

# Quality leadership, quality research use: The role of school leaders in improving the use of research

Joanne Gleeson, Research Fellow in the Faculty of Education at Monash University;  
Mark Rickinson, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Monash University;  
Lucas Walsh, Professor of Education Policy and Practice, Youth Studies at Monash University;  
Mandy Salisbury, Research Assistant in the Faculty of Education at Monash University;  
Connie Cirkony, Research Fellow in the Faculty of Education at Monash University



The role of leaders and leadership is a well-established theme in the literature on the use of research evidence in schools (e.g., Brown, 2015; Dimmock, 2019). Many of the studies that have shed light on this issue, however, have been undertaken outside of Australia. There is therefore a need to better understand the nature and dynamics of research use in Australian schools. The Monash Q Project is a five-year study that is seeking to do just that, and this article shares early insights from this work on the role that leaders can play in supporting ‘quality use’ of research evidence in Australian schools.

This article brings a practitioner perspective to our conceptual *Quality Use of Research Evidence* (QURE) framework, which was introduced in an earlier issue of this journal (Rickinson et al., 2020a). It draws on the responses of nearly 500 Australian educators who took part in the Q Project’s first survey. This survey involved 492 educators (32% senior and middle leaders, 57% teachers and 11% other staff) from 414 schools across NSW, South Australia, Victoria and Queensland. It included questions about what ‘using research evidence well’ and ‘using research evidence poorly’ looks like in a school context. The survey responses indicate that **school leaders can play a central role in facilitating quality research use**. In this article, we discuss what this role involves and highlight key considerations for school leaders seeking to change their school environments and improve the use of research in practice.

## Leadership and quality use of research evidence

The Q Project conceptualises quality research use systemically, with a core of thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence, supported by a blend of individual and organisational enabling components (Rickinson et al., 2020b).

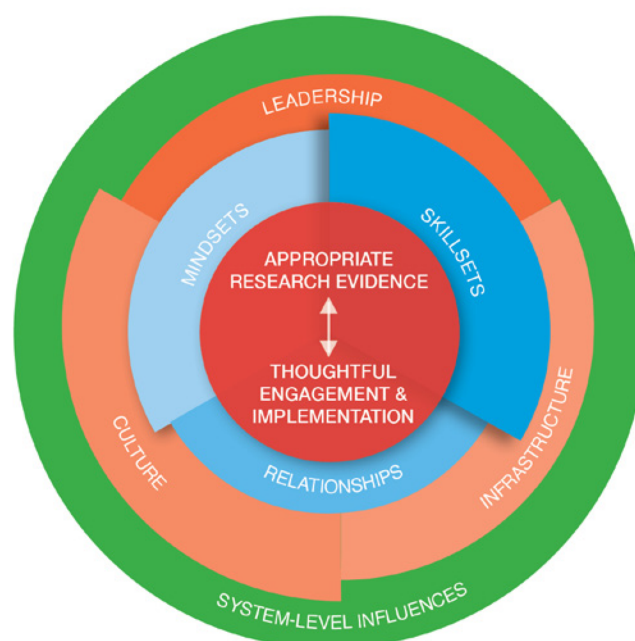


Figure 1: Quality Use of Research Evidence (QURE) framework

School leaders are strongly influential within this complex system. They are enablers of both organisational change, through infrastructure and culture for example, as well as the professional capacity development of individual teachers and staff. For quality research use to become a ‘normal’ part of how a school performs (Brown & Zhang, 2017), our survey data suggests that school leaders can do this in four key ways:

1. **promoting** a vision for and **contextualising** research use;
2. **encouraging** and **involving** others in using research;
3. **role-modelling** a research-engaged mindset and behaviours; and
4. **organising** school resources, processes and schedules to support research use.

