

# From “finding time” to “investing time”: The importance of time and leadership for cultivating cultures of quality research use

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Evidence-informed approaches are widely acknowledged to be key to educational improvement, but finding time to use research in high-quality ways can get lost in educators' busy schedules. Australian educators are working on average 140 to 150% of their paid hours (Education Ministers Meeting, 2021) and these heavy workloads are having negative impacts on educators' health and wellbeing (Heffernan et al., 2019). Time must be allocated to specific activities and purposes, and how leaders do this sends clear signals about what is valued within a school community. Given that educators see research use as important (Rickinson, Gleeson, Walsh, Cutler, et al., 2021), how can we better invest time in quality research use?

In a previous contribution to this journal (see Gleeson et al., 2020), we explored how quality leadership is important for establishing a culture of quality research use through four key approaches:

1. **Promoting** a vision for research use
2. **Involving** others in research use
3. **Role-modelling** research use
4. **Organising** school resources to support research use

Intersecting these approaches is time. The investment of time is critical for supporting educators' quality use of research (Rickinson, Gleeson, Walsh, Salisbury, et al., 2021). Australian educators, however, report a lack of time to engage with research and have called on school leaders to provide more time during school hours (Walsh et al., 2022). Below we provide school leaders with insights on how to support a research-engaged culture through the thoughtful and purposeful allocation of time.

## A note on the methods

Between August and October 2020, the Q Project team conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom with 29 educators (i.e., 20 senior leaders, 7 middle leaders, and 2 teachers) from 26 schools across Victoria (VIC), New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (QLD), and South Australia (SA). The interviews used open questions that invited educators to discuss what is involved in the quality use of research by drawing on school-based examples and their own experiences (e.g., “Based on your experiences, what do you think helps staff in your school to use research evidence well?”; see, Rickinson, Gleeson, Walsh, Salisbury, et al., 2021, for more details).

In 2021, the Q Project team designed an online survey to gain further insights into educators' perspectives about the quality use of research. The survey was conceptually informed by the Quality Use of Research Evidence (QURE) Framework (Rickinson et al., 2020) and was piloted

## *Lack of time is a major barrier to the quality use of research in Australian schools.*

with 12 educators over three iterations of testing and refinement. Following the piloting process, the survey consisted of 20 core and 5 follow-on quantitative questions about educators' research use practices and attitudes as well as their views on research use enablers and barriers. A typical question would be one that asked respondents to indicate their agreement or disagreement on a 5-point Likert scale with statements such as “Using research is worthwhile because it improves outcomes for my students” or conversely “Using research is not worthwhile because it takes significant time to access, read and put into practice.”

A total of 414 educators (i.e., 307 teachers, 32 middle leaders, 24 senior leaders, 51 education support staff) from New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, and Victoria completed the survey. The percentages reported here represent the combined category of respondents who “agreed” or “strongly agreed” to Likert scale items. Fisher's exact tests were used to test hypotheses for these respondents in comparison to the remainder of the sample, and where relevant, *p*-values for statistically significant relationships are reported (see, Walsh et al., 2022 for more details).

## Time for promoting a vision for research use

Promoting a vision for research use that connects research with “school plans, improvement priorities and decisions” (Gleeson et al., 2020, p. 28) requires an explicit investment of time. For large numbers of educators in our survey, research was not considered worthwhile when there was not a clear purpose for its use (47.8%) or it took too much of their time (60.6%). There were also connections between these two barriers. For example, educators who indicated that research use was not worthwhile because it lacked a clear purpose were significantly more likely to also believe that it took too much time ( $p < .001$ ). They were also significantly less likely to indicate that they were willing to invest time in research ( $p = .010$ ). As a result, leaders must provide time for research use:

*Carving out time ... is so important, and we appreciate the impact it can have. We must make time, we cannot presume that people will just [engage with research] out of goodwill, of their own accord. (Senior leader, NSW government secondary school)*



Using research well requires deep engagement and therefore time for educators to engage slowly with the research (Rickinson, Gleeson, Walsh, Salisbury, et al., 2021). In interviews, leaders discussed how allowing the time for slow and deep engagement was important for supporting a clear vision and focus:

*There are times when we need to slow down, refocus and then continue on. Because we live in this fast-paced way that we work ... I think that concept of slowing down to then help you speed up is something that we might need to do a little bit more of. (Senior leader, QLD government primary school)*

However, this time for deep engagement is not always commonplace in schools. While 81.4% of survey respondents who used research during the school term did so during the school day, it was often for less than 30 minutes at a time.

