

Q DATA INSIGHT

NOVEMBER 2020

EDUCATORS' RESEARCH USE AWARENESS AND ATTITUDES



Using research well involves having an “evidence mindset,” a “pervasive spirit of inquiry, initiative and willingness to experiment with new ideas and practices” ([Stoll et al., 2018, p. 7](#); [Stoll & Kools, 2017, p. 9](#)).

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

What attitudes towards sourcing, accessing and using research do Australian educators have? How confident are they in their research awareness and skills? How supportive of research use are their school environments?

There is surprisingly little available Australian data regarding these topics. Monash Q Project is seeking to address these gaps by understanding educators' awareness of and attitudes toward research use in practice. We recently surveyed nearly 500 Australian educators to gain their early insights as to:

- (i) their awareness of and feelings about the use of research in practice; and
- (ii) their views on how well current school environments support research use.

According to the Q Project's [Quality Use of Research Evidence \(QURE\) Framework](#), using research evidence well is about ‘thoughtful engagement with and implementation of appropriate research evidence’. It requires educators to possess research-oriented skillsets (knowledge and understanding) and mindsets (attitudes and dispositions) that are enabled by organisations with supportive leadership (vision and commitments), culture (ethos and values) and infrastructure (resources and processes).

WHAT ARE THE FINDINGS?

1. Educators have positive attitudes towards research; they want to and do use research in practice. However, research evidence is used less than educators' positive attitudes would suggest when compared to other evidence types.
2. Educators have mixed perceptions regarding their school cultures and the support they feel they receive to explore new and different research for use.
3. Educators have some doubts about their own confidence and capacities to locate relevant research, assess it for appropriateness, and interpret and use it in context.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

For Teachers

Highlighting the importance of positive and open mindsets may inspire teachers to: (i) reflect on their own attitudes and confidence with regards to research use; and then (ii) seek out support, mentoring or resources that will help build their professional capacities and improve their use of research in practice.

For School Leaders

School communities look to their leaders to help them develop their research use confidence, mindsets and skills. Understanding educators' attitudinal patterns may help school leaders to: (i) reflect on their own school community's research use attitudes; (ii) develop collective and individual capacity-building action plans; and (iii) be mindful of fostering trust, confidence, innovation and participation within their school culture.

For System Leaders and Researchers

Educators need open and positive mindsets, as well as the confidence and skills to use research well. Being aware of educators' mixed attitudinal patterns and confidence levels may help system leaders and researchers to improve the ways in which they support schools by: (i) providing differentiated development resources and programs by role; (ii) communicating guidelines regarding research and evidence use; and (iii) assisting schools locate, access and contextualise research for use.

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Q PROJECT KEY FINDINGS

Positive Attitudes Overall Towards Using Research

Findings suggest positive attitudes overall towards research and positive beliefs about the connection of research use to improved practice. Most respondents (83%; 'strongly agree' and 'agree') believe 'research will help to improve student outcomes', with the majority feeling 'clear about how research can be used to change practice' (75%), as well as wanting to 'look for relevant research when confronted with a new problem or decision' (65%).

Yet, the extent to which research is used in practice appears less than these positive attitudes would suggest. Relative to other sources (e.g., 'student data' used 'always' or 'often' by 77% of respondents; 'policy and curriculum documents', 72%), research-related sources were used less frequently, such as 'research disseminated from universities' (43%), 'action research' (42%) and 'professional publications' (39%). Overall 70 per cent of respondents reported having used research in the last 12 months, with levels of use differing by role (91% of school leaders; 61% of teachers; and 51% of other staff). Lower use may be influenced by a feeling that 'teacher observations and experience should be prioritised' (43%; 'strongly agree' and 'agree'), which also differed by role (56% of teachers; 51% of other staff; and 17% of school leaders).

Teachers and Leaders Differ in Their Research-Engaged Attitudes and Confidence

When compared with school leaders, teachers overall appear to have some misgivings about the use of research in practice (see *Figure 1*). Findings suggest that, relative to leaders, teachers are less confident about the 'connection of research to student outcome improvement', are less likely to 'look for research to address a new problem or issue', and are less 'clear about how research can be used to change practice'.

