


TRACIE'S CASE STUDY: RELATIONSHIPS FOR QUALITY RESEARCH USE

This practitioner case study shares Tracie's approach to fostering productive relationships to support the implementation of a research-informed phonics program at her school. Tracie's story highlights three key learnings that you could consider in relation to your own work:

1. *Relationships are a powerful support for the quality use of research.*
2. *Professional connections and networks can be helpful for unpacking and interpreting research.*
3. *Building mutual trust and honesty can support the implementation of a research-informed change.*

WHAT WAS THE CONTEXT?

Tracie is the Head of Curriculum at Baltimore School, a government primary school located in rural Queensland. Tracie has worked at Baltimore School for over 13 years and has held a variety of roles, including classroom teacher, master teacher, literacy coach as well as teacher and learning coach.

 "I love research. I just think it has such a positive impact."


Throughout her career, Tracie has regularly drawn on research to inform her practice and has a strong appreciation for the roles that both practitioner-generated and academic research can play in informing the broader evidence base about educational practice. In her current leadership role, Tracie leverages her relationships - both internal and external to Baltimore school - to effectively support the implementation of a research-informed change in her context.



WHAT WAS THE FOCUS?

At the beginning of 2016, Tracie's school participated in a university-initiated project to introduce a synthetic phonics program involving all of the Prep teachers in the school. She recognised that such an undertaking would be unmanageable to undertake alone and leveraged her personal networks to support her engagement with the evidence base behind the project. For instance, she noted: *"it's all about networking ... You can do it yourself. But you would have to be very driven."*

Yet, Tracie also noticed that there was hesitation among her colleagues to take up the program. She reflected that *"we got half of our teachers on board. The other half, however, [were] still digging in their heels"* and identified that this was due to a lack of consultation around the project:

 "The new phonics program wasn't set up for success at the beginning and there was no consultation. I think we're a staff who like consultation. So there needs to be that discussion at the start, this is what we're going to do. ... I had a role to do, but I could see that [some teachers] were really struggling, [and] they had really valid points and really valid information. So, I had to listen to that and take it on board."

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For this reason, Tracie focused on building relationships with her colleagues to support their engagement with the research-informed initiative. This involved actively listening to teachers' perspectives and concerns, building trust, as well as facilitating their meaningful input into the implementation of the program.

HOW DID RELATIONSHIPS SUPPORT TRACIE'S QUALITY USE OF RESEARCH?



Tracie emphasised the importance of leaning on her professional networks to support her own understanding of the research base behind the phonics program. She shared that she does *“a lot of reading ... to try and get an understanding of what [she] might be trying to implement”*, but that she always complements this reading with collegial discussions in order to check her understanding. For example, Tracie explained how, despite the master teacher program in which she participated now being defunct, she still draws on these professional connections: *“I still have a lot of [master teacher] contacts. So if I want to do something [with research], I will ring one of my colleagues and have a conversation.”*

Additionally, Tracie drew on her relationships with expert practitioners within the school to ensure that the research-informed strategies in the phonics program were implemented in ways that would be suitable for her school. Specifically, she collaborated with the school's speech-language pathologist and one of the support teachers who had respective expertise in speech development and other phonics programs. This collaboration enabled Tracie to ensure that the overall program adopted a *“holistic approach”* that addressed the students' specific needs.



“The three of us get so excited, we get together, we talk about it, we share, you know, and we've sort of built up a bank of, of expert knowledge, I guess you can say with the three of us.”

Importantly, though, the extent of Tracie's collaboration did not end with her professional networks, the speech pathologist or support teacher. Rather, she worked closely with all of the Prep teachers to ensure that they were comfortable with the research-informed changes. During her interactions with these teachers, Tracie aimed to provide them with an opportunity to share their own philosophies and classroom practices as well as voice their perspectives about the phonics program.

What made these professional conversations so impactful was Tracie's process of building mutual trust and respect. For example, when reflecting about her collaboration with one teacher who was particularly resistant to the program, Tracie walked through her process for building these trusting relationships:

“It was having lots of discussion. So if we were talking about the project together, and you know, she was very negative ... [about] how it was instigated. So I had to be the bridge between what was happening and where I wanted her to go. ... She wanted to share her learnings and her philosophy on teaching phonics. So I had to sit, I had to listen, I had to take that all on board, and then I had to sort of coach her through. ... So we had lots of discussions, lots of informal talks, she showed me her data, and then I would slowly try and show [her] some things from the other classrooms that were doing the project in its entirety.”