Educators were more likely to report engaging with research for more than 30 minutes if their school leaders regularly embedded research in day-to-day activities. These activities included scheduled team meetings ( $p < .001$ ), informal discussions with colleagues ( $p < .001$ ), induction processes for new teachers ( $p < .001$ ), student learning plans ( $p = .001$ ), and whole-staff learning days ( $p = .007$ ). The value of embedding time in this way was also supported by interviews with educators, as noted by a middle leader from a Victorian government secondary school:

*Whether or not it's built into our meeting schedule [is important]. ... If it's structured into what we're doing, then it makes it easier to find the time to do the reading.*

### Time for encouraging and involving others

Quality research use is a social process that requires collaboration and collective learning. As a result, time needs to be available within schools for collective engagement when "sourcing, reviewing and making decisions regarding research for use" (Gleeson et al., 2020, p. 29). Interviewees emphasised that time dedicated to collaboration is important for cultivating a common research culture because it fosters collective buy-in and shared ownership. For example:

*[Quality use] relies on developing a collaborative learning culture across the school ... with common goals, consistent ways of working and a common language. Everyone [must be] rowing the boat together, not just sitting in it or having one leg in. (Senior leader, NSW government primary school)*

Building on this, teachers valued having dedicated time for focused collaboration around research:

*We're going to start having sessions once a week for teachers and teacher aides. We're going to dedicate an hour solely for [the] purpose of actually having time to sit down as a group to be able to talk about [the research and] to explain things. (Teacher, QLD government special school)*

In our survey, 71.7% indicated that it was important for time to be built into staff schedules for reading, discussing and understanding research. However, just over one in three (37.4%) indicated that they were regularly provided with such time at their school.

Addressing this mis-match requires innovative solutions from leaders to make collaborative and dedicated time available in their school context. For example, one senior leader from a NSW government primary school explained how they had “locked in” regular sessions with their staff:

*[The sessions are] out of school every Wednesday for an hour... that'll be led by [a leader], a consultant, or other executive. Sometimes it will be in smaller groups where they're working with a level. But it's stable, locked in time [for research use].*

On the other hand, leaders also discussed how they would “bank up” several individual development sessions to allow for a period of deeper engagement: “We try not to take [staff development days] earlier in the year, and then once a year, we do a full-day Saturday conference” (Senior leader, NSW government primary school).

### Time for role-modelling research use

Key to a school-wide research use culture are “school leaders ‘walking the talk’ themselves” (Gleeson et al., 2020, p. 29). Leaders, too, value the importance of walking the talk or leading by example with 85.7% of the leaders in our survey indicating that using research is critical to being a good leader. This point was echoed in interviews, where leaders discussed how investing their own time to engage with research was crucial for building a sustainable research use culture:

*When you want to implement something that's going to be sustainable and have a long lasting, powerful impact on student outcomes ... you need to take your time and you really need to explore things carefully [so you can] help your staff understand the “why” behind a [research-informed] change. (Senior leader, QLD independent K-12 school)*

In interviews, several educators reflected on specific instances where senior leaders made regular time commitments to discuss and understand research. For example, a teacher at a government specialist school in Queensland recalled how “the principal and classroom teachers meet for an hour each week to spend more time unpacking [the research] ... and, so, we're able to think about it: ‘How could it be used?’, ‘What's the difficulties with it?’”. This example was supported by the survey data, where 74.6% of educators felt that having their leaders demonstrate and role model research use was an important enabler for the improved use of research.

