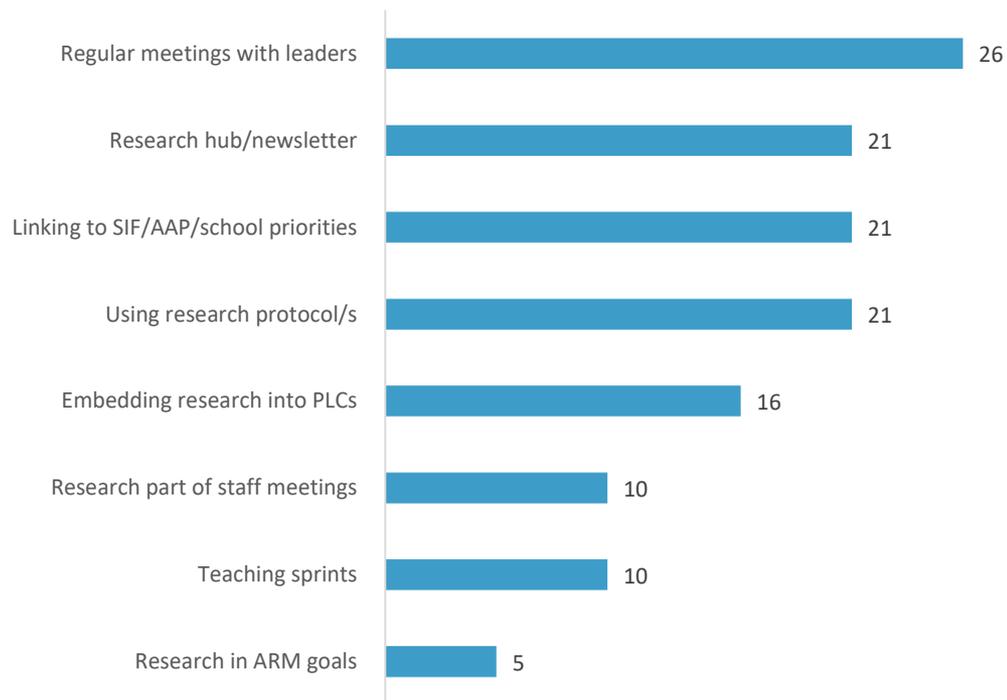
What we learned about… *the impact of the RL role*

Along the continuum of research *awareness* > *engagement* > *use*, schools were asked to report if…

Having a Research Lead helped to….

	Significantly	Moderately	Somewhat
Raise awareness of research engagement and evidence use	37%	58%	5%
Increase engagement with research evidence	21%	58%	21%
Improve use of research in planning, decision making, teaching	32%	42%	26%

■ Significantly ■ Moderately ■ Somewhat ■ Not at all
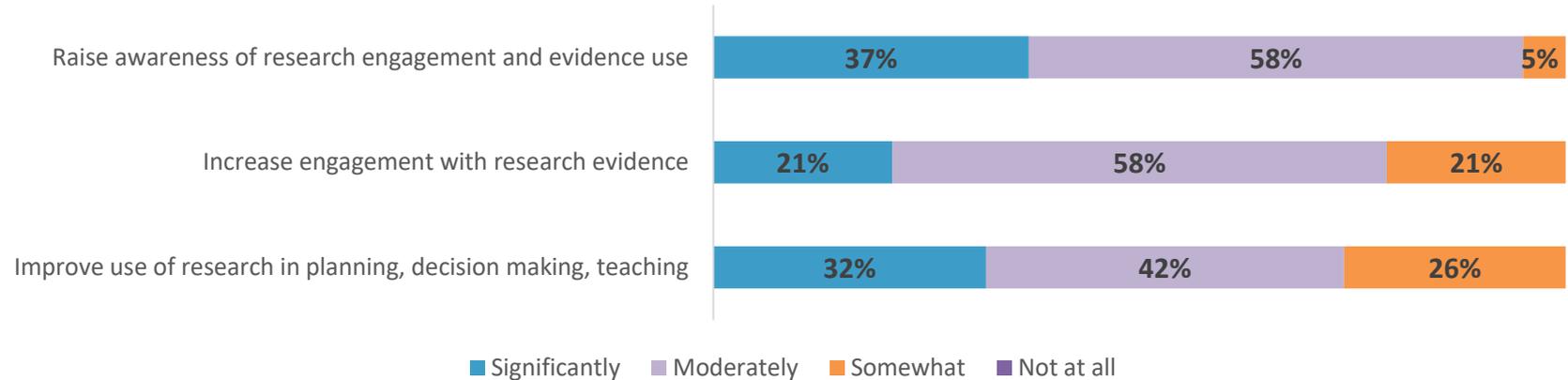
Most schools reported that having a RL helped them to achieve all three outcomes either 'significantly' or moderately':
- raise research *awareness* (95%); increase research *engagement* (79%); and improve research *use* (74%).