### Promoting a vision for and contextualising quality research use

Leaders are ideally clear and consistent in their connection of a 'whole-of-school' research use approach with school plans, improvement priorities and decisions (Dimmock, 2019). Survey respondents emphasised the importance of research-rich school cultures, stating that research was used 'well' and "infused in the culture" when leaders promoted a vision for research use (31% representation in open-text responses) including: identifying and setting strategies for use (12% being consistent in their messaging regarding effective use (7%); clearly stating the purposes of use (6%); and prioritising research for use (6%). Quality use was described as encapsulating: "a shared language and understanding"; "all staff members on the same page"; "decisions aligned with research"; "goals as to why research was being done [or] reviewed"; and "improvement priorities [linked] to research".

Conversely, 'poor' research use was associated with an unsupportive school research culture (91% representation in open-text responses) that was marked by leaders providing: inadequate approaches to understanding and using research (58%); insufficient opportunities to share new knowledge or collaborate for better research use (14%); insufficient clarity or purpose as to its use (11%); and inconsistent or top-down mandates and directives as to what research to use and how (or not) (5%).

#### Teachers value the 3 C's – clarity, consistency and constancy.

"We regularly research modern education practices. Our school leaders determine the importance of a range of research and expose staff to it appropriately. Implementation and decisions are all based on research."

"There is not a consistent approach to using research, there is no reflection, leadership cherry-pick research to suit their agendas and don't consider the whole picture."

Figure 2: Respondents' observations from different schools regarding purposeful research use

For quality research use to become part of a school's cultural lexicon, practitioners need to be able to identify and align research with school plans and priorities (Dimmock, 2019). Survey respondents said that they were influenced to use evidence sources that 'aligned with school plans' (39% ranked influence in top 3; 1<sup>st</sup> ranked influence), and research in particular when it was 'directly applicable to the challenge or problem' (53%; 1<sup>st</sup> ranked influence). Yet, they expressed some doubt about their personal abilities to identify and interpret contextually relevant research. Nearly two-thirds felt that they 'lacked the confidence and skills to find research that addresses my specific practice, context or needs' (64% 'agreed'/'strongly agreed'), with

approximately a third responding that they lacked both 'confidence in analysing and interpreting research for their own teaching context' (32%) and 'knowledge of where to find relevant research to inform practice' (35%). Close to half believed that they 'lacked the confidence to judge research quality' (44%), with teachers (51%) and staff in other roles (62%) feeling this more strongly than school leaders (26%). Hence, practitioners look to their leaders for help. The importance of school leaders who helped practitioners with identifying, understanding and interpreting different research for contextual relevancy was one of the strongest themes in educators' open-text responses (34% representation).

### Encouraging and involving others in quality research use

An open and participatory school culture that enables experimentation and innovation, as well as stimulates the use of a broad variety of evidence, is important (Dimmock, 2019). This was a strong theme in the open-text responses, which touched on the value of: experimentation with different ideas and knowledge (19% of responses); sharing of ideas (18%); and challenges to thinking (17%). Respondents described quality research use as allowing: "educated" and "informed risk taking"; "questions to be asked"; "creativity, innovating [and] different from traditional educational practices"; "new ways of doing things"; and "opportunities to trial new things based on research".

Conversely, 'poor' research use was described as: "no innovation, no change of thinking"; being "discouraged" to use research; "only ever using one source and trusting in that point of view"; leaders being "resistant to change"; teachers "not being encouraged to take risks" or being "scared to take risks"; and "closed doors". Whilst 82% of our respondents believed that their schools 'referred to research when choosing programs or initiatives' and 83% felt that their schools 'sought evidence and information from a variety of sources', 40% felt though that 'informed risk-taking in teaching practices was not encouraged'. Teachers (46%) and staff in other roles (57%) felt this more strongly than school leaders (24%). This finding may be connected to a concern within some educators' open-text responses about research use being directed or mandated without consultation.

#### Teachers want to be involved, not told.

"Leaders take a piece of research as 'gospel' and then decide practices within the school should change based on this research. This is done without consultation."

"We identify multiple sources, analyse the research to ensure it is robust, disperse it to staff and then discuss it as a group before making decisions about using it."