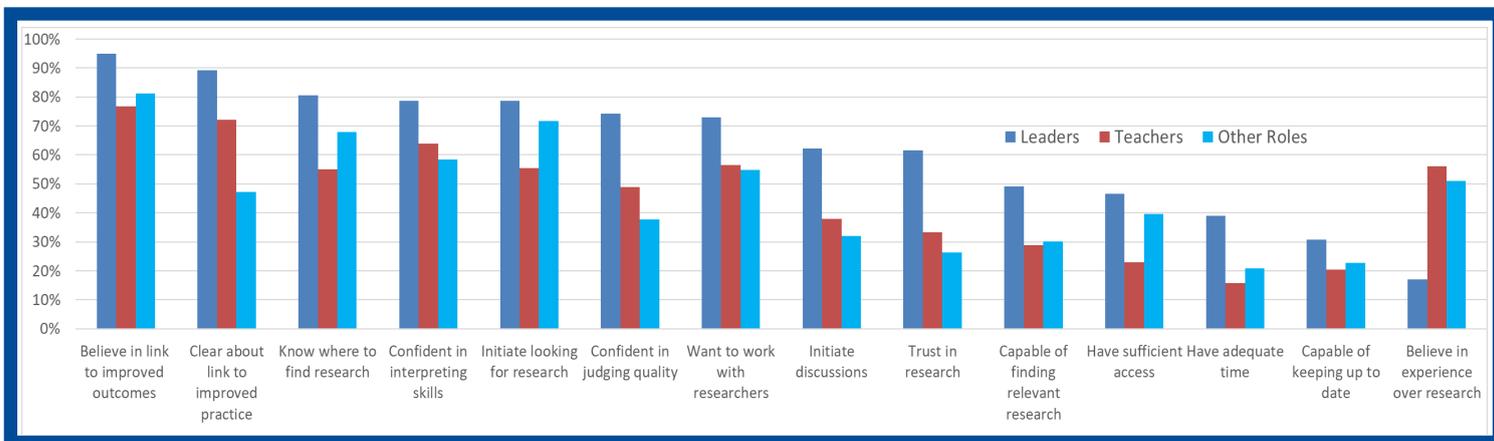


Figure 1: How aware, confident and capable do educators feel about research use? (n=492)

There are differences though depending on teachers' qualification levels or years of experience. For each attitudinal statement, those teachers with research-based post-graduate qualifications (e.g., Doctorate or Masters by Research), responded more positively than teachers with coursework-based post-graduate qualifications (e.g., Masters of Teaching), or those with undergraduate qualifications only (e.g., Diploma, Bachelor or Bachelor with Honours). For example, in response to the statement 'I am clear about how research can be used to help change practice', 91 per cent of research-based post-graduates 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed', compared with 74 per cent of coursework-based post-graduates and 69 per cent of undergraduates. In response to the statement 'When confronted with a new problem/decision I look for research that may be relevant', 82 per cent of research-based post-graduates 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed', compared with 59 per cent of coursework-based post-graduates and 51 per cent of undergraduates.

Years of experience however appeared to have no discernible difference on research-engaged attitudes, with newly qualified teachers (<5 years) not substantially differing in their views regarding research awareness and use than those teachers with far more experience (e.g., 15+ years).

Teachers, when compared with school leaders, also appear less confident about their own capacities to find and use research. For example, school leaders expressed greater confidence: in their 'knowledge of where to find relevant research' (81%, of school leaders 'strongly agree' and 'agree');

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“Sometimes I can get overwhelmed with where to go to source research. I ask myself ‘am I missing something?’ There is so much research out there, being able to discern between what is really good and what’s not, well, that can be overwhelming too”. Lead Teacher, Government Secondary School, Victoria.

67% of other staff; and 55% of teachers); in their capacities to ‘initiate research-related discussions’ (62% of school leaders; 38% of teachers; and 33% of other staff); and in their abilities to ‘judge the quality of research’ (74% of school leaders; 49% of teachers; and 38% of other staff), as well as to ‘analyse and interpret research for my own teaching context’ (79% of school leaders; 64% of teachers; and 58% of other staff). There were no discernible patterns in confidence based on respondents’ qualifications or years of experience.

School Leadership, Culture and Supports

On the whole, school leaders, teachers and other staff had fairly positive perceptions about a number of school-level supports for research engagement (see *Figure 2*). There was strong agreement amongst respondents about their schools ‘facilitating a professional learning community or supporting collaborative learning’ (87%; ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’); ‘seeking and accessing evidence from a variety of sources’ (83%); ‘referring to research when choosing programs or initiatives’ (82%); and having ‘informal’ (69%), as well as ‘formal processes to help staff engage with research’ (64%).

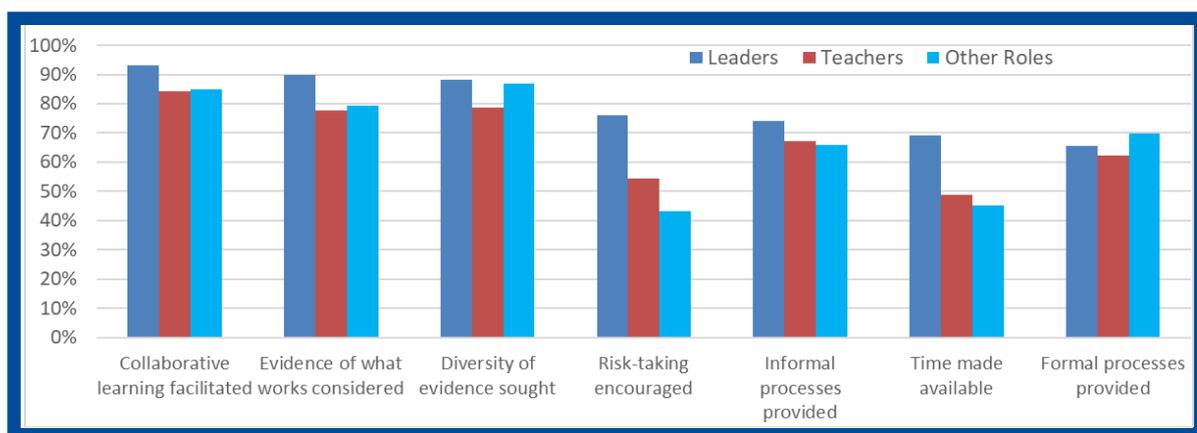


Figure 2: How well do educators believe their school environment supports research use? (n=492)

