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SEADALE PRIMARY SCHOOL'S CASE STUDY: ESTABLISHING INFRASTRUTURE FOR QUALITY RESEARCH USE

This practitioner case study shares the journey of Seadale Primary School and how they developed critical and diverse infrastructure to support research use at the whole-school level. Their story highlights three key learnings that you could consider in relation to your own work:

1. ***Embedding research use into different school infrastructure is a critical way to support quality use of research.***
2. ***Time can be deliberately created to help teachers increase and improve their research use.***
3. ***Key supports and practices, such as the provision of external professional learning opportunities, a focus on collaboration, and measurement and goal setting, can also help to facilitate quality research use.***

WHAT WAS THE CONTEXT?

Seadale Primary School (PS) is a co-education primary school located in the metropolitan area of Sydney, New South Wales. The school is classified as being of low socio-economic status, and has a student population of nearly 700, the majority of whom come from a language background other than English.

Seadale PS has a strong school ethos of using research in their day-to-day operations and stand by the mantra that *"it is the fastest way to success"*. The school drives a *"whole-school"* approach to research use so as to gain consensus amongst staff about its value and for all to work towards the same practice improvement goals. A key priority within this approach is to build and sustain a learning culture for staff and students.

WHAT WAS THE FOCUS?

> "You're so used to being embedded within a certain culture and way of thinking. Sometimes it's not until you visit another school do you realise that it's not always normal practice."

At Seadale PS, the school's leadership team is passionate about promoting quality research use among staff. Understanding that teachers need time, space, as well as access to research and support, they have taken a number of measures to embed research use into the school infrastructure, including in structured meetings and professional learning. Given their strong focus on learning and practice improvement, they also deliberately schedule time and provide resources for teachers to engage with research. These investments are seen as crucial to support the school's *"culture and way of thinking"* around research use.

When it comes to research use, Seadale PS adopts a whole-school approach that is led by a long-serving leadership team who have *"a passion for research evidence*" and share "*a very similar understanding"* about its role in practice improvement. Along with the Principal, the leadership team emphasises the importance of making sure *"everyone knows [research use] is valued"* and spends considerable effort gaining consensus from all about the benefits of using research well. Such buy-in delivers a strong message about *"what matters"* in the school. Importantly, these shared values for research use are embedded in key processes, structures and practices within the school that help teachers to use research in improved ways.

WHAT PROCESSES AND STRUCTURES WERE ESTABLISHED TO SUPPORT QUALITY RESEARCH USE?

Seadale PS has created five key processes and/or structures in which research use is embedded. The first process revolves around the Teaching Sprints framework. Over the last four years, Seadale PS has supported all staff to engage with and draw on research to solve practice issues in short weekly sessions, thereby *"improving teaching and learning in the classroom"*. These sessions, led by

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stage supervisors, take place every Monday after school hours. Every term, there are two sprint cycles, with each comprising five sessions of 20–45 minutes in duration. In these sprints, stage-based teaching teams use student data and/or school performance goals to define specific areas of need or identify topics of interest. The teams then design research-informed strategies to implement, and collect and analyse evidence to measure impact. While the foci of sprints are different, *"there'll be a professional learning need that drives the reason behind the sprints"*. To ensure the teaching sprint process is efficient and staff's investment of time is maximised, stage leaders and/or Assistant Principals usually identify the relevant research and locate the exact texts for staff to read and understand the *"what"* and the *"why"* of the research-informed change.

Another structured process used at Seadale PS involves Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs, comprising whole teaching teams, meet once a term during dedicated staff development days for a minimum of 90 minutes. This time spent together helps to minimise the number of meetings held outside of school hours. Prior to these events, teachers are required to read a piece of research. One example of this process in action involved understanding the teaching approach of *"number sense"*. Initiated by one school leader after several classroom observations, all staff learnt about the approach during PLCs and then spent time together in teaching teams discussing and evaluating its implementation through the use of surveys, peer feedback, classroom observations, and reflections on the implementation fidelity of the research-informed approach.

The third way in which Seadale PS embeds research in school structures is through regular staff meetings. During these meetings, all teachers are encouraged to collaborate, irrespective of their stage, in order to get *"different perspectives"* about their own work. The leadership team makes efforts to connect research topics with all staff meetings, with the purpose being to increase staff awareness of and engagement with research, as well as to improve their professional knowledge.

Hazel, in her role as Deputy Principal, also facilitates *"professional learning time"*, where for two hours each week, teams of teachers can spend time with Hazel and collectively determine how best to support a particular student cohort and address their needs through using the most effective research-informed practice ideas. Depending on the school's priorities at the time (e.g., assessment or new syllabus), or different students' needs, this professional learning time is allocated and made relevant to different teaching teams as needed. The school also provides regular additional professional learning time for teachers who are new to the school, but not new to teaching, so as to help them come up to speed with key research, such as Rosenshine's principles of instruction, that underpin Seadale PS's teaching principles and approaches. In teams of four, these teachers are scheduled to meet with Hazel together for *"good collaborative discussion"*.

> "So, there's lots of different things we do [with research]. Most of it is whole-school, while some of it is targeted towards early career teachers."

Early career teachers at Seadale PS also get additional support to help them engage with research and use it to inform their practice. Under the remit of the NSW Department of Education's initiative – Great Teaching, Inspired Learning – Hazel spends an additional two hours each week with teachers in their first year of teaching, and one hour each week with teachers in their second year of teaching. During this time, she works with the early career teachers in teams to help them identify and understand relevant research. One new teacher, Simone, believes these sessions are very helpful, because *"we're all thinking together. We ask as many questions as we need to and we get answers. Everyone's listening, everyone is participating. [The sessions are] really good because we can all bounce off each other"*.