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What RLs believed to be their most successful strategy/ies (%)

Strategy	%
Regular meetings with leaders	26
Research hub/newsletter	21
Linking to SIF/AAP/school priorities	21
Using research protocol/s	21
Embedding research into PLCs	16
Research part of staff meetings	10
Teaching sprints	10
Research in ARM goals	5

Individual discussions with Heads of Faculty to determine the best ways that research would benefit each faculty. This was successful because it provides insight into the specific needs of the faculty and guidance as to how research could best support and inform teaching practice specific to each faculty.

Creating the Professional Learning Hub and constantly referring staff to relevant pages.

Ensuring that the goal of the Research Lead [was aligned] to the strategic plan of the school, was highly effective. It gave them a purpose and focus that could be transformed into practice.

I believe the most successful strategy implemented was the protocol, the Teaching Sprints Research Jigsaw. The protocol allowed teachers within a meeting to engage with the research article, share their reflections with the group, and finally identify implications for practice within their own classrooms.

Used existing structures and processes that we already had in place and embedded research into these.

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What we learned about... *enablers for the RL role*

Factors that helped RLs at the...

Individual level

Factor	%
Positive relationships with other staff	79%
Belief in value of research, passionate, positive	58%
Experience with research (e.g. post-grad study)	42%
Willingness to learn, life-long learner	21%
Ability to find and analyse research	21%

School level

Factor	%
Support from leadership	74%
Professional learning structures	42%
School desire, culture/value of research	37%
Protected time for RL role	37%

Pilot / MACS level

Factor	%
PL days/sessions	79%
Learning from other RLs	63%
Direct support/sessions with MACS leader	53%
Grant/time release	47%
Resources and Research from PL & CEVN	47%

"The opportunity to be part of a group committed to increasing research engagement in their schools. This collaborative support in terms of other RLs sharing their successes and journeys as well as the 1-1 check in sessions with Shani helped to refine directions and selection of strategies and resources." (Secondary RL)

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What we learned about… *whether having a RL is helpful*

All (19 = 100%) of the participating schools believe having a Research Lead is helpful for strengthening research engagement and evidence use in schools.

Why?

Having a Research Lead:
- formalises and signifies a commitment to research engagement;
- ensures research becomes and stays an important focus in meetings, professional learning, planning and decision making;
- provides a dedicated resource for finding relevant research for leaders and staff to engage with (rather than all staff searching for research);
- enables someone to set-up processes and practices for ongoing research engagement, and to evaluate and strengthen these strategies over time.

Some quotes to highlight the value seen and expressed by schools…

Absolutely! Without a dedicated Research Lead we would not have had the gains in engaging and using research or the opportunity to be purposeful and focussed in embedding this into our school processes and structures. Given that we have seen the effects of teachers accessing, engaging with and using research and that this has resulted in teacher improvement, impacted student learning outcomes, having a dedicated Research Lead to facilitate and drive this in a passionate way is absolutely and undeniably invaluable. (Primary RL)

While improving evidence-based practice cannot be up to one person, it is extremely helpful to have a leader specifically allocated to this role. This ensures that there is someone for staff to consult and a leader driving initiatives. Overall, the Research Lead ensures that research becomes and continues to be integrated and prioritized by the school. (Secondary RL)

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What we learned about… *advice for schools and MACS*

Advice to other schools to make the RL role successful

1. Ensure the RLs work has focus and relevance (13 = 68%)

> E.g. link to AAP/SIF; choose a clear focus; set achievable goal/s, develop a plan, track progress