Importantly, however, making the time to role-model research use does not rest with a single leader alone, but rather a distributed leadership team. For example, a senior leader at a Victorian government secondary school spoke about how they mobilised a team of research-engaged middle leaders to model research use across the school:

*We train [the middle leaders] up. We make sure they are well-trained and then they run around and ... run some of the Professional Learning Teams. ... We [also] send them into the classroom to actually team teach with the teachers.*

From our survey data, two key enablers of educators’ improved research use were having instructional leaders (74.6% indicated this was important) and research leadership positions (59.4%) dedicated to role modelling and driving research use across the school. Importantly, educators who indicated that these roles currently existed in their schools were significantly more likely to report using research regularly in their practice ( $p = .002$  and  $p < .001$ , respectively).

### Time for organisational support

School leaders need to establish organisational infrastructure to support educators’ use of research (Gleeson et al., 2020). Our interviews with educators indicated that the provision of professional learning is an effective way of scaffolding time for engagement with research:

*We have a professional learning day where we have an expert in the field who comes in and we spend time with that person. [We value] that kind of face-to-face discussion about a published text that we use and do a whole-staff study about how it applies to our work at school. (Senior leader, VIC government primary school)*

This was also supported by survey data where four out of five educators indicated that a school culture which had a focus on continuous professional learning was important for supporting their improved use of research.

Educators who reported that there was adequate provision of professional learning in their school were significantly more likely to report regularly using research in their practice ( $p = .001$ ). Thus, professional learning is not only an effective format for educators to engage with research and a means to address important skill gaps (Walsh et al., 2022); it is also a powerful way of establishing a common culture of research use through the purposeful allocation of time.

Finally, while leaders play a crucial role in allocating “time and reflective space [for educators] to engage effectively with research” (Gleeson et al., 2020, p. 29), they should also ensure that research-informed changes are manageable within the time provided. For instance, 45.2% of educators in our survey indicated that research use was not worthwhile because new ideas and changes are introduced too frequently at their school. This was also emphasised in an interview with a senior leader from a government secondary school in Queensland who was mindful about ensuring that teachers were not overwhelmed by rushed timeframes:

*I think all teachers should be given time to [read] research and to learn and reflect. No one has time to reflect on what they do. Our school is very mindful of the fact that you can't introduce too much research to teachers because they've got so much [on] as it is, and you have to take it very slowly.*

### Considerations for educational leaders

Lack of time is a major barrier to the quality use of research in Australian schools. As one senior leader at a government secondary school in NSW said: “In an ideal world, we would have more time for teachers to be reading [research] on a daily basis.” With educators currently struggling to “find the time” to use research within their current workloads, it is important that school leaders make the decision to “invest the time.”

Building on our previous contribution to this journal, here we have explored how leaders can thoughtfully and purposefully invest time to cultivate a research use culture in their school. Specifically, we highlight four key considerations for leaders:

1. **Promoting** a vision for research use and embedding research into school schedules go hand-in-hand. By embedding research in daily activities, leaders can support a culture where educators can engage deeply with research and understand how it contributes to school improvement priorities and decisions.

2. **Involving** others in research use must be supported through the dedication of time for focused collaboration. By making this time available within school timetables, leaders can foster essential aspects of a quality research use culture, including shared ownership, collective buy-in, and common ways of working.
3. **Role-modelling** research use is a time-intensive, yet important, enabler of a research use culture in schools. When leaders and leadership teams invest time to engage with research themselves, they are better positioned to support, guide, and encourage others in their school.
4. **Organising** school resources and the provision of professional learning is an effective way to purposefully allocate time for engaging with research. At the same time, leaders must ensure that their aims and goals for establishing a culture of quality research use are manageable within the time provided.

The availability of time is a complex and challenging issue, which ultimately requires a system-level response. While there have been some recent efforts to free up time by adding more teachers in states such as Victoria, school leaders continue to be pivotal in how they invest time for research use in their school. These investments not only save time in the long run by supporting the uptake of effective practices, they also send a clear signal that research is valued within the school community and is essential for establishing a culture of quality research use.

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