Contextual relevance was also important to respondents. ‘Alignment with school plans’ was the equal highest ranked influence overall of evidence selection and use (39% ranked influence in top 3), with 37 per cent of respondents looking to ensure that evidence used was ‘aligned with their teaching practices’ (3rd ranked). Teachers especially looked to their school leaders to help them understand the schools’ priorities and plans and align evidence and research use accordingly (‘alignment with practice’, 39% of teachers, 1st ranked; ‘alignment with school plans’, 32% equal 5th ranked). Research in particular was used when it was ‘directly applicable to the challenge or problem’ (53%; 1st ranked influence), ‘compatible with practice’ (36%; 2nd ranked), or ‘directly applicable to implementation of a program or initiative’ (31%; 3rd ranked). Context and relevance were also strong themes of influence in open-text responses (17% representation), as was the importance of school leadership. Respondents felt research was being used ‘well’ and “infused in the culture” when leaders promoted a vision for research use (31%) 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 research use occurs when decisions are aligned with research and are carefully considered in the context of the school.”
 Teacher, Independent P-12 School, Victoria.

More mixed views, however, were evident in connection with two issues: (i) the encouragement of risk-taking; and (ii) the provision of time. Nearly half of all respondents (40%; ‘strongly disagree’, ‘disagree’ and ‘neutral’) did not believe that ‘informed risk-taking was encouraged’ in their school

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cultures, with perceptions differing by role (56% of other staff; 46% of teachers; and 24% of school leaders) (see *Figure 2*). Trust and “feeling safe” appeared important cultural facilitators of research-engaged attitudes, with just over half of open-text responses (54% representation) associating quality research use with experimentation, risk-taking, “trial and error”, and idea sharing and challenge.

Teachers, when compared with school leaders, identified time and access as issues affecting their engagement with research. Over half of all other staff (56%) and teachers (51%) did not believe that their ‘school environments allowed sufficient time to access, assess and use research’, compared with 31 per cent of school leaders who felt the same (31%) (see *Figure 2*). These issues were also apparent in response patterns to the statements: ‘I find it difficult to keep up with new and emerging research’ (76% overall; 80% of teachers; 77% of other staff; and 69% of school leaders); ‘I don’t have adequate time to access and review research’ (76% overall; 84% of teachers; 79% of other staff; and 61% of school leaders); and ‘I don’t have sufficient access to research (e.g., subscriptions, logins)’ (68% overall; 77% of teachers; 62% of other staff; and 53% of school leaders) (see *Figure 1*). There were no discernible patterns based on teachers’ qualifications or years of experience.

 Using research well involves “having the time to access new ideas” and then “having the time to digest and implement it”. Teaching Assistant, Independent P-12 School, Victoria. Teacher, Catholic Secondary, Victoria.

IMPLICATIONS

These findings suggest that whilst Australian educators feel positively towards using research in practice, there is scope for greater and improved use. Individuals’ attitudes, feelings of trust and confidence, as well as perceptions of cultural and leadership support are important facilitators of research use. These insights into educators’ mindsets can help inform teachers individually, school leaders and their communities, as well as researchers and system leaders as to how to enable and support greater openness towards improved research use.

In conclusion, we highlight several considerations.

- For teachers: *How confident and open do I feel about using research in practice? What support and resources can I access that will help build my capacities and confidence to access, assess and use research better?*
- For leaders: *How aware am I of my own and my school community’s attitudes towards research use in practice? What actions can I and others take to improve the research mindsets of my teachers and staff?*
- For others: *How can we help develop the professional capacities and mindsets of our school communities to source and use research better?*

ABOUT Q

These considerations form part of the broader conversation regarding research use that Q Project is seeking to foster. We invite all educators to join us at:



<https://www.monash.edu/education/research/projects/qproject>



[@MonashQProject](https://twitter.com/MonashQProject)

Access the Monash Q Project Quality Use of Research Evidence *Framework Report* and *Discussion Paper*.

Source: Monash Q Project survey involved 492 educators from 414 schools across NSW (30%), SA (6%), VIC (40%) & QLD (24%). The sample included 125 Q participating school respondents plus 367 respondents recruited through a panel with The Online Research Unit. The total sample comprised 32% senior and middle leaders, 57% teachers, and 11% other staff. Represented schools included primary, secondary, combined and special schools from government, independent and Catholic education sectors. The survey comprised 5 parts: 8 open-text questions; 8 quantitative questions. The survey was administered online between March - September 2020. Quantitative-based statistics use the sample sizes associated with each question/graph as noted. Qualitative-based statistics represent key-word frequencies across all open-text responses and use the total sample of 492 respondents.