2. Establish leadership support and school commitment for the RL role and research engagement (12 = 63%)

> E.g. regular meetings with leadership; formalise RL role (time, long term commitment, role clarity); promote importance of RL role and research to all staff

3. Choose the RL carefully and their support crew! (11 = 58%)

> E.g. build a team to support RL; connect with other RLs/schools

4. Build research into existing structures/processes (8 = 42%)

> E.g. planning, decision making, meetings, PLCs, online space

Advice to MACS on the RL initiative going forward

1. Establish RL network and opportunities for RLs/schools to learn from each other = 10 (53%)

2. Continue professional learning for RLs = 7 (37%)

3. Continue support from MACS staff/SRA/Shani = 6 (32%)

4. Develop more research resources and case studies = 6 (32%)

Strong desire from all of the schools for MACS to continue investing in RLs as a strategy to support research engagement, and to formalise and grow the RL role by having a professional network with continued professional learning. Concern among many that they do not yet have the confidence to continue doing it by themselves, and not sure their school would continue with the investment without formal recognition and support from MACS.

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Key learnings

1. **Time is critically important, but RLs did not necessarily need *lots* of it.** All RLs made progress towards strengthening research engagement with a relatively small time allocation (on average 2.5 hours/week).

2. **RLs focused on *using,* rather than *doing* research.** RLs spent most of their time helping other staff engage with/use research (e.g. facilitating research-focused PL, supporting leadership to make research informed-decisions, creating access to research).

3. **Using research can be *complex,* but *simple* processes worked best**:

   a) RLs and schools who gained the most momentum used the simple formula of **focus + structure + process** (e.g. choosing a school priority + using an existing meeting/PL structure + adopting a protocol for active staff engagement).

   b) The 'most significant strategies' reported by RLs were not necessarily complex or sophisticated, but potentially critical building blocks for embedding effective research engagement practices in the school (e.g. linking research to **Relevant** school priorities, establishing research **Engagement** protocols in meetings, creating ongoing **Access** to research, having regular meetings with **Leaders**). **Keeping it R.E.A.L!**

4. **RLs can help to strengthen research *awareness*, *engagement* and *use*.**

5. **RLs do not need to be experienced researchers to be effective.** Some RLs were initially concerned that they were not 'researchers' and therefore not 'qualified' to be a good RL. However, the two most important 'individual' enabling factors reported were having **positive relationships with staff**, and a **passion/belief in the value of research**. Prior research experience (e.g. post-grad study) was ranked third.

6. **RLs cannot do it alone.** The **success of a RL is significantly helped by school and program/system factors** (e.g. leadership support, within school PL structures, access to MACS/external PL and support, opportunities to learn from other RLs/schools). Surprisingly the **grant was ranked fourth**.

7. **Need an *explicit* approach to research engagement before it can become *implicit* in everything a school does.** While engaging with and using research is everybody's business in a school, having a dedicated research leadership role formalises a school's commitment to evidence use, and prioritises the establishment, coordination and evaluation of processes and structures for evidence use.

There is great appetite for this work and a strong desire for continued support. Despite a disrupted and often stressful period due to Covid19, all schools made progress in strengthening their research engagement, and expressed a strong desire for the RL role to continue beyond the pilot with ongoing support and capacity building from MACS.

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Examples of RL work – using Padlet for research reflections & discussion

Research for Evidence-Based Vocabulary Teaching
Put your notes below your question below (Middle PLC)

Engaging Strategies for Vocabulary Instruction

FEATURE ARTICLE

Get All "Jazzed Up" for Vocabulary Instruction: Strategies That Engage

Melissa A. Gallagher, Blythe E. Anderson

The authors describe two teacher-generated strategies for vocabulary instruction and share teachers' suggestions for making vocabulary instruction engaging for students.

Gallagher_Anderson_2016_Vocabulary_I...
PDF document
padlet drive

Add comment

Teacher One
What is this article trying to tell us?

1 comment

Anonymous 3mo
Gives us a variety of teaching techniques that might assist teaching vocabulary to students. In particular some strategies that have been shown to have evidence- teaching wall.

Add comment

Teacher Two
How can we understand this article without any preconceptions or judgement?