In addition to these team sessions, Hazel also demonstrates how to apply different research to practice, observes teachers' lessons and provides feedback. This process of support helps early career teachers to expand their knowledge and build their understanding of research-informed approaches from classroom practice perspectives. Simone explains this support process and its benefits:

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"At the beginning of the year, I had never taught phonics. So [with Hazel], we went through and learnt how to teach phonics, and we did all the research behind it. But then Hazel was able to give us examples of what lessons would look like. She sat down and actually showed me how to program a particular lesson and I could work my way through that. And then she also came into the classroom and taught a lesson in front of me, so I was able to see what she was showing us in terms of theory, and then she put it into practice for me in the classroom. … Once I had seen a couple of lessons, I then taught a lesson and she gave me feedback. So then it was kind of like a bit of a cycle because once I learnt the next stage of phonics, she would do the same thing … It was a very consistent process, and its very continuous. So I like doing that."

WHAT OTHER SUPPORTS AND PRACTICES HELP TO FACILITATE QUALITY RESEARCH USE?

"We've tried to reduce superfluous administration and replaced it with more meaningful things like a focus on research, and built it into the timetables as well."

The Seadale PS leadership team understands that using research requires time of teachers who already have a full schedule and multiple tasks to juggle. If teachers are expected to engage with research, the leadership team recognised that there needed to be *"a smarter use of time"*. Deliberate steps have then been taken to reduce teachers' compliance and administrative tasks so that they could schedule time for research use. For example, weekly 30-minute staff meetings, that *"were starting to turn into a large amount of administration and talk"*, were reduced to fortnightly. Agendas for these meetings were also changed to focus on *"curriculum and pedagogy primarily, [and] not managerial [work]"*. Alongside these changes, it was decided that administrative tasks would be communicated and resolved primarily via email. The leadership team also shifted the responsibility for certain tasks from teachers to other staff within the school, including assigning the entering of students' reading and writing assessment data into relevant databases to the Principal's personal assistant. By taking these actions and managing teachers' schedules differently, the leadership team effectively *"built time within the school hours to release collaborative groups for either professional learning or research engagement."*

"We source the research so that the teachers aren't having to wade through and try and find research. So, that's one of the ways that we help keep it on track and make sure it's reputable, but it's not too arduous."

The leadership team are also aware that teachers need a range of supports to help them use research well in practice. For example, certain leaders take responsibility for sourcing relevant and credible research that teachers use in their weekly teaching sprints. The research is curated into short, digestible formats that allow teachers *"to work with a small amount of research but keep coming back to it"* in order to support their sustained learning. Instructional leaders also coach PLC team leaders in how to locate and curate research, so that research use skills are built and sustained in a distributed leadership model. External professional learning opportunities and partnerships with universities help to support leaders find and assess research themselves. For example, Tania, one PLC team leader, described how attending a university-based program recently helped her to access *"good resources"* that she could not only share with her phonics PLC, but with others:

"All of the things that we do are put on the teacher drive, so everyone can access our [materials and notes], everyone can access that research that we are focusing on [and see] what worked and what didn't work."

The effectiveness of these different supports for quality research use is due in part to the collaborative approaches designed and emphasised by the Seadale PS leadership team. Collaborative research use is valued and appreciated by teaching teams as Fran, another early career teacher, explains:

"I think it would be overwhelming if you were to take [a piece of research] and go and read it by yourself and try and apply it

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by yourself. But because we are doing it together, it's not just one person's struggle, it's the whole stage [team] that we are working with. We're all coming back and reflecting, discussing, talking about what worked, what didn't and what we can do next time".

Simon, an Assistant Principal, concurs that collaborative research use has enhanced practices across the school. For example, he explains: *"Now we're actually developing learning intentions together. It's such a different level of collaboration. I think it's much more purposeful. It's much more research oriented, and it's much better."*

As the leadership team moves forward in their research use journey, they have recently used the QURE Assessment Tool to help them assess their own quality use of research and identify specific improvement goals. They have included these goals in their performance plans and believe this type of measurement and tracking approach is another aspect of effective infrastructure that will help them, and their broader school leadership community, use research well in practice.

KEY LEARNINGS

1. ***Embedding research use into different school infrastructure is a critical way to support the quality use of research:*** To promote teachers' engagement with and use of research at their school, Seadale PS introduced various structures and processes, such as teaching sprints, PLCs, collaborative planning time, and early career teacher support sessions, in which research use was embedded. In what ways has research use been embedded in your school's structures and processes? Which ones are effective in helping to improve teachers' research use? What improvements can you make?

2. ***Time can be deliberately created to help teachers increase and improve their research use:*** Seadale PS deliberately created time for teachers to engage with research by reducing the frequency of staff meetings, as well as their administrative and compliance tasks. How can time be built into staff schedules at your school for using research? How can scheduled time for research use be made more effective?

3. ***Key supports and practices can also help to facilitate quality research use:*** The Seadale PS leadership team believe that other supports and practices, such as the provision of external professional learning opportunities, a focus on collaboration, and measurement and goal setting, are also key to quality research use and complement other research use infrastructure in the school. In what other ways is research use supported in your school? How can the QURE Assessment Tool help you and your school leadership team set goals for your improved use of research?

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

Overall, Seadale Primary School's case study is one of establishing supportive ***infrastructure*** to underpin a clear school vision around quality research use. They do this by: (i) incorporating research use into school structures and processes; (ii) deliberately reducing teachers' administrative and compliance tasks to allow time to be built into teachers' schedules for research use; (iii) curating and providing usable research; and (iv) establishing a distributed coaching model to improve leaders' and teachers' research use skills.

You can find out more about the individual enabling components by accessing our Q Project resources & 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.