Figure 3: Respondents' observations from different schools regarding research use collaboration and involvement



For practitioners to feel supported, high levels of trust between staff, teachers and leaders are important, particularly to reduce uncertainty and feelings of risk when trying new things (Brown, Daly, & Liou, 2016). Using research ‘well’ was associated with: “[it’s]ok to try and fail”; “open and honest discussion” about what worked and what didn’t; “having an open-door policy”; and “being given sufficient time and resources to trial [new] research...reflect on it....and that doesn’t mean having to agree with it at the end”. Respondents also said that they wanted to be involved in sourcing, reviewing and making decisions regarding research for use. Within open-text responses, discussion and debate (44% of responses), consultation (32%), and collaboration (20%) were strong themes, and ‘discussions of best practice with colleagues’ was the most frequently-reported use of research overall (76%).

### Role-modelling quality research use

Crucial to research use becoming a school-wide priority is school leaders’ ‘walking the talk’ themselves (e.g., Brown & Zhang, 2017). Our survey respondents strongly valued school leaders who role-modelled appropriate research-engaged behaviours (57% representation in open-text responses), looking to them to “model a culture of using research for enhancing professional growth” and then “provide opportunities for staff to investigate and share research evidence in the context of their teaching”. They wanted leaders to “explain the why” behind research priorities, and to “unpack why it works and how it will work in our school context”. This meant leaders needed to “know the research themselves”.

#### Teachers expect leaders to ‘walk the talk’.

“Leaders are able to not only ‘quote’ the relevant research but are able to match it with what is happening in the school and then model the application of that research to all teachers, staff and students.”

“Leaders forefront the research themselves and use the shared metalanguage in daily conversations that relates back to practice and the data sets that are used by teachers to inform levels of impact.”

**Figure 4: Respondents’ expectations of their leaders as role models of quality research use**

Conversely, leaders’ habits and dispositions that are not open to research use can not only lead to distrust of others who engage with research, but constrain the potential of school cultural change. Respondents expressed concern about leaders who were not “open-minded” or prepared to “explain their use of particular research”. They did not want leaders to “shut down questions” or “expect [teachers] to just agree with whatever direction was set”. They also appeared mistrustful of leaders who followed “a particular trend or fad that doesn’t have any evidence of improving student learning” or “could not support staff to understand the research [chosen] and when that research failed...just jumped onto the next ‘big thing’ in research because the previous thing failed”.

### Organising the school to support quality research use

School leaders also need to intentionally establish an organisational structure and set of processes and resources that focus on building teachers’ research use capacities, as well as allowing them the time and reflective space to engage effectively with research (Dimmock, 2019).

Our survey respondents expressed mixed views about the ways in which their schools supported quality research use through organisational infrastructure. There were strong emergent positive perceptions, with approximately two-thirds of all respondents

thinking that their schools provided both ‘formal’ (64% ‘agreed’/strongly agreed) and ‘informal processes’ (69%) that helped research engagement. Nearly 90% felt that their schools ‘facilitated a professional learning community or supported collaborative learning’. Yet, a majority of teachers (51%) and staff in other roles (55%) felt that their schools ‘did not make time available’ to engage properly with research. This was compared with less than a third of school leaders who felt the same (31%). Further, despite an overall appreciation of their school’s learning environments, respondents expressed some doubt regarding their own skills and available resources: 76% did not ‘believe that they had adequate time to access and review research’; 76% found it ‘difficult to keep up with new and emerging research’; and 68% felt that they ‘didn’t have sufficient access to research’.

#### Teachers + support = quality research use.

“We have professional learning that focuses on upskilling teachers to be research literate. We are given opportunities to investigate our own practice. Time is allocated so that we can assess and reflect on the research.”

“There are a lack of resources to engage with research. We have no research use goals, no regular meetings. We have no additional time given for planning and discussion. There are no regular check-ins.”

**Figure 5: Respondents’ observations from different schools regarding organisational support for research use**

### Considerations for leaders

In conclusion, we want to highlight several considerations for school leaders looking to improve research use in practice.