1 comment

Anonymous 3mo
Strategies that are discussed in the article are things that we as a school are already doing but it is great to know that they are evidence-based, however some may not have been tried (such as allowing the students to pick the words).

Add comment

Teacher Three
How do we make sense of this article based on our own professional experiences?

1 comment

Anonymous 3mo
One can ensure that the use of pictures and student choice of words is an overlooked but powerful aspect of the strategy that can improve our use of this technique.

Add comment

Teacher Four
How does this article help us better understand our context?

1 comment

Anonymous 3mo
Vocabulary as a focus for our students means getting the students to relate words back to their world rather than just getting from books.

Add comment

Everyone
What might we consider doing differently, start doing or stop doing informed by this article and our reflections on the other questions?

3 comments

Anonymous 3mo
-Teacher to source vocabulary but give students more choice.

Anonymous 3mo
-Doing more pictures, finding more images.

Anonymous 3mo
Pick a strategy and go with it, change it if needed.

Add comment

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Examples of RL work – linking research to strategic plan, SIF rubric, AAP

Examples of RL work – creating an online research hub linked to AAP goal

Key reflections

1. **Knowing where and how to start.** There is huge diversity in where RLs and schools are at with research engagement and evidence use, and not knowing where and how to start can be a barrier. We need to frame research engagement and evidence use as a journey of continuous improvement, and ensure our initiatives, approaches and resources help RLs and schools no matter where they are at along a continuum from beginning to advanced research engagement (paying particular attention to what initial positive steps look like).

2. **Moving from general to specific.** Schools early on in their journey tended to focus on *access* to research and *general* research engagement. Whereas schools who were later in their development had a *specific focus*, used existing *structures* and adopted explicit *processes* for more active research engagement and use. We need to share school examples of different practices, and develop descriptors and tools that can support a school's advancement along the research engagement continuum from general research *awareness* to more specific *engagement* and *use*.

3. **This does not need to be *new work*, but a *different* way of working.** Using existing structures and processes (e.g. PLCs, leadership meetings, school improvement planning) seems to be the best way for schools to embed research into their day-to-day work.

4. **Having the will and desire to better engage with research is a good start, but not enough!** Just because someone (e.g. RL) or a school is passionate and enthusiastic about research, does not mean they know how to engage with research *effectively* and use evidence *well*. RLs and schools need a lot more support than anticipated (even the most research-engaged). We have gone beyond needing to convince schools that using research and evidence is a good idea (the *why*), to needing to focus our efforts on helping schools with the *how*.

5. **It's not the RL *role* itself that is successful, it's what the RL *does* in their role that makes the difference**, and this is influenced by individual, school and system factors. Therefore, while RLs seems to be a strategy worth continuing in some capacity, it needs to form part of a comprehensive system strategy to strengthen research engagement and evidence use, linked to school improvement.

6. **This pilot was not only about *school* learning and improvement, but the pilot has been a significant learning opportunity for MACS** regarding what schools need to strengthen their engagement with, and use of research evidence. How can we use the learnings to be a better education system than we were before?

Acknowledgements

St Michael's, Ashburton
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Catholic Regional College, Nth Keilor
St Catherine of Siena, Melton West
Santa Maria College, Northcote
St Columba's, Essendon
De La Salle College, Malvern
John Paul College, Frankston
Trinity, Nth Richmond
St Louis de Montfort's, Aspendale
St Mary's, Williamston
St Francis Xavier, Corio
St Theresa's, Albion
St Mary's College for Deaf, Wantirna Sth

A genuine and big THANK YOU to the 19 schools, principals and Research Leads who demonstrated unwavering commitment and enthusiasm for the Research Leads pilot. All made great progress towards strengthening research engagement and evidence use in their schools, despite the significant challenges of a pandemic!

The following prayer was a constant touchstone throughout the pilot, reminding Research Leads that they cannot do this work alone and will unlikely change the world in a short timeframe! However, they were encouraged to embrace the opportunity to play a pivotal role in their school, laying the foundations for current and future evidence informed practice and improvement.

New beginnings

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything, and there is liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

An extract from The Oscar Romero Prayer, Bishop Ken Untener, Michigan USA

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