“You need to be that open person they can talk to; you have to have the ability to gauge where people are sitting [and] to listen because the teachers are the ones on the ground teaching”.

These professional conversations also provided Tracie with ideas about how to better adapt the phonics program to suit the teacher's practice. As an example, Tracie's discussions with the teacher who was particularly resistant to the phonic program

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allowed her to ascertain what was causing these concerns and make purposeful adaptations:

“So we still continued on with the research, but with a little bit of a different light on it; pulling on some of [the teacher’s] experience. ... We’ve manipulated things to fit the context of our school. That’s only been possible by listening to [the teacher] and using [their] experience.”

Tracie explained how she then fostered these collaborative partnerships with stakeholders in the broader community, noting how these relationships encouraged uptake of the phonics program across the whole school: *“We brought our parent community on board, so [we’re] making videos for them. We’ve drawn in the music teacher. So he now teaches a special phonics music session where the kids are singing, but they’re singing in the cues and the sounds. ... We’ve sort of made it like a little community”.*

WHY DID TRACIE CHOOSE TO FOSTER THESE TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS?

Tracie used her professional relationships to effectively support the implementation of a research-informed initiative across her school. She engaged with the collective expertise of her colleagues and external professional networks to support her own understanding of the research that underpinned the phonics program. Tracie reflected how she values collaborating with these colleagues because of how they will each *“go away, do their own finding out, soul searching, finding information, and then we come back and we share it and discuss”* in order to *“bite [research] off slowly bit by bit”* and collectively build *“a wealth of knowledge”*.

At the same time though, Tracie also understood that building strong relationships with her colleagues was central to fostering change in their practice. She noted that she had *“to be able to build a relationship and to have some credibility with [her colleagues] ... to show them that this [program] works”*. Not only did these relationships bolster her credibility and help her *“to find something that would hook them in”*, but it also fostered Tracie’s colleagues’ trust in her. As the teacher who was initially hesitant about the phonics program reflected: *“That relationship’s been there, where I’ve had that respect for Tracie. I’ve got that trust with her and I feel that I can sit down and talk with her, and then we can have those discussions [that are needed]”*.



Tracie explained that building these relationships was not a quick and simple process: *“It’s not a fast journey, it’s taken a long time to gain the trust of other people on staff that you’re that open person that they can talk to.”* However, she was emphatic that these efforts were crucial to successfully leading the implementation of the research-informed phonics program at her school. To illustrate the impact of her efforts, she again reflected on her relationship with the initially hesitant teacher:

“The more ... that you’re doing that consultation, collaborating with more people, the more convincing it is...than if you’re just going off your own bat. But if ... [it’s] a consultative, collaborative approach, it’s a much easier sell.”

KEY LEARNINGS

1. **Relationships are a powerful support for the quality use of research:** Tracie recognised that strong professional relationships are central to using research well. As a result, she leant on her existing connections to support her own engagement with research while also fostering new relationships with colleagues involved in her research-informed change.

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What existing professional relationships may support your use of research? If implementing a research-informed change, what relationships may you need to build?

- 2. Professional connections and networks can be helpful for unpacking and interpreting research:** Tracie sought out professional connections (e.g., her master teacher network, experienced colleagues) when accessing and interpreting research. By leveraging the collective expertise of these practitioners, Tracie developed a deep understanding of the research and ensured that it was relevant to her context. [What professional networks could you access to support your engagement with research?](#) [How could you leverage your colleagues' collective expertise to unpack and interpret research?](#)
- 3. Building mutual trust and honesty can support the implementation of a research-informed change:** Tracie used her strengths in connecting with others to facilitate meaningful consultation with her colleagues. By listening to their experiences and making purposeful adaptations to the phonics program, Tracie built trusting relationships that supported her colleagues' buy-in to the research-informed change. [What personal strengths could you mobilise to build productive research use relationships with your colleagues?](#) [What might you need \(e.g., time or resources\) to build these relationships in your context?](#)

HOW DOES TRACIE'S CASE STUDY LINK TO OUR QUALITY USE OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE (QURE) FRAMEWORK?

This practitioner case study connects with the individual enabler of **relationships** in our QURE Framework. Tracie built trusting and honest relationships with her colleagues and these relationships underpinned the success of the implementation of the research-informed initiative at her school.

You can find out more about the individual enabler of **relationships** by accessing our [Q Project resources and publications](#).

This case study was generated by the Monash Q Project. The research publications and evidence sources referenced in this story are an illustration of the resources used by the practitioner. Their inclusion is not an endorsement of these sources by the Q Project. For further information, please refer to the [Monash Q Project's](#) website.