School leaders can and do play a powerful role in showing the way. “Knowledge leaders” search out and use appropriate research themselves – “considering it, digesting it, debating it, and making meaning from it” within their school contexts (Brown, 2015, p. 151). They can embody and demonstrate a research-engaged mindset and show others what this means and how it translates to quality research use. We suggest that such mindsets are at the heart of how leaders can help build the professional capacities of practitioners. We challenge leaders then to consider their own mindset and ask:

*How can I improve my practice of thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence? How can I role model these improvements to lead others?*

Research use is not an end in itself, there is “little justification” for research use if it does not translate into improved practice (Dimmock, 2019, p. 61). Ensuring school communities are clear about the value, impact and contextual relevancy of research is a critical enabler of quality use and a direct remit of school leaders. We challenge leaders then to consider the clarity of their ‘whole-of-school’ approach to research use and ask:

*How can quality research use be embedded within formal and informal processes and interactions within my school? How does my leadership impact purposeful research use? How well are we monitoring for impact?*

Lastly, quality research use is not done in isolation. There is a need for greater cognisance of schools as “social organisation[s]” that influence practitioners’ values and behaviours (Dimmock, 2019, p. 65). Discussions, debates, consultation, collaborations, and networks are key levers for leaders seeking to improve their own and others’ research use. We challenge leaders then to consider how well they foster social enablers of research use both within and external to their schools and ask:



## AEL Articles

*In what ways am I helping my teachers and staff 'socialise' research? How does my leadership impact openness of and participation in research use as a collective?*

These considerations form part of the broader conversation regarding research use that Q Project is seeking to foster. We invite all school leaders and practitioners to join us by visiting: <https://www.monash.edu/education/research/projects/qproject>.

### References

- Brown, C. (2015). *Leading the use of research and evidence in schools*. Institute of Education Press.
- Brown, C., Daly, A., Liou, Y.-H. (2016). Improving trust, improving schools: Findings from a social network analysis of 43 primary schools in England. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 1(1), 69-91.
- Brown, C., & Zhang, D. (2017). How can school leaders establish evidence-informed schools: An analysis of the effectiveness of potential school policy levers. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 45(3), 382-401.
- Dimmock, C. (2019). Leading research-informed practice in schools. In D. Godfrey, & C. Brown (Eds.), *An eco-system for research-engaged schools: Reforming education through research*, (pp. 56-72). Routledge.
- Rickinson, M., Walsh, L., Cirkony, C., Gleeson, J., & Salisbury, M. (2020a). Towards quality use of evidence in education. *The Australian Educational Leader*, 42(2), 24-28.
- Rickinson, M., Walsh, L., Cirkony, C., Salisbury, M., & Gleeson, J. (2020b). *Quality use of research evidence framework*. <https://www.monash.edu/education/research/projects/qproject/publications/quality-use-of-research-evidence-framework-quire-report>.
- White, S., Nuttall, J., Down, B., Shore, S., Woods, A., Mills, M., & Bussey, K. (2018). *Strengthening a research-rich teaching profession for Australia*. ATEA, AARE & ACDE. <https://www.aare.edu.au/assets/documents/Strengthening-a-research-rich-teaching-profession-FOR-RESEARCH-PAGE-v2.pdf>.



**Joanne Gleeson** is a Research Fellow in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Joanne draws from cross-sectoral professional experience in executive human resource management, business consulting, careers counselling, education and education research. Her PhD research focused on creating a measure of adolescent career identity to support more effective school-work transitions for students and improved careers education.



**Lucas Walsh**, is Professor of Education Policy and Practice, Youth Studies at Monash University. His research focuses on young people's transitions to post-school life. He is co-chief investigator on the Q Project with the Paul Ramsay Foundation to improve the use of research evidence in Australian schools.



**Mandy Salisbury**, is a Research Assistant in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Mandy has worked in the early years and primary sectors in teaching and leadership roles, and also has commercial experience. She has a passion for pursuing equitable educational opportunities and outcomes.



**Mark Rickinson** is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. His work is focused on understanding and improving the use of research in education. He is currently leading the Monash Q Project, a five-year initiative with the Paul Ramsay Foundation to improve the use of research evidence in Australian schools.



**Connie Cirkony**, is a Research Fellow in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Connie has undertaken work in science and environmental education, and in educational practice and policy. Her PhD research in science education focused on improving students' learning experiences in digital learning environments.